

- classroom” (2014). “Unlock the Gateway to Communication”, Central States Conference Report
5. Nazarbayev N.A., (2012). Call for the people of Kazakhstan of President of the Republic of Kazakhstan [www.akorda.kz](http://www.akorda.kz) / presidentkazakhstan/ poslanie\_prezidenta
6. Yeshimbetova Z. B., Demeuova A. M., (2012). Kazakhstani trilinguism – language policy’s unique formula – Novosibirsk: SibAK

## THE ACADEMIC WRITING COURSE AT A RUSSIAN UNIVERSITY: FACING THE CHALLENGES

Merkulova Edita

*National Research University “The Higher School of Economics”, Russia*

### Background

Unlike reading or speaking, writing as a part of the foreign language communicative competence has been neglected for years in the Soviet-Russian tradition of teaching foreign languages. Those of us who graduated from teacher training institutes (universities) of foreign languages twenty or thirty years ago must remember that writing in English was largely confined to writing dictations, reproductions, or essays, as the only kind of creative writing. Graduates from teacher training universities of foreign languages leaving their universities were supplied with the knowledge that a good essay was the one which had a three part structure (introduction, main body, and conclusion); it was written logically, and it was free of grammar and lexical errors. The idea that writing was rather an art than a skill which could be successfully taught dominated both the teaching and the student communities. S.G. Ter-Minasova summarized the negative features which characterize the Soviet foreign language educational paradigm: formalism which hampers genuine communication, language courses which ignore the real needs of various groups of students, a marked trend towards teaching reading, while paying little attention to other language skills [1].

The algorithm of writing in Russian did not differ much from that one of writ-

ing in English. Course papers and later final papers were written in due time without any instructions being passed over to students on how the process of writing was actually being done. Information on the number of parts in a course paper or final paper, the content points to be highlighted in every part, major requirements for making references could be given by the subject teachers supervising your projects, but the problems arising in the process of writing and connected with it had to be resolved by the writers themselves. Being native speakers of Russian we understood that there were certain peculiarities of the Academic style of writing and that there were some conventions, which had to be taken into consideration while writing academic texts. They were applied to our writing the way they were understood to the best of our knowledge and abilities.

Later when confronted with the need to write our candidate of sciences dissertations, we discovered that the process of writing the post graduate thesis did not differ much from the previous attempts at writing academic texts. We were lucky if our scientific supervisor made an effort to correct our writing from the point of its conformity to the conventions of the academic style of writing or discussed with us the features of academic writing which could produce a positive impact on the target reader. Most of us learnt to write

though extensive reading of literature on our research topic and consciously or unconsciously copying the style of our predecessors, the danger being that that the latter might perpetuate continuous reproduction of pseudo-academic language chunks, which had little to do with the capacity to write efficient academic texts. Learning to write by imitating not always best examples of academic style of writing created a situation in which immature writers of academic texts took “academies” – pedantic, pretentious and often incomprehensible academic jargon - for an example to follow in their academic writing.

The problem of the low quality of Russian academic texts remains acute [2]. It appears to be deeply rooted mainly due to the absence of universally accepted standards for writing academic papers in Russian. The Russian academic discourse needs profound research of its linguistic foundations, so that conventions of Russian academic writing could be developed. [3]

When the course academic writing in English was introduced into the curricula of many Russian universities, many of us were confronted with the problem, which was formulated by one of our colleagues: “We have to teach to write well in English those students who have little or no idea about how to write well in their own native language” [4, p. 140].

The debate on academic writing and more generally on academic literacy of Russian students launched by the journal Higher Education in Russia in 2011 threw light on the most problematic areas in the sphere of teaching writing academic texts both in Russian and in English. It appeared that researchers of education in Russia don't even have a universally accepted system of terms to talk about various aspects of academic writing; the prevailing atmosphere at the majority of mass universities is not conducive to doing research or

writing about research; research competences of Russian students are significantly underdeveloped and generally speaking there is no systematic approach to teaching academic writing at Russian universities [5].

#### Case study

When we began teaching academic writing to students of Higher School of Economics three years ago we were faced with the majority of problems our colleagues had discussed in their articles and had a few more which were specific to our educational establishment. After the first year of teaching the subject to fourth year students of HSE at Nizhny Novgorod it was felt that there was an atmosphere of general discontent. The students were mostly dissatisfied with the volume and complexity of the material they had to process; they did not see how the knowledge that they had gained studying the subject could be used in their further personal and professional lives; and in many cases they felt that their work had been underappreciated by their teachers. The teachers' complaints mostly dealt with the low level of attainment of their students – despite all the effort they had put into trying to get the message across to their students, many of them still preferred to resort to translation of previously created in the Russian language texts with little regard to western conventions of the academic style of writing. Our colleagues felt that the texts that their students had produced proved to be inadequate to the time and effort spent on their preparation for the lessons and trying to deliver the materials to the students.

