

## ACADEMIC WRITING AS A KEY COMPONENT OF ACADEMIC LITERACY

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### ABSTRACT

The article deals with the place of academic literacy and academic writing in the concept of the New Literacy Studies. The issue is being widely discussed among language teachers in many educational institutions and seems highly relevant at the moment.

The goal of this paper has been to review the nature and the structure of academic literacy focusing on developing academic literacy within the framework of English for Academic Purposes course. Various approaches to the definition of academic literacy are discussed as well as how EAP (English for Academic Purposes) course contributes to its formation.

Writing is seen as a key component of Academic Literacy. The paper also identifies some difficulties that Russian students are likely to have due to a low level of native language academic skills and suggests ways to overcome them.

The Western experiences in developing academic language skills and the ways which may contribute to Russia's integration into the international educational environment and increase competitiveness of Russian education have been thoroughly assessed.

**Keywords:** education, literacy; university; learning; student; language proficiency; research.

### INTRODUCTION

Nowadays the English language contributes much to free exchange of knowledge in the scientific community. Consequently, it has become extremely important to take into account the increasing role of the English language as a tool for communication among scientists. Thus, students and scientists around the world have to be aware of the English language academic discourse, features to better understand their discipline in order to build up an academic career, or simply study successfully.

In this connection, Russian universities are reassessing the goals and objectives of English language courses. Different theoretical orientations tend to focus on the necessity of developing academic and communicative competence within the framework of *English for Academic Purposes (EAP)*, rather than *English for Specific Purposes (ESP)*.

The ultimate goal of *English for Academic Purposes (EAP)* is to develop the students' ability to learn to use language proficiently and conduct their own research in English. [13].

Attainment of this objective is inseparably linked with the development of students' general academic literacy.

According to Korotkina I.B. [10] the universities in the West develop academic literacy of students within special university courses among which academic writing occupies the central place.

However this discipline is the part in a complex of other disciplines, aimed at developing academic skills. The latter make up academic skills of literacy and their formation is considered the institutional responsibilities of universities and colleges.

## **METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

The idea of academic literacy has recently become the much-debated issue among Russian EAP teachers. A cursory review of literature helps to understand on the one hand that people engaged in different research lack the essential skills necessary for successful university studies and future research activities and on the other hand - how different are the methodological and practical approaches to solve these problems. The survey of international studies reveals poor development of independent critical thinking and analytical ability to work with different kinds of information both among Russian students and among specialists with experience as well [1]. [2].

We should accept the revelations of our overseas colleagues and admit that the domestic educational practice does not provide the infrastructure to teach relevant courses to help students develop critical thinking and analytical ability to work with different kinds of information. At the same time, it is purposeful development of these skills that allows foreign students to cope with tasks which require independent decisions of non-standard solutions, analysis and synthesis of information.

Creating a system of integrated development of academic literacy is a matter of great urgency. We believe that academic literacy is an interdisciplinary competence, a certain complex structural formation, which integrates traditional knowledge and intellectual, communicative, ideological skills as well.

The development of academic literacy skills will contribute to formation of a certain way of thinking appropriate for a specific cultural environment [9]. The complex of these skills represents a special kind of literacy determined by international educational community as academic literacy. Australian scientist Bill Green [5] defines three aspects (dimensions) of academic literacy:

1. Operational skills - language (particularly writing) competence
2. Cultural literacy – understanding discourse or culture: the ability to exercise communicating in the specific language of professionals (e.g., research in different fields of knowledge).
3. Critical literacy – understanding how knowledge is created and interpreted (e.g., the ability to understand the meaning of newspapers or scientific articles).

Accordingly, the range of academic skills will include:

Academic reading – the ability of searching, evaluating and analysing information;

Academic Listening – being able to understand lectures and oral presentations, outlining the main thoughts;

Academic speaking – being able to produce a well-organised and effective presentation;

Academic writing – being able to promote hypothesis, make conclusions, organize and structure the text.

Thus, our community of academic writing teachers will have to give much thought to comprehension of different educational contexts in which the appropriate courses are taught, as well as to identification of those strategies and teaching techniques that are appropriate for these contexts. However, the difficulties arising here appear as typical of Russia and the reason for these problems is that the students have no relevant academic skills.

Not so long ago a model of academic literacy was focused only on training the weaker students to help them to revise language skills before taking a course of university studies and it served as a set of skills to read, write and speak [12].

The student was treated as an object in a passive role, and instilling in him a certain set of skills occurred without taking into account the social context. Within the framework of the New Literacy Studies (NLS) the idea was put forward that language is not only a communication tool, but also an important social practice. This means that students should be able to transfer different types of discourse, i.e., follow verbal rules of each specific type of discourse, to understand its values and the type of identity [16]. Broadly speaking, discourse is the socially conditioned organization of speech activity born by the participants of social groups, communities and suggests greater attention to the relation between writing and learning in a specific discipline. "Following this perspective NLS, with its roots in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, conceptualizes writing and reading as contextualized social practices" [14].

Thus, we can talk about the presence of a discursive model of academic literacy and the importance of writing as a social practice in the formation of the ability to become a full member of the community.

Therefore, formation of academic literacy is not just development of reading and writing skills, but a certain way of thinking, suitable for a specific cultural environment.

