Common mistakes in writing abstracts in English

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Abstract

The abstract is usually the first thing people read before they start to read the whole article. Therefore, very careful attention must be devoted to writing it. It might be the most important part of one’s writing. This article focuses on those mistakes, both formal (e.g. the layout of the article or a maximum number of words) and linguistic-stylistic (e.g. a use of articles, the word order or formality vs. informality), which authors should avoid in order to succeed in having their articles published. The paper also discusses how this type of scientific writing should look like and provide a few tips of completing it. In conclusion, a specific teaching example is outlined.

Keywords: abstract; formal writing; English; mistakes;

1. Introduction

The most common form of formal writing all the students have to do in English at universities all over the Czech Republic is to write an abstract of their qualified papers, be it a Bachelor paper, a dissertation or a doctoral thesis. Although they do summaries, seminar papers or project writing in their native language, i.e. Czech, most of the students are not able to write them in English. This article focuses on the shortest one, but perhaps the most important form of formal writing in English – an abstract, and lists the most common mistakes students usually make when they write it.

2. Material and methods of the analysis

In the summer semester of academic year 2011/2012, 66 abstracts in English were collected from the part-time students of Management of Tourism at the Faculty of Informatics and Management of the University of Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic. These students had to write an abstract of their Bachelor paper (BP) since they were in their third year of study. In fact, what they did was a translation of an abstract from their native language into English, which obviously sometimes was reflected in an interference caused by their native language. According to general requirements set by the faculty and university, students were asked to submit an abstract of 200 words at maximum. Moreover, students were advised to consult at least two British abstracts, corresponding partly to the content of their abstract in order to be provided with some model. The abstracts of their BP focused on their field of study, i.e. either management or tourism, such as: development of tourism in Cambodia, tourism marketing management in the village of Bouzov, issues of information centers in Polabi tourism region, agrotourism in the...
Czech Republic and Great Britain, providing tourism services for clients with allergies, congress tourism in contemporary travel industry, memorable trees, the potential of nature tourism in Malaysia, environmentally friendly tourism in the Giant Mountains, activities of non-profit organizations in Pardubice and their potential use in tourism, or extracurricular events as a specific part of the offer in tourism. Only one paper was an exception and it concerned financial analysis of company IVECO. The reason was that the student works as a financial analyst in this company.

The Publication manual of the American Psychological Association (2002) presents four main types of abstracts, which are as follows:

1. an abstract of a report of an empirical study
2. an abstract for a review or theoretical article
3. an abstract for a methodological paper
4. an abstract for a case study

The abstract of a report of an empirical study should describe the problem under investigation, in one sentence if possible; the participants or subjects, specifying pertinent characteristics, such as number, type, age, sex, and genus and species; the experimental methods, including the apparatus, data-gathering procedures, complete test names, and complete generic names and the dosage and routes of administration of any drugs (particularly if the drugs are novel or important to the study); the findings, including statistical significance levels; and the conclusion and the implications or applications.

The abstracts for a review or theoretical article should describe the topic, in one sentence; the purpose, thesis, or organizing construct and the scope (comprehensive or selective) of the article; the sources used (e.g., personal observation, published literature); and the conclusions.

The abstract for a methodological paper should describe the general class of method being proposed or discussed; the essential features of the proposed method; the range of application of the proposed method; and the behaviour of the method, including its power and robustness to violations of assumptions.

The abstract for a case study should describe the subject and relevant characteristics of the individual or organization presented; the nature of or solution to a problem illustrated by the case example; and the questions raised for additional research or theory.

Abstracts of students’ BP mostly resembled to 2 and partly to 1 because in many cases students also applied a small-scale empirical research in form of short questionnaires (see Fig.1 below). Thus, the most common structure of students’ abstracts was as follows:

- stating the topic and the purpose of BP;
- describing the scope of the paper;
- providing results and conclusion.

