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Some Difficulties Facing Native Speakers of Czech and Slovak in Writing in English

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The paper presents an analysis of errors occurring in English essays written by Czech and Slovak university students. It distinguishes five major error types, i.e. grammatical, lexical, lexico-grammatical, text-coherence, and formal errors. The study relates the occurrence of certain error types to the linguistic and cultural background of the author of the text, and looks for possibilities of developing writing skills within academic writing courses. The paper suggests that courses focus on text-coherence, a phenomenon which has a high priority in Anglo-American written discourse and which is not specifically addressed by any other courses in Czech and Slovak university curricula. The paper outlines some successful strategies in writing coherent and effective texts.

1 Introduction

In the last fifty years, the English language has become the language of international political, business, and academic discourse, and the ability to communicate in English has become largely indispensable. The feasibility of acquiring a foreign language is determined by the learner's natural abilities, as well as the extent of his/her exposure to the language in spoken

and written communication. Other factors influencing foreign language acquisition are differences in the grammatical and lexical systems of the target language and the learner's native language, cultural differences, and – especially in acquiring advanced writing skills – differences in stylistic norms (cf. Čmejrková 1994, Chamonikolasová 2005, and Stašková 2005). The present paper looks into some of the difficulties experienced by native speakers of Czech and Slovak in writing texts in English.

The study is based on our experience in teaching academic writing to students majoring in English studies, who are expected to master the writing of academic essays, and write their final dissertation in English. We have analyzed errors in Czech and Slovak essays written as assignments for our courses. We chose 30 essays (15 written by Czech and 15 by Slovak students) that were comparable in regard to length (500-600 words) and writing style (a literary interpretation and an argumentative essay), as well as the authors' level of language skills (BA students of English). The sample that our data are based on is not very large, and we do not intend to draw any final conclusions about the frequencies of different error types. Instead, we intend to show what specific problems native speakers of two Slavic languages have to solve, and outline areas that deserve special attention in the process of teaching and learning academic writing.

2 Analysis

The results of our analysis of the 30 essays are presented in Table 1. The major error types distinguished in our study are grammatical, lexical, lexico-grammatical, text-coherence, and formal errors.

Table 1 Distribution of different error types in Czech and Slovak students' essays

Lexical errors	Lexico-grammatical errors	Grammatical errors				Text-coherence errors		Formal errors		Total
		word collocation phrase	preposition	article/determiner	verb form	word order	other	local	global	
259 (28.7%)	86 (9.5%)	214 (23.7%)	83 (9.2%)	30 (3.3%)	72 (8.0%)	66 (7.3%)	21 (2.3%)	27 (3.0%)	46 (5.1%)	904 (100%)
259 (28.7%)	86 (9.5%)	399 (44.1%)				87 (9.6%)		73 (8.1%)		

Table 1 indicates that most Czech and Slovak students have particular difficulties in the field of English grammar. Of the grammatical errors, the most frequent are errors in the use of articles and determiners, and the correct verb forms with regard to tense, aspect, mood, and subject-verb agreement.

The high frequency of the wrong use of articles can be explained by the absence of articles in the Czech and Slovak grammatical systems. The correct use can only be learned by understanding the strategy and philosophy of article usage, which is not inherent in Slavic learners. The most frequent errors in this category are due to overuse of articles in phrases with abstract nouns, such as **money for the transport* (> *money for transport*), **the university*

education (> *university education*), and in their generic use in noun phrases, e.g. **inevitable for the university students* (> *inevitable for university students*), **the expenses for the books* (> *expenses for books*). On the other hand, the definite article has been found missing in proper nouns containing a common noun as their head, such as **European Union* > *the European Union*, **Czech Republic* > *the Czech Republic*. Further examples of missing articles are noun phrases with post-modification, such as **improvement of higher education* (> *the improvement of higher education*) and **introduction of tuition fees* (> *the introduction of tuition fees*), which suggests that the students neither feel nor understand the defining force of the ‘of-phrase’. Instances of a missing indefinite article are especially noun phrases consisting of an abstract noun as head and an adjective (adjectives) as attribute, e.g. **to get unbiased insight* > *to get an unbiased insight*, **to give her children tranquil family life* > *to give her children a tranquil family life*. Another group of errors is the use of the definite article where another determiner (e.g. a possessive or demonstrative adjective/pronoun) would be contextually more appropriate and vice versa, e.g. *regardless of *the* (> *their*) *social class*, **the* (> *their*) *access to university education*, **Those* (> *The*) *students cost money*, **Its* (> *The*) *positive impact...*

Errors in verb forms, i.e. errors in tense, aspect, mood, and subject-verb agreement, represent a relatively small group of grammatical errors, but significant enough to be considered for feedback activities. The most typical error type is the use of simple present instead of present perfect with temporal adverbials expressing duration and repetition in a period extending from the past to the present, e.g. **countries that are* (> *have been*) *members for a certain period of time...*, **As was* (> *has been*) *suggested many times...*, **recently almost nothing is* (> *has been*) *so widely discussed*. Errors of this type may be due to the interference of the native Slavic languages, which make use of only one present imperfective verb form. Another error type is the use of verb forms which are in agreement with the complement rather than the subject which should govern the grammatical verb form, e.g. **The fees is* (> *are*) *one thing...*, **The fourth effect are* (> *is*) *the previously mentioned students*.