It became quite obvious at that time that the course needed a thorough rethinking. One of the ideas was that we could do it with the help of the introduction into the teaching process a specifically designed for the course textbook which must be tailored to the needs of the

particular group of students and teachers. The question was how to identify the needs of our students and how to specify the most problematic areas. It was also necessary to see if we had enough resources to implement our ideas into practice. In order to find answers to the last two questions it was decided to use the method of the SWOT analysis.

In this article we give a brief overview of the method used and show how the analysis results helped us to design the course syllabus and select the materials for the course textbook [6] which ultimately helped us cope with many of the problems we were confronted with during the first year of teaching academic writing in English to students of economics at HSE in Nizhny Novgorod.

### The SWOT analysis

#### 1. External factors

##### 1.1. Threats

(1) Most teachers of English have little or no experience of creating their own academic texts in English. The idea that “writing is an art” still persist.

(2) Academic writing groups are at least twice as big than their English language counterparts. No time is allocated to teachers of academic writing for marking their students’ papers. The teaching load does not envisage any time spent on assessment. As a result neither close supervision of the students’ process of writing, nor more detailed evaluation of the their fragments of work are possible.

(3) Students have to write and submit their project proposals long before the actual research and the final paper are completed. It puts additional stress on the writer of academic texts. The time lag between deadlines for both papers can run up to 4 months.

##### 1.2. Opportunities

The attitude to teaching writing is being changed. The Federal Educational

Standards of the third generation envisaged that school children now begin studying English when they are in the second form and in the first form if they go to specialized language schools [7]. While English as one of the exams of the Unified State Exam now belongs to the group of optional subjects, there are plans to make it one of the obligatory ones as for example, Mathematics or the Russian language are now. The English language as a part of the Unified State Exam treats writing in English as an equally important skill along with reading, speaking and listening. New generations of teachers realize the importance of teaching writing and they are equipped with the necessary techniques of how to do it effectively.

#### 2. Internal factors

##### 2.1. Weaknesses

(1) According to the results of the survey we conducted only from two to five percent of senior bachelor students are actively involved in research work and could be planning an academic career. A vast majority of students fail to see any practical application of academic skills, and, consequently, have a negative attitude to the subject and a low level of motivation for studying it.

(2) The Academic Writing group is a mixed level and ability group, while streaming is applied for other English groups at HSE in Nizhny Novgorod. Some of the students are likely to have a level of English which is hardly compatible with the complexity of the tasks they will have to solve.

(3) Despite a large number of textbooks on academic writing, most of them do not efficiently contribute to the achievement of the practical aim of the course - writing a project proposal in accordance with the international standards of writing academic texts. Most complaints that we heard from our students dealt either with the fact that the theory on

academic writing was difficult to comprehend because of the complex and highly specific language used by the authors of such books, or that while doing exercises they had to overcome a similar problem, as the texts they had to read were not relevant to their area of interest. Consequently a lot of time was spent on reading without getting results either in the form of knowledge obtained or skills acquired.

(4) The lexical area proved to be difficult, as this is the area where students found the biggest number of differences from what they have studied before. They found it confusing to deal with a large number of vocabulary units and their collocations from the sphere of their research area and also many of them complained that various features of the academic register presented difficulties for them as well.

## 2.2. Strengths

(1) Foreign languages have traditionally occupied a significant place in the curricula of all faculties of Higher School of Economics in Nizhny Novgorod. The length of the course and the number of contact hours in every year of study are traditionally bigger than those ones at other higher educational establishments in the Nizhny Novgorod region. In the course of studies at HSE fourth-year students have been exposed to a variety of «Englishes». By their fourth year at the university they have already studied General English, Academic English (preparation for IELTS) and Business English (English for Occupational Purposes).

(2) The Unified State Exam in a foreign language is a requirement for entry at HSE. The requirement to produce Unified State Exam results in English has attracted to HSE students whose level of English is seldom lower than B1, which is significantly higher than that one at other higher educational establishments where English exam results are not required. By the end of their second year of studies students

must achieve the level B2/C1 ("Common European Framework of Reference: Learning, Teaching, Assessment") [8]. The level they achieve determines the mark they get for the course, but it can't be lower than B2. Some of the lectures and seminars are delivered in English. Students may experience the practical need for writing academic texts.

