

ON WRITING ACADEMIC PROJECTS

The article reports the results of a study on the effects of implementing a new approach to instructing university level students (under- and post graduates) to write academic projects and project proposals. The authors highlight the issue of effective academic writing and share their experience in working on a course for learners interested in acquiring professional English language competencies. The approach offered is based on analyzing pattern phrases typical of English academic writing and using recurring sequences to perform different discourse functions while reviewing literature, reporting on methodology etc.; it also provides guidance for students on structuring their works. Finally, the benefits of implementing the new approach in teaching practice are discussed.

Key words: *academic writing, academic projects, competence in EAP, recurring sequences.*

The present article describes the experimental study conducted at National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) and highlights the efficacy of the new approach aimed at handling difficulties faced by NNSs while writing in English. Nowadays the growing need to prepare learners for written communication outside their own cultural boundaries has become challenging – both for language teachers and their students, raising competence in EAP in an L1 setting being by no means an easy task. The article addresses the issue focusing on different options of teaching university students the essentials of effective academic writing. The ELT department at HSE faced the challenge about 5 years ago when the tasks of writing academic projects and project proposals in English were introduced into the final exam programmes for bachelors and post-graduates. The 4th year students of non-language faculties were to complete a piece of independent research work, *an academic project*¹, and postgraduates working on candidate dissertations were to write a brief outline of what they intended to investigate – *a project proposal* (otherwise known as *project report*). A project (or a proposal) is a (more or less) detailed plan of the research work similar – in a number of aspects – to an *introduction* to a Russian candidate dissertation, the main difference being stricter formal and structural rules.

The task proved quite a trial for students, especially for those whose command of English was insufficient (level B or lower), and also for teachers who were to provide efficient training. The complex of problems to be solved (common for many ELT departments) included the necessity to choose (or create) teaching materials and methods appropriate for the purpose; to squeeze much information into scarce teaching hours; to get feasible results – to name just a few. What was to a certain extent unique was the way to handle those difficulties.

Thus, the ultimate goal was to develop an approach comprising both conventional features and innovative elements to provide a reliable basis for training Russian students engaged in writing academic projects and project proposals. Seen in their relation to the general purpose, a number of specific objectives confined to the following: to lay foundations for building up students' academic vocabulary; to select types of activities aimed at developing competence in EAP; to supply criteria for assessing the results (written projects and proposals) – to name just a few. The results obtained during the past 5 years (2008 – 2012) are the basis of our experimental study and some insights seem to be useful for NNSs of English involved in similar tasks.

Initially, all participants were 4th year students in the faculty of sociology. They thus shared basic demographic characteristics, such as L1, age, and field of study. A total of 96 students in four groups were taught by two instructors. In addition a follow-up study was conducted a year later and included 400 students of some other non-language departments (management, psychology, history, electronics and cybernetics). Finally, it was extended to post-graduates (about 100) of the same departments. Students' language level varied from *pre intermediate to intermediate*, while the majority of post-graduates were *false beginners*.

Materials for students consisted of a lexical minimum (about 500 words) and pattern phrases characteristic of academic discourse. Initially, the data were extracted from dictionaries and online resources, using a frequency-based approach for determining phraseology and formulaic sequences. Lexical items were further verified by analysing their use in recent academic publications. Baseline data were collected during 5 years of the study; every participant submitted 10 articles by native English-speaking writers s/he had read while working on an academic project which roughly amounted to 5 000 authentic texts (10 000 symbols each). The articles selected were both review and research articles published in leading international journals. Since the term 'native' is rather problematic, writers' affiliation was used as a guide, along with the fact that international journals commonly accept the works that conform to the rhetorical traditions of the English-speaking academic community.

The corpus obtained was the basis for updating and specifying the data under consideration, especially the recurrent sequences. The lexical items selected refer to the sphere of EAP, terminology being beyond the scope of language teachers' investigation. The use of particular terms pertaining to different areas of learners' specialisation was the prime concern of their research advisers. Thus, students were to learn the essentials of the academic writing style and demonstrate the ability to organise their project proposals along the internationally accepted lines.

