IT'S NOTHING TO WRITE HOME ABOUT
Finnish writers in the world of Anglo-American academic writing conventions

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Tämän tutkielman tarkoitus oli selvittää, minkälaiset englanninkieliseen akateemiseen kirjoittamiseen liittyvät ongelmat ovat yleisiä suomenkielisille ja suomalaiseen kirjoituskulttuuriin tottuneille opiskelijoille. Aihe on tärkeä, sillä tiedemaailma noudattaa pitkälti angloamerikkalaisen kirjoituskulttuurin konventioita, jotka eroavat monelta osin suomalaisesta kirjoituskulttuurista. Englanninkielisten tieteellisten tekstien kirjoittaminen ei ole tärkeää vain englanninopiskelijoille, vaan kaikkien alojen asiantuntijoiden on oleellista hallita asiaankuuluvat taidot. Vaikka suomenkielisten kirjoittajien ongelmia ja suomalaisen kirjoituskulttuurin eroja angloamerikkalaiseen vastineeseen verrattuna onkin tutkittu aiemmin, Suomessa ei ole vielä juurikaan tutkittu aloittelevien akateemisten kirjoittajien asenteita ja kehittymistä.

Tutkielmaan osallistui kolmekymmentäyksi koehenkilöä, jotka täyttivät kyselylomakkeen ja kertoivat omista englanninkielisen akateemisen kirjoittamisen kokemuksistaan. Vastaamishetkellä koehenkilöt olivat englanninkielenopiskelijoita yliopistossa ja suorittivat parhaillaan englanninkielistä tieteellisen kirjoittamisen kurssia. He olivat näin ollen jo tietoisia ongelmistaan ja hyvän tieteellisen kirjoittamisen vaatimuksista. Kyselylomake koostui monivalintatehtävästä sekä avoimista kysymyksistä, joiden perusteella yleisimmät ongelmat oli mahdollista tunnistaa.

Tulosten perusteella kävi ilmi, että opiskelijoilla oli eniten ongelmia tiettyjen syvärakenteiden suhteen. Ongelmia oli muun muassa tekstin järjestämisen, tiettyjen tekstin kokonaisuuksien ja metatekstin käytön kanssa. Toisaalta monilla opiskelijoilla ei ollut merkittäviä ongelmia, mikä korostaa henkilökohtaisten erojen vaikutusta ja sitä, miten kaikki kirjoittajat ovat yksilöitä. Tulokset tukivat aiempia tutkimuksia, joissa on päädytty samankaltaisiin johtopäätöksiin.

Asiasanat: academic writing, culture, education, foreign language writing

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1 INTRODUCTION

Cultural differences in writing conventions and the problems foreign language writers encounter in the Anglo-American academic writing culture have been widely researched in the past. Hyland (2003:31-35) and Mauranen (1994:31) have stated that grammatical competence is a problem that foreign language writers themselves often see as their main difficulty, but sufficient mastery of academic writing requires more than the ability to produce error-free texts. Anglo-American writing conventions, such as the value placed on argumentation and critical thinking, are not self-evident in all cultures and can cause problems for writers who are used to different approaches. Mauranen (1994) explains how writers' cultural background can often be seen in their writing even when they are writing in a foreign language. Several studies have discussed the differences between various cultures, but these studies have usually concentrated on the division between Anglo-American and Asian writers. However, some studies have examined Finnish writers and the effects their cultural background have on their writing (Mauranen 1993, 1994), but there is still more to be researched in this field. This relative lack of extensive data is the reason why novice Finnish writers were chosen as the topic of the present study.

The purpose of the present study was to determine what types of difficulties Finnish university students studying English encounter with their first academic writing course in English. The course in question functioned as a thorough introduction to Anglo-American academic writing as students were expected to produce two full papers and several shorter texts using Anglo-American writing conventions and stylistic choices, such as proper citations and argumentation. Thirty-one students filled in a questionnaire that consisted of a multiple choice section and several open questions that asked the students about their most and least significant problems. The hypothesis was that the students would report some amount of trouble with surface features such as formal language but that their major problems would be related to deeper issues. It was also expected that the results would vary from one extreme to another due to the fact that writers are individuals

and culture is not the only factor that determines the nature of someone's writing (Hyland 2003: 36-37).

