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RESEARCH, TOPICS, AND DIFFICULTIES IN ACADEMIC PAPERS WRITTEN BY AMERICAN LANGUAGE ASSISTANTS IN SPAIN

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the analysis of topics approached by American students enrolled in three of the Master's Degrees of the program 'Teach & Learn in Spain' in Madrid, Spain (Instituto Franklin- Universidad de Alcalá?) in the academic years 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 and challenges faced in the context of academic writing and research required for the development of a Master's Thesis. This article reflects on aspects previously discussed in Vitalaru and Vescan (2017) in terms of challenges in academic writing and adds a specific analysis of the topics approached in each of the three types of papers written by students, more details regarding the students' profiles, difficulties by type of paper and examples of the recommendations provided by the advisors to the different types of academic difficulties identified.

Keywords: Master's Thesis, academic requirements, challenges.

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1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the analysis of topics approached by American students enrolled in three of the Master's Degrees of the program 'Teach & Learn in Spain' in Madrid, Spain (Instituto Franklin-Universidad de Alcalá?) in the academic years 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 and challenges faced in the context of academic writing and research required for the development of a Master's Thesis. It

consists in an extension of a previous paper written by Vitalaru and Vescan (2017: 25-36), which focused on general academic and cultural difficulties "based on cultural and academic expectations and requirements in the context of academic writing of a Master's Thesis in Spain". This article reflects on the previous aspects and adds a specific analysis of the topics approached in each of the three types of papers written by students, more details

regarding the students' profiles, difficulties by type of paper and examples of the recommendations provided by the advisors to the different types of academic difficulties identified.

The previous paper was based on two assumptions:

1. Most American students in the program mentioned, who come from a variety of training profiles and backgrounds, have different types of difficulties when facing the academic requirements of research papers in Spanish postgraduate programs in general.

2. There are several cultural/educational differences considering the Spanish and the American education systems that may result into difficulties for the American students as indicated by the advisors who corrected the drafts and guided them throughout the process and by the students themselves. Vitalaru and Vescan (2017: 26)

In fact, the advisors observed that, in spite of their enthusiasm, motivation and good and even excellent final results, students seemed to face challenges throughout the process of planning and writing the Master's Thesis especially due to the need to adapt their ideas and work methods to Spanish and general academic requirements for research papers, to the differences regarding cultural/educational aspects as well as lack of onsite training sessions throughout the year.

a) The analysis carried out is the result of the main advisor's attempt

to understand the cause of these challenges and their context as well as improve the students' learning process. Specifically, this paper has two main objectives: a) to analyze the types of papers (Master's Theses) submitted by students from three of the MA in the program in the last two academic years (2014-2015, 2015-2016) considering the three options they could choose from and establish the percentage of papers related to cultural aspects and approaches to teaching methods that are specific for American culture;

b) to establish the specific needs, cultural expectations and difficulties American students have when carrying out research and academic writing based on advisor's reports and the students' own perceptions.

This paper is divided into three main sections: a basic theoretical background which establishes the context -the basic characteristics of the program, the objectives and requirements of the course for which the analysis is carried out and the national requirements/skills for the type of course involved-; a description of the research method based on an analysis and discussion of different aspects (students' profiles, types of papers, topics they focus on, difficulties considering academic requirements in general and difficulties considering cultural expectations, examples of feedback provided by advisor) and conclusions. The literature review on the topic is very scarce due to the practical and specific nature of this paper.

The practical component is also divided into two main sections: the first one focusing on the analysis of the types of papers chosen by students from the three options offered in the syllabus and topics (section 5) and the second one focusing on the actual types of academic and culture-related difficulties the students had (section 6).

2. Background

2.1 The 'Teach and Learn in Spain' Program

As mentioned in Vitalaru and Vescan (2017: 26), the 'Teach and Learn in Spain' program aims at providing "native English speaking students the opportunity of studying a Master's Degree and be a language assistant (LA) in a school of the region of Madrid". Six Master's Degrees are offered, each one of one academic year:

- Master's in Bilingual and Multicultural Education (MA in BE)
- Master's in International Education (MA in IE)
- Master's in Teaching (MA in T)
- Master's in Learning and Teaching Spanish as a Second Language (taught in Spanish).
- Master's in School Management.
- Master's in Special Education in a Bilingual Context (Instituto Franklin, 2018).

This paper will focus only on those that are taught in English and were taught during the academic courses analyzed (the first three from the list). Although the objectives and content of these three programs are

different, their structure is similar. Thus, all of them combine three main areas: academic courses taught through onsite and online classes, "a life experience portfolio" based on actual practical teaching experience as language assistants in a school in Madrid, and the submission of a Master's Thesis.

Specifically, according to Instituto Franklin's website, the first three have the following objectives:

- The Master's in Bilingual and Multilingual Education focuses on "psycholinguistic perspectives on bilingualism, language development, cultural and social perspectives on bilingual education and evaluation of bilingual education programs", providing both theoretical and practical knowledge in fundamental topics and evaluating "models and programs of bilingual education" (Instituto Franklin Website, Master's in Bilingual and Multicultural Education, 2017).
- The Master's in International Education trains students to achieve a profile of education professionals such as teachers, administrators and trainers in general, who will work in an international environment at all education levels (from kindergarten to high school). It provides specific training focusing both on theoretical and practical knowledge on leadership and educational management as well as historical, social, cultural, global aspects in an intercultural and intercultural context (Instituto Franklin Website, Master's in International Education, 2017).

