

Developing Students' Academic Skills in a Russian Context

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I would like to start this article with the definition of English for academic purposes (EAP) taken from English for Academic Study: problems and perspectives (ETIC 1975): "EAP is concerned with those communication skills in English which are required for study purposes in formal education systems". The term EAP, in fact, appeared in 1974, became quite common by 1975 and spread all over the world under a simplified name 'study skills'. A few more years passed and Russian students got an opportunity to study on a double-degree programme in Russia and to continue studying in Western Universities, for which they needed to develop study skills and pass an international examination.

The problem that any student who needs to take an international exam faces is misunderstanding as to what skills he/she is to possess and how they compare with those they already have. While studying at school students were taught for at least 5-10 years to read texts, answer questions about the content and retell them; they listened to talks and interviews, wrote letters to a friend, did a lot of grammar exercises and prepared topics for oral examinations. Those were general purposes skills or social purposes skills. To be able to study in English (to be a University student anywhere else in the world, to do post-graduate studies or research) students will need different skills adapting them to a new academic system.

In what way do study skills differ from the skills students acquired at school while studying a foreign language? Firstly, they are "abilities, techniques and strategies which are used when reading, writing or listening for study purposes. For example, study skills needed by university students studying from English language textbooks include: adjusting reading speeds according to the type of material being read, using the dictionary, guessing word meanings from context, interpreting graphs and symbols, note-taking and summarising" (Richards, J.C., J. Platt and H. Platt 1992). Secondly, it is adaptation to a new academic system within a different cultural and educational environment, which has its own conventions. As for the first point, motivated students rather easily realise the difference between general/social purposes skills and study skills. The second issue needs explanation, direction and adjustment.

Students studying on a double-degree programme or continuing their education in Western Universities need to possess the following academic skills: academic reading (which includes predicting, skimming, scanning, guessing unknown words from the context, understanding text organization, distinguishing between main information and supporting details, fact and opinion); academic listening (this is listening for gist and detailed information, evaluating the importance of information, listening to lectures and identifying the main and supporting ideas and examples, note-taking technique); academic writing (includes essay writing, structuring the text, discussion analysis technique, accuracy, punctuation); academic speaking (seminar skills: agreeing and disagreeing, questioning, persuading, emphasizing, interrupting, concluding; presentation skills: structuring texts, signposting, creating interest, involving audience, preparation and use of visuals and OHP; body language and non-verbal communication).

The International College of Economics and Finance (ICEF) – a faculty of the State University – the Higher School of Economics in Moscow – is a university where students are trained to develop their academic skills. Studying on the external programme of the University of London for a Bachelor's degree they are supposed to take and pass the

IELTS exam with the minimum of Band 6. This is understood as a “competent user” and is defined by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) as having “effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings, they can use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in familiar situations” (Cambridge Practice Tests 1 for IELTS 1996).

The main objectives of this university programme are: to broaden and expand students’ proficiency and knowledge in General and Business English: to develop students’ academic reading skills to enable them to skim the text for main idea, to scan the text for specific information, to deduce meaning from the context; to develop students’ academic writing skills to enable them to write reports, articles and essays analyzing factual information and analytical essays; to develop students’ academic listening skills to enable them to understand and apply specific information from the output (understand lectures and take notes); to develop students’ academic speaking skills to enable them to use general, social and professional language, to negotiate, report, summarise, develop a situation, make presentations and reports.

As can be seen from the above listed objectives of this English language programme, students’ skills development is based on academic skills development, which is supplemented by vocabulary and grammar development in the course of General English, business skills development in the course of Business English and basic terminology and problem solving in Economics in the course of ESP.

The programme is accomplished on the basis of authentic course books and supplementary materials which have been developed to optimize the teaching process. Among these are grammar tests prepared in the format of multiple choice exercises; a variety of tasks for speaking skills development through the use of the Internet; training materials for academic reading developed in the IELTS exam format.

Academic reading is a skill rather difficult to acquire by Russian learners due to the fact that at school they were basically taught general purposes skills, and it takes time to teach them how to read a text for a purpose. In learning how *to skim* the text for the main idea students are taught to read only the headline/title and sub-heading which often summarise the main idea of the text; the first two paragraphs which introduce the subject of the text; the first, second and last sentence of each paragraph: one of these is likely to be the topic sentence; the concluding paragraph: this gives a summary or a conclusion (Stanton, A., Morris, S. 2004). Students are advised to get a general idea of what it is about without translating unknown words or sentences. *Scanning* means reading the passage to locate specific information which may then require reading in detail in order to answer a particular question (students first read the questions and underline key words which help them to locate the relevant part of the text). The most challenging task for a teacher is to convince the students that texts can be understood even though there are vocabulary items and structures they have never seen before and they can do some tasks satisfactorily even though they do not understand the whole text.

