

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18454/RULB.2018.14.2.2>**ОБУЧЕНИЕ СТУДЕНТОВ-ПЕРВОКУРСНИКОВ ОТЛИЧИТЕЛЬНЫМ ПРИЗНАКАМ АКАДЕМИЧЕСКОГО ПИСЬМА (СЛОЖНОСТЬ, ФОРМАЛЬНОСТЬ, ОБЪЕКТИВНОСТЬ, ОТВЕТСТВЕННОСТЬ)**

Научная статья

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Английский язык для академических целей и академическое письмо на английском языке является новыми учебными дисциплинами для языковых и неязыковых российских вузов. Особой сложностью для студентов, изучающих данные дисциплины, является осмысление отличительных характеристик академического письма, таких, как сложность, формальность, ответственность и объективность письма. В данной статье предлагается алгоритм действий и пример разработанных заданий направленных на осмысление упомянутых особенностей академического письма.

**Ключевые слова:** английский язык для академических целей, академическое письмо, сложность, формальность, объективность, ответственность.

**TEACHING FIRST YEAR STUDENTS FEATURES OF ACADEMIC WRITING (COMPLEXITY, FORMALITY, OBJECTIVITY, RESPONSIBILITY)**

Research article

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English for academic purposes (EAP) and Academic writing are new disciplines studied at many Russian universities. Understanding the distinctive features of academic writing, such as complexity, formality, responsibility and objectivity, causes particular difficulties for many students studying EAP. This article suggests an algorithm of actions and some designed activities aimed at raising students' awareness of these features.

**Keywords:** English for academic purposes, EAP, academic writing, features of academic writing, complexity, formality, responsibility, objectivity.

**Introduction**

In the recent decades, English has become a predominant medium of Higher education, both in English-speaking countries and worldwide. This has significantly increased the importance of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), which is used as a lingua franca for international studies.

The term 'EAP' has been in use since 1970s and is broadly defined as 'communication skills in English which are required for study purposes in formal education systems' [7, P. 1] or a particular discourse of representing, thinking and talking about the world shared by academic practitioners (teachers, researchers and students) [1, P. 6]. At the Departments of International Business and Administration at MGIMO University the students' main specialism is Business English, and EAP is only taught at Year 1, to teach students the basics of academic reading and writing. Similarly to many recent school leavers, most first-year students at MGIMO face considerable difficulties with EAP, especially academic writing.

To some extent, we assume that it is the cross-cultural differences that cause the problem and complicate the process of learning how to write academically in English. The Russian academic culture seems to differ significantly from one of the English-speaking countries. According to G. Hofstede, a social psychologist and the founder of

comparative intercultural research, the academic culture in Russia is dissimilar to those in the UK and the USA in four of the five fundamental value clusters (or "dimensions"): Russia has a high power distance whereas both the UK and the US have a low one [5, P. 110]; Russia has a collectivist culture as opposed to the individualist cultures of the UK and the US [5, P. 96]; Russia is a feminine culture, whereas the UK and the US are both masculine cultures [5, P. 143]; Russia has a high uncertainty avoidance index as opposed to a low one in the UK and the US [5, P. 192].

Cultural differences between Russian and English-speaking countries are especially obvious in the sphere of academic writing. Because the Russian culture is mostly focussed on conserving rather than extending knowledge, most writing done in the Russian language is often rather descriptive. Even if students realise the need to use expert knowledge in their writing, they tend to think their main task is to summarise the information and then simply provide their personal opinion, instead of judging the information critically.

Most first-year university students face considerable difficulties with writing academic essays. Another reason for this, besides the cultural differences, is that the students are very familiar with the 'essay' format of the Russian State Exam (RSE). The test-format essay is a five-paragraph essay,

in which the students are to provide a personal opinion, without any references to relevant research, in fairly general language. For the most part, Russian school leavers have extensive practice writing RSE essay, and as a result, first-year students tend to think this is the only correct way to write essays, and often do all their writing in the same format.

