

# UNIVERSITY-LEVEL REFLECTIVE WRITING, ANALYZING THE INTERNSHIP REPORTS OF STUDENTS OF FRENCH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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## Abstract

*Reflective writing is an important aspect, especially for students who are majoring in teaching a foreign language, because it constitutes an initial step for finding a solution to problems arising in practice. Reflectivity in writing can be acquired by working since the first cycle studies, even in the pre-university system but in the Albanian context, it is not always realized from one level to another. This paper will focus on reflectivity in writing by means of internship reports handed by students at the end of their two-month internship in middle and secondary schools.*

*The corpus consists of the internship reports of the last two years (2011-2013) submitted by 80 master's students, in order to point out that the students' reflection on their internship in various schools are not realistic due to their inability to express their viewpoint on their experience. The main results of the analysis indicate that the students fail to coherently organize the data according to the internship report's structure and they cannot explain accurately the problems encountered in the Albanian context. Instead, in most of the cases, they depart from an ideal context found in various foreign authors' works. They are unable to argue on the importance of teaching experience for exercising their future profession. Furthermore they display several deficiencies in describing sample classes that they have taught in the schools.*

**Key words:** *internship, reflexivity, students, university.*

## Introduction

Writing is broadly studied nowadays in the framework of literacy; a skill in reading and writing that helps personal development and better integrates the individual in a democratic society. When speaking of literacy, attention is mainly directed to the development of the ability of critical thinking by means of different use of language, but this is not always that simple because it depends on many other factors. These may be social factors but they might also be related to the form and time in which the selected methodology is implemented to develop in the student the ability to think critically through reading and writing. Countries, in which the educational system is somehow consolidated, work a lot on these aspects in elementary

school systems starting with the teaching of mother tongue, (report on Literacy, Ontario, 2004/ Scribner, Cole 2010) which makes the transfer of different strategies and techniques in foreign languages easier for the other degrees (high school and university). The notion of literacy and critical thinking is increasingly found in the official texts of MES (MASH) in Albania and in the criteria on curricula development (MASH 2010, Mustafai, Guxholli, Dautaj 2011) especially in the last 5 years. In fact the rhythm of content, text and methodology variation is slow due to some factors related to teachers' qualification, conception of consolidated texts and particularly the stability of the programs that curricula offers in different fields.

### *Research Problem*

In the last few years, with the introduction of new contemporary courses in faculties of foreign languages in Albania conception of the writing process has changed and considerable work has been done on reflective writing. However a variety of problems deriving from the pre-university education systems such as the textbooks used and as well as the importance given to reflective writing in, cannot be easily avoided during university studies. Even though the main courses like *Methodology of university work*, *Written language*, *Research methodology*, *Techniques for writing a diploma thesis*, *Structured comment*, are updated with the latest models on how to reflectively write in a foreign language, our students keep having high deficiencies.

One of the most complex forms of reflective writing is the internship report that students draft after they finish the internship in primary and upper-secondary schools, since it is a combination of some elements aiming at achieving the coherence between theory and practice. Reflective writing just like the internship report must contain the descriptive part, analyses, critics and the solution to the problems (Dejempep and Dezzutier, 2001) four important stages that deal with reflexion about the act and during the act (Schon, 1994). Reflexivity is not synonymous to the word reflection, it is about the actions done by the student until one manages to build 'a reflexive habitus' (Bibaow and Defays 2010; Perrenoud, 2001).

Even though the internship report is drafted after the completion of the studies (fifth year, second term), most of them leave much to be desired in terms of the students personal contribution. Furthermore, even the students openly admit the difficulties they encounter in conceiving a task of a reflective character. However, their reports are generally coherent in structure, with a table of content and paragraph arranging according to meaning. They are also organized according to the formal rules of writing such as references, quotations, bibliography, appendix positioning etc.

### **Methodology of Research**

The authors have studied the internship reports of 80 students majoring in French who have attended the master studies at the Faculty of Foreign Languages during the 2011-2013 academic years. Generally, the students who have chosen to attend the master program in teaching, do their internship in the capital city's high schools as well as in elementary schools and it lasts 2 months. Firstly the students do the passive internship, in which they mostly have to observe and in a second stage they pass on to active internship, in which they are obliged to teach 5 classes per week. The number of students from one group to another varies from 17 to 35 and the teaching level reaches B1 of CEFRL, achieved in the last year high school.

Students work on the internship report in the first year of bachelor degree and during the master degree, a cycle in which they expand their knowledge on master thesis writing that they deliver with the completion of their studies. It must be highlighted that even though it is a public attending the master degree, it inherits problems related to reflective writing since their 'reflexive habitus' is not consolidated.

The analysis method is mainly the qualitative analyses of students' reports which aims

at identifying the main problems that arise by relying on the analyses of the students' writing speech (Deslauriers, 1998). The method of written discourse analysis (Moirand and Peytard, 1992) it is used to observe the content of all the student's works, in order to see which are the most frequent problems they have concerning reflexivity. Time after time the authors illustrate by using parts taken from the internship reports, the main writing tendencies that students display so that the problems treated are more obvious.

