

**SURVEY REPORT**

**CHALLENGES OF WRITING THESES IN ENGLISH  
AT UNIVERSITIES OF APPLIED SCIENCES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Writing research texts in English is challenging, especially for non-native writers. This report focuses on the linguistic challenges of final theses written in English at Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS's). The report is based on a survey of programme managers' and language instructors' views about the challenges of thesis writing in English. The number of respondents is 33, representing almost all UAS's who implement degree programs in English. The aim of the survey was to gain estimates of the skill level of English used in theses, to learn about the current methods of language support available to students, to identify the challenges of the current methods, and to find out how current methods could be improved. The findings showed that the role of theses written in English is considerable and that, despite continuous work to develop the linguistic quality of theses, a lot remains to be done.

This report suggests that since the number of international programmes and international students is growing and more and more employers require theses written in English, guidance for writing in English should be incorporated into the Thesis processes at universities of applied sciences, which is not currently done at all institutions. Writing in English is currently seen more as a 'final check' of a Bachelor's Thesis rather than as a developmental process. Respondents reported numerous problems that are difficult to fix at a late stage: everyday English style, unclear logic, plagiarism, irrelevant content, missing or unanswered research questions.

80% of respondents report that there is room for improvement in the level of English in Bachelor's studies. Early intervention by a language expert is vital for reaching the desired skill level before the 4th year. UAS's are encouraged to design a language support process for those who write theses in English for programmes taught in English or other programmes. Several options have been suggested in the report, from separate or integrated courses to guidance processes. Overall, all students should perhaps not be allowed to write a thesis in English: UAS's could set up systematic criteria for language level requirements as proposed in criteria used by some UAS's. Last but not least, principles of good academic writing in any language should become a criteria for writing other reports as well as theses. Perhaps students could write systematically write academic papers with the assistance and supervision of both subject teachers and language experts. These improvements could raise the level of writing in all languages, not only English.

Key words: Bachelor's Thesis in English, university of applied sciences (UAS's), language guidance in English

## TIIVISTELMÄ

Tekijät: FL Marjatta Huhta, FT Teppo Varttala, FM Olli Ervaala

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Englanninkielisten tutkimusraporttien laatiminen on vaativa tehtävä, etenkin ei-englanninkielisille kirjoittajille. Tässä raportissa käsitellään suomalaisten ammattikorkeakoulujen englanninkielisten opinnäytetöiden kielellisiä haasteita. Raportti perustuu ohjelmajohtajien ja kielenopettajien keskuudessa kartoitettuihin näkemyksiin englanninkielisten opinnäytetöiden kielellisistä haasteista. Vastaaaja oli 33 lähes kaikista ammattikorkeakouluista, joissa on englanninkielisiä ohjelmia. Kartoituksen tavoitteena oli selvittää missä määrin opinnäytteitä laaditaan englanniksi, kerätä arvioita opinnäytteissä käytetyn englannin tasosta, saada tietoa käytössä olevista tavoista tukea opinnäytteiden kieliasua, tunnistaa nykyisten käytänteiden haasteet sekä löytää tapoja parantaa nykyisiä kieliasua koskevia käytänteitä. Tulosten perusteella englanninkielisten opinnäytteiden määrä on merkittävä ja huolimatta jatkuvasta opinnäytteiden kieliasuun liittyvästä kehittämistyöstä parannettavaa löytyy vielä paljon.

On tärkeää, että kielten asiantuntija tulee prosessiin mukaan ennen neljättä opintovuotta, jolloin on myöhäistä vaikuttaa tutkimuskirjoittamisen tasoon. Raportti esittää, että englannin kielellä kirjoitettavat opinnäytetyöt pitäisi sisällyttää opinnäytetyöprosessiin, koska kansainvälisiä ohjelmia ja vaihto-opiskelijoita on yhä enemmän ja toimeksiantajat pyytävät opinnäytetöitä yhä enemmän englanniksi.

Raportissa on selvitetty useita tapoja, jolla ammattikorkeakoulut voisivat vaikuttaa englanninkielisten opinnäytetöiden tasoon. 80% vastanneista 33 koulutusjohtajasta tai kielenopettajasta katsoo, että englanninkielisten opinnäytetöiden tasossa on parantamisen varaa. Kaikkien opiskelijoiden ei kannata antaa tehdä opinnäytetyötä englanniksi: on mahdollista asettaa kielen arvosanarajoja, järjestää testi tai rajoittaa perusteita, joiden nojalla työ voidaan kirjoittaa englanniksi. Hyvän tutkimuskirjoittamisen periaatteet pitäisi ottaa mukaan jo aiemmilla luokilla tehtäviin kirjoittamistehtäviin, joiden laatua arvioisivat sekä ammattiaineen että kielen ohjaajat. Tämänkaltaiset parannukset voisivat nostaa asiakirjoittamisen tasoa niin englanniksi kuin kaikissakin kielissä.

Avaisanat: opinnäytetyö, ammattikorkeakoulu, englannin kielenohjaus

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with the challenges of theses written in English at universities of applied sciences (UAS's). The findings are based on a survey organized in the spring of 2007 by degree programme managers of English-speaking programmes and language instructors who provide linguistic guidance for writing in English. Thirty-three replies were received.

Writing a good research text is a challenge, even in one's own language. It is time consuming even for a professional and often a new genre for a student. The students may not be sufficiently familiar with research texts to understand what is expected of them. The text must adhere to expectations arising from

- the practices of the discipline (e.g. technology, social science, business),
- the discourse community (company, hospital),
- discourse practice (that of site managers, nurses, cultural managers),
- the genre (research report, presentation, paper, meeting),
- the discourse structure of the genre (introduction, background, method...),
- the structure of research reports (e.g., an abstract includes the following portions: subject area, objective, need/cause, method of study, main (type of) results, impact of the study)
- register (special terminology and formulation practices of the genre),
- referencing practices
- style
- metatext (writing text to the reader to express how different parts of the study are linked together)
- logic and coherence.

These are some of the linguistic issues. However, they can only be dealt with after the major challenge has been tackled: How to create a logical, coherent academic work with a reasonable research question and an outcome that satisfies both the university supervisor and the commissioner from a company, clinic or city organization.