This report will first introduce previous studies that have been conducted in the field of foreign language writing and present findings that are relevant to the topic of the present study. After that there will be an explanation of the data and methods used in the context of the present study. The group of students who provided the data will also be presented here. The section will be followed by the presentation and analysis of the results. The present study will conclude with final thoughts on the topic, what the results indicate, why they are significant and how students and teachers could use the results when planning their work.

2 FOREIGN LANGUAGE WRITING PROBLEMS

Foreign language writing and foreign language writers are different from first language writers and the texts they produce. It is therefore not surprising that foreign language writing has been the subject of numerous articles and research papers over the years. One specific topic that has interested teachers and researchers is what types of difficulties foreign language writers encounter when they write academic texts, such as essays, in English.

As Hyland (2003:31-35) and Mauranen (1994:31) state, foreign language writers often have different grammatical competence and linguistic skills than first language writers. As a result, their writing can contain more errors than texts written by native speakers. Foreign language writers also often report that insufficient mastery of grammar and vocabulary is the main cause of their difficulties in academic writing (Hyland 2003:34). The same is reported by Jones (2000:40) who states that foreign language writers may let concern over surface features dominate their writing process, leading to the fact that they do not pay sufficient attention to the content of their writing. Hyland (2003:5) states that writers need to adequately control these surface features before a high level of writing can be achieved. However, problems with grammar and spelling are surface errors and correcting them does not automatically result in good writing. It is therefore more

interesting and beneficial to both teachers and foreign language writers themselves to concentrate on the larger problems that usually stem from writers' cultural and educational background. Such a perspective has been very common in studies that explore the nature and problems of foreign language writing.

2.1 Different writing cultures

There is more to good writing than error-free production. The scientific community largely follows the conventions of the Anglo-American writing culture which involves some features that may be unfamiliar to writers with a different background. English (2000:17) emphasises argumentation as an important factor in good writing in the western world. Hyland (2003:39) agrees by pointing out that good writing in the western context is generally expected to involve writers' own thoughts, critical thinking and using a variety of sources together to examine earlier theories to see if they are still valid. As obvious as these features may seem to someone who has been educated in the Anglo-American context, they may cause trouble for many foreign language writers who are not properly acquainted with them. Mauranen (1993:3) states that even experienced writers may encounter difficulties when composing texts in a context that differs from their own. No matter what their background is, writers always bring their own cultural expectations, preferences and values to their writing (Hyland 2003:36). Similar conclusions are reported by Mauranen (1994:31) who adds that cultural expectations and conventions can often be seen in writers' work regardless of what language they are using. Hermerschmidt (2000:11) interviewed a native speaker who was also an English teacher and describes that the interviewee stated that there are certain cultural aspects in academic writing that people outside that culture must learn. If writers do not possess sufficient knowledge and experience with the more unfamiliar writing conventions, they may encounter trouble with their writing and having themselves understood.

As was already stated in the above paragraph, writers have a cultural and educational background that can affect their expectations and performance in a different writing context. English (2000:17-19) examines the case of a Japanese student who had trouble receiving sufficient grades in her essay assignments. The student used largely correct and

fluent English in her essays, had studied the topics sufficiently and provided enough information about them in her writing. Despite these efforts, she continuously received poor grades. The purpose of English's study is to examine the gap that exists between what the student considers valuable in writing and what the teachers actually demand. It is a common stereotype that Japanese and Asian students in general are sometimes afraid of arguing and questioning the validity of previous research and theories. This was the case with the student in English's study as she often merely listed facts in her essays instead of discussing them and their reasons or results. However, Hyland (2003:36-37) points out that even if writers carry their cultural background with them, no culture is homogenous and culture therefore does not fully determine what writers' work will be like. Writing is also affected by the individual characteristics of writers, such as age and social class (Hyland 2003:32). Despite all this, it is hard to determine whether the problems foreign language writers experience are a result of their different cultural and educational background or of something else. It can also be difficult to establish what is characteristic for one specific culture.

