АКАДЕМИЧЕСКОЕ ПИСЬМО

Academic Writing: Difficulties and Possible Solutions for Engineering Students

Liudmila M. Bolsunovskaya – Cand. Sci. (Philology), Assoc. Prof., e-mail: bolsunovskl@tpu.ru
Irina E. Rymanova – Senior lecturer, e-mail: rymanova@tpu.ru
National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University, Tomsk, Russia
Address: 30, Prospect Lenina, Tomsk, 634050, Russian Federation

Abstract. Academic writing is considered to be the most challenging and difficult skill in terms of English as a Second Language. This study critically explores the obstacles in academic writing faced by students at Tomsk Polytechnic University, Russia. To investigate, a comprehensive questionnaire has been floated among professional teachers to get their expert opinions (about students' obstacles in writing) in order to identify some problems and form effective remedial strategies eventually. This paper focuses on the two significant aspects of academic writing, namely language skills (LS) (Grammar etc.) and writing skills (WS) (writing itself as a skill). Equally relevant to the issue are organization, coherence, and connectivity. The authors claim that Russian learners have poor learning background in writing skills due to the lack of balanced syllabus and teaching technologies. Aside from this, only determining problems is not sufficient to take students out of writing phobia. Furthermore, it is necessary to point out the fact that poor reading skills also lead to this kind of disappointment. Most of Russian learners do not know how to initiate their composition (essays). This paper will prove to be an academic contribution to improve the writing skills among ESL/EFL Russian learners in general and students of Tomsk Polytechnic University in particular. The presented analysis should also be of interest to researchers in other countries (universities) in which the field of academic writing is emerging.

Keywords: higher technical education, English as a Second Language, academic writing, obstacles in writing, language skills, writing skills

Introduction

In recent decade, there has been a worldwide movement, to bring the neglected writing research back. Globally, there has also been a revival in research in writing, studying how people develop as writers across their lifetime, how reading and writing interact, how the mind grows through engagement with writing, what conditions bring up writing development, how teachers understand writing, and what transitions in writing students must make as they move from elementary to secondary school to higher education and the workplace [1]. Nowadays, academic writing is emerging as a distinct teaching and research subject in Russian higher education. The recognition that Academic Writing needs to be taught is now widespread, and the call for teaching writing has come both from

outside and from within the Russian universities. The study of university writing is becoming increasingly trans-national and comparative in nature. To understand the context within which the teaching of writing in Russian universities has begun to take place, developments need to be set against some important changes in higher education policy. The National Russian Higher Education Policy has endeavored to make every university teacher a teacher of writing, to bring enthusiasm and knowledge of how writing works to his/her students.

However, engineering's professional institutions, blamed much disorder in the profession on poor communication skills, and writing courses are a requirement for engineering degrees. By the mid-1990s, higher education was already in the process of becoming a "universal system" [2]. The first of these is the modularization of degree programmes. Modular degree programmes allow students to choose and follow their individual trajectory to degree completion [3]. As a consequence of these increased numbers and the diversification of student backgrounds that accompanied them, both the need for new teaching technologies and the need to be more explicit about writing practices began to be recognized. Scholarly activity is moving rapidly to support the development of Academic Writing programmes and initiatives in Russian universities. Students of National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University, for instance, have been taught writing skills since 1998. In particular, academic writing is difficult [4], and students in Russian higher education find it so. Many students face writing obstacles, such as: at text level: difficulty in achieving *text level* organization, such as structural weaknesses, with some failure to support ideas logically and effectively. At the sentence *level, the* composition is sometimes faulty*, with a common lack of effective sentence marking – including punctuation. At the word *level,* spelling mistakes are common, constituting a distraction from writers' meaning and argument.

The nucleus of the presented study is to identify problems of organization, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, vocabulary, and grammar in writing among the students of writing skills courses at Tomsk Polytechnic University, Russia. Hence, the study suggests some remedial strategies to cope up with the problems faced by the students and teachers alike.

This study also reviews the relationship between engineering students and writing at National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University, Institute of Natural Resources, and suggests that motivating students to want to write is more useful than teaching them writing.