An interesting and important idea was introduced by Johns and Davies (1983): in reaching academic skills a text should be treated as a ‘vehicle for information’ not a ‘linguistic object’. This is why the authors recommend while working on texts to focus on the information rather than on various linguistic features in them. This skill can be approached as information search technique involving understanding text structure, main idea, supporting ideas, examples, cause and effect relationship. In low groups these skills can be developed very-very gradually, on the basis of course- books (for, example, “The CAE course” by M. Spratt and L. Taylor) supplemented by materials designed in the way that they help to develop academic reading skills and prepare for the IELTS exam simultaneously. These tasks contain a variety of exercises, for instance, multiple choice

exercises; completing sentences with the words taken from the reading passage with a requirement not to use more than three words; choosing the best title; completing the summary with the words given in the list below; “Yes”, “No” and “Not given” task and many others.

Students from low groups complain of failing to cope with time limit. One of the reasons for this might be the low speed of reading and comprehension rate. Those students who have a narrow range of vocabulary (they probably finished a secondary school not specializing in English which means one or two classes per week) tend to read slowly because they were not taught to develop reading comprehension without understanding or translating all the words in the text. It is generally a good idea to include methods of increasing reading speed techniques in the curriculum but this would mean an increase in the number of teaching hours and teaching potential which a university can not afford.

Vocabulary development is of greatest importance in academic reading though it is of concern to the other three academic skills as well. Students use the word when they know it. If they do not know it, they will not even recognize it in the text. How can students expand their vocabulary? Firstly, they do it while reading subject textbooks and listening to lectures (they expand specialist or professional vocabulary); secondly, in the course of General English which is available at different levels in this programme (they expand General English vocabulary); thirdly, they should practise inferring the meaning of a word from the context and then check it with the dictionary or the teacher. The last way is quite unfamiliar to former school leavers since at school they practised translating the unknown words (either looking them up in the dictionary or asking their teacher for translation). In fact, the skill they must acquire is the skill of looking at the linguistic context, at word building, at examples. In developing this very skill a variety of exercises can help: filling in the gaps (a list of words is usually given), matching exercises (term with explanation, synonyms with antonyms, etc.). Some advanced students manage to guess the meaning from the context which is very beneficial for them.

Academic writing is another important skill which is also difficult to teach to Russian students since from their school programme they are familiar with writing only compositions. In essay writing they should focus on analysis, use of language functions, sentence patterns and academic style. *Writing formally* is difficult to learn – it takes some students nearly the whole of the 1st semester to pick up this skill. The most difficult aspect for most students seems to be making the writing *impersonal* and also making conclusions which summarise and give a personal view point. The most productive way to teach these is to read a model text on the topic, do exercises (gap filling, matching or in a diagrammatic form) and, finally, produce a text on the analogy with the one analysed but based on their own country or town. Before writing their first complete essay it is essential to discuss the key points in class, have an oral discussion of the content, text structure, language resource. In this way the ICEF students write their first complete essay in the middle of the 1st semester. The topic for it can be simplified and generalized at the same time: it can be “Poverty” (or “Unemployment”), for example. Individually and in pairs students work out an explanation of this notion; then they name possible causes of poverty (economic, political, social, psychological, natural disasters, etc.); finally, they think of a conclusion trying to make a good summary. On the other hand, such a simplified topic is quite easy to structure; on the other hand, it does not contain any prompts like in any IELTS exam topic (e.g. “In many countries children are engaged in some kind of paid work. Some people regard this as completely wrong, while others consider it as valuable work experience, important for learning and taking responsibility.

What are your opinions on this?" (Cambridge IELTS 3 2002), which makes it more difficult for 1st year students to write.

Paragraphing causes another difficulty to Russian learners: some of them develop ideas in one long paragraph, while others produce paragraphs of unequal length, which seems to be a disadvantage lowering the mark. *Repetition* is another drawback and cannot win marks. This is mainly due to limited vocabulary and language resource, which can be overcome with time and experience in writing essays.