## Results of Research

### *General Observations*

The students' inability to express an idea on the school and the teaching context was quite evident in the "Description of the internship experience" of almost 37 reports. In fact there are given superficial ideas or ideas describing in general terms the work of a foreign language teacher, of the intern and the teaching process in a class. Such aspects can be found in each didactic book of an informative nature, not necessarily in an internship report.

*«Practical internship enables the intern teacher to observe the class' life and to be integrated there. The ability of the intern teacher to effectively guide a class is evaluated during the internship. But internships train students not necessarily specialists» (E.D internship in a high school).*

In these cases the problems lie in the descriptive part of the internship where we found so many generalizations. This makes the description theoretical and consequently worthless regarding the function that this part of the report should have.

### *Use of Clichéd Sentences*

In some internship reports, it was observed the use of the same sentences or the same fragments when addressing specific problems with language, particularly in language high schools. The following paragraph might illustrate this. It is about the difficulties that arise during the teaching process of non-linguistic disciplines and it was encountered in 9 internship reports:

*«I have observed that there were often problems during the physics, geography and history classes, problems which couldn't be dealt with during the speciality classes, but they need to be taken into consideration during the language teaching classes. In this case it is noticed a good collaboration between the science teacher and the French teacher».*

The same observation is made in six other internship reports written by students who have done their internships in primary schools. They have written about teachers' profession and the interaction one should have in the framework of teaching process.

*«A teacher's profession is one of mutual help, support and collaboration. Close teacher-parent collaboration is the key to a child's complete development, because this enables the fulfillment of their needs »*

### *Tendencies to Take Examples from Idealized Contexts*

Nowadays information sources on the network are innumerable; consequently different readings from the internet have an impact on the students' writing assignments. It is not about plagiarism because the students are given the right orientation in drafting just before starting with the report, but it is about summarizing and borrowing samples from researches or professors who write about a far more consolidated context of the French teaching process. Thus, students for instance talk among other things about the use of information technology and communication, they point out the teaching process with an interactive board or the use of computer classrooms, while in reality these scarcely ideal orientations are difficult to be put into practice and they are premature for most schools in the capital city and the localities.

*«The use of interactive board would be a good opportunity for the teacher of a foreign language because this technology enables the conception of many pedagogical scenarios and makes the teaching class more effective. The class becomes more interactive and the students discover a variety of recent multimedia documents»*

It is obvious to the professors who evaluate of the internship report that these suggestions, ideas or comments are borrowed from foreign languages specialists because in many cases the student, who does the drafting, gives the references.

#### *Comments that Remain at the Level of Observation*

In the part of the report about the students' personal reflection on the internship, they try to express their opinions on what they have learned and what they could have done in this short teaching experience. This is the most difficult part of the report and forces the student to directly reflect on the quality of his/her practice, what he/she has done and what improvements could be made. The 38 internship reports show that the students have focused only on describing their work without offering any solutions to the problems encountered during the teaching process. In the following comment, the student emphasizes that the pupils were interested in French and eager for more information but she does not go further:

*«My students were motivated and wanted to learn beyond what the textbook could provide to them. I had to carefully plan all my lessons because they asked a lot of questions and they always wanted to learn more». (S.B internship in the high school)*

In another report, the student points out a frequently mentioned problem by many other students; the interpersonal relationship with the pupils:

*«I found it hard to manage the class when their teacher was not there. The pupils would easily destabilize the learning process and it took me a lot of time and effort to put order and to hold their interest » (I. L internship, primary school)*

In this case, the student provides no details how she managed to deal with this challenging situation: whether she asked for the tutoring teacher's help, she changed her form of communication or she used another strategy. Likewise, similar comments are provided in other reports where there are made observations on the difficulties encountered in assessing and motivating the students, gaining their respect, writing the diary, using the textbook etc... *«I had troubles with some teenagers who had little interest in French language since it was a mandatory subjects imposed by the school. I had to handle this kind of problems and to adapt to every similar situation»*, reports another student.

One of the main elements of this part of the internship report is the students' self-evaluation of their teaching performance in which they have to indicate their strengths and weaknesses. There are also reports with objective self-evaluations where there are highlighted both achievements and imperfections in the teaching process. However most of them tend to have very positive connotations. Furthermore, all the self-evaluations are not accompanied with the appropriate arguments based on certain criteria and this trend is evident in about 65 internship reports. Below, there is an example of a student who does not provide explanations why she considered her experience a success despite the fact that the supervising teacher had noted that there was room for improvement:

*«I can say that my objectives have been fully accomplished in this one-month internship at the high school. This internship was about French as a foreign language and teaching. I think I managed to successfully make the connection between them» (S. O, internship in a high school)*

### *Deficiencies in Describing the Teaching Models the Students Employed*

All reports contain a description of a teaching model that the students have employed in the active phase of the internship, but very few reports are comprised of all the stages for teaching a class. This means that the authors want to infer that the classes were taught to students who do not manifest any difficulty in understanding the lesson, in a classroom equipped with all the necessary devices for creating an optimal learning environment and with a teacher trainee who has a solution to every problem. Most of the described teaching models resembled to the models learned in the university courses of didactic nature. The only difference seems to be in the description of elements such as the number of students per group, their proficiency, textbooks or any other material used in the teaching process. All the teaching models respect the structure of: audience, number of students, proficiency, background information, duration, material, general objectives, and specific objectives.

