

The 'problem' of student writing in Hungary

Francis Prescott

It is often commented upon by teachers in the School of English and American Studies (SEAS) at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) that students have great difficulty writing well organised formal texts in English and that the general standard of students' writing is steadily deteriorating. Since writing is at the centre of teaching and learning in any university, this perceived problem is extremely worrying.

To find out more about this situation, and in particular to find out how students become initiated into written academic discourse within the university, a long term qualitative study was done at ELTE investigating the experience of first-year students as they come to terms with the writing requirements of the university and also looking at the perspective of subject teachers on their students' writing. The main research questions were as follows: what are the experiences, attitudes, and problems of first-year students as they deal with their writing assignments, and what are the causes of the problems?

The presentation will first place the research topic within the wider context of negative attitudes to students' writing practices which can clearly be seen at present in virtually all English-speaking countries (often referred to as a crisis in literacy). Comparisons will be made between teacher's observations at ELTE and observations from official reports and research literature in several English-speaking countries, particularly the United Kingdom and the USA. The point of such a comparison is to show that this is not an isolated phenomenon and neither is it restricted to students of English as a Foreign Language.

The research itself was conducted over the course of a whole academic year (2005/6). A series of qualitative interviews were done with 20 first-year students and 10 subject teachers. By analysing these interviews using the constant comparative method developed by Strauss and Corbin (1998), a number of relevant categories emerged and their properties could be described. The presentation will focus on several key issues which emerged from the data including teacher and student perceptions of written accuracy, style and vocabulary, student 'survival' strategies when dealing with written assignments, the use of the Internet and the issue of plagiarism. By comparing student behaviour and attitudes with the teacher's views and behaviour, the presentation will show how a tendency for teachers to see the situation as worse than it is, along with a failure to provide students with clear and consistent guidelines and adequate practice can serve to exacerbate and 'feed' the students' problems. Finally, the implications of the research findings for the future in view of the ongoing changes in Higher Education in Hungary will be considered.

References

Strauss, A., Corbin, J. 1998. *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. London: SAGE.