Academic listening skills are easier to teach to Russian students than the two skills discussed above because students seem to be familiar with, at least, note-taking, since they listened to lectures at school. The problem for a teacher is to teach them effective note-taking techniques though many students feel comfortable with their own methods. Nearly all students find their notes useful for preparation for exams and think they increase attention during the lecture. Most lectures in Russian universities last for 1 hour 20 minutes, and students find it difficult to concentrate for such a lengthy period. Much depends on lecturers, certainly. Understanding lectures can be eased if lectures are clearly structured and delivered and lecturers use the board or OHP to put some key terms, main ideas and diagrams. What do notes involve? For most students they are just summarising (sometimes in a graphic form) and highlighting important elements (underlining, circling an important idea and placing NB in the margin). These techniques look rather simple and probably not sufficient for university students because note-taking is also "topic-relation notes (topicalising, translating, schematizing, etc.), concept-ordering notes (relation ordering, cuing), revising notes (inserting, erasing)" (Rost, M. 1990). Some students find the Carnegie note-taking system rather efficient as it helps them to analyse and come back to the topic. The majority of students are unaware of other note-taking systems such as, for example, *the branching system* (diagramming, web or mapping). It consists of a central topic from which points emanate. Lines and arrows are very common in this system. As it is visual, it makes the material easier to remember. *The guided note-taking* technique consists of two parts: the first part shows the use of word cues – the exact words that they hear; the second part shows alternative guidance for the same section of the talk (Jordan, R. 1997). It is clear that students should be trained to use different note-taking techniques but whichever one they choose, they must be sure it is effective.

Academic speaking skills are the most appreciated by university students. Most of them have studied in specialized English schools with an enhanced English programme, some have been to language schools in Great Britain more than once. They feel their conversational skills are much better than academic speaking skills. In a university environment they are supposed to be asking questions in lectures, participating in discussions and seminars in different professional subjects, making oral presentations and reports. R. Jordan mentions the ability to express themselves in speech as the biggest difficulty. This is also true for Russian learners. The main types of question asked by students at lectures are questions requiring clarification of given information and examples (when students do not understand the meaning of the notion) and questions asking for repetition of what was said, due to difficulties in understanding accents other than RP (Received Pronunciation) which they were taught at school. There is one more issue which is difficult to overcome: some students are naturally shy and find it difficult (due to peer pressure) to put up a hand and ask for clarification. Seminars sometimes take the form of monologuing and answering teacher's questions, it can also be a discussion. Students participating in it feel rather confident in monologuing and pair work since they are prepared for it in advance.

Making presentations is very beneficial for students: in this faculty they are taught how to do it (to make an introduction stating the purpose and highlight the main points to

be developed, to build arguments and create interest, to use visuals and conclude). Basically, students like this activity, especially those who intend to continue their research and make it into a course paper or diploma work. Apart from language resource to be used in presentations (which students master reluctantly), there is also *body language*. Many students learn about the fact that over 70% of communication is non-verbal only from an English course-book. They could have heard about it but had never been taught it at school. And, lastly, difficulties with pronunciation and word-stress. Some students mispronounce [w - v], [s - z], interdental sounds. They are not really aware of the mistake because their attention has never been drawn to the difference in the articulation of these sounds. This is why most of them are very reluctant to work in a language laboratory, to say nothing about doing it on their own. Peer group teaching does not work under these circumstances either.

University students in Russia are highly *motivated*. To enter university they are to take and successfully pass (not below the pass grade) entrance exams. Basically, they realize that they have come to a University for knowledge and a qualification degree. As a rule, there are no problems with attendance and discipline because studying for two degrees is really tough. Students welcome various kinds of learning methods: on their own, in pairs and even in small groups (which is a bit difficult to implement in language groups of up to 10-12 students). They also tend to be pragmatic: they realise that it is not only academic skills development but also IELTS exam preparation, which they are to take at the end of the academic year. The English language programme is designed on the understanding that teaching and *testing* are closely interrelated. The following system of testing is used: entrance exam, 1st mid-term exam, end of 1st semester exam, 2nd mid-term exam, final IELTS exam taken at the British Council.

What seem to be the advantages and the disadvantages of this academic skills development programme? The major advantage is that students are motivated to acquire new skills which they will need while studying in a double-degree programme and doing further research. They also realize that studying is valued by the faculty (the rating and fee reduction system is used). Most students want to obtain a “more advanced English” and learn “something new”. Some students feel peer pressure and do not want to lose face. And, of course, the majority of students find it useful to benefit from self-study opportunities. The disadvantage of this programme is that English is not the main subject at an economic institution, so students are aimed at taking and passing the final exam halfway through the academic year, leaving more time for other subjects. They also mention a number of difficulties they experience while studying on an academic skills development programme: some students have problems understanding different accents in listening skills development, others admit having insufficient vocabulary to do all reading tasks within a time limit; a few students fail to structure their essays properly and have spelling mistakes, which result in lower than expected marks in writing. The majority of students wish to be trained on more sample materials and have more themes for discussion in the IELTS exam format. Nearly all students though admit that the University provided them with sufficient knowledge and books. I would like to finish this article with one quotation. I do not remember who said it but it still clearly reverberates in my memory: “If you are given a fish, you are fed for a day, but if you are told how to learn, you are fed for life”. At the end of the 1st academic year students realise that they possess skills which make a good foundation for their future life and career.

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