**Development of tourism in Cambodia**

This bachelor thesis is dedicated to the development of tourism in Cambodia. This country, despite its bloody history and serious war heritage, experiences boom of tourism. In this thesis the author offers complex information about the development of such tourism and points out main obstacles in this area. The work is divided into two main parts. The first one provides basic information about the country including brief historical background and geographical excursion. The second one is dedicated to main tourist attractions, to the history and development of tourism and finally to main obstacles in the development. The thesis is completed with maps and charts with statistical data which let the readers understand the situation in the country.

![Figure 1. An example of student’s BP abstrakt](image)

The methods employed in the analysis are: analytical, quantitative and comparative.
3. Abstracts analysis and results

The most common mistakes students made in their BP concerned two main aspects if content mistakes were excluded (cf. Frydrychova Klimova, 2010; Stoykova, 2012):

- formal aspects (e.g. the layout of the abstract, its structure and length);
- linguistic-stylistic aspects (grammar and spelling, stylistics and punctuation).

In the area of formality, students did not make so many mistakes, although 15% of them did not care much about the proper layout of the abstract. These students did not skip a line between the paragraphs. As far as the structure is concerned, only 7% of BP abstracts were not quite logical. As it has been stated above, students were asked to submit abstracts of 200 words at maximum. However, 7% of BP abstracts were longer.

Nevertheless, the most serious mistakes were made from the linguistic-stylistic point of view. The most frequent basic mistakes for Czech students as non-native speakers of the English language are word order and objectivity of one’s abstract. Other mistakes include: articles, agreement in subject and predicate, tenses, existential-locative sentences with there, prepositions, spelling, appropriate register, long sentences, repetition of words, punctuation and capital letters.

Word order errors in English are considered serious, and they are obviously caused by interference of the Czech language since English word order is fixed while Czech word order is flexible. Almost 35% of abstracts had the wrong word order.

Example:
In the theoretical part are given some basic information on the countries which form the Arab world. (wrong)
In the theoretical part basic information on the Arab world is given. (right)

…..the use of questionnaires determines what is its influence on environment in the Czech Republic and what is its economic gain. (wrong)
….. the use of questionnaires determines what its influence on the environment in the Czech Republic is and what its economic gain is. (right)

To achieve the defined task was used an anonymous questionnaire…. (wrong)
To achieve the defined task, an anonymous questionnaire was used…. (right)

During winter season is the destination more attended…. (wrong)
During winter season the destination is attended more often…. (right)

In their BP abstracts again 35% students used the first person singular or ich form, personal pronoun you or we, or possessive pronouns my, your or our. As the Publication manual of the American Psychological Association states (2002: 14), use the third person rather than the first person.

Example:
After collecting enough responses, I will evaluate the results separately. (wrong)
After collecting enough responses, the results will be evaluated separately. (right)

In the practical part of my paper I concentrated on threatened monuments in Jaromer. (wrong)
In the practical part of the paper, threatened monuments in Jaromer were discussed. (right)

Undoubtedly, articles were also very problematic elements for the Czech students since they rarely use them in their native language. There is not such a phenomenon in the Czech language.

Example:
The goal of my Bachelor paper is to provide a specific information….. (wrong)
The goal of my Bachelor paper is to provide specific information….. (right)

The results are processed into map form….. (wrong)
The results are processed into a map form….. (right)

As far as the agreement in subject and predicate is concerned, students most often made the interference from their native language, particularly in the case of word information, which in the Czech language is used in the plural form.

Example:
In the theoretical part are given some basic information on the countries which form the Arab world. (wrong)
In the theoretical part basic information on the Arab world is given. (right)

All the information presented in the thesis are shown….. (wrong)
All the information presented in the thesis is shown..... (right)

As the Publication manual of the American Psychological Association claims (2002, p. 14), “use the present tense to describe results with continuing applicability or conclusions drawn; use the past tense to describe specific variables manipulated or test applied”. Generally, students used present tense in their abstracts. Only 12% of them had problems with using the right tense. They were mixing present and past tenses.