Context of the research

Till now, at Russian universities, it was not considered necessary to teach writing in the disciplines. It was the presence of unspoken assumption that students already knew how to write before going to university, since a prerequisite for university entrance is a good pass in the compulsory subject "Russian Language". One more problem is that there is no exam in "English Language" for university entrance in Russia, as it is in the world's universities. To understand the context within which the teaching of writing in Russian universities has begun to take place, developments need to be set against some important changes in higher education policy. From the mid-1990s, there was an unprecedented boom of English Language learning in Russian higher education. As a result of the unprecedented rise in English language learning, academic members of staff are teaching a larger and larger number of students, and are spending less and less time with individual students. At the same time, academic members of staff paid more attention to spoken skills than writing ones. The issue of teaching writing is now central in the Russian higher education system – in a system that is considered to be an elite rather than a mass system. Traditionally, Russian universities have been seen as the fortress of academic knowledge, but the processes of globalization and internationalization in the twenty-first century are raising questions about the very status of universities as both knowledge-holders and knowledge-providers. Academic literacy sup-

port for students is beginning to be seen as a marker of good provision. The roots of today's attention to student writing in Russian higher education can be found in global processes and changes (not only in economics and politics, but also in education) occurring all over the world. For the reasons outlined above, provision usually has been devoted not just to writing but to academic support more broadly, covering many aspects of learning and communication for academic purposes. In many instances, writing, as well as other aspects has been taught with no direct connection to the content of the curriculum being followed by students. However, it is now becoming more common for writing to be a compulsory element within the curriculum.

This work has been carried out and described in different university settings with diverse groups of students [5–7], non-native speakers of English [8] and postgraduate trainee teachers [3], focus on power relationships in essay writing, strategies on writing [9; 10], writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) and writing in disciplines (WID) [10], language training of technical university students [11], e-learning [12; 22], students' autonomy [11], writing centres support [13–17].

Background of the research

The "ability to write clearly and fluently is undoubtedly one of the more important skills" [4], and academic writing as a form of evaluation that asks you to demonstrate knowledge and show proficiency with certain disciplinary skills of thinking, interpreting, and presenting [18]. According to Rowena Murray and Sarah Moore, "Academic writing is not the printed display of one's fully formed thoughts" [19]. Rosemary Jones characterizes academic writing as writing based on analysis – the process of breaking down ideas – to increase one's understanding. Academic writing varies from other forms of writing because it considers a topic from an impersonal, research-driven angle. The language of academic writing is formal, structures and vocabulary are concise, and it has its own set of rules and practices, i.e. writing objec-

tively (using the third person, avoiding clichés and slang, using academically sound sources of information to support your arguments), writing clearly (writing a plan to organize your writing before you start, academic paragraphs correctly, shorter sentences, punctuating correctly), using the technical vocabulary of your subject area (using terms correctly), using standard English correctly (specialized vocabulary), using correct English (correct sentences, spelling, and punctuation).

Research

The English department of the Institute of Natural Resources at Tomsk Polytechnic University established a research and development project to improve the written skills of second-year undergraduates studying on degree programmes in the discipline of English. According to this programme, some aspects of academic writing are implemented already in the second year, since junior students participate in international scientific conferences and scientific competitions. So, within the English discipline, modules "Education", "Work and jobs", "Sciences", "Invention and technologies", etc. were introduced to students, and at the end of the second course such genres of academic writing as annotation, essay, abstract are studied.

Teachers of the English department collected students' essays, checked them and the results were reflected in a questionnaire. The questionnaire of the members of staff in English department showed that the writing skills of students needed strengthening. Twenty members of the department completed the questionnaire on writing skills so that the authors of the paper could assess how teachers felt about students' abilities to write essays.