Teachers of English for Academic Purposes realize that mastering academic writing competence is of great importance and should take its firm place in all courses at all levels of studies (undergraduate, graduate, postgraduate).

The ability to write well is not a naturally acquired skill - it is usually learned or culturally transmitted as a set of practices in formal instructional settings or other environments. At the same time, it is purposeful development of these skills that allow foreign students to cope with the tasks, which require the adoption of non-standard solutions, analysis and synthesis of information.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the modern university education in Russia, students are immersed in a vast array of information that they need to be able to understand and handle properly. Thereupon students learning a foreign language have serious problems when they are asked to write essays, articles, interviews, projects, etc. Nevertheless, the most important thing is not only the presence of an actual difficulty in writing certain types of tasks but the lack of necessary skills to work with written texts of scientific content. The typical problems students experience here are:

- lack of appropriate skills to collect and organize material,
- highlight the main and secondary
- compare the point of view of different authors
- express personal opinion
- generalize and draw conclusions.

Other explanations of inadequate writing skills among Russian students concern the ineffectiveness of practicing writing only within the framework of Literature subjects and when enrolled in college and facing a new academic culture, which recently has been more and more focused on written communication, students experience considerable difficulties. Moreover, it is with certain reluctance that students use authentic writing constructions and accept foreign language scientific paradigm.

However, it is obvious that this unwillingness may be a natural psychological response to activity that a person is not able to do or is unable to do it properly.

Besides, there still is the contradiction between the needs of students in mastering academic discourse in general and the ability to write an expository essay in particular on the one hand, and lack of holistic

approach to teaching these skills on the other. This complicates the performance of such individual writing works as abstracts, summaries, yearly research papers and degree works.

Orientation of academic writing on the real academic and research activity has set forth a number of impending problems for foreign language teachers. Compared to students writing in their native language, students writing in a foreign language have to acquire proficiency in the use of the language as well as writing strategies, techniques and skills. Students having low level of general language competence are not able to make a serious abstract deduction. Their writing skills tend to lag far behind the level of development of other language skills: reading, speaking and listening.

Almost all publications note that despite the diversity of problems, there is one, which is not exclusive to those who are learning English as a foreign language but also to the students whose mother tongue is English, and it is the ability to structure the text. The course of academic writing teaches students to generate their own ideas, organize them logically, structure the whole text, justify the hypothesis of each component (or dimension) and build a coherent and clearly targeted text.

The trouble or difficulty in teaching writing in general and in teaching Academic Writing in particular lies in the fact that the key stages a writer goes through are the ideas, thoughts, arguments, conclusions, generalizations, etc. which the author formulates. They may come to the author's mind before and during the process of writing. It is impossible to create a whole text at once - it is written in parts, and there is the problem for the author to process the language of each part, to combine parts between themselves and make each part correspond to communication purpose of the whole text [11].

Few authors paid attention to the fact that in academic writing the text is built of paragraphs, not divided by them. Moreover, the paragraph is an essential element of the text, and it is important to learn how to write a paragraph; how to express thoughts clearly adhering to a single type of logical construction in the paragraph. Sentences in the paragraph are linked syntactically and lexically formed by certain laws, which correspond to basic mental operations – analysis, synthesis, comparison, generalization and are less affected by extra linguistic factors. In this case, the paragraph could be considered as a linguistic and logical unit.

During the formation of the ability to create structural links between the main components of a paragraph students master the principles of construction of the main types of paragraphs [9], [11].

The significance that such individual writing works as abstracts, summaries, yearly research papers and degree works have assumed is widely commented in literature. Meanwhile, Federal State Educational Standard clearly formulates what competencies should the graduate have. Bachelor's and Master's lists of competencies both include the ability to solve various professional tasks in accordance with the professional activities. The introduction of academic writing courses into the curriculums of Russian universities makes the discussion of tasks and methods of teaching relevant [17].

Our own experience concerns teaching writing a summary, which was carried out within the framework of teaching academic writing for the students of Arts and Humanities specializing in Oriental Studies in Kazan Federal University.

Basic skills and competences that underlie the ability to write are universal and having been formed in one discipline can be transferred to other subjects and other activities [8]. In the process of studying different disciplines students acquire a specific glossary for each topic, develop the ability to work with dictionaries and reference books, gain experience in drafting abstracts, writing summaries and abstracts, reviews, essays; learn the skills of editing. Thus, continuous improvement or gradual build-up of the research component takes place.

Promoting student research further, we focused the students' attention on their yearly research paper in their major speciality: *Language and Literature of the Orient* with the view of writing a summary. According to the curriculum, the students in the second year of Bachelor's program work at the research paper in the field of Arts or Linguistics, which is carried out in Russian. The final assignment of our course of Academic writing was making a written synopsis (summary) of the research paper in English.

## CONCLUSION

The process of writing the summary can be described as *translation* and this metaphor may have a double meaning. First, summary is typically a "translation" of a large text into the text of smaller volume. Second, the metaphor acquires its literal nature in the case of a foreign language text summarization. The resulting papers showed the effectiveness of these teaching strategies, which contribute to the formation of research competences. The ability and readiness to conduct research work has become part of the key competencies and provide students with the potential of continuous self-development. Interpreting and elaborating on the paper accomplished in Russian forms the right attitude towards their own academic writing, research work of other scientists and in general teaches students to perform this kind of work and to comply with both formal and ethical standards in their writing in the future.

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