

TYPICAL ERRORS IN PUPILS' SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH PAPERS IN ANGLOFONE LITERATURE STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

While involved in scientific research activities, pupils get acquainted with the methods and structure of scientific research, thus acquiring skills necessary to handle and develop theoretical concepts, carry out empirical analysis, develop analytical and critical thinking and acquire new knowledge and skills. Expert-accessor analysis of the pupils' papers presented between 2017–2022 in the national competition of research papers in foreign language and literature studies has allowed the detection of distinct categories of mistakes appearing in numerous papers that prevent even very talented pupils from achieving good results. Thus, the study aims to promote the understanding of both pupils and teachers supervising research papers of the most common mistakes that should be avoided while elaborating a research paper and stimulating the creation of more successful research papers in the future. The report provides a summary of data obtained by analysing 27 pupils' research papers submitted in the Riga region and reviews of these works, identifying the most common types of errors and how they affect the results, as well as providing recommendations on how to eliminate such errors. The study concludes that the three most important groups of errors are related to an inappropriate selection of the research field, inability to formulate and prove the topicality and novelty of the research, and failure to balance, structure, and harmonize the research carried out in the theoretical and empirical parts of the paper. The obtained results indicate that it is necessary to educate further supervisors, pupils, researchers, and prospective teachers on how to avoid these mistakes to improve the quality of the research in the field of literary studies, so suggestions are provided at the end of the paper.

Keywords: *Anglophone literature studies, errors, structure, pupils' research papers.*

Introduction

It has been confirmed in numerous studies that participation in research-oriented activities leads to significant acquisition of research, resource management, communication, and interpersonal skills (Ravishankar et al., 2009), and undoubtedly “schools play a central role in students’

orientation towards science” (Reinhold, Holzberger, Seidel 2018). Alas, there often is “a significant gap between research (researchers) and school practice (teachers’ understanding of the research” (Tothova, Rusek 2021), which does not allow to reach the best possible results. Since 2016, the development and evaluation of students’ research papers have been carried out within the framework of the European Social Fund project with the aim to promote the development of individual competencies and talents of pupils at general education institutions by providing a set of national and international support measures (National Centre for Education, 2016). The competition of secondary school pupils’ research papers is an annual event, involving secondary school pupils from all over Latvia. The implementation of the project is coordinated by the National Centre for Education, Republic of Latvia. The University of Latvia, as one of the cooperation partners, oversees and carries out the assessment and reviewing of the pupils’ research papers in the Riga region.

Although the benefits of being involved in research activities are undeniable as it provides a “great opportunity for students’ personal and career development since it is a source of learning and self-discovery that helps unveil the validity of their assumptions and ideas” (Djoub, 2021), pupils’ and their teachers’ lack of experience and knowledge about the stages of scientific research development, the optimal structure and content of a scientific paper have an adverse effect on developing a successful research paper.

Evaluating the scientific research works of the Riga region since 2014 in the field of Anglophone literature studies, the most typical mistakes that recur from year to year, hindering the achievement of the best possible results have been detected, analysed, and summarised. At the final phase of the competition, that is, research conferences, pupils often mention the lack of skills to perform an in-depth analysis of a literary work as their primary problem that has not allowed them to achieve the planned results. Actually, the study of pupils’ papers and their reviews reveal that the scores are more often lost because both the pupil and the supervisor have had inadequate skills to choose the scope of and limit research to a definite scientific field of study; to explain the topicality and novelty of the research, and failure to balance and harmonize the theoretical and empirical studies necessary for the analysis.

Methodology

Altogether 27 pupils’ scientific research papers devoted to Anglophone literature studies written between 2017-2022 were randomly selected out of 40 submitted to the section and were analysed in line with the given expert-assessor reviews. Both the content of the papers was re-evaluated,

the compliance with the *Guidelines for Writing Pupil Research Papers*¹ (National Centre for Education, 2021) was investigated, and the comments provided in the expert-assessor reviews were analysed, paying particular attention to the errors inherent in a significant number of the examined papers.

Results

Scrutiny of the selected research papers and their reviews revealed that several areas require special attention. While the compliance of the papers with 20 requirements is analysed and evaluated in the process of reviewing, for the current analysis, only those categories were selected that indicated the highest number of similar mistakes appearing in more than 15% of the papers. As *Table 1* discloses, errors in the given fields range from being very common (56%) to comparatively rare (17%).