- The Master's in Teaching provides specific training (knowledge and skills) in teaching for students who lack specific training in education as well as a context to help them understand the needs of a learner and develop "effective strategies for a diverse classroom". Its content focuses on the following aspects: teaching methods, curriculum design, classroom management, learning theories, designing classroom resources, assessment, and evaluation (Instituto Franklin Website, Master's in Teaching, 2017).

2.2 The Master's Thesis and Required Skills

The Master's Thesis is a compulsory course with a workload of 6 ECTS, based on three elements: 6 onsite sessions, students' independent study, and guidance from academic advisors who are Professors within the program and Ph.D. During the academic years analyzed students had to choose between the three types of papers included in the syllabus: Research Paper (RP), Curriculum Design (CD), and Teaching Portfolio (TP) and conduct empirical research as well as use knowledge acquired during classes and, particularly in the case of the last two, experience as language assistants (LAs) in bilingual schools in Madrid. The details included in the syllabus regarding each of the options and the possibility it had of suiting their career interests were the following:

- A final research paper, which requires students to read previously

published studies in a specific area of interest within the field of teaching/school administration, to design and conduct an original study applicable to that situation, and to discuss the original data obtained in light of the previously published work.

- A curriculum design, which entails an examination of existing materials and books available on the market to determine a current need, detailed justification of that need, and development of a course and materials adapted to fill the gap observed.

- The design and completion of a teaching portfolio. Among other aspects, this option involves writing up reflections on the material studied in the MA courses and documenting these reflections with actual examples of work done during the teaching practicum (Final paper Syllabus, 2015-2016).

The general objectives of the paper focus can be contextualized in the need to provide students the opportunity to improve their specific knowledge on writing an academic paper mostly based on research while studying in Spain, by specifically focusing on:

- Carrying out research in the educational setting and the ability to argue a point, expressing themselves in an academic style and using specific conventions.

- Combining previous training, literature review, synthesized material learned in the onsite classes and practical experience acquired as LA.

- Designing or making use of

materials and theoretical concepts from different sources.

- Describing, analyzing and interpreting situations and data gathered so as to see practical social/educational applications of their results (Final paper Syllabus, 2015-2016; Vitalaru and Vescan (2017: 27).

The specific competencies required according to the same syllabus are:

- Synthesis and extended application of the concepts acquired in the different Master's Degree classes.

- Reflection on the student teacher's own professional practice during the Internship with a view of his or her professional development.

- Critical thinking.

- Improved ability to write in an academic/professional style.

- Ability to understand research in bilingual/international education already published in professional journals.

- Ability to communicate research conducted on a specific topic to a specialized/academic reader.

- Ability to design and implement a practical educational project.

- Time management

- Independent/autonomous study (Final paper Syllabus, 2015-2016).

Both the objectives and the skills of the syllabus have been established in accordance with the general competencies established in the Spanish national curriculum. Thus, according to the Spanish Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (MECES)

(BOE, 2010) for the master's degrees in Spain, the following basic skills are essential for the final paper (Master's Thesis) that students must write in graduate programs:

- Apply the knowledge acquired and develop their ability to solve problems in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts related to their field of study.

- Integrate knowledge and handle complexity and formulate based on scientific evidence, from information that may be incomplete or limited, including social and ethical responsibilities linked to the application of their knowledge and judgments.

- Communicate conclusions, knowledge, and rationale that support to specialists and non-specialists in a clear and unambiguous manner.

- Acquire learning skills that will enable them to continue studying autonomously Vitalaru and Vescan (2017: 28).

Considering the Spanish academic requirements and expectations regarding the type, of course, the Final Paper is established in the curriculum of most graduate programs as an independent/autonomous study. Thus, it mostly relies on student's autonomous work and guidance from an advisor as well as basic onsite 1-hour class sessions during the writing process resulting in a total of 4 hours during the academic year. This constitutes a peculiarity for the students considering the intensive 5-

hour onsite sessions they are used to attend in the other courses of the curriculum.

The procedure for guidance the advisors followed during the writing process was the following (Final paper Syllabus, 2015-2016):

1. Informative sessions/guidance on the different types of papers, structure, and characteristics of each at the beginning of the academic year so that students can make an informed decision about the route they will follow.

2. Basic workshop on research methods and academic style at the beginning of the course.

3. Submission of the proposal by the student.

4. Detailed feedback from the advisor and office hours.

5. Submission of a draft that includes the theoretical part of the paper and an outline of the method/practical part.

6. Onsite office hours or email to check the practical part of the paper (method, data interpretation) and individual difficulties.

7. Final paper evaluation.

3. Method and Context

3.1 Method

Considering the objective of the paper several aspects will be analyzed and through different quantitative and qualitative methods that will eventually constitute an opportunity for reflection. Specifically, the paper will focus on three aspects: identify the types of papers students chose, the types of topics (focusing on the percentage of topics related to cultural aspects),

and the types of difficulties they face in the academic writing process as well as their relation to cultural and educational aspects. Thus, the following aspects will be observed through different methods:

- The students' profile: previous academic training through a basic analysis of a database with students' background (quantitative).

- Types of topics through an analysis of a database of topics/titles and corpus of papers from the last two academic years (2014-2015 and 2015-2016) (quantitative).