## Response to challenges

Having performed the SWOT analysis, which helped us to identify the major challenges posed by the introduction of the new subject into the university curriculum, we could come up with a number of solutions which enabled us to define the contents of the course syllabus and design course materials. Knowing the favorable and unfavorable factors which could facilitate or hamper the achievement of the objective, while designing the syllabus and course materials we attempted to rely on the former ones and to minimize the latter ones, seeing a tailored to the needs of our students' textbook as a solution to the majority of problem.

As the problem with the negative attitude, caused by the complexity of the subject, was among the most significant ones, it was necessary to minimize its impact on the students' motivation to study the subject by adopting efficient methods of teaching and by adopting the materials to our students' abilities. The answer to the problem could be a course textbook which clearly and coherently would lead both teachers and students through all the stages of academic writing: from preparation for writing to editing a finished text, providing extensive practice on every aspect of academic writing ultimately leading to the creation of the targeted academic text. This had to be a practical product-oriented course. Every task that was to be given to the students had to bring them closer to their target – successfully writing a project proposal of their

final paper.

The physical inability of teachers to supervise their students' writing continuously due to the absence of time allocated to the writing process supervision led to the necessity to design exercises aimed at teaching students to proofread and edit texts. After students had been taught the peculiarities of the academic style of writing and had been exposed to a number of model academic texts from their field of interest, they were given exercises where the students were requested to comment on how successfully the academic text had been written, and, if necessary, they were asked to make improvements to make the message more efficient. An assessment matrix specifying and explaining the features of academic writing their teachers were going to evaluate was provided to the students, so that they could use it for peer-editing and self-editing. When students became aware of the conventions of the academic style of writing and the importance of considering the target reader while writing, they could begin peer- and self - reviewing referring to the teacher for help when they needed it.

Another obstacle, which made writing difficult, was the fact, that the project proposal in English was to be the students' first attempt at writing a lengthy academic text in English which was time and energy consuming. Apart from that it had to be written before the final paper was completed. To respond to the challenge, the textbook provided students with information on how to organize their time. They were taught the basics of time management with reference to being involved in academic tasks. . They were given thorough explanations on how to write each part of the project proposal and the role of each part in the paper as a complete piece of writing was explained. In other words, students were given a comprehensive and comprehensible algorithm of working at every part; provided with support and en-

couragement throughout the period of writing. There were given guidelines for work which required concentration on a goal over a long period of time.

The general lack of research skills was responded to in the textbook by providing explanations of the algorithm of research work. Exercises helping students develop their basic and more advanced relevant for doing research analytical and critical skills were designed. Only relevant for students of economics authentic texts were selected.

The lack of enthusiasm connected with the fact that only few students would choose an academic career, while others viewed the subject as tedious and of little practical application, could be overcome through pointing to the sceptics how the skills obtained at the Academic Writing class could be used in their future careers. The parallels drawn between writing the project proposal and the final paper (the bachelor thesis) let the students see how writing the project proposal could improve the quality of their final paper.

The problem connected with the necessity to teach a difficult subject in English to mixed ability groups was solved by designing exercises for practicing various aspects of academic writing at different levels. The lexical approach, enabling teachers to introduce academic vocabulary in text chunks was found to be most efficient for introducing academic lexis to students whose level of English is low.

Many students found that reading about conventions and requirements of academic writing in English was fraught with difficulties, because many authors of textbooks on academic writing targeted either native speakers of English or were aimed at students whose areas of interest could range from physics to philology. As a consequence, our students had problems reading and understanding theory and instructions in such textbooks because of the difficult language and content. That is why

it was decided to use simple vocabulary and a clear style of writing while giving to our students explanations on the theory of academic writing in English. We chose a friendly and encouraging tone of narration, making an effort to establish rapport with the students who were reading the text we had written. Perhaps, another factor that contributed to the positive attitude of our students to the textbook was the realization that the textbook was specifically created for the students, and while reading the materials and analyzing them from the point of view of their conformity to the standards of academic writing they at the same time could develop their professional competence, the sample texts were relevant to their field of study.