Another source of frequent errors is the choice of a suitable lexical unit. Students often make up a collocation or phrase, or select a word or phrase from a Czech/Slovak-English dictionary without checking its exact meaning in a reliable mono-lingual dictionary or corpus of English texts. The result is the use of expressions such as **enchanted circle* (> *vicious circle*), or **perform crazy things* (> *do silly things/fool around*). In many cases, again, the lexical error is due to the interference of the native language: **the father means authority in the children’s lives* (*otec ‘znamená’ v životě dětí autoritu* > *the father represents authority ...*); **perspective young people* (*perspektívni mladí ľudia* > *prospective young people*). In some cases, the lexical choice is unacceptable for stylistic reasons, e.g. the use of the word **kids* (> *children*) in a formal analysis of a literary work.

Besides lexical and grammatical errors described above, our material contains a large number of errors in the choice of suitable prepositions. Since the use of prepositions is related to the grammatical, as well as lexical level of language (cf. Hallan 2001), we decided to treat errors in prepositions as a separate category, i.e. a category of lexico-grammatical errors. Examples of the wrong use of prepositions are **on the top* (> *at the top*), and **a decrease of* (> *in*) *young newcomers*. In some cases, the wrong use of a preposition has its origin in the native language of the writer, e.g. the expression **approve tuition fees* (> *approve of tuition fees*), is probably motivated by the Slovak construction *schválit/schvalovať poplatky za štúdium*, the expression **feel hatred to Tom* (> *feel hatred for Tom*) seems to copy the Czech phrase *cítit nenávisť k Tomovi*.

Comparable to the frequency of errors in prepositions is the frequency of errors in text coherence. Distinguishing errors in coherence from other error types is not always easy: impaired text coherence is often the result of grammatical or lexical errors. We included in the

coherence category instances of language units/patterns that were acceptable (grammatically and semantically) when judged separately but inappropriate in view of a wider context. To our knowledge, there are different conceptions of text coherence/cohesion (e.g. Halliday 1994: 308-339; Hannay and Mackenzie 2002: 154-74; Givón 1995: 59-116) but no generally accepted typology of coherence errors. Our conception of coherence is close to (though not identical with) Givón's (1995) conception of *local and global coherence systems*.

Within the category of errors in local coherence, we included cases of e.g.

- (1) unclear or missing antecedent/referent
- (2) missing link or information
- (3) redundant information/expression
- (4) unclear, inconsistent, illogical, or puzzling statement
- (5) untruthful statement or statement contradicting common understanding

The list above provides only a tentative survey of local coherence error subtypes. In some cases a particular coherence error comes under two or more of these subtypes, e.g. a missing antecedent (1) or missing link/information (2) produces a puzzling statement (4). A more reliable typology of coherence errors would have to be based on a more extensive study of text coherence and a larger number of cases. Below are examples of the five coherence error types.

- [1a] *Thus she shows she desires no changes in the family that she is used to and she keeps on manifesting it.*
- [1b] *He is seen as somebody who would fight for preserving the family: "I thought my father would stand up, come at him [...] He would tell Irene that enough was enough. But my father got to his feet..." (29). Later, it is even more visible that he does not make a single effort to do so: "Mom left a note [...] He could come if he wanted to." (41). Thanks to this and also to Tom's efforts, the three adolescents begin to trust him: ...*

In example 1a above, the antecedent of the pronoun *it* cannot be identified. Grammatically, the only potential antecedent is *the family*; the semantic analysis, however, rules out the co-reference of these two elements. The author of the text applied the pronoun *it* in order to refer to the notion of 'her desire for no changes', hidden behind the formulation *she desires no changes*. Such indirect and non-precise reference, however, is unacceptable in a written English text.

In example 1b, the author presents a series of quotations from the primary text illustrating the character of 'Father'. Following this series, the author uses the pronoun *him* in an attempt to refer to another person, i.e. 'Tom'. Since the most natural anaphoric reference of *him* in the last sentence is the reference to 'Father', the reader is likely to be confused by the passage and has to make a special effort to interpret its meaning.

- [2] *All the time, the mother is called Irene. This shows a clear distance, that the mother wasn't very close to her children and vice versa. (> distance between ...)*

In example [2], a higher degree of explicitness is required, i.e. a clear specification of what type of distance the author has in mind.

- [3] *When Tom entered the room, he "held his back straight", showing his pride and willingness to fight for the woman he loves. Although he does not say a word following this, and apparently ...*

The expression *following this* in example [3] is redundant because the sequence of ideas/events is obvious.