#### *Lack of Coherence in the Choice of Activities according to the Pupils' Proficiency*

Most internship reports reveal discrepancies between the pupils' proficiency in French and the activities organized in class. For instance, there are provided exercises and activities for the B1 level of proficiency in 24 reports. On the other hand, in these reports it was stated that the pupils' level of proficiency could not go higher than A2. One possible explanation would be the fact that the exercises and activities organized in class are provided as appendixes of the report and for most of our students the appendixes have secondary importance and are not given the appropriate attention. When reading them, they give the impression as if they were separate parts of the report rather than illustrating the ideas developed in it.

It was also observed that the students had the tendency to generalize on the pupils' proficiency by considering them at a beginner or intermediate level and without pointing out the fact that the classes consisted of mixed proficient students. As a result, there is no room for the differentiated pedagogy in their teaching suggestions, nor in their descriptions of the teaching models. Instead, there is provided information on teaching models employed for all pupils regardless of the proficiency differences. This tendency results from the students' insecurity to describe and analyze a mixed proficiency classrooms even though they actually tried to propose activities for this type of classrooms.

#### *Poor Conclusions*

In 17 internship reports, the conclusions are very general and theoretical and there is little difference with the introduction. It is known that at the conclusions there should be formulated critical opinions, there should be offered future difficulties and perspectives. (Lauper, 2006 : 9). These reports are missing many of the abovementioned elements and consequently they vary in length from two to four short paragraphs. Furthermore, they lack logical connectors, which results from the lack of a strong and well-founded reasoning in the conclusions.

#### *Discrepancy between the Level of the Written Internship Report and Its Oral Presentation*

Two of this paper's authors are also professors who evaluate the internship reports and they have noticed that during the oral presentation of the report, a large number of students are better at addressing certain issues orally rather than in a written form. This is because the students are asked questions that help and encourage more critical thinking. Consequently, the oral assessment is higher than written report's assessment. Professors, who teach courses on writing

research papers and internship reports, try to bear this fact in their minds when they instruct their students on how to argue and express their ideas in a written form.

## Discussion

Many authors working on reflective writings emphasize that the internship report obviously reflects the fieldwork experience and for that reason it has a reflexive character. This experience makes it possible for students to:

- to look closely at the different actors of the school ( institutional pedagogy),
- to study the relation that different pupils have with knowledge (reflection of epistemology character),
- to analyze self functioning and its habitus (psychology and sociology),
- to verify its ability to connect theory with practice (didactics)
- to place them in one of the poles of the didactic triangle (Dejemeppe and Dezzutter, 2001; Alier, and Renard Paquay, 2000).

From the analysis of the reports, it resulted that all five above mentioned dimensions were present in those writings, but they were more visible in the general structure than in substance. In many parts critical thinking was shallow, incomplete, inadequate and at times inconsistent, which shows that the report is one of best proofs to expose the deficiencies of students of the French language regarding the ability to think and write in reflective way.

Reflexivity in writing is connected to the culture of writing that is relayed in schools (Lahire 2008), and the lack of reflective dispositions can hinder its success and achievements. In the reports can be distinguished a culture of writing that has not encouraged reflexivity over the years and it becomes even more evident during oral presentations when the student significantly improves his/her ability of critical thinking after being asked certain additional questions. Thus, we have to find more suitable, diverse methods of evaluation and exercise in order to really improve critical thinking. Similar results are seen in writings which are focused on reflexivity not only on the internship reports, but also in other forms of analyzing the professional experiences like the summary of classes observations. (Deum, 2004; Maela, 2005; Moretti 2003)

## Conclusions

After analyzing the data, the authors can come to the conclusion that in most reports, the efforts to develop a critical distancing from the first teaching experience have not always been satisfactory. Reflective writings highlight that there is considerable room for improvement in the students' writing practices, because they frequently tend to be descriptive, lack enough criticism and provide fewer solutions. Improvement cannot be achieved if there is no coherent methodology in all teaching levels, since it is noticed that even though in universities it is paid attention to reflexivity in learning, a lot more is needed in order to achieve the best level.

Some techniques that can be used more frequently with students in order for them to improve report writing:

- group analysis of certain reflective writings, by using criteria well defined by the professor
- surveys and more often analysis of pedagogical situations, by progressively going from description to analysis and finally to the critical thinking
- the concept of ``writing workshops`` where incomplete reflective writing is completed by students
- peer evaluation of the level of writing regarding the presence of elements that makes them reflective
- frequent implementation of the practice of rewriting the reports that have problems after the first correction and after the professor has displayed elements of real life pedagogical situations.

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