When a student at a university of applied sciences (UAS) must accomplish all this in a foreign language, the challenges become even greater. The genre of research reports is not well known to students. Their experience with English is normally limited to everyday English seen and heard in films, songs, on the Internet and on TV, colloquial or marketing English or textbooks with relatively easy English. In order to get an idea of research report writing, they should first read a number of research books and articles in the field. This helps to familiarize them with the genre, register and style of the student's own field. The challenges for the student are real and unexaggerated.

English is, fortunately, used as a *lingua franca* in business and industry and many other fields. This means that the English produced by a non-native cannot be expected to reach the level of a native speaker. However, it can clearly be comprehensible, functional, utilitarian<sup>1</sup> international English.

This survey report concerns final projects or theses written in English at universities of applied sciences. The general view of rectors and degree programme managers is that more and more studies are written in English. Statistical data, however, are not available. Language instructors and participants at language coordinators' biannual meetings have reported similar observations. English language teachers frequently discuss the increasing workload coming from this area - and questions concerning the resources needed for this "invisible" work have also become an issue.

At some universities English studies are so limited that procedures linked to theses in English have not yet been created or are in the process of being created. Rumours have spread that theses produced at universities of applied sciences fail to meet criteria; other rumours have claimed that theses in English by universities of applied sciences are better supervised than those at science universities. Thus it is worthwhile to find answers to the following questions:

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed account of the utilitarian discourse system, where the common language serves the useful purposes of the discourse community can be found in Scollon & Scollon (2001:110- ).

- To what **extent** are final projects/theses written in English?
- What is the estimate of the **level of English** of theses written in English?
- What are the current **methods of language help** available/used?
- What **challenges** are reported when it comes to the current processes?
- What **improvements** could be made either by joint efforts or at the level of individual institutions?

Sending a questionnaire to degree programme managers and language instructors is a very quick and easy - and unfortunately superficial - way of receiving data about the present status. A deeper analysis could be possible through a thorough analysis of current studies in English, interviews with language instructors and degree programme managers and comparisons of good practices. However, this short survey hopes to serve as a starting point for a closer examination.

The objective of the survey is to provide university administrators and degree programme coordinators with ideas on how the process of theses in English could be tackled at their own universities, if the process has not already been fixed.

The Finnish word 'opinnäytetyö' can be translated in numerous ways: **final project, Bachelor's thesis, Master's Thesis, graduate study**. It seems that the term 'thesis' (Bachelor's Thesis, Master's Thesis) has gained popularity amongst universities of applied sciences. This can be defended insofar as such studies have both theoretical and practical components. If the study is primarily of a practical nature, such as development work for organizations, product development projects, programming or manual writing projects, or artistic production and is composed of a practical solution/product, the term 'final project' may better capture the practical nature of such a study.

This report continues by looking at some background factors to thesis writing in section 2. Section 3 describes the survey procedure, followed by the results in Section 4. Section 5 discusses the results and suggests some conclusions.

## 2 THESIS WRITING AT UNIVERSITIES OF APPLIED SCIENCES

The total number of theses produced by universities of applied sciences has been fairly stable since 2002, when the Polytechnic network became complete. In 2002 19,652 Bachelor's studies were written, and the figure for 2006 is only 20,919. The AMKOTA database does not record which language was used for the studies. Therefore the question of which studies were done in English is worth asking.

### 2.1 Thesis Writing as Part of Research and Development

Universities of applied sciences - earlier translated into English as “polytechnics” - were established in the 1990s as a result of a decision to base the Finnish higher education system on a parallel structure with science universities on the one hand and universities of applied sciences on the other hand.

The mission of universities of applied sciences is set forth in the *Polytechnics Act*. In short, universities of applied sciences have been established to provide higher education for **professional positions** which are based on **research** and **artistic considerations**. Teaching is aimed at supporting **professional growth**. Universities of applied sciences are meant to do **applied research and development** work which serves **applied higher education, working life** and **regional development**, taking into consideration the area's economic structure. Universities of applied sciences also maintain and consolidate adult education through degree studies and continuing professional education to support **competencies needed in working life**. The *Polytechnics Act* also states that universities of applied sciences have **freedom of teaching and research**. This should also apply to the interpretation of applied research and development.

The general objectives of degrees are to provide students with



1. broad, practical basic knowledge and skills for operating in expert positions
  2. prerequisites for being able to make observations and keep up with the developments in the field
  3. capabilities for continuous learning
  4. sufficient language and communication skills
  5. competencies required by international activity in the relevant field
- (Polytechnics Decree 1995, §7, translated by the writers)

Point two above, developments in applied university fields, often requires the used of international sources and point three, continuous learning, requires learning about current development in the EU and globally, i.e. knowledge that is available only in foreign languages. Two of the points, point four and point five, imply that graduates should also be able to cope and operate professionally in foreign language situations in their fields. It is interesting that decision-makers have set forth four out of five objectives that require the ability to obtain information in foreign languages and operate on a “sufficient” level. It is therefore in line with the objectives of universities of applied sciences that foreign languages also be used as the language of final project reports or theses.

Moreover, polytechnic education allows degree programmes to be implemented in languages other than the two domestic languages, Finnish and Swedish. At this time the applied university sector implements numerous Bachelor’s degree programmes and a few Master’s degree programmes in English.

Therefore, final projects supervised by universities of applied sciences should be included among the objectives of applied research and development, which optimally benefit the surrounding region, economy, adjacent organizations and expert personnel within the field.

The objective of theses is expressed in the Decree as follows:

develop and demonstrate the student’s capacity to apply his/her knowledge and skills relating to his/her field of study in an expert position (Polytechnics Decree 352/2003)

In the thesis process the student gains degree-programme specific, professional and vocational expertise as well as general competencies for working

life. The objective may be to identify central problems of the specialty area, to examine optional solutions and to apply research results and practices in the field to new and changing situations. (Opinnäytetyön laadun tekijät 2006: 6)

## 2.2 Thesis Writing in Universities of Applied Sciences

Intensive activity has been focused on developing processes for thesis writing work at universities of applied sciences. This study will make no effort to list them all, but rather will provide some sources for further information.