### Methodology

Many researchers name the following features as distinctive of academic writing: complexity, responsibility, formality, objectivity, explicitness, accuracy, hedging (or cautious language) [1], [2], [7], [9]. However, most first year students are not familiar with these features and do not realise that what they know as an 'essay' does not meet the requirements of an academic essay.

Arguably, one of the main aims of the initial stage of teaching EAP writing is raising students' awareness, or, according to K. Hyland, 'rhetorical consciousness-raising' [6, P. 560] of the above-mentioned distinctive characteristics of academic writing. This can be done through getting the students to notice and reflect upon the features of either model texts (arguably 'perfect' examples of academic writing) or sample texts ('imperfect' texts that can be improved upon), and then to use the knowledge thus received to construct their own writing pieces.

This paper focuses on consciousness-raising of four of the key features of academic writing, namely, responsibility, complexity, formality, objectivity. Another feature of academic language, accuracy, is also touched upon; however, much less attention is paid to it because the students tend to be very familiar with it, accuracy being the most assessed feature in all written work they have done previously.

**Responsibility** involves justifying the author's position, and providing evidence for the claims the author makes. It requires applying citation practices relative to what a particular community prefers, for instance, direct quotation or paraphrasing [9, P.132]. A key concept of a writer's responsibility is his/her ability to include proper references to the work of other authors, so as to avoid plagiarism. This "not only helps establish a persuasive framework for the acceptance of arguments by showing how a text depends on previous work in a discipline, but also as it displays the writer's credibility and status as an insider" [6, P. 554].

Lexical **complexity** might imply a higher degree of lexical density, for example, by means of utilizing collocations, academic- and discipline-specific vocabulary, specialised or technical vocabulary and metaphors [6, P. 182-184]. To achieve a higher grammatical complexity, the author may make use of noun-based phrases, employ subordinate clauses and/or passive structures.

To achieve a proper **objectivity** of an academic text, a writer is to make little reference to him/herself, emphasizing the facts or evidence instead, thus avoiding personal bias. Self-mention is supposed to be undesirable, unless an author specifically wants to emphasise his/her own contribution to the field while seeking agreement for it [6, P. 554].

By **formality**, we understand utilizing a proper register of academic writing, colloquialisms, overly idiomatic language, slang or argot, ellipsis or contractions.

### Implementation and main results

As a first step of raising awareness of the distinctive characteristics of academic writing, students are to compare four pairs of sentences, each demonstrating a feature of EAP writing, and distinguish which one sounds more academic. Below is an example of an activity we designed with this aim:

**Work in pairs. In the following pairs of sentences, decide which sounds more academic, and which one sounds less academic. Write A (for Academic) and NA (for non-academic) next to each sentence.**

- A. I completed the experiment as I was told to. (NA)  
B. The experiment was completed as instructed. (A)

A. You can control trains this way to make sure the trains run more safely, no matter how bad the weather gets. (NA)

B. The use of this method of control unquestionably leads to safer train running in the most adverse weather conditions. (A)

A. Researchers observed the way strain accumulates around a fault. (A)

B. Researchers looked at the way strain builds up around a fault. (NA)

A. Brown (2003) concludes that the level of motivation to succeed depends not only on factors in the home but also peer influence. (A)

B. According to some research, the level of motivation to succeed depends not only on factors in the home but also peer influence. (NA)

Following this activity, learners match each pair of sentences with the name of the feature they illustrate: objectivity (pair 1), complexity (pair 2), formality (pair 3), responsibility (pair 4), and try to explain how they understand each feature, and why it is important for academic language.