- Types of difficulties (academic and cultural) the advisor identified in the analysis of drafts submitted by students, detailed revisions and questions during office hours (quantitative and qualitative).

- Cultural differences that result in difficulties as indicated by the students in a survey.

3.2 Students' Profile

The papers submitted by students in the last two academic years (2014-2015, 2015-2016) in the three MA programs resulted in a total of 189 papers. The 2015-2016 students' academic profile will be considered as a starting point in order to establish a potential initial knowledge or experience in research.

Firstly, the fields of study of their undergraduate training are quite varied. Thus, in general, the following eight fields cover the profile of the students from the three Master's: Education, Language/Communication, Health Sciences/Psychology, Social studies, International Relations/Political

Studies, Anthropology/History, Journalism and Law/Business/Economics.

As shown in figure 1, the same diversity characterizes the students' profile by Master's; thus, students from the MA in Bilingual Education had formal training in four general fields, those from the MA in International Education in seven fields and those from the MA in Teaching in eight fields (Vitalaru and Vescan, 2017: 29):

Figure 1. Students' Profiles by Master's Degree in 2015-2016

Thus, the highest percentage in the MA in BE is of studies in Education (56%), in Language Studies or Communication (28%) and in International relations (12%) followed by Social Studies (4%). On the other hand, in the MA in IE the first two categories have the highest percentages in this program but lower percentages considering the previous program (approx. 21% and 15%); it also includes studies in Law/Business/Economics (6%) and four of the categories is of (Health Sciences/Psychology, International Relations/Political Studies, Anthropology/History, Journalism) have the same percentage, of 3%. Finally, in the MA in Teaching from the eight fields considered, the highest percentage is of students from Language/Communication Studies (28%), Health Sciences/Psychology (21%) and Education (14%); other significant fields are Anthropology/History (10%), Law/Business/Economics, and Journalism (7%). The lowest

percentages are Social Studies, International Relations/Political Studies, and Journalism with 3.5% each.

4. Analysis of Papers and Findings

4.1 Types of Papers

This section focuses on the following aspects:

a) A quantitative analysis of the types of papers chosen by the students from the three options offered considering the two academic years selected in the three programs.

b) A basic quantitative analysis of the topics students worked on in the research papers and the curriculum designs showing the aspects they are more interested in.

c) Considering the third type of paper, the teaching portfolio, a brief description of its content as well as an improvement considering students' previous tendencies.

First, considering the type of paper chosen, as mentioned in Vitalaru and Vescan (2017: 29) 32 students (approximately 17%) wrote an RP while 84 students (approximately 38%) wrote a CD. The rest of them, 73 (approximately 45%) from a total of 189 students, wrote a TP (figure 2). The high percentage of students interested in the last two options (83%) shows that students tend to be more interested in the practical application directly related to their practice as LAs in bilingual schools or focused on their professional development as educators.

Figure 2. Types of papers 2014-2016

Figure 3, below, shows the changes regarding the number of students that were specific for each type of paper (RP, CD, and TP) during the two academic years in question in the three Master's Degrees:

Figure 3. Types of papers. Evolution by MA

Thus, if considered in general it can be said that the interest was higher in the CD and in the TP, although the last one was not offered in 2015-2016 in the Masters in Teaching. If considered by Master's results vary showing more interest in research in students from MA in Teaching and in International Education and at the same time more pragmatism since the numbers of students creating a CD from the same two MAs are higher than in the MA in Teaching.

Moreover, the evolution of the numbers is also shown by type of paper. On the one hand, the number of RP in 2015-2016 was higher with 17% than in 2014-2015 in the MA in Teaching, while in the other two programs the percentage was 23% and 14% lower in the MA in International Education and in the MA in Bilingual and Multilingual Education. On the other hand, the number of CD has increased with 50% considering the total number of papers in the three programs. Specifically, by 11% for the MA in BE, by 32% for the MA in IE and by 43% for the MA in Teaching, which did not include the option of a TP in the last academic year (Vitalaru and Vescan, 2017: 29-30).

Finally, the number of TP has decreased in the MA in BE and increased in the case of the MA in IE.

4.2 Topics in the Three Types of Papers

4.2.1 Topics in Research Papers

Regarding the topics chosen, the analysis of the titles of the RP written in the three MAs revealed the diversity of the topics approached. Therefore, within the RP category, ten main categories were established to cover a variety of topics discussed in 32 papers ranging from specific topics related to the objectives of the MAs in which the students were enrolled (education, communication, etc.) to less common topics such as nutrition. From the first category, of higher percentages, some examples are: teaching methodology or use of specific strategies (37%), cultural aspects (21%), development of certain skills (9%), attitudes/perspectives teachers-students (9%), analysis of teacher training/design of specific, proposal of practical guides for trainers and analysis of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (6%). From the second category, of lower percentage (3%), the following subcategories can be mentioned: analyses related to literature, technological aspects applied to teach, bilingualism, or even nutrition and its effects on academic performance, among others (figure 4).

Figure 4. Topics and percentages in Research papers

Results show the variety of

interests of the students as a reflection of either their background (nutrition, literature, cultural aspects), their interest in helping specific groups of students (bilingualism, technology, cultural aspects) and advising future LAs or main teachers (guides, perspectives teachers-students, technology) or future professional interest based on knowledge and experience acquired (methodologies, skills, CLIL, guides).

