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DESIGNING ACADEMIC WRITING COURSE IN RUSSIA: FOCUS ON CONTENT

Abstract. *The aim* of the study is to find the ways to adapt the content of Academic Writing course to Russian educational needs.

Methods. The methods involve both – theoretical and empirical. Theoretical methods: the analysis of the teaching materials by English-speaking and Russian-speaking researchers in the field of EAP (English for Academic Purposes) writing, modeling, systematisation. Empirical methods: observation, interview, questioning, students' needs analysis; longitudinal pedagogical experiment; methods of mathematical statistics.

Results. Syllabus design starts with the course objectives that are quite specific with reference to writing academically in English in Russia. The author examines cultural factors that make motivation to use English for academic purposes (EAP) wane. One of them is teaching the subject which has application different from that in English-speaking countries. The author concludes that the experimental results of students' expectations may contribute to the Academic Writing course design. They may alter both content and sequencing the material. Two main areas of academic writing application are writing for science and teaching others to write in English. The article provides a list of possible genres that vary depending on students' professional needs.

Scientific novelty. Further, developing the idea the researcher discusses three basic sources for the choice of the course material, i.e. foreign teaching EFL writing sources, printed works of Russian scholars devoted to teaching academic writing and, finally, needs analysis conducted with the Russian language students. The article provides an overview of these three sources and illustrates the main positions with the examples.

Practical significance. Theoretical framework and findings may serve as a basis for organising a course of Academic Writing. For instance, a specially developed set of lectures is strongly recommended as the introduction to practice. Firstly, a lecturer obtains an opportunity to develop students' professional motivation through the real life examples of EAP writing application in Russia. Additionally, there should be presented basic information that Russian «non-academic» students had no possibility to learn at early stages of their language education.

Key words: academic writing, EAP in Russia, syllabus design, learner-centered approach, needs analysis.

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ОТБОР СОДЕРЖАНИЯ ОБУЧЕНИЯ АКАДЕМИЧЕСКОМУ ПИСЬМУ В РОССИИ

Аннотация. *Цель* статьи – описать возможный вариант отбора содержания обучения английскому языку при формировании академической письменной речи в российском вузе.

Методика и методы. Теоретические методы: сравнительно-сопоставительный анализ работ зарубежных и отечественных методистов-специалистов в области обучения письменной речи на иностранном языке; систематизация данных; моделирование. Эмпирические методы: наблюдение, собеседование, анкетирование, лонгитюдный педагогический эксперимент, статистическая обработка данных.

Результаты. Рассмотрены особенности сферы применения академического английского письма в англоговорящих странах и России и обозначены разные цели обучения такому письму, среди которых особо выделены два направления: намеревается ли студент использовать академический английский в научной или же в педагогической деятельности. В связи с этим аргументированно показана необходимость пересмотра подхода к формированию содержания вузовского курса иностранного языка. Отмечены и описаны жанры, на которых, по мнению автора, следует делать акцент при обучении письменной английской речи.

Научная новизна. Для более объективного обоснования отбора содержания курса английского языка последовательно представлены результаты анализа существующих форматов академической письменной речи, заложенных в аутентичных источниках; изучены имеющиеся учебно-методические пособия, разработанные отечественными специалистами; исследованы ожидания и запросы российских студентов в отношении указанной осваиваемой дисциплины и специальности в целом.

Практическая значимость. Предложенный автором поход к обучению академическому английскому письму позволяет в зависимости от профессиональной ориентации студентов менять как объем изучаемого материала, так и последовательность его подачи. Для этого следует сформировать содержа-

ние обязательной теоретической лекционной части курса, которая должна, вопервых, давать представление о востребованности академического английского в профессиональной деятельности; а вовторых, восполнить пробелы в знаниях студентов, не изучавших академическое письмо до вуза (non-academic students), в частности познакомить их с такими базовыми понятиями, как культура письма, риторические традиции, риторические образцы построения текста-рассуждения, особенности академического стиля письма. Объем и содержание практической части дисциплины должны варьироваться в зависимости от специфики предстоящей профессиональной деятельности и степени мотивации студентов освоения английской письменности.

Ключевые слова: академическое письмо, академический английский в России, отбор содержания обучения, личностно-ориентированное обучение, изучение ожиданий студентов.