¹ Various other terms such as *extended essay, long essay, dissertation* etc. are also found in literature on the subject.

Traditionally, academic writing skills acquisition is based on studying quite a number of lexical units which are to make the bulk of active vocabulary. Like many teachers who share the emphasis on the lexical aspect we tried to provide students with a reliable EAP basis, and then gradually added the necessary terminological framework. At the beginning of the course (64 hours) students were given two lists of about 500 or more words in English and in Russian to start working on their own lexical minimum (the task involved the knowledge of lexical combinability and synonymy). On completion of the course, by matching words from the lists (and adding other lexical units – if necessary) they produced two concise versions (English – Russian and Russian – English) of a mini EAP vocabulary ‘tailored’ to meet their particular needs.

Another important aspect of enlarging students’ vocabulary and developing writing skills was connected with academic style peculiarities. There are different ways of addressing the issue [1; 2; 3; 4; 5], one of the most popular with our European and American colleagues being phrasebanks [6] which offer a great variety of multi-word units to choose from, or (if necessary) to memorise and reuse in certain contexts. However, online resources, helpful though they are, seem to target competent language users who can make their choice conscious. As for low level students who tend to randomly choose from those phrasebanks expressions most appealing to them and seemingly appropriate for the tasks set, the efficacy of the procedure could be challenged in terms of teachability. To properly develop writing skills it is expedient to find a more reliable instructional method.

The method under study rests on the thematic classification of recurrent sequences correlating with a particular task of academic project writing (see App. 1). Each thematic unit is subdivided into four blocks with respect to a relevant discourse function, e.g. connected with *summarising the content*, and within blocks lexical items are grouped according to the structural elements that could be used interchangeably. A fragment from Academic phrasebank rearranged below can serve as an illustration.

Table 1

The Academic phrasebank version	The rearranged version	
<i>This paper has given an account of and the reasons for the widespread use of X ...</i>	<i>This paper/ essay / assignment / dissertation</i>	<i>has given an account of / the reasons for.../ argued that .../ explained.../ investigated...</i>
<i>This essay has argued that X is the best instrument to...</i>		
<i>This assignment has explained the central importance of...</i>		
<i>This dissertation has investigated</i>		

Students can be invited to add other synonyms (also from their wordlists), to discuss the possibility of replacing lexical items by similar ones, and to finish their phrases. The method is based on the sentence structure analysis which facilitates identifying patterns common for different parts of academic projects / proposals since the functional categorisation adopted correlates with a particular task in the process of writing *introduction, main body and conclusion*. Compact blocks of pattern phrases² thus obtained and presented in a convenient tabular form are easier to work with since the search could be reduced considerably and instead of choosing from a long list (at times approaching 100 phrases) offered in a corresponding section of Academic Phrasebank students need to ‘process’ about 10 times less amount of information; four or five blocks per a project unit proves suffice to cope with the task like writing a conclusion. Moreover, the procedure helps students to grasp different sentence structures and synonymous expressions used to perform similar functions. Thus the approach described could be rendered more flexible and teachable. Moreover, it adds several elements, namely the classification of recurrent sequences with respect to particular functions of writing academic projects and the analysis of sentence structures.

To illustrate those features the sets of recurrent sequences correlating with actual lines of the project preparation were discussed and practiced. The classification though to a certain extent arbitrary was rather flexible. The following examples referring to the work on writing literature reviews can illustrate the approach offered.

Task 1. Supply a clustering idea (in Russian) summarising the essence of the pattern phrases grouped in each block; it might amount to an unfinished sentence. Write them out on a separate sheet of paper so that finally you’ll have a complete list ordered in a logical sequence – to facilitate further practice [7, p.19-20].

1. _____

<i>For a long time / In the history of ... the research on...</i>	<i>was concerned with / linked to / tied up with / clearly related to...</i>
	<i>has often served as stimulus / object / illustration of... ideas</i>
	<i>Involved / included / addressed the question / comprised essentially the problem / issue / (so many other) characteristics of [z]</i>

2. _____

<i>Studies on [x] / [x] / Recent investigations / N’s research</i>	<i>developed in part as.../ appeared in academic arguments/ root in the most elementary fundamentals of [y]</i>
	<i>put forward new definitions / made (a similar) point / a strong case for.../ gave critical tools for... / rise to the critical literature on.../ ably criticised (the premises of ...) / critically reviewed... in the light of the data collected by R / in [x] and related works</i>

² Further this term along with *recurrent sequences* will be used to define word combinations frequently employed in academic discourse.