- [4a] *His character is very similar to their father. (> to the character of their father)*
[4b] *They have to deal with the fact that their mother loves another man whom they blame for having been separated from their father. (> for having separated them from their father)*

The expression *their father* in [4a] above is an example of inconsistency. The use of the expression *having been separated from their father* in [4b] after *whom they blame for* is illogical and provides a puzzling effect.

- [5] *Although Tom is never called a father, he is the father...*

The statement *Tom is never called a father* is not true: at the end of the story that the author of example [5] is analyzing, the heroes of the story start calling Tom ‘father’.

The category of global coherence errors includes inconsistencies in the global structure of the essay, e.g. a missing or unsuitable introduction or conclusion, or a discrepancy between the promise delivered in the introduction (the thesis) and the contents of the body and the conclusion. Global coherence errors are less frequent than local coherence errors (the ratio is 1:3) because the opportunities of making them are more limited (e.g. there can be only one discrepancy between introduction and body in one essay), but they are perhaps more serious in that they may obscure the message of the entire essay.

Within the last category of errors, i.e. formal errors, we included errors in spelling and errors in punctuation. Most of the spelling errors in our material were errors in the use of capital letters (e.g. **Slovak republic > Slovak Republic; *... but also about father > but also about Father*), and typing errors (**finifshing > finishing; *aviable > available*). Errors in punctuation include, for example, the insertion of a comma before the conjunctions *that* and *when* (**... the fact, that ...; *She refuses to accept reality, when ...*); missing commas in sentences containing a parenthetical note (**Just at the end by means of flashback she allows herself to be heard > Just at the end, by means of flashback, she allows herself to be heard*); or a wrong placement of the full stop in combination with quotation marks and references to sources (*“... sliding slowly under water.” (p. 37) She also ... > “... sliding slowly under water” (p. 37). She also...*). We have not taken into consideration unsuitable graphical and typographical layout, the layout of the heading, unsuitable spacing, font, or indentation of paragraphs. Such formal inaccuracies would, however, be considered as errors in British and American universities.

3 Improvement Possibilities

To teach writing means to teach students not only how to write correctly, but also how to organize their thoughts, how to brainstorm and how to express their own ideas in a critical way. Our study outlines some of the weaknesses of Czech and Slovak university students in writing academic texts in English. The question is what kind of training can lead to improvement and what kind of feedback the students should receive, if any. Discussions in the recent literature on error correction offer controversial opinions on whether and how to indicate errors (directly/indirectly) and whether to correct all errors, including grammatical errors, or only errors that are related to the problems of actual writing style (cf. Ferris 1999; Ferris and Roberts 2001).

The survey presented in Table 1 suggests that as much as 82 per cent of all errors occurring in the analyzed texts are due to their authors’ difficulties at the grammatical, lexicogrammatical, and lexical levels. Academic writing courses at Czech and Slovak universities, however, cannot deal with students’ insufficient abilities at these levels because of the limited

space that these courses occupy in the curricula. (Most students only take one one-semester academic writing course.) Grammatical and lexical problems therefore have to be dealt with primarily within practical language classes, while academic writing courses should focus on the level of coherence and the formal level, i.e. areas which are not specifically addressed in any other courses.

Formal errors in our survey are the least frequent type (8.1 per cent); their number, however, is still relatively high considering the availability of software capable of indicating and correcting formal errors. Spellcheckers can deal with a large percentage of spelling errors, as well as errors in punctuation, but our data indicate that students do not use spellcheckers consistently. Students wanting to improve their writing at the formal level have to familiarize themselves with some systemic differences between English and Czech/Slovak punctuation (e.g. the different rules for placing the full stop before/after the final quotation mark) and between the requirements of different editorial styles with respect to, for example, the format of paragraphs, the bibliography page, or the structure of in-text references.

Although errors in coherence represent only 9.6 per cent of all errors in our material, they deserve special attention: they occur not only in the essays of weaker students (i.e. essays containing high numbers of grammatical and lexical errors), but also in the essays of students with a very good command of English grammar and vocabulary. The most common causes of incoherencies in writing are lack of development of writing habits, lack of thinking about the topic, and lack of revising and re-drafting. Strategies leading to coherent writing include exercises in combining thoughts into one complex whole, joining sentences by means of conjunctions and relative pronouns, gap filling, loop writing, and précis writing (cf. Hrehovčik and Uberman 2003; Axelrod and Cooper 1991; Laaken, Landkamp and Smith 2001). Students' awareness of errors and inaccuracies can be increased through in-class analyses of sample essays (e.g. localizing the thesis, writing a descriptive outline of the paragraphs), peer editing of students' assignment essays, and by means of feedback from the teacher. Coherence has a very high priority in Anglo-American writing, and native speakers of English are more sensitive to inaccuracies in coherence than native speakers of Czech and Slovak, who often do not see the discrepancies and logical inaccuracies in their own texts. In our opinion, it should be the focus of academic writing courses to increase the students' sensitivity to text coherence and to develop their ability to present ideas clearly, logically, and linearly. A deeper analysis of coherence errors might be a good starting point for the creation of a handbook of coherent writing offering exercises addressing the difficulties of Czech and Slovak writers outlined in this paper.

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