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Introduction

In the process of education students come across various types of writing. In the first place they need take notes from lectures and while reading for exam revision. Other most typical situations in which academic writing is used are compositions, examination essays, course papers, laboratory reports and projects. Until recently most of the genres of study writing were a rare activity outside the class, especially in a foreign language. However, an opportunity to study abroad, international projects or contacts in the academic sphere have resulted in the following: Academic English have started to play a visible role in professional education of both language and non-language students. As a vivid example we may present the results of a student survey conducted in Volga (the International Youth Forum in the Volga Region) in 2014 with 50 participants. All the participants competed in the forum with their own innovative scientific projects using English as the International language. They represent different countries (the majority was from Russia), different universities and different research areas. Being an expert in «Science and Innovations» section I held the seminar about foreign language competency required from students to participate in international events. While answering my questionnaire, 100% of students mentioned that they had an experience of communication for Academic Purposes in English: 96% of students wrote reports before making a verbal presentation, 87% – produced monologues (written and orally), 75% – attended lectures in a foreign language, 60% – took part in debates/group discussions, 42% – participated in seminars, 30% wrote exam essays. Consequently, the teaching of EAP has to have its finger on the pulse of learners' needs.

Statement of the Problem

In Russia teaching writing aspect of EAP has started developing gradually since 2004 when the Unified State Examination was first introduced. Since that time the phenomenon of 'essay in English' has been constantly kept in the public eye.

Additionally, in May 2012 the President signed the Decree «On measures to implement the state policy in the field of education and science». Among other things, the Decree set the task of increasing the proportion of publications by Russian researchers in the total number of publications in the international scientific journals indexed in the WEB of Science database up to 2.44% by 2015. Still according to Web of Science (WoS) Russia is currently in the 13th place by number of publications and in the 22nd place by their citations [1].

Nowadays institutions of higher education face the necessity for designing specialised Academic Writing courses. Syllabus design normally starts with the course objectives. It should be assumed that they are quite specific concerning writing academically in English in Russia. First, we teach *non-academic students*, i. e. students who have had no academic background. Second, the subject application is different from that in the English-speaking countries.

The term *non-academic students* [18] does not refer to those who need English for communication purposes without regarding further development in the academic environment. It rather describes the statement of the matters when students are not born in the English rhetorical traditions, they are not taught the linear paragraph structure since primary school, and they do not regularly take exams in an essay form. Thus, non-academic students first learn about certain rhetoric culture at a higher institution.

As for the application of EAP in Russia, it refers mostly to two heterogeneous groups of students:

– science-oriented students from all the possible areas who are ready to do and to write science presenting their results and achievements worldwide,

– and language students who will probably go in for teaching or interpreting and who will communicate within the academic environment helping others to feel comfortable at the international level.

Theoretical Framework

Syllabus design usually starts with the course objectives. Course objectives, syllabus, approaches and methodology are genuinely integrated in Pedagogy [12, p. 49]. Specific objectives of teaching EAP writing in Russia inevitably influence the other component of a system, i.e. syllabus and methods.

To begin with, we need to explain to our students the basics, i.e. what academic writing in English is, what genres of academic writing exist, what areas of academic writing numerous unwritten conventions regulate, what the main idea is, how we should formulate it in the text in English, why linear structure of English texts is preferable etc.

Dealing with non-academic students, we also start the formation of their professional needs as part of them has never heard of academic writing. As a result, students have vague idea of the spheres where they can apply the target knowledge and skills. At first they confuse a good command of general English with good skills in EAP. They suppose that the ability to write in English automatically enables them to write essays, summaries, reports etc.

Keeping learners' gaps in mind, we need to adapt and sometimes organize the content of the course in a totally different way. To fulfil the task we should take into consideration two types of goals: institutional goals, i.e. what the learners will need to do in the future, and learners' current needs, i.e. what problem areas they would like to work on within the frameworks of our course. To set up global aims – institutional aims – a deep analysis of the existed teaching experience is required. First, it is essential to make an overview of the British and American teaching EFL writing sources available in Russia.

In the authentic textbooks the starting point for choosing the material is considered to be genre of a text. The repertoire of genres varies in accord with the register at which the course is aimed [6, p. 8]. In other words, the choice of a certain genre depends on the course objectives.