In addition to difficulties that stem from foreign language writers' cultural and educational background, they encounter many problems that first language writers also face. Two such issues will be introduced in this paragraph. Writing coherent and understandable essays in which the main ideas are well organised and the text flows naturally can be difficult regardless of one's cultural background or language skills. Crème and Lea (2003:87-90) emphasise the importance of developing one main argument or theme for the essay or paper and building the structure of the text like the plot of a story. In practice this means that the central idea of the text alone should reveal what the text is about and everything else in the text should support or develop the idea further. Similar ideas are presented by Jones (2000:41) who states that writers need to organise content so that the text and its meaning are understandable for the reader. Plagiarism and referring to sources are other issues that can cause trouble for writers from all cultural backgrounds and with varying experience. Créme and Lea (2003:63-64) state that it is always the writers' responsibility to indicate whose ideas they are either quoting or paraphrasing. The problems presented in this paragraph are examples of difficulties

that are not characteristic for any specific writing culture and are common throughout the world. The next section will explore elements that are generally seen typical for the Finnish writing context and how these characteristics can cause trouble for Finnish writers.

2.2 Finnish writers

There are certain conventions that can be seen as characteristic of Finnish writing and which can lead to problems. Mauranen (1993:13) sees Finnish as a reader-responsible language that demands more of the reader than of the writer. In practice this means that Finnish writers do not consider it necessary to guide the reader through their text or have their own presence explicit in their writing. This is the exact opposite of what is generally seen as the accepted norm in Anglo-American writing. Mauranen (1994) describes how the Finnish preference for remaining distant as a writer and leaving more work for the reader results in several differences in writing conventions that sometimes make Finnish writers seem insufficient in their writing. The two such differences studied by Mauranen are the way the text and its contents are organised and writers' use of metatext. Mauranen (1994:32) states that Finnish writers prefer to start their text afar from the topic and systematically approach it through description and argumentation whereas Anglo-American writers introduce the topic in the beginning and support it throughout the rest of the text with the help of repetition and arguments. The latter could be seen as more reader-friendly because it tells the reader what the text is about and how all the arguments relate to it.

In the context of the present study, metatext and signposting language are used to describe textual expressions such as *In the next section we will examine…* and *The ideas introduced in the previous section will also be relevant here.* Mauranen (1993:13) states that Finnish writers use considerably less signposting language in their writing than Anglo-American writers and prefer stating facts and leaving the presence of the writer out of their text. This type of writing seems bare and sometimes even clumsy, and it forces the reader to make the connections between various parts of the text him- or herself. Hyland (2003:48) explains how metatextual elements, such as reviewing and

previewing parts of the text, create clarity and make the text easier for the reader to follow. Writers should be aware of the differences between different writing cultures because they will otherwise experience problems with writing in the unfamiliar context. Many of the problems Finnish writers reportedly experience with their writing can perhaps be linked to Mauranen's suggestions about the general nature of Finnish writing.

The following paragraphs will briefly examine the cultural explanations Mauranen (1993, 1994) has offered for the differences between Finnish and Anglo-American writing conventions. As was stated before, Mauranen (1994:33) considers Finnish a reader-responsible language due to various reasons, including that Finnish writers prefer stating their purpose towards the end of the text and do not necessarily state it explicitly. Mauranen does not give any explanations for this in her articles, but she points out that even though the Finnish form of organisation demands more attention from the reader, it is not necessarily worse because it implies that the reader is intelligent enough to understand the text without explicit help from the writer (Mauranen 1994:37). The same could perhaps be applied to metatext and Finnish writers' preference for not using it. Mauranen (1994:35-36) suggests that the reason for the lack of metatext in Finnish writing is the desire not to state the obvious. The use of signposting language has sometimes even been seen as the sign of bad writing because a good text will make everything clear without metatextual help from the writer. Mauranen (1994:35) even describes how Finnish writers consciously acknowledge their distaste for using metatextual elements in their writing. It is curious how Finns universally seem to consider signposting language something to be avoided in writing, even when they know what uses it serves.

Mauranen (1994:37) suggests that the reason for this could be the relatively homogenous Finnish cultural context that allows writers to assume that most of their readers have similar educational background and shared knowledge. The Anglo-American context includes writers from several countries and cultural backgrounds, which perhaps forces writers to be more explicit and tell their reader exactly what the text is going to be about and how it is going to achieve its goals (Mauranen 1994:37). Finnish writers should keep

in mind that the texts they write in English should be understood by everyone regardless of what their background is. To achieve this, Finnish writers should become more aware of the cultural elements that can guide their writing and make it hard to understand for someone who is more familiar with the Anglo-American context.