Along with reading articles on economics in class, students had to compile their own reading lists, which formed the basis for their Literature reviews. While reading the articles they had to select academic vocabulary blocks and compile their own glossaries of terms from the articles they read for their project proposals. It helped them to build their own vocabulary trajectories which later proved to be invaluable for writing and presenting their project proposals.

### Results

The feedback described in this article is based on 86 responses, given by last year fourth year students of the faculty of economics of HSE in Nizhny Novgorod who studied academic writing and who agreed to answer the questions of the questionnaire. The questionnaire aimed to measure the students' level of satisfaction with the course and to detect the remaining difficulties to be dealt with later.

The first question finds out how much our students had known about the conventions of the academic style of writing before they took the course and whether they found the materials presented in the textbook "Writing a Research

Proposal in English" sufficient for writing their papers. For the majority of students the rules of academic writing turned out to be complete terra incognita. 98 percent of respondents admitted to knowing nothing or very little about the rules of academic writing. 95 percent of students said that they did not need to use any additional materials for writing their project proposal, as the information provided by the textbook proved to be sufficient for the purpose. The remaining five percent commented that they needed to consult some dictionaries and grammar books for reference. They consulted the APA style manual when they needed some information on how use in-text citations and on how to compile reference lists as the information in the textbook did not cover citation for all possible types of source material.

Not always adequate translations of the students texts from Russian into English was one of the problem areas last year that is why we wanted to know what the actual process of writing was like after the introduction of our textbook which used the guided writing approach which we defined as "learning by doing". 72 percent of students followed the suggested procedure and kept writing their instructors recommended their project proposal part by part as it. The rough copies were later edited and corrected. 26 percent of respondents said that the most difficult parts either from the point of view of language or the content, were first written in Russian, and only then they were translated into English. 4 students found it easier to follow the more familiar to them algorithm: they first wrote their texts in Russian and then translated them into English. As the questionnaire was an anonymous one, we could not be sure about the reason for their doing it. We see it as either that the students' attendance of the lessons was not high enough for them to understand and follow the instructions, or that their low

level of English did not allow them to participate in class discussions and follow the recommended procedure effectively.

As in the first year of studying academic English most students saw little or no correspondence between their final papers in Russian and project proposals in English we were interested to know if the situation changed after the introduction of our textbook. It turned out that 98 % of all students who answered this question pointed out to both the papers' positive influence upon each other. Among the comments stressing the positive impact of the project proposals on their bachelor theses were: a considerable expansion of their reference lists in final papers due to the students' familiarity with the source material which was published in English. They also pointed out to the fact that they could get a better and more profound understanding of the topic researched. The project proposal helped the respondents understand the concept of the final paper and what each part meant in the framework of the academic work as a whole. They also felt the positive organizing influence of the course on their day to day routines. The necessity to come to the lesson every week and bring something that ultimately contributed to writing their project proposal, had a beneficiary influence on their bachelor theses as they had to get down to business significantly earlier than if they had done it if they didn't have to write their project proposals. The remaining two percent still blamed the time lag between the deadlines for submission dates for little connection between the two papers. "I lacked more research to be able to describe what I had meant to do to the best advantage"; "I don't know how to speak about anticipated results if the research hasn't been completed" – could illustrate the reasons why some respondents felt as if they were involved in doing two different jobs while working at their final paper and research proposal in English.

At the same time, commenting on the connection between their bachelor theses in Russian and project proposals in English many respondents pointed out to the relevant for writing their theses academic skills which they had acquired while writing their research proposals. Getting ready for and attending the lessons of academic writing course our students learnt how to organize their time, search for new materials, how to evaluate the sources, how to use a critical approach while dealing with materials from different sources, what criteria to use for making a decision about the reliability of a source for using it in a scientific work. Our respondents most frequently pointed out to the abilities they had either acquired or further developed in the course of studying academic writing: the ability to accumulate knowledge, the ability to synthesize and analyze information, the ability to build logical arguments. All of these are the components of the research competence. It was generally felt by the students that these skills and abilities will prove to be useful in their personal and professional lives. Among other useful acquisitions students also reported that their level of English had gone up significantly. One of the unexpected for us benefits of the course was that several students referred to psychological benefits they had obtained while studying academic writing. The successful completion of the course helped them to overcome the feeling of insecurity connected with the lack of self-confidence and it also helped them to overcome the fear of public speaking, as academic presentations were also a part the course. The acquisition of presentation skills was considered by many to be a valuable asset for their future careers. Several respondents believed that that the skills and knowledge obtained would make them more successful magistrates' students. One student even wrote that taking the course of academic writing was the most important argument

for her in favor of taking a post-graduate course.