Based on AMKOTA data from 2004, more than 21,000 theses are written at universities of applied sciences.

**Reviews of studies on thesis work** can be found for example in Irene Isohanni's and Maisa Toljamo's article (2005) which reports on fourteen different studies analysing different aspects of Bachelor's theses at universities of applied sciences. Many of them are Master's theses but there are also licentiate studies by Varjonen (1998), Rissanen (2001), Alanko & Turunen (1999) and Frilander (2000), and dissertations by Kilpiäinen (2003) and Rissanen (2003). An article in KeVer by Kari Salo, Timo Toikko and Minna Söderkvist discusses the **criteria for a good thesis** at universities of applied sciences. Additionally, the Ministry of Education has organized a few studies in this area, for example Stenvall (1999), *Tutkimus- ja kehitystyö ammattikorkeakouluissa* (Research and Development Work at Universities of Applied Sciences) (2004:7).

As for practical guidelines on how to write a research report, most universities of applied sciences have a website available to guide students in through their thesis work. A joint study funded by the Ministry of Education describing the **quality features of theses**, which gives detailed **recommendations** and samples of **good practices** can be found in *Opinnäytetyön laadun tekijät - Suosituksia opinnäytetyötä ohjaaville* (Quality Factors of Theses - Recommendations for Supervisors) (2006). The reference listings in the above documents provide a sense of the intensive development activity that is underway to improve the academic level of final project studies.

### 2.3 Common Denominators of Academic Writing

Scholarly activity in the field of academic writing has been active. This report is not the place to report on it. Some sources may, however, be mentioned.

Bhatia (1993: 76-100) discusses research genres, describes the components parts of a research paper and gives examples. The text is written from the point of view of a non-native and is therefore useful for second language learners. Dudley-Evans (1995) discusses the teacher's role in teaching academic writing to second language learners. Swales (1990) discusses *English in academic and research settings*. This account is linguistically detailed and helpful, but some examples may perhaps be too subtle for a second language learner. Swales and Feak (1995) report on essential tasks and skills that graduate students must have in academic writing.

Ann M. Johns<sup>2</sup>, a professor and literacy researcher, summarizes the principles of academic textual practices (1997), which are widely approved and quoted in academic communities across disciplines.

- Texts must be explicit. Paraphrases should be avoided if specialized academic vocabulary exists. Ambiguity must be avoided.
- The topic and argument should be explained in the introduction.
- Writers should provide “maps” or “signposts” for the reader throughout the text, telling the readers where they have been in the text and where they are going.
- The language of texts should create a distance between the writer and the text to give the appearance of objectivity.
- Texts should maintain a “rubber-gloved” quality of voice and register. They must show a kind of reluctance to touch one's meanings with one's naked fingers. (Elbow 1991:145)
- Writers should take a guarded stance, especially when presenting arguments and results. Hedging one's statements through the use of modals (may, might) and other forms (it is possible that...) is perhaps the most common way to be guarded.

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<sup>2</sup> Johns (1997: 58-64) draws the principles of academic textual practices from three main sources: *Reflections on Academic Discourse* (Elbow 1991), *Words and Lives: An Anthropologist and Author* (Geertz 1988), and *The Scribal Society: An Essay on Literacy and Schooling in the Information Age* (Purves 1990). She also refers to Dudley-Evans 1995.

- Texts should display a vision of reality, shared by its members, about the particular discourse community to which the text is addressed (or the particular faculty member who made the assignment)
- Academic texts should display a set of social and hierarchical relations; they should show the writer's understanding of the roles they play within the text or context.<sup>3</sup>
- Academic texts should acknowledge the complex and important nature of intertextuality, the exploitation of texts without resorting to plagiarism. Students should not resort to "knowledge-telling" but instead use texts inventively for their purposes, a practice called "knowledge-transforming". (Bereiter & Scardamalia 1989) This is not always easy, as Widdowson points out:

When people make excessive and unacknowledged use of (another text), and are found out, we call it plagiarism. When people astute in their stitching of textual patchwork, we call it creativity. It is not easy to tell the difference... If a text is always in some degree a conglomerate of theirs, how independent can its meaning be? (Widdowson 1993: 27)

- Texts should comply with the genre requirements of the community or classroom.

The above principles, though only selective, are widely accepted in academic disciplines. Many questions arise: To what extent do theses written at universities of applied sciences recognize the fact that writing in a second language is more challenging than writing in the student's native language? To what extent can we recognize and accept that not all students who are requested or required to write in a foreign language have the ability to do that? Where do universities of applied sciences stand in the process of producing adequate research papers in English?

Another consideration is whether the *lingua franca* use of English - plain, simplified, basic communication - will be sufficient to meet quality requirements for argumentative writing in theses at these institutions. Can universities of applied sciences compromise, accepting frequent, almost direct use

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<sup>3</sup> Johns reports that when she showed this to one of her students, she said: "So students have to know their place!" A student needs to know registers to play different roles. The more people use these registers the more power they can have over the situations about which they are reading or writing.

of other texts, short paragraphs of cryptic main clauses and research results with little or no interpretation, simply because of a lack of skills in argumentative writing?

Given the autonomy of applied science universities, each university can find and identify the best methods suitable for its situation and volume of studies in English. The discussion and conclusions section provides an overview of the findings of this study.

### **3 DESCRIPTION OF METHOD AND MATERIAL**

#### **3.1 Method and Design**

The incentive for this survey came from the ARENE Language Committee, which was established in 2004 as one of the permanent committees of ARENE. The need for finding out details about the status quo arises from the fact that increasing numbers of theses are written in English and discussions about problems in their quality occur when representatives of universities of applied sciences meet. The work was assigned to Teppo Varttala, then (2006) a member of the ARENE language group, and Marjatta Huhta, who has developed procedures for improving the quality of Bachelor's and Master's theses written in English. When Teppo Varttala went on leave of absence in February 2007 his work was continued by Olli Ervaala, Head of the Language Centre at the Kymenlaakso University of Applied Sciences.