Example:
The aim of the study was to analyse available information about the Giant Mountains in terms of the development of tourism and to use this knowledge to summarise tourist supply and demand, to assess the potential of the area and to establish future steps for sustainable development. The works looks to evaluate the influence of tourism and its development on the environment in the Giant Mountains, especially as the status and protection of the Giant Mountains is an essential feature for future development. (wrong)
The aim of the study is to analyse available information about the Giant Mountains in terms of the development of tourism and to use this knowledge to summarise tourist supply and demand, to assess the potential of the area and to establish future steps for sustainable development. The works attempts to evaluate the influence of tourism and its development on the environment in the Giant Mountains, especially as the status and protection of the Giant Mountains is an essential feature for future development. (right)

Students also wrongly used existential-locative sentences with there instead of applying the given noun as a subject.

Example:
In this thesis there are mentioned calculations..... (wrong)
In this thesis calculations are mentioned ..... (right)
There is mainly discussed economic and political situation..... (wrong)
Mainly economic and political situation is discussed..... (right)

Mistakes in using prepositions were usually caused by the transfer from the native language.

Example:
.....a possible inspiration in their work. (wrong)
.....a possible inspiration for their work. (right)

Due to the results and available sources of information the SWOT analysis is created. (wrong)
Thanks to the results and available sources of information, the SWOT analysis is created. (right)

Even though students were advised to use an English spell-check, there were several abstracts (7%) with spelling mistakes.

Example:
Attention is therefor paid to.....(wrong)
Attention is therefore paid to……(right)
..... overcrowded summer resorts beaches. (wrong)
.....overcrowded summer resort beaches. (right)

It is very common that students do not know how to use certain words in the appropriate register, in this case the register of academic language, when they prepare their written work. Thus, when writing an abstract, they should avoid colloquialisms and informal modes of expressions. They should use only standard English.

Example:
Further on the calculated results are interpreted in this part of text. (wrong)
Furthermore, the calculated results are interpreted in this part of text. Or The calculated results are also interpreted in this part of text. (right)

Occasionally (7%), students wrote long sentences. In general, sentences should not be too long. They should be straightforward and concise. Dunleavy (2003) suggests that a sentence should not be longer than 40 words, and that one should aim for an ideal sentence length of around 20 words. Whenever a sentence is more than 40 words long, one should always chop it up into two or three sentences. Where it is between 20 and 40 words, we should assess if it would be better split into two. Problems with long sentences usually reflect either the author writing inauthentically in a pompous style, or trying to do too many things within a single sentence.

Example:
The main part includes the data analysis and it considers making these products more effective in terms of different aspects, such as specialization of the particular topics at a congress within the economic conditions of our country, benefits of interconnection with other sectors of tourism and economy to increase a number of potential and prospective clients and to improve awareness of how to take advantage of these products in their branch.

In very rare cases (3%), students used the same words. The reason is straightforward – a low level of English proficiency. The most frequent repeated words were aim at and focus on.

Among the most common punctuation symbols are full stops (UK)/ periods (US) and commas, which are connected with the basic function of the abstract – and that is to inform the reader about the content of their BP. Only the commas which are frequent and with which students very often make mistakes are exemplified. Students usually lacked commas:
- after a subordinate sentence, which precedes the main clause,
- after a word or a group of words which add something to the main part of the sentence, usually the so-called adverbials, e.g. however, for instance, for example, finally, in my opinion, . . . . .

Example:
As the name shows I focused….. (wrong)
As the name shows, I focused….. (right)

Therefore the other aim of the submitted thesis is to suggest a marketing strategy for local government for next five years. (wrong)
Therefore, the other aim of the submitted thesis is to suggest a marketing strategy for local government for next five years. (right)

Finally, only two students made mistakes in capital letters.

Example:
It also describes the work of the Agency of nature protection in the Czech Republic. (wrong)
It also describes the work of the Agency of Nature Protection in the Czech Republic. (right)

4. Conclusion

This article attempted to summarize the most common and comprehensive mistakes students usually make when they write abstracts in English. As it has been stated above, most of the mistakes were caused by the interference since students wrote their BP predominantly in Czech (only two students wrote their BP in English) and then translated their Czech abstract into English. Therefore, the methodological message for the teachers is to make students first summarize any English text before they start writing any abstract which might be based on the Czech text.

References