4.2.2 Topics in Curriculum Designs

On the other hand, the topics approached in the curriculum designs can be classified into different types of categories, either by a level of education addressed (preschool, primary education, secondary education, and adult education) or by topic/skill they focus on.

Considering the overall objectives of this paper the main focus will be on the second criteria applicable, that is the topic/skill they focus on. From this point of view, several categories can also be established depending on whether a particular method was considered more important than the topic or vice versa by the students themselves or even applying a specific strategy to a topic, as the titles chosen by the students and shaped by the advisors suggest. Thus, if the topic is considered, the corresponding 84 papers can be divided into the following twenty-one categories listed from higher to lower percentage (figure 5):

- Culture.

- Language & culture.
- Science.
- Adult education/life skills.
- Arts.
- Literature.
- Guides.
- Oral communication skills.
- Special needs.
- Design of materials.
- Reading/phonics.
- Playing.
- History.
- Environmental aspects.
- Immigration.
- Pronunciation.
- Math.
- Values.
- Bilingualism.
- Technology.
- Classroom management.

Figure 5. Curriculum designs. Classification by topics

As seen in figure 5, the topics with the highest percentages are, as expected, culture and culture as a complement to language learning, which represent 37% of the papers, followed by aspects such as adult education/life skills, arts and language, design of practical guides for assistants/teachers and oral communication skills, with a percentage of 6%, literature (5%), special needs and design of materials with 4%. Other topics such as playing, phonics, among others, represent 2% each, while the last five topics from the previous list have the lowest percentage, 1%.

On the other hand, if we consider the teaching methods/theories approached and/or even highlighted in the title, the following

fourteen categories can be established, which have been listed below from higher to lower percentage (figure 6):

- Combination of methods (such as traditional lecture method, group-oriented discussion methods, cooperative learning and project-based learning; or use of multiple intelligences, translanguaging, constructivism; task-based learning activities, using a student-centered approach in the context of CLIL).

- Use of arts.
- Exploratory approach.
- Task-based/project-based learning.
- Real-life learning.
- Interdisciplinarity.
- CLIL.
- Use of media.
- Inquiry-based and cooperative learning.
- Playing.
- Cultural immersion.
- Multiple intelligence.
- Use of literature.
- Mindfulness.

Figure 6. Curriculum designs. Classification by methods

As seen in Figure 6, the categories that have the highest percentages are a combination of several methods, approaches or theories (27%), use of arts (14%), exploratory approach, task-based/project-based learning (8%), real-life learning, interdisciplinary (6%), CLIL (5%). Other aspects such as the use of social media, inquiry-based and cooperative learning, playing, cultural immersion, multiple intelligence and use of literature have

the same percentage (4%), while mindfulness has the lowest percentage (2%).

In this case, it is important to mention that, although their title or topic focused on one particular approach, most students approached a combination of methods and all of the curriculum designs are student-oriented, as opposed to more traditional, teacher-oriented practices, more common in primary and secondary education in Spain. Moreover, one of their main objectives is to improve communication, oral skills or application of a specific strategy to improve skills and education practices in Spain, US or other countries (Japan, Korea, Latin American countries) where based on their experience and research, they identified a specific need.

Finally, the high level of awareness regarding the variety of aspects involved in education is surprising since students not only identify the specific needs of the groups targeted through the papers (Spanish and English speaking teachers and students) but also aspects that have not been particularly addressed or that may constitute a challenge in the country in question such as special needs, mindfulness, immigration, values or cultural aspects and language/communication, among other topics.

4.2.3 Teaching Portfolios as a Special Category

Finally, regarding the third type of paper, the teaching portfolios, the

actual topics cannot be discussed due to the nature of the paper itself, since it focuses on the student's experience, difficulties and solutions provided as well as defining their teaching philosophy and personalities as teachers based on research and experience. Since no specific topics are required in the case of this paper, the evolution in the number of papers by the program will be included as well as a brief description of its structure and an improvement considering the students' perspective on its applicability.

First, there has been a variation considering the numbers of teaching portfolios written considering the two academic years mentioned: from 49 papers in 2014-2015 in the three programs to 24 in 2015-2016 in the first two programs, that is a decrease of approx. 34%.

Figure 7. Teaching portfolios in the 3 programs

Moreover, it is also important to consider the specific structure of this type of paper, based on the following criteria: teaching philosophy based on literature review and personal experience, a description of the current teaching practicum, an evaluation of the school and cooperating teachers, an analysis of the most common problems encountered at the school and strategies used to solve them, reflections on the experience in the Master's Degree courses, and personal reflections on the course contents and documentation (lesson plans and materials, etc.).

Finally, an improvement can be observed considering the choice of a specific title for this type of paper (other than "Teaching Portfolio"). Thus, if in the academic year 2014-2015 only approx. 30% of the students from 49 had a specific title/topic for their portfolio, in the next academic year, all of them (100%) had a specific title at the advisor's recommendations, which suggests a change of perspective regarding its applicability as a supplement to their r?sum?. In terms of the effectiveness of the titles considering specificity and accuracy, both groups of students chose unique and suggestive titles. Some examples of the 2014-2015 papers which included a specific title are:

- An American Perspective on Teaching in a Bilingual Spanish School: A Teaching Portfolio.
- The Art of Wonder: A Teacher's Reflection.
- Authentic English: Creating a Positive Learning Environment for Project Based Learning.
- A Glimpse into Bilingualism: My Role as an American English Language Assistant.
- Teaching Portfolio: The Integration of Project-Based Lessons with Whole Brain Teaching at a Bilingual School in Madrid.
- Changing the Everyday Approach: A Focus on Positively Educating International Citizens.
- Teaching Portfolio: Reflections on teaching experiences and their effects on teaching methods, objectives, and overall practices.