Two questionnaires were designed in Finnish, one for degree programme managers and the other for language instructors. After the first round of feedback it became evident that both also had to be provided in English, as some professionals in these groups preferred to reply in English. The questionnaires were implemented using an e-questionnaire tool at Stadia.

<i>Commission by the ARENE language group</i>	<i>Sept 2006</i>
<i>Planning</i> <i>Collecting addresses</i> <i>Designing the questionnaires</i>	<i>Oct - Dec 2006</i>
<i>Translation to English and formatting to e-questionnaires</i>	<i>Jan - Feb 2007</i>
<i>Reply time</i>	<i>March - April 2007</i>
<i>Analysis and writing of the report</i>	<i>May - September 2007</i>

*Table 1. Survey design*

The following subsection 3.2 reports in greater detail on the survey process.

### **3.2 Description of the Survey**

The questionnaires were sent to two target groups: degree programme managers and language teachers who participate in the language tutoring process. The target groups were selected by contacting the Rector's conference of Applied Science Universities, who sent a request to universities of applied sciences asking for the names of degree programme managers involved with English-speaking programmes. The names were received by Marjatta Huhta. As for language instructors, Teppo Varttala sent an request to the list of language coordinators at universities of applied sciences ([kieltenvastuuopet@oamk.fi](mailto:kieltenvastuuopet@oamk.fi)) to send information about language instrutors who deal with theses at the institutions. This list of potential language instructors was sent to Varttala.

The data were collected in April 2007. Thirty-three replies were received in the form of an electronic questionnaire. Fifteen degree programme managers and 18 language teachers replied to the questionnaire. They represent 18 universities of applied sciences. Some additional comments were received mentioning that the questionnaire should have been sent not only to persons responsible for English-speaking programmes but to all language

teachers who acts as tutors for thesis writing in Finnish-speaking programmes, as well.

Replies were received from 15 senior lecturers, 5 principal lecturers, 8 degree programme managers and 5 others, such as language coordinators and other teachers. The majority of respondents (16) was 41-50 years of age, 8 were under the age of 40 and 9 were more than 51 years of age. Of the respondents, 23 were female and 10 were male.

### **3.3 Respondents**

The respondents represent Technology and Communications (14), Social Services and Health Care (9), Social Sciences Business and Administration (9) and Culture (1). The field of Technology is represented by 10 degree programmes in IT, 3 in Industrial Management, 2 in Logistics and 1 in Chemistry. In Social Services and Health Care, 8 degree programmes represent Nursing and 3 represent Social Services. Ten degree programmes represent Business, such as Business Management and International Business. Music Management belongs to the field of Culture. The size of these programmes varies from 210-270; four replies come from smaller, specialized studies in English. Two are Master's degree programmes. The number of students in the programmes varies from 10-85. The average is 26 students.

## **4 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

The results are reported in the sequence of the questions in the survey, as can be seen in appendices A (sent to degree programme managers, in English) and B (sent to language instructors, in English). Section 5, Discussion and Conclusions, summarizes points reported in Section 4 in a more concise format.

### **4.1 Number of Theses Written in English at Universities of Applied Sciences**

As many as 85% of both language teachers and programme managers estimated that final projects in English are also done in Finnish-language degree programmes, not only in English-language programmes. Degree programme managers estimate that the number of projects written in English at their UAS overall will be 722 in the academic year 2007-08, including those

from Finnish-language programmes. If the total of Bachelor's studies as indicated by the AMKOTA data is around 21,000, the percentage of studies in English would be around 4%.

As for the current situation, programme managers' own degree programmes produced a total of 265 final projects in English in 2005-06. Their prediction was to have a total of 322 produced in English in 2007-08 by their own programmes.

It is worth noting that one institution contacted us and regretted that the questions were only sent to those universities of applied sciences which had an English-language programme. It is true that studies are written in Finnish and Swedish-language degree programmes, as well. This time the questionnaires were sent only to English-language programmes.

Language teachers report that they have supervised from a few to as many as 20 theses per year. The average number of theses a language instructor supervises per year has been eight.

## **4.2 Quality of English**

The respondents were asked to evaluate the level of the quality both through a multiple choice question and an open question. Of the respondents, 57.5% (33 respondents) are of the opinion that the quality of the theses varies, requires improvement or is only satisfactory. Another 33% find the quality good, and up to 9% find the English excellent.

The respondents' open comments illuminate some of the roots of problems. Some students' background skills are reported as not sufficient for theoretical research. There are problems with grammar, structure, form and layout. Sentences are too short and not linked together. Finnish-speaking students do not always reach a sufficient level for writing a thesis in English; the same applies to, for example, Russian students and the increasing number of Chinese students mentioned by respondents.

It is especially demanding to reach the required level of academic formality. The text may become simplistic since it is written in a foreign language. Graphs may be left unexplained. A research question may not be mentioned at all, or if it is, the question may remain unanswered. Discussion and con-



clusion sections are cryptic. Sometimes there is too much irrelevant background information. Students are using too much direct referencing. Sometimes the language sounds like a manual; smoother transitions are needed.

Guidance given by language teachers improves the quality of theses. One respondent mentions, *“Supervised by a competent and experienced language teacher the theses become excellent without exception.”*

#### 4.3 Permission to Write a Thesis in English

Receiving a permission to write a thesis in English seems to be fairly easy, but certain conditions must be met. Of the respondents, 67% (33) report that there are some restrictions on students' ability to choose to write a thesis in English. Universities of applied sciences generally set certain conditions for students before allowing them to write their study in English. The student can get permission to write a thesis in English based on some of the following criteria.

- It must be requested or required and the student must have sufficient language skills, or
- The topic itself must require that it be written in English, or
- The study must be part of a major research project, or
- The student must plan to continue with further studies, or
- The student is non-Finnish and non-Swedish, or
- The student must have passed an examination (e.g. the PAW examination (Passport to Academic Writing), or
- The students must receive a grade of 4 or 5 (on a scale of 0-5) for a Research Project, or
- A student of a Finnish-language programme must have a grade of 5 in English; if the grade is only a 4, other reasons need to be well established, or
- The student must have participated in a traineeship at a foreign research institute, e.g. Cern, and must complete the thesis under the supervision of that institution, or
- A combination of the above.