Data collection. In methodology, there are different investigation methods (theoretical and empirical) which are aimed to enhance the studying process effectiveness. So, theoretical methods are based on abstraction, analysis and synthesis, comparison, deduction and induction, modeling and extrapolation. Alternatively, empirical methods include analysis of scientific and

methodical literature, scientific observation, best teaching practice, conversation, experimental learning, questionnaire, testing, timing, statistical analysis. Within our study, we consider empirical method of investigation, i.e. questionnaire which is designed to collect, fix, classify and analyze data (information) in order to get appropriate feedback and offer methodological recommendations. This method provides obtaining information by means of responders' feedback analysis [20]. The questionnaire of the study was developed by the researchers to get teachers' feedback on some significant aspects of writing (organization, spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, and grammar) concerning students' essays. The researches (we) proposed the statements be responded by teachers choosing answers 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' according to each criterion (task achievement, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, and punctuation).

So, the questionnaire included the following statements:

− The students' written works fully satisfy all the requirements of the task *(Task achievement)*.

− Students can sequence information and ideas logically *(Coherence)*.

− Students manage all aspects of cohesion well *(Cohesion)*.

− Students use a wide range of vocabulary fluently and flexibly to convey precise meanings *(Lexical resource)*.

− Students produce rare errors in spelling and/or word formation *(Spelling and word formation)*.

− Students use a wide range of grammatical structures *(Grammatical range and accuracy)*.

− Students have good control of punctuation *(Punctuation)*.

Task achievement. According to the analyzed teachers' answers, it was found that 30% of students fully satisfy the task's requirements, 42% of students are clear about the task, present, and highlight key features, and only 12% of students

fail to address the task and the answers of 16% of students are barely related to the task's requirements.

Coherence. The teachers' feedback regarding sequence information and ideas shows that 32% of students are able to present information and organize ideas logically, 45% of students arrange the information with some organization. The teachers admit that 13% of students do not organize ideas logically, so there is no clear progression in response, and moreover, 10% of students have very little control of organizational features.

Cohesion. The teachers consider that 28% of students manage all aspects of cohesion well and use paragraphing sufficiently and appropriately, 47% of students use a range of cohesive device appropriately, although there may be some over or under use. The teachers admit that 13% of students may use limited cohesive devices, which may be inaccurate or repetitive, and 10% of students do not organize ideas logically and do not use any linking words or phrases.

Lexical resource. The teachers point out that only 5% of students use a wide range of vocabulary fluently and flexibly to convey precise meanings, 10% of students use an adequate range of vocabulary and lexical items with the awareness of style and collocation. It is important to note, that 60% of students use mainly basic vocabulary, which may be repetitive and inappropriate in its application. Students mainly have difficulties in collocation, so it can cause strain for the reader. In addition, 25% of students use limited or an extremely limited range of vocabulary. They never use phrasal verbs, idioms, and complex sentences.

Spelling and word formation. The teachers' responses associated with spelling and word formation in which 5% of students have a very good spelling of words with rare minor errors, 10% of students produce rare errors in spelling and word formation. Furthermore, 70% of students have some difficulties in word formation, so they rarely use the same words in different parts of speech, and 15% rare spell words cor-

rectly and get puzzled writing the words with /ght/, /sion/, /tion/, /ch/, /sh/.

Grammatical range and accuracy. The teachers consider that only 15% of students use a wide range of grammatical structures, rarely make errors, 20% of students use a variety of complex grammatical structures, have good control of grammar, but 30% of students may make frequent grammatical errors related to the usage of articles and prepositions, modals, 35% of students use a very limited range of structures and errors predominate in subject-verb agreement, auxiliary words, tenses and word order in affirmative and interrogative sentences.

Punctuation. The teachers admit that 5% of students can punctuate properly, i.e. know where to put comma, colon, semicolon, full stop, question mark, apostrophe, inverted commas. At least 20% of students have good control of punctuation, but 40% make some errors in punctuation and sometimes do not use comma, colon, semicolon, apostrophe, inverted commas properly. In addition, punctuation for 35% of students is often faulty: they never use comma, colon, semicolon, apostrophe, inverted commas properly.

Discussion

According to the findings, the teachers came to the conclusion that their students have poor levels of literacy, and they face more serious difficulties in vocabulary (spelling, word formation) and grammar (subject-verb agreement, auxiliary words, tenses, and word order in affirmative and interrogative sentences). The other aspects of writing which are categorized into least serious are coherence (arranging the information with some organization) and cohesion (using a range of cohesive device appropriately).