On the other hand, titles of teaching portfolios from 2015-16

were even more specific:

- Enhancing Language Learning through Multisensory Teaching, Cultural Content, and CLIL.

- Cultural Takeaways and Comparisons from Teaching Internationally, Culture in the Classroom Analysis.

- Teaching Portfolio: Applying Concepts in Student Engagement, Classroom Management, and Assessment in Cooperative and Skill-Based Instruction for Primary-Aged English Language Learners.

5. Academic Difficulties

After an overview of the course in general and of the topics approached, in this section, we will focus on the different types of academic difficulties related to the planning and writing of the different types of papers.

As mentioned in section 3, one of the important steps taken to evaluate the students' writing process and be able to advise them considering the difficulties each student had was the correction of the draft submitted by the students and providing individual feedback based on detailed revisions. Based on the analysis of the difficulties the advisors identified in the correction of the drafts from these two academic years, two categories of difficulties were established: specific for each type of paper and related to academic writing in general, which were common to all types of papers.

5.1 Difficulties Related to Academic Writing

As mentioned before, the

difficulties related to academic writing, in general, were common to all types of papers. The aspects identified by the advisors in the correction of the drafts will be listed considering the same criteria used for each type of paper: title, structure, content, and style (adapted from Vitalaru and Vescan: 2017: 30; 32).

Title of the paper, sections, and subsections:

- General titles of the sections, not specific enough to accurately reflect the topic discussed in the section.

- RP: generic titles, lacking information about the method/objective, specific topic or field of analysis.

- CD: generic titles, lacking information about significant details that make the paper original such as the country or target students, level of education, type of course, topic (field or skill to be developed, a particular strategy, approach).

- TP: generally lacking a title or focus on a particular aspect/difficulty.

Structuring the information at section and paragraph level:

- Ideas vaguely explained with no context alternated with complex arguments, detailed explanations and examples.

- Jumping between ideas and topics.

- Lack of connectors, transitions and of an apparent connection between ideas in the same paragraph.

- Lack of introductory paragraph explaining aspects that will be discussed in that particular section.

- Lack of topic sentence with the main idea of the paragraph.

- The combination between general statements and specific ideas with no context especially in the Introduction.

Content:

- Weak theoretical background on teaching methods and approaches mentioned, the definition of important concepts such as competences, culture, communication, or others that the student focuses on in the practical part of the paper.

- A faulty literature review of other courses, and of other studies/ findings related to the main topics discussed.

- Choosing an adequate research method.

- Adequate strategies for interpreting data.

Style and academic expression:

- Use of specific education-related terms such as competences, methodology, strategies, training process, class management, tools, analysis, data, etc.

- Frequent use of verbs and action verbs in general, which is more specific for oral discourse.

- Frequent use of the personal pronoun "I".

- Personal tone.

- Subjective expression of personal opinions and perceptions.

- Use of personal opinions as arguments.

- Use of general or subjective adjectives or expressions such as: "original" or "useful", "fun", "they like me as a teacher", "should know/ should have known", "different".

- Vocabulary specific for analyzing and interpreting data.

5.2 Difficulties by Type of Paper
As shown in Table 1, different elements of the aspects identified as difficulties in the previous section (title, structure, content, and style) were also considered for comparative analysis by type of paper:

Table 1. Types of Academic Difficulties by Type of Paper. Source: Vitalaru and Vescan (2017: 31)

The same information was included in figure 8 to show, in a more visual way, the comparison between the three types of papers:

Figure 8. Types of Difficulties by Type of Paper

As mentioned in Vitalaru and Vescan (2017: 31) and as shown in both table 1 and figure 8 the students that had most difficulties, in general, were those that chose to write a teaching portfolio, especially due to its personal and subjective nature as well as to the fact that, contrary to their expectations, it involved an academic approach and a more formal/neutral perspective and expression. In fact, students expected it to be a personal reflection of their personalities as teachers in a more informal/less academic way.

More specifically, it can be observed that a high percentage of students who chose this option (ranging between 71-87%) had difficulties for each of the four criteria used to analyze the difficulties: choice of a title, structuring the information within sections and paragraphs, writing or focusing on content specifically related to defining their teaching philosophy based on theoretical

background, expressing their own teaching approaches and strategies used as teaching assistants in bilingual schools during the practicum, difficulties they faced and strategies they used to solve them, and, in general, academic style and expression.

Other types of difficulties students had also mentioned in Vitalaru and Vescan (2017: 31), affected the following:

a) The description of the challenges faced as LAs in bilingual schools in Spain such as the teaching approaches observed, their own adaptation to the Spanish education system and its reflection on the communication process between teachers and LAs, on the organization and planning of class materials, perception of information and feedback, culture shock, classroom management, or adaptation to students' profiles, among others.

b) The description of their own teaching philosophy and its application in the classroom. Students had difficulties distinguishing between the theoretical background on teaching approaches required and their own (potential) application of the different approaches in the classroom. Since the perception about the objective of this part of the paper was affected, the academic expression used by the LAs was also affected. The academic expression tended to be thus, in this case, overcome by the importance of personal experience and subjective points of view.