Table 1. Statistical data of typical mistakes found in the pupils' scientific research papers

Mistakes	out of 27 papers	%	2019 9 papers	%
Does not correspond or only partially correspond to the field of science	15	56	4	44
Incorrect citation	7	28	3	33
Plagiarism	4	17	1	11
The topicality of the work is poorly justified, lack of novelty	16	61	7	78
The goal of the research is incorrectly formulated	11	44	4	44
Faulty hypothesis or research questions	11	44	4	44
Faulty Literature Review	9	33	2	22
Faulty structure, poorly or not connected theoretical and empirical study	13	50	4	44
Incomplete Conclusions	7	28	3	33

To ascertain that the selected works reflect believable overall tendencies, all papers submitted in the section of Anglophone literature studies in 2019 were re-evaluated. The obtained data were compared to the results gained after studying the randomly selected papers. As *Figure 1* indicates, though the percentages slightly differ, typical mistakes remain the same from year to year.

¹ GUIDELINES for the development and evaluation of pupils' research papers

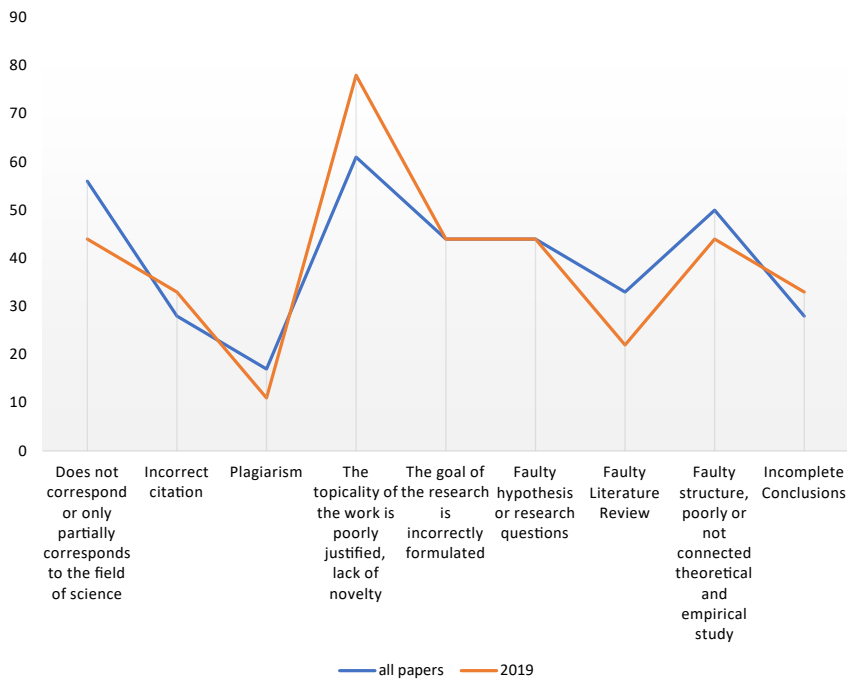


Figure 1. Comparison of the selected papers with the data of 2019

Discussion

As seen in *Table 1*, the three most common mistakes of pupils' research papers are:

- 1) the topicality of the work is poorly justified; the research paper does not demonstrate or fails to prove novelty – 56%;
- 2) lack of correspondence or just partial correspondence to the research field – Anglophone literature studies – 56%;
- 3) faulty structure, poorly or not related theoretical and empirical study – 50%.

Topicality and novelty

The research makes it apparent that 61% of all pupils, as one of the critical problems encounter the necessity to prove or explain the topicality and novelty of the research. The primary goal of any research paper is to utilize “acceptable scientific methodology to solve problems and create new knowledge that is generally applicable” (Babariya & Gohel, 2017). One of the causes of the lack of novelty is that the issues which seem fresh, interesting, and captivating to secondary school pupils who have

encountered some classical literary works for the first time in their lives have already been thoroughly studied by generations before them. Thus it becomes extremely difficult to create new knowledge by studying those. Though probably, something new could be discovered by applying a fresh research angle even to the theme “The Social Status of Women in Victorian Period Society and its Reflection in the Works of the Brontë Sisters” (NCE Scientific Conference of Pupils from Riga Region and Riga [SCPRR], 2018, JS²), it is hardly possible that an inexperienced researcher will be able to implement it. Performing research on a theme like the given one, pupils will find it difficult even to get an approximate understanding of the general tendencies of the views of other scholars who have studied the theme, as the amount of critical works to consult will be immense. Studying well-known and widely covered topics will still be useful to the pupil, who will learn a lot in the process, but it will be very challenging to achieve and prove the novelty of such research.

Another difficulty even talented pupils struggle with is the requirement to explain and prove the topicality in the Introduction of the paper, as demonstrated by the reviewer assessing a well-written paper: “The topicality of the research is unquestionable, but it is compulsory to define it and point out that the works of this particular author have not been studied much yet and there are no widely available studies on the use of” particular elements in the given set of the literary works (SCPRR, 2019, RB-review³). Even though the reviewer is experienced enough to recognise a relevant study carried out from a unique angle, it is still the researcher’s task to devote a couple of lines in the Introduction to define and explain topicality; otherwise, the score is diminished.