Guidelines on Effective Study/ Academic writing mostly focus on the following text types:

1) *paragraph* as a genre of academic writing. The authors choose a paragraph as a starting point due to the fact that it is a compressed form of any academic text. To learn structural characteristics of a paragraph format guarantees you success in academic writing in other genres: essays, research reports, case studies, surveys, dissertations, theses, and examination papers. C. A. Boardman highlights the rules of writing paragraphs based on different rhetorical modes: example, cause and effect, comparison and contrast, definition, narration, description, classification [4];

2) *essays*. R. R. Jordan shows that 'there tend to be four main tasks that are required from students when they write essays in examinations – a concept, the relations between/among concepts, a process argumentation' [10, p. 89]. However, the variety of essay types is presented in a much wider range. They are mostly based on rhetorical modes discussed in paragraph writing: classification, cause and effect, comparison and contrast, explanation, problem solution, persuasion, description [4, 22]. Essays may also be

classified according to the situation they are used in, e.g. timed/exam essays, application essays [4, p. 22]. Moreover, some sources provide an original set of essay types, such as 'Q to A' (Question to answer), theory, issue-centered, thematic [13, p. 60–62];

3) *summary*. P. Crème and M. R. Lea [5] single out executive summary, main point summary, key point summary, and outline summary;

4) *tutorial presentation* which may be prepared both orally and in a written form as a preparatory step;

5) *report* for study purposes that has its specific features in organisation with a business report;

6) *project/ dissertation* for post-graduate students along with *scientific publications* [16].

A different approach to the choice of materials is presented in textbooks that explore the stages of the writing process step by step. In product-oriented approach most attention is paid to genres, model texts, in particular. The writer needs knowledge of organising a definite type of a text to fulfil the writing task.

In process-oriented approach, on the contrary, most attention is paid to the process of generating and organising the ideas. Writing process knowledge includes technical knowledge of arranging the writer's thoughts and opinions. Still the process-oriented textbooks also need the material – texts – to be based on. In the analysed sources the basic texts turn to be of a paragraph and essay format [4, 5, 11, 22].

Keeping genre approach of the English-speaking books in mind, we may compare it with the approach to the choice of teaching materials developed by the Russian scholars. Printed works of Russian scholars devoted to teaching academic writing are rarely genre-based. They naturally contain examples of essays that are a predominant genre in our books. Nevertheless, they include preliminary information for essay writing:

– basic rhetorical modes, i.e. description, argumentation, definition, classification, comparison and contrast, cause and effect1 [14, 17, 21],

– notes on organization of a whole essay and its components (title, introduction, topic sentence, argumentation, conclusion) [2, 14, 17, 20],

– reading and analysing model texts and extracts from them, which enhances editing skills and informs of revision strategies [2, 14, 17, 20, 21]

– a few of the sources comment on the style of writing [17], though most authors focus on useful vocabulary or typical grammar structures without emphasizing the fact that these language units add formality to the style of academic writing [14, 19, 20, 21].

The next essential component of the textbooks published in Russia is practice that is mostly based on writing essays and their constructive elements such as thesis statements, topic sentences, introduction or conclusion.

Finally, our textbooks often include appendixes with the model texts as a source of information for more precise genre analysis.

Thus, we may assume that Russian textbooks are predominantly process-oriented with the emphasis on preliminary theoretical material that is basic for English rhetoric, but due to culturally specific educational environment it is new for our non-academic students.

Aside from these process-oriented works, there could be mentioned a textbook elaborated by a large group of Russian specialists in EAP [3]. The material was chosen on the basis of All-Russian question pall *Internationalisation of Russian Higher Education* conducted in 2001–2012 [8]. The relevant genres for those who are going to take part in international communication in the academic field are:

– samples of academic correspondence,
– grant proposals,
– abstracts,
– and summary.

In fact, these genres suit well those students who are oriented on scientific career, i. e. mostly non-language students and partially linguists. As for the language students intended for teaching and interiorising others to feel comfortable at the international level, their interests are poorly served. Potential teachers need more profound knowledge on academic discourse, rhetorical patterns that are widely employed in academic texts and basic study writing genres, i. e. a paragraph and an essay.

A disputable fact that comes into view after cross-cultural comparison of the textbooks is the mismatch in the content. In fact we do need basic information on various rhetorical patterns. However, the practice of writing numerous types of paragraphs and essays is not justified in most cases. The repertoire of genres has to be revised and often narrowed while adapting practice of teaching EAP abroad to Russian institutional goals.

Findings

Modern teaching technologies developing the ideas of Humane Pedagogy focus on learner-centered learning. Both Russian and foreign researches argue that in the classroom where English is a foreign language the shift from traditional teacher-centered approach to a learner-centered one has been a great challenge [7]. Prof. O. M. Osiyanova mentions that ‘quite often the methods and techniques used in educational process have an object-oriented

character and leave aside the subject of communication, the communicator himself' [15, p. 120].

To fit the learner-centered methodology, we conducted a needs analysis at the next stage of the research. Students' needs analysis was taken in the course of a 4-year experiment with the Russian language students at Samara Branch of Moscow City University, Department of English Philology and Modern Technologies in Foreign Language Teaching. The main methods of the analysis were: 1) student interviews/questionnaires, and 2) writing samples. The students were given writing activities.