Both types of difficulties were specifically addressed by the advisors, who provided more context regarding the specific objectives of this type of paper, its applicability for their professional development and improvements and ultimately its practical use as a supplement for potential employers. They recommended the use of specific strategies to change the way in which the information was provided so as to focus on the strategies learned and the skills developed as a result of those experiences rather than on the challenges they faced.

Secondly, the percentage of students with difficulties writing the CD was lower than those writing a TP, with numbers ranging from 47% to 85%, depending on the criterion in question. The aspects they had most difficulties with were related to content, structuring of the information and style/expression. Of particular interest are the difficulties related to establishing objectives and competencies for the course proposed in the context of the use of specific local or national standards applicable as a starting point.

Other types of difficulties were related to the use of specific terminology such as "competences", "methodology", "training process", "objectives", "analysis", etc. as well as to the planning and designing of the course (Vitalaru and Vescan, 2017: 31-32) so as to balance following instructions and expectations for the university level of education in Spain and, at the

same time, showing creativity and originality as a way to excel.

Finally, the percentage of difficulties for RP was lower for most of the aspects indicated (title, content, and style) except for structuring the information in the different sections and paragraphs (72% and 47%). At a more specific level it can be said that the difficulties were related to choosing an adequate research method, designing questions for the surveys and interviews in order to obtain the appropriate amount of information, the use of adequate terminology (52%), the adequate type of information and interpreting the results (53%) (adapted from Vitalaru and Vescan, 2017: 32).

5.3 Examples of Recommendations Provided by Advisors

Several types of comments and suggestions were provided by the advisors with different objectives in mind:

a) To help the student reflect on the topic and use more arguments/examples to defend a perspective or make a point.

b) To suggest a different way of structuring the information to make the message clearer and more effective for the reader.

c) To provide general tips on how to be more specific and improve the academic style/expression.

A selection of the many examples from each category is included below (tables 2 and 3):

Table 2. Examples of Comments for Improvement of Content and Structure

Type of difficulty	Advisor's comments
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a) Helping the student reflect on the topic and use more arguments/examples to defend a perspective or make a point	General statements Avoid general statements without using an official source, your own results/experience of X years and always mention implications.
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Ask yourself: How does that affect the students? The teachers? The learning-teaching process?	
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b) Suggesting a different way of structuring the information	
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Describing a situation in class in a very personal way mixing facts, interpretation and teacher's strategy to solve the problem. Tricks to improve structure within a section	
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Be specific and subdivide ideas/aspects to make sure you cover it as much as possible.	
--	--

You could describe each problem/difficulty focusing on elements such as:

Type of difficulty: interruption	
----------------------------------	--

The reaction of the teacher, of the other students	
--	--

The reaction of the student in question	
---	--

Implications for the student, for his learning process	
--	--

Implications for the teacher	
------------------------------	--

Describing personal experience as a teacher and using the information to prove the effectiveness of a strategy or decision to act in a certain way. Avoid telling a story (avoid action verbs and sequence of events).	
--	--

Apart from style (passive voice, nouns, etc.), specific strategies can	
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also be used: the sequence of events is not very important in this case so you can structure the information in a more impersonal way.

Find names/categories for the important topics you will discuss. Include the facts, the main idea.

Talk about the implications/effects of a series of actions that were/were not taken.

Table 3. Examples of Comments for Improvement of Style

Avoid general words/references/statements. When you talk about the following aspects, consider these questions:

"Original" or "useful" From what point of view? E.g. If you refer to a strategy or a method, you could refer to the fact that they are not included in the textbooks; or say that they are effective considering students' acquisition of knowledge related to the specific topic, development of a particular skill.

"Fun" Find a more academic expression: "motivating", "it encourages students to participate, develop communicative skills", etc.

"They like me as a teacher" Refer to their attitude in class, towards the learning process, their response to certain activities, their level of satisfaction in general

"Should know/should have known" Based on/according to what standards? Source of information?/What type of experience (for how long)?

"Different" (not explained) From what point of view?

"Effective" (not explained) Effectiveness in terms of the

development of which specific skills?

Or what specific aspects regarding the learning process, the knowledge acquired? What does that mean for the student? To remember the information for a long time? Long-term or short-term knowledge? Knowing how to apply learned knowledge or skills to daily life situations or specific circumstances?

"This is because" More formal expressions which can be used: "the reason why", "due to", "a possible explanation would be that".

6. Difficulties Related to Culture and Education Systems

Apart from the difficulties included in the category of aspects related to the academic requirements within graduate studies in general, other specific difficulties or needs could be identified by the advisors. They seem to be related to cultural expectations in general and specifically to educational differences related to the expectations and roles (of the students, of the advisor) in the two education systems involved: Spanish and American. Data included in this paper was gathered and interpreted based on reports from advisors (qualitative analysis) and surveys to the students/LAs (quantitative analysis).

6.1 Observations from Advisors

The advisors' observations regarding students' specific needs/difficulties discussed in Vitalaru and Vescan, 2017: 32-33) will be listed and expanded below:

1) Structure of the syllabus and guidelines. Aspects such as the

following resulted in difficulties for the students:

- "the lack of an FAQ structure [...], which tends to be included in an American syllabus (questions such as "How to do"? "What to include?" "What is a?")";

- the lack of sections that are not normally included in a Spanish syllabus such as the role and responsibilities of the groups/agents involved.