Apart from the larger issues that were examined in the previous paragraphs, there are some smaller difficulties that Finnish writers may encounter with academic writing. Some of them relate to Hyland's (2003:31) summary of differences between first and foreign language writers but are more than mere surface errors. For example, writers with an insufficient mastery of the English language may not be aware of the differences between formal and informal language and which expressions are suitable for the genre and context in question. As Mauranen (1994:34) states, Finnish writers stereotypically do not state their purpose early on. This can result in the fact that Finnish writers may not feel comfortable using topic and concluding sentences whose function is to indicate what the text is and was about. Using sources can also cause trouble for Finnish writers. While sources are naturally referred to in texts written in Finland, the way this is taught in Finnish senior high school is significantly different from the Anglo-American conventions. What is required in the Finnish matriculation exam and what is therefore taught extensively by teachers of the Finnish language is that everything about the original writer and publication must be included in the text. If writers have not become familiar with other ways of referring to sources, they might use this method, which is very different from the Anglo-American system that only incorporates the writer's name, year of publication and page numbers. As the examples given in this and the previous paragraphs show, there are many larger and smaller issues that can cause trouble for Finnish writers.

3 THE STUDY

3.1 The research question and hypothesis

The aim of the present study is to discover what types of problems Finnish university students studying English have with their first English academic writing course and which of them are the most common. Of interest are also students' own opinions on their

problems and strengths, what possibly causes them and what they consider to be significant problems in their writing. The replies will be compared to studies conducted in the area of second language writing. Students' attitudes and what they think of their writing process will also be looked at in the study, but it is not a significant part of the analysis.

The reason for conducting the study is that second language writing is a significant field and that studies relating to it can offer both students and teachers valuable information about their work. Students might find it easier to identify their strengths and weaknesses if they are made aware of the theories related to second language writing and the cultural factors that influence the writing process. Furthermore, the data for the present study was collected among students who were currently in the middle of their first academic writing class, so teachers might find the results helpful and of interest.

The students were all language students studying English as either their major or minor subject in university, so the hypothesis was that they would share some characteristics, such as sufficient language skills. However, Hyland (2003:32) mentions individual differences such as age, expectations and learning history as factors that contribute to the writing habits of an individual and that can either strengthen or weaken the influence of cultural characteristics. The group of students that provided the data for this study is therefore likely to consist of writers with very different types of problems and varying amounts of difficulty. The conclusions drawn by Mauranen (1993, 1994) will be looked at with particular interest because they give concrete date about Finnish writers to which the results of the present study can be easily compared. Based on Mauranen's findings, it would be logical to assume that the students would experience varying amounts of difficulties with signposting language and the organisation of content in their texts.

3.2 The questionnaire and data

The data for this study was collected by handing out a questionnaire (see Appendix 1) to university students of English currently studying their first academic writing class in English at the University of Jyväskylä. The questionnaire is included in the appendix of the present study for further examination. Two separate first-year academic writing classes led by two different teachers were given the questionnaires. Thirty-one students in total answered the questions. This data was collected in November during the students' academic writing class. The class had started in September and students had had one session per week. The first group of students had not been notified beforehand whereas the second group knew about the questionnaire. The second group also answered the questions entirely without the teacher being present and they were allowed to leave after they were done. The first group answered the questions in the middle of the class with the teacher being absent for about five minutes. Each group spent approximately ten minutes answering the questions.

Thirty-one students received the questionnaire and filled in their answers. As the students were likely to have varying amounts of experience, the questionnaire included a question about whether they had been involved with this type of writing before. The answers divided the students into two halves, the first half having had no prior experience and the second half having different types and different amounts of it. For example, student 26 has written academic texts in German and Swedish while student 15 had had no prior experience. Some students had written academic texts in English before in other contexts, such as during their student exchange year.