After that, students focus on each feature separately and read a series of statements, choose the accurate ones and correct the false ones. As a result, learners compile a list of rules concerning each feature of academic writing, having discovered them by themselves:

**Are the following statements about each feature of academic writing True (T) or False (F)? Why? Correct the false ones.**

*E.g. You should always use the first person (pronouns 'I' and 'we'). – False. You should avoid using the first person, unless it is required.*

### Objectivity

1. You should always use the first person (pronouns 'I' and 'we'). (F)

2. You should place the main emphasis on the information. (T)

3. You should emphasize your personal opinion as much as you can. (F)

4. You should base your position on evaluation of the evidence. (T)

### Complexity:

1. Shorter words are preferable to longer words (e.g. 'make' is better than 'produce/manufacture'). (F)

2. You should use more varied vocabulary. (T)

3. You should make use of more noun-based phrases (E.g. 'There has been a decline in numbers of...' instead of 'The numbers fell'). (T)

4. You should avoid using subordinate clauses. (F)

5. You should avoid using passive structures (e.g. 'They grow oranges in Spain' is better than 'Oranges are grown in Spain'). (F)

### Formality:

1. You should avoid colloquial language (e.g. *kid*, *buddy*, *grab a bite*). (T)

2. You should use more idioms (e.g. *dig your own grave*) and proverbs (e.g. *Put your money where your mouth is*). (F)

3. You should avoid slang (e.g. *wanna, cool, fab*). (T)

4. You should use one-word verbs (e.g. *educate*) rather than phrasal verbs (e.g. *bring up*). (T)

5. You should try to contract all auxiliary verbs (e.g. *don't, should've, there's*). (F)

#### **Responsibility:**

1. You should justify your position and provide evidence for the claims you make. (T)

2. You should demonstrate your understanding of the source material. (T)

3. You should cite the sources you use properly. (T)

**Discuss the corrected statements with the class. These are 'rules' that will help you write well in Academic English. Can you explain WHY it is a good idea to follow them?**

To provide further practice of the four features of academic writing, learners rewrite the sentences, making them more academic, improving on each feature. Multiple variants may be suggested by the students, which may lead to peer discussion with the aim of choosing the best variants.

**Rewrite the sentences, improving them on the features of academic writing:**

#### **Objectivity**

1. I will describe the reasons for this in my essay. (*The reasons for this will be described in this essay*).

2. You should obey your parents and be respectful of them. (*Young people should obey their parents and be respectful of them*).

3. I believe it's stupid to smoke because it's bad for you. (*It is widely known that smoking is harmful to people's health*).

#### **Complexity:**

1. You can buy this device anywhere (*E.g. This device can be purchased anywhere/ubiquitously*).

2. People have tried and failed many times to teach animals to speak like humans. (*E.g. Many attempts have been made to teach animals to speak in human fashion, to no avail./ Many futile attempts have been made to teach animals to speak in human fashion*).

3. Many people enjoy risky sports. But they can be very dangerous. (*E.g. Although many people find risky sports enjoyable, they might pose a risk to human health*).

#### **Formality:**

1. It's impossible to get rid of this problem by doing this. (*This problem cannot be solved by those measures*).

2. Lots of scientists have brought up this issue. (*This issue has been raised by many scientists*).

3. The future of this invention is up in the air. (*The future of this invention is still unresolved*).

4. The prospects for the business are pretty bad. (*The prospects for the business are fairly/rather pessimistic/ are not very promising*).

#### **Responsibility:**

1. I think smoking in all public places should be forbidden. (*E.g. Smoking in public places poses a significant risk to non-smokers. The health risks of passive smoking are a matter of scientific consensus (Kessler 2006, Samet 2008). According to the Report on the Health Consequences of Involuntary Exposure to Tobacco Smoke (2006), passive smoking may cause disease, disability, and even death. To avoid exposure of non-smokers to second-hand tobacco, it might be justified to forbid smoking in all public places*).

**Compare your improved sentences with a partner. Do you have the same variants?**

Students may further improve their knowledge of the four characteristics, working with an authentic sample essay. Authentic writing often facilitates learning as it allows a student to see the stronger and weaker points in a piece of writing of a fellow learner, which leads to collaborative discussions; afterwards, students can rewrite the piece, correcting the errors, which promotes their own writing. Conversely, we have found that employing model essays tends to discourage and demotivate learners because they feel they cannot produce a piece of the same quality; because nothing can conceivably be changed or improved in the model, students become passive copiers at best.