- language (a more basic language adapted for students and a more direct approach).

- the use of precise templates to be followed for the different sections of the paper, the structure of the curriculum, the lesson plans to be included, etc.

2) Working with different documents that provide information and guidelines for the writing process and academic conventions since several documents with different purposes are used:

a) the official syllabus with information following the structure that the university provides;

b) a specific document with instructions regarding the type of information to include in each section, advice and assessment information;

c) a specific document for style guidelines;

d) appendices with templates and

e) training materials on research methodology.

Advisors indicate that students actually prefer one document with all the 'important' details. On the other hand, since they lack specific

training on methodology and/or academic expression for this subject and actual onsite training classes throughout the course, students seem to need very specific examples and details for each of the aspect involved (objectives, structure, methods, data interpretation, introduction, conclusion, style, etc.). Therefore, although the intention of the advisor is to facilitate access only to the information required at a certain point during the writing process, this practice is limited by the training deficiencies of the students and the little class time dedicated to improving their knowledge. Thus, although the illusion of having to work with "too many" documents was reduced through the ulterior measures adopted in the following years, consulting a variety of documents and selecting appropriate information is part of the typical research process required in graduate studies.

3) Requesting templates for the structure of the course proposed in the CD and examples of paragraphs for each section, detailed lesson plans, examples of proposals and of a possible table of contents was another difficulty identified. Students believed that following the instructions regarding the type of content to include in the different sections and consulting other papers was insufficient considering their lack of practice and specific training. This type of information was ultimately provided by the advisor for the next generations of students

as a result of the needs identified for students from the two academic years analyzed and having in mind both the training deficiency and the lack of experience working autonomously in the Spanish education system.

3) Difficulties understanding the need to show creativity and originality when structuring the information from the main sections. For example, the course proposed as part of the CD needs to be adapted considering the type of course proposed and duration (one semester, one year long or an intensive course), the country where it will be taught and the standards required and target students' profile, etc. Thus, following a specific mandatory template can be problematic. Since academic expectations in the two countries involved (Spain and the US) are different, most of the students prefer to follow templates rather than risk not getting a good grade for not following specific requirements. On the other hand, the teaching portfolios also required adaptations depending on personal experience, creativity, and research conducted by the student. Due to the characteristics of this type of paper these students were less reluctant to show creativity and originality, leaning towards too much subjectivity. Ultimately, this difficulty suggested a lack of communication regarding the different perception considering the competencies required, expectations and the student's role.

4) Independent study with an advisor. Since students have little practice and training regarding research methods and curriculum design, some students require constant contact and the advisor's approval for the changes or decisions they make regarding the content, structure and sometimes even style.

5) Other important aspects:

- Discussing new information that was not initially included in the syllabus as fundamental under the different sections of the papers can be confusing for students.

- Questioning the possibility of choosing between different options in structuring the information.

- Understanding academic approach and conventions especially regarding formal expression, impartiality (distancing themselves from the content) and using arguments and facts instead of personal opinions.

- Unnecessary stress-related, in part, to academic achievement and desire to excel.

6.2 Cultural differences identified by the students

The final step of our analysis focused on the cultural/educational differences considering the Spanish and the American education systems that both the advisors and the students perceived as the potential cause of some of the challenges. Therefore, based on the advisor's observations, a survey was designed and distributed to the students from two of the programs (MA in IE and MA in BE) in the academic year

2016-2017 to gather information about their expectations regarding the Final paper, some of the difficulties encountered and general perceptions that were briefly mentioned in Vitalaru and Vescan (2017: 33-34). More details will be provided below.

First, although only approximately half the students in each MA answered, the following observations can be made:

a) Considering the difficulties, most students (approx. 85%) in each of the MA (figure 9) felt that onsite classes were essential to fully understand requirements and expectations, learn about the different aspects involved in the different types of papers, in order to practice as well as obtain feedback on an ongoing basis and based on the submission of several drafts, as reported in an open-ended question of the survey.

MA in International Education
MA in Bilingual Education

Figure 9. Survey. Type of Course Preferred by Students. Source: Vitalaru and Vescan (2017: 34).

b) When asked to underline the cultural and educational differences that the advisors had previously identified in their reports as the cause of the difficulties, the students themselves identified all of them. Specifically, although with variations between the two masters, both programs identified the advisor's role (approx. 75% and 90%), the general expectations (66% and 69%) and the way of structuring the instructions (40% and 85%) as

essential differences (see figures 10 and 11) resulting into actual difficulties or questions that they felt needed clarifications. The aspects that had lower percentages as aspects identified as causes of difficulties were the students' role (16% and 38) and the academic requirements (33% and 30%).

MA in International Education:

Figure 10. Cultural differences identified by the students in MA in IE

MA in Bilingual Education

Figure 11. Cultural differences identified by the students in MA to BE

These results confirmed the initial assumption that aspects such as the perception of roles, expectations, and instructions are key in the intercultural communication involved in the educational settings. Therefore, raising awareness regarding these differences that also affect the academic writing is fundamental.

As pointed out in Vitalaru and Vescan (2017: 35), although based on basic data, these aspects seem to confirm the fact that the students not only see the cultural differences as challenging, but they also perceive them as important factors which, combined with the time constraints of the program and the general academic requirements may result into difficulties during the writing process.