A commissioner (company) may require that a study be in English and the student may feel that it is easier to write the thesis in English. Sometimes writing in English improves the student's employment opportunities.

Many of the respondents indicated that they did not have sufficient knowledge about whether writing in English was always approved of: *"as far as I know yes"*, *"There are so many degree programmes that that I do not have an overview"*. *"I should think so"*, *"I do not know if yes or no"*. *"The principles for allowing the student to write in English have not yet been decided in our university of applied sciences"*.

Thus there is a reason to establish explicit criteria to refer to at institutions where these principles are still case-based, not procedural.

#### **4.4 Feedback on the Current Thesis Processes**

Respondents are not fully happy with the current processes. The majority of the respondents, 58% (19) see the current processes as either satisfactory or not very good. Another 42% consider the current processes good or excellent. Respondents characterize the process in open answers in the following way. From the point of view of degree programme managers there is supervision and guidance, but current practices do not provide enough guidance. Second, collaboration between teachers of professional studies and languages is not on a sufficient level and should be increased. Third, the thesis process is unclear, and guidelines are partial or missing.

Language instructors feel that the guidance process is still under construction (2 replies) and this applies especially to Finnish-language degree programmes. Some also mention that supervisors should be more persistent (*"jämäkämpiä"*) in requiring a higher level of language skills. Some language instructors suggested in their open-ended comments that teachers of professional subjects may not consider language as an important aspect and do not see that thesis writing requires special skills. It is often assumed that if students have passed their English classes, they should also be able to handle academic writing. In some universities language training is the student's own responsibility; it is felt that learning language skills should be left up to the student. The final comment by teachers was that theses in English cause supervisors more work, which is not taken into account in planning the

allocation of resources, and therefore not enough effort can be put into the supervision of studies in English.

#### **4.5 Resources for Language Guidance**

Of the respondents, 75% replied to this question. It is unclear whether the rest are not familiar with resources, as may be the case with programme managers who may not be aware of this particular detail, or whether they chose not to reply.

##### *Checking Abstracts*

Language instructors are allocated a certain amount of resources for checking and giving feedback to students' about their abstracts. The typical time resource is 30 minutes of work time (60% of respondents). Others vary from 15 minutes (10%) to one hour (20%) or 45 minutes (10%).

##### *Contact Classes*

Forty-two percent of respondents mention different forms of contact teaching that can improve skills for thesis writing. There are a number of solutions provided by universities of applied sciences. Some institutions give guidance as separate courses, others as part of other courses or workshops. Some mention that writing abstracts is part of an English course, for which a few hours are allotted in class.

The separate courses mentioned by several respondents are typically called Academic Writing, Technical Writing, or Scientific Writing and they vary from 1.5 to 4.5, credits.

Many respondents report that Academic Writing courses are part of methodology studies. For example, one respondent reports on four 4-hour sessions of Academic Writing in methodology workshops. The biggest resource in terms of academic points was found in one degree programme in Nursing, which consisted of two courses: Nursing Research, 6 points, and Scientific Writing, 4,5 points.

### *Individual Language Guidance*

Eighteen respondents' resources provide for individual language guidance that varies from one to 30 hours. The variation of replies is so big that it is possible that some respondents have misinterpreted the question. If the 30hr./thesis is left out of calculations, the average would be 7 hours/Bachelor's Thesis (with the 30hr. case 8.4 hrs./thesis) and 8 hours for a Master's Thesis.

One of the respondents commented that resources for individual language guidance are allocated on an annual basis: 60 hours of workload/year and the instructor may divide his/her time accordingly.

### *Posting Thesis Guidelines on the Web*

None of the universities of applied sciences report having set aside resources for the production of guidelines to be published on the university's website.

## **4.6 Linguistic Challenges of Thesis Writing**

The respondents report a variety on challenges in theses written in English. In some theses it is practically impossible to differentiate what is the student's own contribution and which parts come directly from a cited or uncited source.

The open replies by the respondents report the following challenges:

- coherence and fluency of text must improve
- lack of signposting/metatext calls for more logical text structures
- increased carefulness, precision, finalizing
- avoiding the impact of the mother tongue
- using formal, objective research writing and avoiding colloquialisms and everyday language
- improving writing skills in general
- improving the process of thesis writing with clear checkpoints
- correct referencing techniques must be used; plagiarism must be avoided
- style of writing academic texts

- clear instructions for theses are needed
- scheduling problems need to be tackled

**Scheduling problems** relate both to instructors and students. For instructors, reading, evaluating and commenting takes time and **work gets congested**. Students tend to start too late and **deliveries** are **delayed**.

A major problem relates to companies who require a thesis in English when the student's competency is not sufficient for writing the thesis in English.

An interesting question was asked by one respondent: *"What are the practices a Finnish academic study in English should follow: Finnish tradition, Anglo-Saxon tradition. To what extent can a Spanish or Russian student use their own rhetoric?"*

Another thought-provoking comment came from a training manager: *"At this moment the instruction and guidance situations is good. We have competent and experienced language teachers; the challenges lie in the area of contents instruction. This applies both Finnish and English theses."*

#### 4.7 Improving the Level of English

Thirty-six percent of respondents report that they do have plans for improving the quality of theses in English; 64% report not having any at the time of the survey.

An open question brought to light the following needs and comments:

- more time and resources
- describing and improving the thesis process (4)
- more teaching or new courses on research writing/Academic Writing
- better guidelines (written)
- some measures may have been considered but not yet discussed with language teachers
- the aim is to keep up an excellent level

The respondents gave a number of suggestions to the question, *"In what ways could the linguistic level be improved in the best way?"*

Degree programme managers felt that

- very strict rules need to be set on plagiarism
- more teaching is needed either through separate courses or by incorporating instruction of formal writing into others courses
- collaboration between subject teachers and language instructors should be increased
- language teachers should be allotted the necessary resources for checking language in theses.