The next question of the questionnaire aimed to reveal our students' emotional attitude to the course: "What do you feel finishing the course?" The dominant emotions were joy, pride and satisfaction. Some students even experienced a feeling of superiority over the students of other higher educational establishments of our city who did not have the subject of academic writing in their curricula. Seeing it as a "logical completion" of the course of English, they expressed regret, that their formal studying of English was over: "I feel satisfaction as everyone would after finishing serious work, but at the same time I sort of started missing English already", or "I am going to miss my English classes in the future".

The last question was: "Do you justify including the academic writing course into the fourth year curriculum of our university? What is your attitude to it?" The overall majority – 93% gave positive responses to the question. Seven percent of the respondents said that it would have been more useful if the course had been included into the curricula earlier – when they were in their first or second years of studies.

The question concerning the most difficult aspects of the course revealed that 62% of respondents found it quite easy; 22% of respondents found the vocabulary area to be the most difficult for them, 16% of students complained about the necessity to work under stress as they had to strain themselves to the limit trying to obtain research results for their projects proposals long before the deadline for their final papers was due.

#### Summary and conclusion

As the surveys of the students' opinions before and after the introduction of several important changes into the Academic Writing syllabus have shown, the

course can be made attractive to students despite a small number of those bachelor students who are planning to take up an academic career. Academic writing can be interesting even to the students for whom it is the first and only experience of creating their own academic text in English. The emotional reversal from mainly negative to almost universally positive attitude can be achieved if the difficulties and challenges which students experience while studying the course have been revealed and dealt with at the stage of selection of teaching materials and designing teaching techniques to be used in class. The SWOT analysis appears to be an efficient tool for the detection of difficulties and the evaluation of available resources in a particular educational environment when it is necessary to develop a new academic course which will meet the unique needs of all the participants of the educational process. Our experience of using the SWOT analysis proves that it can be successfully applied for educational purposes – namely for course and course materials design. The introduction into the teaching process a specifically designed for the course textbook which has been tailored to the needs of a particular group of teachers and students will raise the level of attractiveness of a difficult course and facilitate the attainment of the course goal saving time and effort both for teachers and students.

#### REFERENCES

1. Ter-Minasova S.G. Teaching Foreign Languages in Modern Russia. What is ahead? *Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta – Lingvistika i mezhkul'turnaya kommunikatsiya* [Herald of Moscow State University – Linguistics and Intercultural Communication], 2014, no.2, pp.31-41. (in Russian)
2. Krasnova T., Lugovtsova A. Unfortunate Mistakes in Norms of Academic Writing in Publications of Lecturers Vy-



- isshee obrazovanie v Rossii [Higher Education in Russia], 2012, No.5, pp.37-43. (in Russian)
3. Merkulova E.N. (2016) [On the Significance of the “Academic Writing” Component in the Text of the Official Reviews on PHD Theses]. Vysshee obrazovanie v Rossii [Higher Education in Russia]. No.12 (207), pp. 68-75. (in Russ., abstract in Eng.)
  4. Korotkina I.B. Academic Writing : Towards conceptual unity. Vysshee obrazovanie v Rossii [Higher Education in Russia], 2013, No.3, pp.136-142. (in Russian)
  5. Smirnova N.V., Shchemeliova I.Yu. Academic Writing in a Higher Educational Establishment: Of Case-Analysis National Research University Higher School of Economics. Homo Loquens: Aktual'nye voprosy lingvistiki i metodiki prepodavaniya inostrannykh yazykov (2014) [Homo Loquens:Acute Issues of Linguistics and Teaching Foreign Languages], Sankt-Peterburg, Otdel operativnoy poligrafii NIU VShE Publ, 2014,Vol.6, pp.409-421. (in Russian)
  6. Merkulova E. N., Nenasheva T. A. Writing a Research Proposal in English: Textbook, N. Novgorod: Izdatelstvo Nizhegorodskogo gosuniversiteta Publ , 2014, 189 p.
  7. Federal State Educational Standard of Basic General Education. Available at: [http:// base. garant .ru/ 55170507/ # friends](http://base.garant.ru/55170507/#friends) (accessed: 17 September 2016).
  8. Common European Framework of Reference: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. Framework\_EN.pdf. Available at: [https://www.coe.int/ t/ dg4/ linguistic/ Source/ Framework\\_EN.pdf](https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf) (accessed: 17 September 2016).