The purpose of the questions was to determine what students themselves see as their major problems in academic writing so that this data could be compared to previous studies and theories on foreign language writing. The questionnaire first included a list of academic writing conventions, and the students' task was to mark how much difficulty they had with each one. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of open questions about writing and problems. In addition to the questionnaire, a separate question about

signposting language was later sent to one of the two groups by e-mail, but only four students replied to it.

3.3. Methods of analysis

The results of the first part of the questionnaire will be analysed with quantitative methods. The students' replies will be counted together and I will convert them into statistics that show what the most common problems were and what percentage of students found them difficult or easy. The results will then be analysed by comparing them to previous research in order to see whether they support or contradict it. I will also attempt to find possible reasons for the results by referring to previous research in the field, especially the articles by Mauranen.

The open questions and the one additional question will be analysed by concentrating on what the students have said about their writing and by drawing possible conclusions from them, such as whether the majority of them reports difficulty with the same aspects of academic writing. There are some variables that need to be taken into account here, such as whether the students had already had previous experience with academic writing before this particular English course. This question was asked in the questionnaire. In addition to this, I will compare these results to the statistics drawn from the first set of questions and see if they support each other or not.

4 WRITING PROBLEMS

4.1 Problems experienced by the students

The first part of the questionnaire consisted of sixteen elements of academic writing, ranging from simple to more complex. The students reported how much trouble they thought they had had with each issue on the scale of *very little – little – average – much – very much*. The questionnaire with all the questions can be seen in Appendix 1. The results have been turned into graphical form by creating a figure that shows how the students replied to each question. The figure can be found in Appendix 2. The bottom row shows the number of answers for each question while the vertical line indicates

which question is being discussed. This line corresponds to the numbered questions on the left.

When looking at the figure, there are several factors that have to be taken into consideration. Several students failed to answer the questions properly and made mistakes when filling in their answers. When answering the second question, which was about using relative clauses, one student answered both "little" and "much". Because of this, the student's answer was excluded from the results, meaning that instead of the usual thirty-one answers, there were only thirty answers to the second question. Several other questions also received less than thirty-one answers because some students had forgotten to answer them. This will be mentioned when dealing with questions that had a smaller number of answers than the total thirty-one.

The results of the open questions will be presented by summarising what the most common answers were and by providing examples. The examples and students have been numbered for easier reading so that it can be seen whether some students were quoted more than others and so that answers by the same students can be compared if needed.

4.1.1 Multiple choice questions: diversity and problems

The most common answers to almost all of the questions were "little" and "average". Only two questions received answers that did not follow this pattern. These questions were numbers ten and sixteen and handled writing a conclusion and a bibliography. Writing a conclusion seems to divide the students as ten out of thirty-one reported much trouble with it while nine experienced little trouble. One student had very little trouble, three very much and the others an average amount. This is the only question in which neither "average" nor "little" was the most common answer. The students' experiences with writing a bibliography are also interesting because they are so even. Seven students out of twenty-nine reported very little trouble with this issue and exactly the same number of students experienced an average amount of trouble. The number of students who had little trouble is eight out of twenty-nine while the number of students who had much trouble is six. No other question had as many students report very little trouble as

this one, which together with the other answers to this question shows that students feel that writing a bibliography is not very problematic. This could be caused by the fact that writing a bibliography is an issue that is covered well and practiced in the course the students were attending.

The large number of students who reported little trouble with the key issues presented in the questionnaire seems to indicate that the students generally were quite confident with their writing skills. However, it is also possible that the students did not have enough time to reflect on their experiences due to the limited time they were given and therefore chose what they felt were the safest answers. As Hyland (2003:34) states, students often identify inadequate language skills as their major problems. These types of problems are easy to notice and students who struggle with the language understandably may not give much consideration to more complex issues. English (2000:18) explains how simply knowing about academic writing conventions is not enough and that students also need to understand how to use them and what function they serve in the text. A further possibility is therefore that the students could not properly identify their problems with certain key issues and decided to choose the middle ground.

The results clearly support the obvious: students had more trouble with complex issues rather than surface features. For example, nobody reported that they had very much trouble with formal language and expressions, whereas ten students out of thirty reported that they had much or very much trouble with linking paragraphs together in order to form a clear structure for their paper. At first glance this seems to contradict Hyland's (2003:34) and Jones's (2000:40) statements that students often see surface features as their major problems. However, the questionnaire for the present study did not ask students about their language skills. Formal vocabulary and expressions are a surface feature compared to more complex key issues with academic writing, but they are a more advanced feature than mere grammatical competence.