Language teachers largely agreed with the degree programme managers. All the above comments can also be found in language instructors' replies. Additional suggestions are as follows:

- more careful attention must be paid to student acceptance processes
- the level of teaching must be raised and more native teachers (comment by a native speaker) should be used
- students must be required to achieve a certain level of English before being allowed to write a thesis in English (this concerns specifically Finnish-speaking students)

#### 4.8 Language in the Grading of Theses

In 88% of cases (33) respondents said that the quality of written English influences grading of a final project. In the evaluation process, *"language and contents are both important"*.

In many cases it seems that grades are arrived at through collaboration between the subject teacher and the language teacher. For example: *"The English teacher evaluates the study on a scale of 1-5, who delivers the grade to the supervisor that considers it in the grading"*. In equally many cases, the subject evaluation is the decisive element, and the language assessment can influence the outcome marginally: *"There are many practices but generally the language grade gives some direction."* In three cases out of 25 the language instructor does not know whether his/her evaluation has influenced the grading.

Some criteria for grading, according to respondents, are the following:

- "the same as for the Finnish theses"
- academic quality

- clarity, logical structure, register
- correctness and “field relevance”
- sufficiently clear and understandable
- layout
- fluency
- contents, appropriate style, readability
- readability and fluency count; complex structures are not required.

In 73% of cases (33) the English teacher has guided the students’ language usage; 5 persons report that language checking is done by the subject teacher. If a language teacher is not involved, the reason can be that resources are not allotted to this procedure or that there is *no language teacher in the unit*.

#### 4.9 Expectations for the Future

Of the respondents, 20% feel that quality is already as required; 80% (22) see a need for development. The latter wish to see the following developments:

- more competition and higher standards for students entering education, which will have an automatic impact on the level of writing in English
- an improvement in the quality of the level of English
- early intervention by language teachers
- fluency, professional terminology, improved professional texts
- a more analytical discussion of references
- clarification of what is the student’s own input and what is being cited
- adequate resources devoted to thesis language reviews
- an understanding that fluent spoken language skills do not guarantee academic writing skills
- the addition of an Academic Writing course
- an Academic Writing course that must be complemented through a practical course.

Some respondents also felt that:

- the situation cannot be improved because of heterogeneous groups

- if degree programmes do not provide resources for language guidance, nothing will improve.

## 5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Theses written in English at universities of applied sciences seem to be on the increase, though statistics about the language of these studies is not yet systematically collected in the AMKOTA information system. In a small minority of universities of applied sciences the quality concerning language is considered to be on a sufficient, even excellent level. However, a large majority - 80% - sees a clear need for development. Fifty-eight percent of respondents find the quality of English less than good. Thirty-six percent report having plans to improve the level of English. These survey results may perhaps raise some discussion in the institutions and encourage others to respond to the situation, as well.

As for the future developments, some respondents predict positive development if competition increases and higher quality students enter education, thus automatically improving the level of writing in English. Some more pessimistic respondents predict that not much can be done because of heterogeneous groups and problems with allocation of resources.

The results show that fluent spoken everyday language skills are not sufficient to guarantee academic writing skills; these skills must be specifically introduced and taught, with guidelines provided, and teaching them requires a fairly high starting level. Therefore early intervention and collaboration with language instructors is necessary. Replies to this survey indicate that there are many options for how this could be accomplished.

The following table summarizes the major observations of this study, showing challenges and suggested remedies proposed by the respondents. The challenges fall into four categories: first, challenges that relate to the level of English and academic writing in general, second, findings that relate to the content challenges in academic writing, third, to the thesis process overall, and finally to the relevance of research content regardless of the language a report is written in.



<i>Challenges</i>	<i>linked with suggested solutions</i>	<i>in categories of</i>
<p><i>Insufficient background skills in English</i></p> <p><i>Increasing numbers of international students with mixed backgrounds</i></p> <p><i>Problems with grammar, terminology, research discourse, simplistic English; sentences/ideas not linked to formal text</i></p> <p><i>Resources are insufficient or not allocated</i></p>	<p><i>Restricting permission to write a thesis in English in some way (for ways see 4.3)</i></p> <p><i>Intervening early with language courses for international students; diagnostic testing for written English</i></p> <p><i>Courses in Written English; Academic/Scientific/Research Writing courses/components in projects, individual language guidance etc. (for ideas see in 4.5)</i></p> <p><i>Resources allotted for courses in Academic English and language guidance in English (or other forms of structured language help)</i></p>	<p><i>1. English language and academic writing overall</i></p>
<p><i>Everyday language; colloquial style</i></p> <p><i>Unclear logic</i></p> <p><i>Plagiarism</i></p> <p><i>Rough draft becomes a thesis</i></p>	<p><i>Using specialized academic vocabulary; Terminology of the field; Demonstrating a distance between writer and the text; Using formal style; modesty for claims</i></p> <p><i>Concepts first defined, then discussed; Sentences/paragraphs linked together to form logical arguments; use of connectors Metatext and signposting practiced Tables and graphs first introduced, then interpreted; Fluency and coherence improved</i></p> <p><i>Referencing practices of the field; Quoting and paraphrasing practices; Sources not only paraphrased but also discussed and argued</i></p> <p><i>Collaboration with the subject specialist and language instructor</i></p> <p><i>Process writing exercised to improve quality; Increased care, accuracy, precision</i></p> <p><i>Emphasis on finalizing drafts</i></p>	<p><i>2. Contents of language guidance in English</i></p>
<p><i>58% find the thesis process not good at their institution</i></p> <p><i>Process unclear since guidelines are missing</i></p>	<p><i>Improved thesis process both in theory and in practice (see Opinnäytetyön laadun tekijät 2006)</i></p> <p><i>Guidelines to how to write a thesis must be available, also for theses in English</i></p>	<p><i>3. Thesis process for theses in any language</i></p>