While defining the topicality, researchers should avoid such empty phrases like “problems which are highlighted in the novel are still essential” (SCPRR, 2019, PŠ) “without naming any of the problems” (SCPRR, 2019, PŠ-review). Even though the reviewer recognizes the validity of the claim that “the social problems discussed in the novel are still relevant today” (SCPRR, 2019, PŠ-review), for it to be considered as a justification of the topicality, it is essential to name and specify these problems. Reviewers take into consideration the lack of experience of pupils and are lenient when evaluating this aspect; still, the young researchers should take into account that they are the ones responsible for naming the problems, issues, and approaches used while carrying out the research and should devote

² To preserve the anonymity of the authors of the papers, only their initials are provided.

³ To separate the research papers from the reviews of those, ‘review’ is added after the initials of the author of the research paper.

at least a couple of sentences defining and explaining the topicality and novelty of the paper.

Correspondence to the research field

Another crucial problem of pupils writing the research papers and of their supervisors – teachers, is the failure to recognize what is and is not pertinent to the field of Anglophone literature studies. According to the set requirements for the national research paper competition: “The text of the research paper must be written in the official state language, except for the field of science of foreign linguistics and foreign literature, where the work is written in the relevant foreign language⁴” (National Centre for Education, 2021). While the guidelines make it clear that only papers written in the fields of foreign linguistic and literature studies can be and must be written in the respective language of the given section, that is English here, and all other papers must be written in Latvian and submitted to the corresponding sections, some pupils and teachers assume that every paper written in English belongs to linguistic and literary studies. Thus, several papers that ought to be written in Latvian land in the section of Anglophone literature and linguistics, as the language of the research paper is English. The following paper, “Music genres affect the lives of young people” (SCPRR, 2018, MJ) should have been written in Latvian and handed in either in the section of Psychology or Arts, depending on the focus, while the following paper “The impact of studying abroad on future career” (SCPRR, 2021, KH) belongs to the field of social studies. The paper on “The use of elements of drama at the lessons of the Russian and English languages” (SCPRR, 2021, KB, AB, AK), should have been submitted to the section of Pedagogy. A couple of well-written papers “The relationship between gender, motivation, and achievement when learning English as a foreign language” (SCPRR, 2022, IEL) and “The impact of age on English language acquisition” (SCPRR, 2022, LS) belong to the field of Social studies, as these carry out research in the areas of psychology and pedagogy, and again, all these papers should be written in Latvian. The teachers supervising research papers should remember that the fact that the paper is related to English language acquisition does not make it in research in linguistics or literature, if neither of those has been studied; these are not linguistic or literary studies if the focus is not on the language or literature itself but the pupils learning the language.

Another common mistake is to carry out research in the field of literary studies in the theoretical part of the paper and switch to unrelated and theoretically baseless survey in the field of the social sciences in the

⁴ here and everywhere else translation by Antra Leine

empirical part. The author of the paper on the theme “Stereotypes and cultural diversity in the novel ‘Murder on the Orient Express’ by Agatha Christie” admits being more interested in studying “how stereotypes and cultural differences affect the formation of students’ thinking, opinion, and tolerant behavior” (SCPRR, 2022, JJ) – research which belongs to the field of Social sciences. To achieve it, the author sets several widely scoped research questions: “To study the sociocultural background of the novel [...] To identify class and cultural differences using the Novel”, “To plan lessons about the Novel. Discuss the stereotypes, cultural and class differences described in the Novel [...]” and “To create a survey (questionnaire) to study the impact of reading the extract of the Novel on students’ attitude to cultural and class diversity and evaluate how stereotypical their thinking is. To foster cultural awareness of students, the potential readers of the Novel” (SCPRR, 2022, JJ). Neither the paper itself nor the set objectives include theoretical studies in literature, psychology, and pedagogy that would be essential to reach the set goals.

Neither the authors of these papers nor their supervisors have been aware that 1) also surveys of the peers and classmates must be carried out using scientifically sound and proven methodology and based on theoretical studies in the field; 2) analysis of the awareness, knowledge, or attitude of the classmates and their ability to detect some literary elements or apply some knowledge, is not a research in literature or language studies.

While more often the papers in which different science fields are mixed up deal with pedagogical or psychological experiments in the empirical part, occasionally more interesting but still invalid approaches appear. Sometimes young researchers forget that fictional works are not entirely reliable sources and should be used to learn how something is depicted instead of employing these as the sources of profound, scientifically based historical investigations. Thus, Daniel Defoe’s ‘Robinson Crusoe’ is not a survival guidebook and should not be used as an academic source to learn “how to survive in extreme conditions” (SCPRR, 2018, KK). Besides, the topic belongs to anthropology studies, while the research should have been conducted in literature.

To avoid these mistakes and prevent poor results or failure, teachers and pupils should strictly confine their research to the study of Anglophone literature or linguistics without theoretically baseless excursions into the fields of social or other sciences.