Sample Needs Analysis 1: Student questionnaires

Questions to discuss:

– What are the functions of writing in the society?

– What role does writing play in your life?

– What kinds of writing have you already done in English?

– How confident do you feel writing in Russian / in English?

– What skills should a competent writer have?

– Do you think academic writing requires any particular skills? Could you provide your answer with any examples?

Sample Needs Analysis 2: Writing Samples

Task: Describe in a paragraph or two why you want to take Academic Writing course. Supply your expository paragraph(s) with a suitable title.

Fifty-nine students took part in the procedure of questioning in 2011–2014; 110 responses were given to the tasks described above. The tasks made the students reflect carefully on their expectations from the subject, academic activities, content areas, or announced topics. The teacher's task was to indicate the presence of personal or/and situational (institutional) goals.

The students had strong opinions regarding their overall language proficiency. Almost everyone expressed their wish to reinforce their language skills and preferred to have some sort of practice instead of theoretical explanation.

Areas Covered in Students' Answers:
General and Subject-oriented Expectations

The total number of answers, %	Students' needs areas	Students' answers that narrow the area to a particular aspect
1	2	3
36	overall communicative competence	– overall ability to write – to convey the idea to the reader – to increase the level of literacy – to understand the purpose of writing

1	2	3
		– cultural differences between Russian and English writing – to formulate thoughts clearly – to structure coherent texts – ability to generate ideas
20	overall language competence	– to learn useful vocabulary – to improve grammar skills – to get knowledge of punctuation
36	academic writing skills and knowledge	– to increase the level of academic literacy – to gain the ability to edit – to structure texts according to requirements – to formulate the main idea – to build arguments – to learn what vocabulary and grammar are appropriate for the academic style – to analyse the examples of academic texts – to write good essays – to gain comprehension of what an ideal academic text for native speakers is
8	professional needs	– integral part of higher education – to apply for a place at a foreign university – to be able to correct my pupils when I'm a teacher – to make changes in my professional work – useful for all professions/ for a scientist / for a teacher – for international communication in my scientific career – to be able to teach and to develop the course of academic writing

The data indicate that 56% of students have no pre-existing interests in the subject. More than a half of students perceive it as a part of their language education that is aimed at the development of their overall language skills and communicative competence.

As stated above, majority of the learners showed general interest in the language material and communicative practice the course could provide them with. However, 44% of students were intended to make use of academic-oriented materials. Few of them – 8% only – were ready to employ the specific knowledge and skills in their teaching-oriented or science-oriented career paths. To sum up, less than half of all language students have expressed professional interest in the course of academic writing. This imposes certain obli-

gations on a teacher who is expected to increase students' professional motivation.

According to S. Hidi and J. M. Harackiewicz, «the key to maintaining interest lies in finding ways to empower students by helping them finding meaning or personal relevance» [9, p. 155]. In case with the EAP courses it could be assumed that we definitely need to help Russian students to find meaning of the knowledge and skills they will apply precisely in their country. As a result they need a lot of preliminary theoretical information that will disclose the perspectives of the subject. Moreover, Russian students need theory before practice, though they disregard it in the questionnaire, to make practice more meaningful and professionally-oriented.

Discussion and Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be stated that the content of the Academic writing course in English is obviously influenced by several factors:

1. *Culturally specific situation in Russia in the sphere of language teaching at higher institutions*. The work with *«non-academic»* students requires from a teacher the ability to start with the basics while developing students' skills and motivation. Sufficient level demanded by the state should be achieved within 2–3 years of studying at the University without preliminary courses in EAP. Additionally, student should be informed of the changing state policy in science and education oriented on globalization. Thus, there should be organised a certain preliminary theoretical part.

2. *Learner-centered approach*. Declared as the leading approach in Russian pedagogy, it requires to consider student's expectations and student's current situation (where a student is, what a student is able to do now) alongside with the institutional goals (where a student should be, what a student will have to do in future professional life). Following the results of students' needs analysis, a teacher may reinforce parts of the course that develop overall ability to write in English (e.g. going through the stages of the writing process and focusing on the effective strategies associated with each stage). Students' answers also show that a teacher today faces the necessity to explain to students and/ or to illustrate the perspectives of academic writing in English in Russia.

To sum up, teaching English for academic purposes in Russia requires considerable changes in teacher training, as teachers in higher institutions are the specialists who should know Russian students' needs, real demands of the society in the sphere of their subjects and ways to make these two ends meet together.

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