The issues that received the largest number of answers stating that the students had very much trouble with them were using connectors, linking paragraphs together with ideas

and using critical thinking and discussion. The last two are complex issues that require not only writing skills but ability to organise content into understandable segments. It was therefore not surprising that some students experienced trouble with them. Jones (2000:38) highlights the complex nature of academic writing and the importance of providing students with suitable training to master these issues and produce good academic texts. One key issue explained by Jones (2000:41) is the writer's responsibility to organise content in a way that is appropriate for the writing assignment in question.

Each of the questions that received the largest amount of "very much" answers, however, also had some students answer that they had very little trouble with these issues. For example, four students out of thirty-one reported very much trouble with using connectors, which is exactly the same as the number of students who had very little trouble with this issue. Almost all questions had answers ranging from one extreme to another, which illustrates that the students are individuals with their own specific strengths and weaknesses rather than clear cultural stereotypes. This is what Hyland (2003:32-37) addresses by pointing out that no culture is homogenous and nobody's writing is simply a sum of stereotypes often connected with their culture and background.

4.1.2 Open questions: present attitudes

The first of the six open questions asked the students about their major problems at the beginning of the writing course. The aim of this question was to determine what types of difficulties students with little experience in academic writing in English would be likely to experience. The most common answer to this question was the use of formal language and structures, but several students also reported difficulty with writing clear and functional paragraphs. A group of students said they had trouble starting the writing process and planning when and how to begin their work. Some students said they had trouble with the English language, but they were in the minority. This is contradictory to what Hyland (2003:34) and Jones (2000:40) state about how students often see their language skills as the cause of their difficulties. This contradiction can perhaps be explained by the fact that the students who filled in the questionnaire were university students with English as either their major or minor subject, so a certain level of skill

could be expected from them. The students discussed by Jones (2000), for example, were exchange students majoring in other subjects. The following examples (1-3) show how some of the students expressed their early difficulties with academic writing:

(1) To learn to use the language academically and succeed in writing formal language. (Student 2)

(2) Probably getting used to the highly formal way of writing and remembering to pay attention to even the smallest of details. (Student 13)

(3) The amount of work scared me and it was difficult to get started. (Student 14)

The answers to this question contradict the students' answers in the multiple choice part of the questionnaire. Only three students out of thirty-one reported much trouble with formal language in the first part, but this was the most common answer to the first open question. One possible explanation for this could be that students might have thought about the entire writing course when filling in their answers for the multiple choice questions whereas this open question implicitly asked them about their problems in the beginning. It could therefore be argued that the students had trouble with formal language in the beginning but that the course helped them improve.

The second question was about what the students saw as their major problems in the middle of the course when they were filling in the questionnaires. Some of the students still reported trouble with formal language and structural issues, but the most common problem was finding suitable sources for their paper. When the students were filling in this questionnaire, they were beginning to work on an expository paper for which they had to find their own source material. Instead of considering their academic writing skills, many students were more worried about this contextual problem, as the following examples (4-6) illustrate:

(5) Citations, formal language, bibliography, structuring a paper etc… (Student 4)

(4) Gathering the material needed for the Paper2. It's hard as one can not imagine what are the ways to search for some. (Student 5)

(6) Focusing my subject and pulling my thoughts together (Student 19)

In addition to trouble with sources, several students said they found it problematic to use logical connectors in their writing. This is reflected in the multiple choice questions of the questionnaire since seven students reported very much or much trouble with logical connectors. There were also several students who had trouble with organising their text and making it easy to understand, referring to sources and writing specific parts of their paper, such as the bibliography. These issues are so diverse that it is impossible to declare any specific problem universal for the group, but it is interesting to note how many of the reported problems could have cultural reasons behind them. For example, the difficulties with citing sources could be a result of how the issue is taught differently in the Finnish upper secondary school. Organisation of text, which Mauranen (1994) identifies as a major difficulty for Finnish writers, will be discussed later in the present study.