From this point of view, a study that is relevant as a basis for establishing differences between the Spanish and American cultural expectations is Jessie Kooyers' article

(2015) "The United States and Spain: A Comparison of Cultural Values and Behaviors and Their Implications for the Multi-Cultural Workplace". In this article, based on Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions from a social point of view, the author identifies several key cultural differences between the United States and Spain, which affect not only business settings but also workplace interaction and intercultural communication. Although not specifically addressed in this article, certain attitudes in the classroom interactions between the different agents involved and behaviors as a result of certain expectations can be better understood in the context of some of the principles explained in the study (Vitalaru and Vesca, 2017: 35).

7. Conclusions

Based on the analyses and discussion of both type of aspects included in this paper several conclusions can be drawn. Additional information and explanations have been included in the basic conclusions provided in Vitalaru and Vesca (2017: 35) and the information has been divided into four different subsections.

7.1 Conclusions Regarding Types of Papers and Topics

Based on the general analysis of types of papers and topics carried out in the first part of the practical part of the paper the following observations are essential:

- Approximately 45% of the students prefer to write a CD due to

its applicability for the practicum and, in general, for their professional future. The rest of the percentage is divided between the other two types of papers.

- Most papers focus on cultural aspects and student-oriented approaches as an effective way of enhancing language learning in context and applicable in a globalized world.

- A combination of teaching methods, strategies and theories are most commonly used in the CD. The most common ones are project-based, task-oriented and cooperative learning.

- A variety of topics is covered both by research papers and curriculum designs and, as expected, the highest percentages are specific for those related to culture, language & culture, the use of different teaching methods, development of certain skills, especially oral communication skills, the adaptation of teaching practices in Spain, US or other countries (Japan, Korea, Latin American countries).

- The teaching portfolios tend to be more subjective and personal due to their main characteristics.

Results show the variety of interests of the students as a reflection of either their background, their interest in helping specific groups of students and advising future LAs or main teachers or future professional interest based on knowledge and experience acquired. The high level of awareness regarding the variety of aspects involved in education is a

direct result of students' exposure to intercultural differences and difficulties and has practical applications since they not only identify specific needs but also aspects that have not been particularly addressed or that may constitute a challenge in the country in question.

7.2 Conclusions Regarding Academic Difficulties

In spite of their enthusiasm, motivation and high academic achievements students seem to face difficulties throughout the process of planning and writing the Master's Thesis especially due to the need to adapt their ideas and work methods to Spanish and general academic requirements for research papers as well as lack of onsite training sessions throughout the year.

The advisors identified several types of academic difficulties in the correction of the drafts, which, for the purpose of this analysis, have been included into criteria such as title, structure, content, and style, for each type of paper. Generally speaking, some conclusions can be mentioned:

- The students that had more difficulties, in general, are those that chose the TP, especially due to its personal and subjective nature as well as the fact that, contrary to their expectations, it involved an academic approach and a more formal/neutral perspective and expression.

- The aspects that those who wrote a CD had difficulties with were related to content, structure,

definition of objectives and skills, use of terminology and style/expression.

- Finally, the difficulties that students who wrote an RP had were: using an adequate research method, designing surveys, using adequate terminology and interpreting the results.

7.3 Conclusions Regarding Difficulties Related to Cultural/Educational Expectations

Regarding the difficulties related to cultural expectations several aspects that were useful for understanding perceptions and improving instructions have been identified.

On the one hand, the advisors' perspective underlined several educational differences related to: the structure of instructions in the syllabus, the students' reluctance to work with different documents, the need to use templates, the different perception of creativity when structuring the information, the possibility to choose between different options as problematic, the particularities of working independently with an advisor, understanding academic conventions and the competitive nature of the students' themselves.

On the other hand, students themselves felt that onsite classes were necessary to understand expectations, receive training and ultimately feel reassured about their decisions. They confirm the causes indicated by the advisors themselves and identify the specific aspects related to cultural and educational

expectations as essential differences that may result into actual difficulties or questions that they feel need some kind of clarifications.

In terms of applicability of this research, both the advisors and the students agree that there are several types of difficulties involved and that practical solutions are required to make the writing process easier for the students by lowering cultural/educational differences while focusing on basic training on research methods and academic writing. Some possible solutions have been applied by the advisors in the current academic year (2016-2017) (Vitalaru and Vescan, 2017: 35) such as:

- A practical workshop on research methods at the beginning of the academic year.
- Use of templates with examples of content in the different sections of each type of paper.
- Extended office hours.

Additional solutions suggested in Vitalaru and Vescan (2017: 35) and applied in the academic years 2017-2018 and/or 2018-2019 are:

- Making students aware of the cultural expectations and educational differences in a

workshop at the beginning of the academic year.

- Structure instructions in a more basic way adapted for their actual needs considering differences and little time availability for onsite sessions.

- Use of recorded videos that could be available online.

- Use more standardized templates but also allow creativity in terms of structure and content for students who want to excel.

7.4 Limitations

Although this study can currently benefit both students and advisors from the two cultures involved, it could be improved by including the analysis of papers and results from the academic year 2016-2017. It could also provide a more detailed background on the differences between the Spanish and American educational systems and cultural expectations. Comparing the different cultural aspects mentioned in the two systems starting from the principles mentioned in Kooyers' (2015) article could provide more specific understanding of the different perspectives involved and help us think of practical solutions useful for both cultures.

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