<p><i>Substance teachers do not sufficiently recognize the problems of writing in English</i></p> <p><i>Resources allocated are insufficient</i></p>	<p><i>Improved collaboration with the subject specialist and language instructor</i></p> <p><i>Subject teachers must do extra work to supervise studies in English; allocation of extra resources is suggested</i></p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Too much irrelevant background text</li> <li>- Too little of the student's own input</li> <li>- Excessive use of direct quotes, either referenced or unreferenced</li> <li>- Clear plagiarism</li> <li>- Research question not mentioned</li> <li>- Research question not answered</li> <li>- Discussion and conclusions cryptic</li> <li>- Scheduling problems, p. 15</li> </ul>	<p><i>Principles and practices of academic writing in any language should be a component in any Bachelor's or Master's studies programmes at universities of applied sciences if the objectives of the Polytechnic Act concerning <b>applied research and development</b> work are to be complied with. Another question is how each university of applied sciences interprets the Act and creates its own quality standards for theses overall and specifically theses in English.</i></p>	<p><i>4. Contents of guidance of theses in any language</i></p>

*Table 3. Challenges of theses written in English reported by universities of applied sciences in 2007.*

The contents elements of categories 2 and 4 are separated to illustrate the writers' views of what should fall under the guidance of the substance expert and which elements would require a language instructor to step in. The division could be different - it is a matter of agreement and personal arrangements at any institution - but often the case may be that the language instructor cannot "fix the grammar" because the logic is not there yet. This division of labour is worth discussing in the context of planning the allocation of resources.

What stands out in the summary in table 3 and is rather unexpected to the writers is the fact that a great majority of the challenges could be met by improving the whole thesis process - and making studies in English a component of the process.

As for English, the most problematic category in the Challenge Grid (Table 3) is, what can the UAS's do to make an international student capable of writing a thesis within four years? For those who are willing, it may be possible to develop and organize a writing test to diagnose the situation early on.

International tests, especially online tests, may assess many other valid points but do not address academic writing abilities. Based on these results, an additional helpful component could be created and added in collaboration with many UAS's.

As for Academic Writing component/s in curricula, there could be more general writing courses for international students and for those with low skill levels, which students from many different degree programmes could attend. These writing courses could easily involve texts that need to be written for professional studies anyway (e.g. reports, proposals, summaries, introductions, presentations) and could pave the way for good, fluent writing. At the final stage, discipline-specific components (e.g. parts of the students' Research Projects) need to be introduced because different disciplines apply different referencing techniques.

Providing resources for the language component at a university of applied sciences is a matter of taking all degree programmes into consideration. If one or two English-language programmes alone fund the resources, the cost may seem high with respect to the benefit. Again, if the same process can serve any degree programme (both English and Finnish/Swedish, and visiting international exchange students), the process can meet many needs at the same time. This option is also open for UAS's to consider.

All in all, this report suggests that thesis processes at universities of applied sciences should be developed in a way that incorporates the language challenge element in the whole process, because of more international programmes, international students, immigrants and employers who require studies in English.

Early intervention by a language expert is vital for reaching the required skill level before the 4th year. Second, UAS's are encouraged to design a language support process for those who write theses in English, be it in English-language or other programmes. Several options have been mentioned in this report (e.g. 4.5). Third, all students should perhaps not be allowed to write a thesis in English: UAS's could set up systematic criteria for language level requirements.

Last but not least, principles of good academic writing in any language, as shown in category 4 of Table 3, could become a criteria for writing other re-

ports as well as theses. Perhaps students could write papers based on this criteria once a year, or once a term, assisted by both subject teachers and language experts. This kind of improvement would raise the level of writing in Finnish, Swedish, English, and all languages.

## SUMMARY

Theses written in English at universities of applied sciences have gradually become more and more common. Some universities of applied sciences already have a well-functioning process, but the majority of UAS's deal with the issue on a case by case basis or by relying on the practices of one degree programme.

Based on the information received, the number of theses in English continues to increase. Eighty percent of respondents see a need for development. It is therefore necessary to create some processes for raising the quality of academic writing in English.

Although this study focused on theses written in English, the outcome of the study suggests strongly that some of the prevailing problems of theses in English can only be solved by improving the thesis process overall in both domestic languages and English, and by making sure that principles of academic writing in general are common knowledge to students.

As for studies in English-language degree programmes, it has become clear that early intervention of language instructors is necessary. International students with mixed backgrounds must get extra language training before they are expected to write a thesis. Theses checked and - in some cases - partly rewritten by a language expert are not the product of the student her/himself and cannot be said to meet the above described quality features. Some programmes and language guidance must be part of the quality improvement.

What each university of applied sciences decides to do is entirely its own decision, given the autonomous positions of the institutions. This study, hopefully, provides ideas and options for dealing with this growing challenge.

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## APPENDIX 1: TEACHER SURVEY ON THESES WRITTEN IN ENGLISH

This survey concerns the practices linked to the linguistic aspects of Bachelor's and Master's theses written in a foreign language (normally English) at different universities of applied sciences. The aim of the survey is to identify best practices and development needs as concerns the language of such theses. The survey is sent to teachers whose work is linked to the linguistic aspects of theses written in English. A survey on the same topic is also sent to persons in charge of degree programmes conducted in English.

### Teacher survey on theses written in English

#### Background information

University of Applied Sciences	--Valitse tästä--
Occupation	--Valitse tästä--
Other, what?	
Field of study	--Valitse tästä--
Sex	--Valitse tästä--
Age	Alle 30

#### Degree programmes/modules that the answers concern

1. Name of degree programme or module conducted in English	
Scope (ECTS points)	
Annual student intake	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Level: Bachelor's
	<input type="checkbox"/> Level: Master's
	<input type="checkbox"/> Level: other

(If you deal with theses from one degree programme only, please do not answer questions 2 and 3)

2. Name of degree programme or module conducted in English	
Scope (ECTS points)	
Annual student intake	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Level: Bachelor's
	<input type="checkbox"/> Level: Master's
	<input type="checkbox"/> Level: other
3. Name of degree programme or module conducted in English	
Scope (ECTS points)	
Annual student intake	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Level: Bachelor's
	<input type="checkbox"/> Level: Master's
	<input type="checkbox"/> Level: other

#### Number of theses in English

In the degree programmes(s) that I deal with, the number of	
---	--



theses in English during academic year 2005-2006 was

The approximate number of theses in English in 2007-2008 will be

Are theses produced in English in other degree programmes at your university of applied sciences?