The issues reported in the first two questions are also relevant to the third question, which was about whether the students had experienced any trouble that had not been included in the multiple choice questions at the beginning of the questionnaire. Some students chose not to answer this question at all, which indicates that they had no additional trouble. Those students who did reply reported lack of motivation and interest and trouble with planning their work and finding time to do the actual writing. The following examples (7-9) show some of the answers the students gave to the third question:

> (7) Yes, producing plans for my papers beforehand (Student 4)
>
> (8) Motivation to check, rewrite, and overall do all the stuff needed. (Student 5)
>
> (9) The schedule is kind of tight. (Student 29)

From the answers to both the second and the third question, it can be gathered that the students were more concerned with their own personal attitudes to writing rather than general difficulties with academic writing. While some of them did report difficulties with key issues, most of the students concentrated on how they felt about writing and the particular assignment they were working on. This could be because these issues are easy for them to notice and describe.

4.2 Students' strengths

The fourth question asked students what they felt were their major strengths. This does not explicitly relate to the topic of the present study, but examining the answers leads to interesting conclusions. Several students reported that they felt they had no clear strong points, but those students who did list something often mentioned their language skills, both grammatical aspects and the ability to use formal language, and their positive attitude to writing. Another major strength that several students reported was their ability to create arguments and have strong opinions. Both Hyland (2003:38) and English (2000:17) state that argumentation and critical thinking are essential elements of good writing in the western context. Hyland in particular stresses the importance of the writers' own point of view. The fact that several students identified these elements as their major strengths (examples 10-13) shows that not all of the students had trouble with what is generally considered one of the most complex and important elements in good writing.

(10) good own ideas, clarity arguments (Student 8

(11) Writing out my own opinions and arguments. (Student 9)

(12) I think the grammatical side of my texts has been quite sound so far (Student 13)

(13) I have been good at writing introductions and thesis statements. Using formal language has also been relatively easy. (Student 11)

These answers further support Hyland (2003:37) who states that while culture often functions as a factor in determining what writers' problems and strengths are, it alone is not decisive. While the group of students who provided the data for the present study do have some problems that could be seen characteristic for Finnish writers not yet familiar with all the conventions of Anglo-American writing culture, they were a diverse group with their individual difficulties and strong points. This is where Hyland's (2003:32) statement about the importance of individual differences and factors becomes relevant.

4.3 Metatextual elements and the organisation of text

The students were later sent an additional question about how they felt about using signposting language. The question was sent through e-mail and only four students replied to it. Two students said they do not feel comfortable using sign-posting language while one student answered that he understands the importance of it. One student said that she does her best to avoid signposting language in her writing.

As was stated by Mauranen (1993:13), Finnish is often seen as a reader-responsible language that places the responsibility of understanding the text on the shoulders of the reader instead of demanding that the writer uses textual methods to make the text easier to follow. Anglo-American writing conventions tend to be the exact opposite, so it could be assumed that Finnish writers would have trouble with this issue. We will first look at the topic of signposting language because it was a major theme in Mauranen's second article and the students' answers to the additional question about this topic can be directly compared to Mauranen's findings.

Mauranen (1994:35) compared English texts written by Finnish and Anglo-American writers and explained how the writers had very different approaches to metatextual elements. The Anglo-American writer used them to explain what the text was about and to guide the reader through it whereas the Finnish writer proceeded with the facts without explaining anything. This drastic difference is supported by the answers the students gave to the additional question. Two students admitted that they do not feel comfortable using signposting language in their writing and one even claimed that they try to avoid it but that sometimes they let some of it through. This implies that the student considers signposting language to be something that has to be avoided. Such a notion is addressed by Mauranen (1994:35-36) who states that it is characteristic for Finnish writers to want to avoid stating the obvious and that they are taught not to use metatextual elements in school. Part of the answer one student gave confirms this proposal. The student cannot be identified because the answer was received through e-mail and it is impossible to know which questionnaire is hers.

(14) Earlier in upper secondary, it was a absolute no no to tell in your essay what you are going to write about.