To improve students' skills, we are planning to implement a methodology, which should be based on the following approaches:

– product-oriented writing / genre-based writing (a text as a model to be analyzed and imitated/produced;

– process-oriented writing (a writing process, which includes 3 stages: 1) pre-writing/rehearsing, 2) writing/drafting, 3) revising/editing/post writing (control) [21].

Moreover, in the questionnaire, there are a few helpful suggestions proposed by the teachers, which determined the need for motivating students in writing. It is very important to find efficient teaching methods to inspire students, so the biggest challenge of teachers is to create and maintain the students' motivation. The following teaching measures may be useful to improve the writing skills of students.

Strategy for task achievement in writing. The teachers may offer specific tasks to students based on writing strategies in academic writing related to identifying main tasks, planning ideas, and making a detailed structured outline.

Strategy for coherence and cohesion in writing. One of the main teacher's duties includes guiding students to write with clear organization and flow. In written work, coherence and cohesion can be practiced by implementing suitable organization of content, and by planning exercises. Great attention should be paid to linking words, i.e. through references by using pronouns, substitution. However, students should not over-use linking words and phrases.

Strategy for lexical resource development. A large vocabulary raises confidence and aids the student in writing. One of your main teacher's tasks is to help students develop rich and useful vocabulary. In order to enlarge vocabulary, teachers should teach synonyms, word collocation, and idioms.

Collocation is also an important part of writing, so students should know how words occur together. Sorting and matching are key techniques for students to develop. There are a lot of possibilities to help students with these activities. All kinds of card games can be devised to promote awareness of collocation and idioms.

Strategy for grammatical range, accuracy and punctuation improvement. Grammatical range, accuracy, and punctuation are very important elements in writing. To produce proficient writing, teachers should correct

Table 1

Teaching strategies for improving writing skills

Writing criteria	Suggested strategies
Task achievement	− Underline key words in the task − identify parts of the task − plan the ideas − group and sequence the ideas
Coherence and Cohesion	− Use paragraphs − use topic sentence − connect paragraphs and sentences with linking words
Lexical Resource	*Teaching synonyms:* − identify synonyms for nouns, verbs, adjectives − revise a paragraph using synonyms from any teacher's material − synthesize their knowledge of synonyms by rewriting a small text *Teaching collocation and idioms:* − group words according to collocate such as make/do − match collocations/idioms end to end − use sets of cards where students match up pairs − match pairs being disturbed *Teaching spelling:* − identify which letters make what sound − break up words into syllables − analyse mistakes − show them and let them analyse their own mistakes − use useful strategy, for example, look, cover, write, check − limit the number of rules − encourage their students to use a dictionary.
Grammatical Range, Accuracy and Punctuation	*Using techniques:* − self−correction − group correction − peer−correction

the mistakes of their students. However, there are other techniques for correction mistakes: self-correction, group correction, and peer-correction. Self-correction increases the self-confidence of students because they can catch and correct their own mistakes. As for group correction and peer-correction, these techniques create a positive earning environment where students can feel comfortable experimenting with the language. Teaching strategies for improving writing skills are presented in *Table 1*.

In general, it was considered by staff and students alike that there was a great need for facilitation of writing skills development. Nearly all interviewed teachers felt that the problems were to be found in the field of argument development, paragraphing, choice appropriate register, and construction of sentences, spelling, as well as syntax and punctuation. Moreover, all teachers emphasized the need to encourage students to focus on their learning and progress as part of development progress. The research results confirmed their views about students' abilities and requirements, and particularly the need for methodology approaches, which assist students to improve writing skills. To facilitate writing skills, we can offer: using a process approach to writing, modern technologies of e-learning and writing centres support.

A process-oriented approach to writing. The most important element of this approach is feedback or the other terms, such as peer response, peer editing, peer evaluation, which can be "defined as input from a reader to writer with

the effect of providing information to the writer for revision". This approach will help students to know more clearly, what is wrong with their writing and improve their writing skills.