Students are to read a sample essay that has certain sentences highlighted in different colours. These are sentences lacking in one of the features of academic language: objectivity (green), complexity (purple), responsibility (yellow), formality (red), accuracy (vocabulary) (blue), accuracy (grammar) (grey). For the sake of readability, these sentences are italicised in the sample below, with colour marked in brackets:

**Read a students' essay the essay, paying attention to the highlighted sentences. Can you guess why they are highlighted?**

*Every society needs rules (purple). Rules are necessary because they help to bring order to the society. They help us to keep peace and live together (purple). In this essay I will discuss rules of my university (green).*

Every university has rules which must be followed, of course not all the rules are followed by students, but forgetting about them may bring bad consequences.

I am a student at MGIMO University. One important rule at my university concerns clothes. Students and teachers should *wear properly (blue)*, no shorts and other beachwear. Almost everyone in MGIMO university wears classic suits. *Leave your outerwear at the cloakroom (green)*. Now I want to discuss why this rule exists. When we come in room from outdoors our jackets and coats accumulate dirt and this dirt turn into dust. *According scientists' researches, one in three Russians suffer from dust (have allergy)*. *In the near future one in two people in Russia will have allergy to dust (yellow)*. 30% of Russians suffer from asthma, it is much more than in USA or Europe. Besides, in winter and autumn our outerwear can be wet and spoil furniture. Moreover, wearing outerwear in room breaks etiquette. Every well-mannered person should know this rule. Finally, it is not convenient to wear jackets and coats inside.

Some other rules concern student's behavior. You shouldn't be late for classes and disturb your colleagues during the lesson. *Don't forget about other students, you mustn't scream, run and distract others (green)*. Attendance is also one of the most important things, afterwards, *your absence (green)* will cause *lots of problems (red)*. Drinking alcohol and smoking is not allowed inside the university. Any outpouring of aggression is prohibited and can lead to *deduction (blue)*. It is not allowed to speak anything that can offend other nationalities and religions *and so on (red)*. This rule appeared because there are people from different countries and representatives of various nations and religions, and all students must be peaceful to each other.

In conclusion I want to say that rules help to keep order and without them our *society become anarchic (grey)*. These are some rules which will help you to settle down in our university and avoid having problems.

First, students match each colour with a feature that can be improved upon in the highlighted sentence: Objectivity (green), Complexity (purple), Responsibility (yellow), Formality (red), Accuracy (vocabulary) (blue), Accuracy (grammar) (grey). Then, students are to find more examples of sentences that need improvements on those features in the essay and highlight them in the text (highlighter markers in the same colours are to be provided; alternatively, this can be done as a whole-class activity, using the Interactive Whiteboard, with a highlighter tool). After discussing their findings as a class, learners improve upon the highlighted sentences and compare their variants.

As a follow-up activity, students get the assignment to write an essay on the same topic, paying special attention to the features of academic writing discussed in class, which allows them to recycle all the information learned in class.

The activities described in this article have been used in the course of EAP at Year 1 of Faculty of International

Business and Administration. After raising awareness of the distinctive features of academic writing, the teachers have given focussed feedback on distinctive features of academic writing. As a result, students improve their academic writing skills and consistently implement knowledge of those features in their writing.

#### Conclusion

Consciousness-raising of distinctive characteristics of academic writing involving conducting mini-analyses of writing samples has proved to be an effective method. By using an inductive approach, a teacher avoids 'lecturing' and providing students with information on the features of academic writing; thus, they are guided to understand the differences between academic and non-academic language themselves, which makes learning more meaningful and memorable.

#### Конфликт интересов

Не указан.

#### Conflict of Interest

None declared.

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