The findings in the previous paragraph support Mauranen's proposal that Finnish writers characteristically leave the responsibility of understanding the text on the shoulders of the reader. In addition to the lack of metatextual elements, another sign of this is the organization of the text and the Finnish tendency to start from details and state the main topic towards the end of the text (Mauranen 1994:33-34). It cannot be explicitly examined if this is true for the students in the context of the present study because none of their texts have been collected as data, but their answers to the questions seem to support Mauranen. Several students reported trouble with writing well-structured and functional essays in their answers to the second question, which handled the students' problems in the middle of the course. Specific issues that the students mentioned were topic sentences and thesis statements, using connectors and writing good paragraphs. Linking paragraphs together to create a clear structure for the paper was one of the key issues that received the highest number of "very much" answers in the first part of the questionnaire. From these answers, it could be concluded that the students were not entirely comfortable with the Anglo-American way of organizing ideas. The results therefore support Mauranen and her arguments regarding the characteristics of Finnish writers.

5 CONCLUSION

The purpose of the present study was to determine the most common difficulties that Finnish writers experienced with their first academic writing course in English in university. Students were asked to fill in a questionnaire that asked about their experiences, both positive and negative, and the process they felt they had made as writers during the course. The questionnaire consisted of both multiple choice questions and open questions. The former were analysed with quantitative methods while qualitative methods where used to draw conclusions from the former. The data was compared to previous studies in the field to determine whether it supported or contradicted it.

The results show that the most common problems that the students reported were complex issues such as the organisation of text, metatextual elements and writing certain sections of their papers, such as conclusions. Surface errors such as the use of formal language were also commonly experienced by some students. These findings support earlier studies conducted in the field of second language writing and present many of the same difficulties that can be seen as characteristic for second language writers. At the same time the students' Finnish background can be linked to several of the problems they experienced, including the use of signposting language, organisation of text and using citations. However, no examples of actual writing produced by the students were analysed for the present study, so it is impossible to know how well the students' answers corresponded with their work. The questionnaire was also relatively simplistic due to the small scale of the study. A more in-depth perspective and more varied methods of gathering data, such as a more complex questionnaire and actual student writing to be analysed, could give more interesting results and could be an area of further research.

The findings of the present study provide valuable information to both students and teachers who are planning their work. Students can become more aware of the nature of their problems, what is generally expected of them and what types of effects their cultural and educational background might have on them as writers. Teachers may find it interesting to observe their students and see if the findings of the present study are reflected among them. When they become more aware of the roots of the problems, guiding students to overcoming them should also be an easier task.

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Appendix 1

I am doing my proseminar about the difficulties students experience with their first academic writing course in English. Please answer the following questions as well as you can. You do not have to write down your name. The replies will not be shown to outside parties.

A Fill in how much trouble you have had with the following.

	Very little	Little	Average	Much	Very much
1. Using formal vocabulary and expressions					
2. Using relative clauses					
3. Using articles					
4. Using tenses					
5. Using congruence					
6. Avoiding run-on sentences					
7. Writing a thesis statement					
8. Topic/concluding sentences					
9. Writing an introduction					
10. Writing a conclusion					
11. Using connectors to link ideas together (*however, therefore* etc.)					
12. Making each paragraph consist of one or few logical ideas					
13. Linking paragraphs together to create a clear structure for the paper					
14. Critical thinking and discussion instead of repeating what you have read					
15. Referring to sources correctly (not how it is done in senior high, for example)					
16. Writing a bibliography					

B Please answer the following questions as well as you can. Provide examples if possible.

What were your biggest problems at the beginning of the course?

What are your biggest problems now?

Have you encountered any problems not included in the list?

What have been your strongest points?

Had you already had experience with this sort of writing before this course?

What are your thoughts on writing a portfolio in the end of the course?

Appendix 2

16. Writing a bibliography

15. Referring to sources correctly (not how it is done in senior high, for example)

14. Critical thinking and discussion instead of repeating what you have read

13. Linking paragraphs together to create a clear structure for the paper

12. Making each paragraph consist of one or few logical ideas

11. Using connectors to link ideas together (however, therefore etc.)

10. Writing a conclusion

9. Writing an introduction

8. Topic/concluding sentences

7. Writing a thesis statement

6. Avoiding run-on sentences

5. Using congruence

4. Using tenses

3. Using articles

2. Using relative clauses

1. Using formal vocabulary and expressions

Legend:
- Very little
- Little
- Average
- Much
- Very much