Implementation of e-learning technologies. E-learning technologies can optimize the educational process and organize students for writing activities via wiki technologies, forum and chart with peer evaluation.

Writing centres support. At Tomsk Polytechnic University, English departments generally offer writing instruction as a form of provision rather than as a subject in the curriculum. Nevertheless, in Europe and the USA, teachers of writing centres provide students with study skills, academic literacy via classes, or face-to-face consultation. This form of support can produce significant learning outcomes. Writing centres, which would have a positive impact on writing skills development, have also appeared in Russia [6; 13–17].

Conclusion

We have aired some possibilities, tentatively, from a starting point of some preliminary and small-scale research. In the light of the respondents' expert opinion and the students' writing samples, it has been inferred (teachers have found) that students face more difficulty in organization, capitalization, vocabulary and grammar. It is advisable that teachers should attend some training classes to be aware of the latest development in methodology. In addition, keeping in view the educational and cultural backgrounds of the students, teachers, or staff of writing centres may devise more ways to tackle the identified problems in the best possible manner (face-to-face or via the Internet). We consider that motivating students to want to write is a key factor in students' writing development. Although, it is our hope, that we have given emphasis on the need for a more explicit awareness of students' writing practices in Russian higher education and the importance of tutorial intervention based on writing centres.

Through our work in the University's General English and English for Academic Purposes programmes for non-native speakers of English, we have come to the conclusion that we should help undergraduates to write in an "authentic" way and the way, which meets the demands of the university. In the future we are planning to find out how new technologies (such as e-learning, MOODLE, and etc.) could be harnessed to motivate students to revise their writing through collaborative learning and peer review. We hope that these new ideas also will have an impact on us personally, and we will be able to share with our students the discoveries that we were making about our own writing processes – what worked, what didn't.

In addition to mentioned above, we have found that teaching writing should be an integral, ongoing part of disciplinary learning for all students, it should be a part of the responsibility of disciplinary teachers within the discipline's curriculum being supported by writing centres.

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Академическое письмо: проблемы и пути решения при обучении студентов инженерных специальностей

Болсуновская Людмила Михайловна – канд. филол. наук, доцент. E-mail: bolsunovskl@tpu.ru
Рыманова Ирина Евгеньевна – ст. преподаватель. E-mail: rymanova@tpu.ru
Национальный исследовательский Томский политехнический университет, Томск, Россия
Адрес: Россия, 634050, г. Томск, пр. Ленина, 30

Аннотация. Академическое письмо считается одним из самых сложных навыков в преподавании английского языка как иностранного. Оно предполагает решение различных задач: начиная от письменных заданий, тематических исследований, технических отчётов, лабораторных отчётов, экзаменационных вопросов до написания дипломной работы и статей в научных журналах. Данное исследование рассматривает препятствия и трудности, с которыми сталкиваются студенты инженерного вуза при написании академических текстов. В рамках данного исследования было проведено анкетирование преподавателей, чтобы выявить проблемы, связанные с академической письменной речью студентов и разработать эффективные стратегии по совершенствованию навыков письменной речи среди студентов неязыковых специальностей технического вуза. В статье рассматриваются две важные составляющие академического письма: языковые навыки (грамматика и т. д.) и непосредственно письменные навыки. Подчёркивается, что определяющими характеристиками академического текста являются организация, согласованность и связность. Авторы работы отмечают, что студенты инженерного вуза (в данной статье – Томского политехнического университета) имеют слабую подготовку по русскому языку из-за отсутствия сбалансированного учебного плана и эффективных технологий обучения и, как результат, низкие навыки письменной речи на английском языке. Кроме того, в статье обращается внимание на то, что плохие навыки чтения также приводят к низким результатам при создании академических текстов. В рамках статьи авторы предлагают некоторые стратегии по совершенствованию навыков письменной академической речи. Выполненный анализ может представлять интерес для исследователей, занимающихся проблемами написания академических текстов.

Ключевые слова: инженерное образование, обучение иностранным языкам, академическое письмо, языковые навыки, умения письменной речиб сложности письменной речи