The approximate number of theses in English within the entire university of applied sciences in 2007-2008 will be

The number of theses I provided language guidance for in academic year 2005-06

### Quality of language

What is your general evaluation of the quality of English in theses produced at your university of applied sciences?

How would you characterise the linguistic quality of theses written in English more specifically?

What challenges do you see when it comes to the language of theses written in English?

In what respects would you expect the language of theses in English to improve during the years to come?

### Influence and evaluation of thesis language

Can students from any degree programme write their theses in English at your university of applied sciences?

On the basis of what criteria?

Does the level of language have an effect on the evaluation of the thesis?

If yes, how is the language evaluated?

Who is in charge of language evaluation?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ To get a permission to write a thesis in English, the student's English grade must be high
- ☐ A recommendation from an English teacher is needed
- ☐ Language checking by a person not employed by the university of applied sciences is recommended
- ☐ The university of applied sciences provides thesis guidelines on the Internet
- ☐ The degree programme provides written guidelines
- ☐ The university of applied sciences provides individual language guidance
- ☐ Students are required to complete a relevant course before writing a thesis

\_\_\_\_\_

Students are required to pass a test before writing a thesis

\_\_\_\_\_


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[illegible]

## Resources

 checking the English abstract

--

 class teaching

 individual language guidance for the entire thesis

--

☐ creating Internet guidelines  
☐ something else

If something else, what?

#### Possible measures

Has your university of applied sciences considered future measures for improving the language of theses written in English?

Kyllä



What measures have been considered?

In what ways do you think the language of theses in English could best be improved at universities of applied sciences?

#### Please send me a copy of the results

You will obtain a copy of the survey results if you write your e-mail address in the box below. The results will also be available on the Internet pages of the Language Teaching Development Working Group appointed by the Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences. All answers will be treated anonymously. E-mail address:

#### Submit information

Tyhjennä

Thank you for your answers!

## APPENDIX 2: SURVEY ON THESES WRITTEN IN ENGLISH FOR PERSONS IN CHARGE OF DEGREE PROGRAMMES

This survey concerns the practices linked to the linguistic aspects of Bachelor's and Master's theses written in a foreign language (normally English) at different universities of applied sciences. The aim of the survey is to identify best practices and development needs as concerns the language of such theses. The survey is sent to persons in charge of degree programmes conducted in English.

### Teacher survey on theses written in English

#### Background information

University of Applied Sciences

Helsingin ammattikorkeakoulu Stadia



Occupation

--Valitse tästä--



Other, what?

Degree programme that you are in charge of	--Valitse tästä--
Sex	--Valitse tästä--
Age	Alle 30

#### Degree programmes/modules that the answers concern

1. Name of degree programme or module conducted in English	
Scope (ECTS points)	
Annual student intake	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Level: Bachelor's
<input type="checkbox"/>	Level: Master's
<input type="checkbox"/>	Level: other

(If you deal with theses from one degree programme only, please do not answer questions 2 and 3)

2. Name of degree programme or module conducted in English	
Scope (ECTS points)	
Annual student intake	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Level: Bachelor's
<input type="checkbox"/>	Level: Master's
<input type="checkbox"/>	Level: other

3. Name of degree programme or module conducted in English	
Scope (ECTS points)	
Annual student intake	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Level: Bachelor's
<input type="checkbox"/>	Level: Master's
<input type="checkbox"/>	Level: other

#### Number of theses in English

In the degree programmes(s) that I deal with, the number of theses in English during academic year 2005-2006 was	
The approximate number of theses in English in 2007-2008 will be	
Are theses produced in English in other degree programmes at your university of applied sciences?	Kyllä
The approximate number of theses in English within the entire university of applied sciences in 2007-2008 will be	

The number of theses I provided language guidance for in academic year 2005-06

### Quality of language

What is your general evaluation of the quality of English in theses produced at your university of applied sciences?

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How would you characterise the linguistic quality of theses written in English more specifically?

What challenges do you see when it comes to the language of theses written in English?

In what respects would you expect the language of theses in English to improve during the years to come?

### Influence and evaluation of thesis language

Can students from any degree programme write their theses in English at your university of applied sciences?

Kyllä

On the basis of what criteria?

Does the level of language have an effect on the evaluation of the thesis?

Kyllä

If yes, how is the language evaluated?

Who is in charge of language evaluation?

englanninopettaja

Someone else, who?

If language does not have an effect on thesis evaluation, why is it so?

What measures are taken at your university of applied sciences to influence the linguistic level of theses written in English? (check the relevant practices)

☐ To get a permission to write a thesis in English, the student's English grade must be high

☐ A recommendation from an English teacher is needed

- ☐ Language checking by a person not employed by the university of applied sciences is recommended
- ☐ The university of applied sciences provides thesis guidelines on the Internet
- ☐ The degree programme provides written guidelines
- ☐ The university of applied sciences provides individual language guidance
- ☐ Students are required to complete a relevant course before writing a thesis

Name of the course

Name of the test

- ☐ Students are required to pass a test before writing a thesis

Other measures, what?

In your opinion, the current language counselling process of theses is

How would you characterise the process more specifically?

## Resources

Does the language counsellor receive time resources for

Time resource per abstract

- ☐ checking the English abstract

If class teaching, what course and how many ECTS points?

- ☐ class teaching

Time resource per Bachelor's thesis/Master's thesis?

- ☐ individual language guidance for the entire thesis

If something else, what?

- ☐ creating Internet guidelines
- ☐ something else

## Possible measures

Has your university of applied sciences considered future measures for improving the

language of theses written in English?

What measures have been considered?

In what ways do you think the language of theses in English could best be improved at universities of applied sciences?

**Please send me a copy of the results**

You will obtain a copy of the survey results if you write your e-mail address in the box below. The results will also be available on the Internet pages of the Language Teaching Development Working Group appointed by the Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences. All answers will be treated anonymously.  
E-mail address:

**Submit information**

Tyhjennä

Thank you for your answers!