The connection between the theoretical and empirical studies

The third most problematic issue of pupils’ research papers is the composition and logic of the structure. Deciphering the meaning of the text and interpreting it is an art and requires a very complex set of skills

(Goldman, Lee 2014; Lee 2011). The structure analysis divulges that pupils are too often not skilful enough to intertwine logically and structurally the theoretical and empirical parts, ensuring that the practical study of literary works is based on the academic findings stated in the theoretical part of the paper.

Here the problems appear mainly due to two often related causes. First, the theoretical part is just too short, and does not provide all the necessary information to carry out successful research: “The theoretical part of the research is not completely related to the practical one, the part that forms the main theoretical basis of the research takes up only half a page.” (SCPRR, 2018, KK-review). “The literature review on Gothic and Gothic features in literature takes up only half a page” (SCPRR, 2019, AM-review), thus, providing an incomplete basis for the research on the given theme. To the same group belong the papers lacking a qualitative theoretical basis altogether or those in which the theoretical part is a compilation of various, relatively superficial, non-academic sources without expansion and analysis.

The second group of faulty papers includes those in which there is no correspondence between what is discussed in the theoretical part of the paper and what has been analysed in the empirical one. Thus, for example, the theoretical part provides analysis of the use of “inversions in other languages” (SCPRR, 2018, LG), but the issue is never discussed in the empirical one.

Typical of scientific research activity, “the solutions to the posed questions cannot be found solely by obtained knowledge and skills – new knowledge must be learned” (Volodko & Čerņajeva, 2019), but not everything that is learned during the writing process, must be included in the final research paper. Thus, while writing the paper “Anorexia in Fiction: the Analysis of “Wintergirls” by L. H. Anderson” (SCPRR, 2017, SS), the author must learn what anorexia is and what are its typical features, but extensive analysis of the medical aspects of anorexia does not correspond to the chosen research field and should not be included in the work of literary studies.

To the same group belong papers in which unnecessary information about the biographies of the authors is provided: “The subdivision dedicated to biography is superfluous and useless” (SCPRR, 2019, AM-review). These either in no way are helpful to the analysis carried out in the empirical part of the paper: “Although an exciting task, it is not clear how the researcher’s translation of the biographies of A. Sakse and T. Zālīte into English helps to understand better the portrayal of the character traits in the translated fairy tales” (SCPRR, 2020, MK-review) or tempt pupils to carry out hypothetical assumptions about the goals and motivations of the

authors. It is pointless to include these in the research, as the findings of the biographical facts of the author do not prove anything about the value, plot, structure, characteristic features of the genre, or any other element of the literary work. Also, as counterproductive are attempts to explain either author's motivations and actions or literary works themselves by providing an amateurish psychological analysis of some biographical facts of the author in relation to the elements in the literary work under discussion. To outline some parallels between the author's biography and the fictional work may be interesting for the researcher, but these observations should be left out of the final paper, as the goal is to study a literary work, not the author's psychology.

Conclusions and suggestions

1. Pupils should be encouraged to choose themes that have not been already extensively studied. Comparative analysis of English and Latvian literature of the same period or having other unifying properties could be a good option; as well as, choosing contemporary Anglophone literature or a comparison of definite aspects in a literary work and its more recent screen adaptation could be worth studying to ensure the novelty of the research.
2. Though the topicality and novelty of the paper may seem obvious to the researcher, these must be defined and clarified in the Introduction. The topicality of the research may be proved by providing an overview of the growing popularity of the particular literary genre, literary work, author, screen adaptation, and so on, mentioning relevant figures and facts. If the problems or nay other aspects discussed in a literary work are still significant, these must be named and explained.
3. Scientifically invalid are the research papers in which the theoretical part provides a study of the concepts related to literary analysis, while the empirical one discusses the data obtained by studying classmates' reactions to the fictional work or their ability to recognize some literary elements. The focus must remain on literary works.
4. Papers studying classmates and/or written about the acquisition and teaching of English language and literature must be written in Latvian and handed in in the respective social sciences sections.
5. Everything that is discussed in the empirical chapter must have a corresponding theoretical basis. The theoretical chapter should not discuss issues that will not be approached in the empirical one.
6. While a couple of lines introducing the author of the literary work are necessary, longer overviews and studies of the biographies of the authors should not be included in the final version of the paper. The

goal is to study a literary work instead of its creator; the analysis of the author belongs to the field of social sciences.

Author Note

To access the pupils' research papers and reviews for research purposes, permission should be required from VISC, visc@visc.gov.lv.

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⁵ As the hyperlinks to the actual papers contain pupils' last names, to preserve anonymity, as the reference the hyperlink to the site containing all papers and the reviews of the respective year and section are given, in citations providing initials of the students that would allow the location of the respective research papers and their reviews.

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