	<i>are /is a relatively new feature /virtually unknown today / are/is gaining ground/the privilege and status /command(s) wide support among../ challenge(s) /question(s) / has/ve called into question (the widespread belief)...</i>
	<i>were/was highly suggestive / promising/ fruitful</i>
<i>The idea/ view(point) /theory / (traditional) approach to [x]</i>	<i>has a widespread appeal (within a scientific context)/ rests on n basic ideas /fits into contemporary speculations / finds/receives/commands wide/strong support /has gained a number of followers/ has undergone a profound shift in.../root and branch transformation</i>

3. _____

<i>(Although) It / The issue / article/ Subject / question</i>	<i>can be found</i>	<i>in numerous (publications).... / not only in [x] but in [z] as well</i>	
	<i>has been</i>	<i>dealt with / analysed and discussed / at the heart of numerous discussions / hotly debated time and again</i>	<i>by the leading scholars / renowned scientists (of the past) / theoretically inclined (readers)</i>
		<i>under increasing scrutiny / incessant attacks</i>	<i>(in the works of a number) of chief theorists / authors of...</i>
	<i>Inspired / couched</i>	<i>a great deal of (intense / public / animated) debate</i>	<i>among professionals not only in [x] but in [z] as well</i>

4. _____

<i>However, the problem [x] / this factor / element / type of questions / the potential application / role / value of [x]</i>	<i>has not yet / so far</i>	<i>received all the attention it deserves / scientific support in the literature / been subjected to conscious scrutiny / carefully investigated</i>	
	<i>has / needs to be</i>	<i>further analysed in terms of [z] / investigated in greater detail / solved / answered on the basis of the [z] analysis / a scientific conclusion</i>	
	<i>Deserves / requires / needs</i>	<i>closer examination / a lot of further investigation / joint and complementary efforts of different scholars / to be encountered from (still) another perspective</i>	
	<i>tends to be remains</i>	<i>rejected / dismissed / overlooked / effaced / little discussed in the literature still uncertain / open / unsolved / questionable from the point of view of...</i>	
<i>Our knowledge / understanding of [x]</i>	<i>is</i>	<i>quite limited / far from being / not yet comprehensive / powerless to provide answers to certain questions (since it depends / is based on [z])</i>	

The task of supplying a clustering idea in Russian proved rather helpful; instead of word for word translating each pattern phrase in a block students focused on the broader content trying to convey the essence of the message to be conveyed. Since the method walked students step-by-step through the conventional stages of the research process they could make a detailed plan for each stage of the project work relying on those 'block headlines'. Their task was to pick out recurrent sequences they thought appropriate, add the necessary terms to complete the phrases, organise them logically and make the final product coherent. That proved suffice for low level students whose primary goal was to abandon the habit of seeking out English equivalents to common Russian expressions. As a rule, they gradually came to realise that the very choice of pattern phrases is determined by a certain logical organisation relying on culture specific ways of reasoning and structuring. Of course, upper level students, more competent and creative, were invited to introduce greater variety and detail within the frames set.

The course in general was organised with respect to the skills to be developed. Different tasks pertaining to vocabulary work aimed at developing language awareness were introduced along with extension activities for consolidation and further practice; they were largely based on rendering and independent writing, analysing and evaluating examples of their fellow students' academic projects.

The experimental course approbation has undergone 3 stages. The first piloting project launched in 2008 targeted 96 sociology students 90% of whose written works appeared to meet the necessary requirements. However, external experts from London School of Economics attending the final exam pointed to two main drawbacks, namely to a certain structural imbalance of the academic projects (so characteristic of the Russian academic style) and the lack of rigorously formalised assessment criteria.

Thus, before embarking on the next stage (2009 – 2010) the necessary changes based on experts' recommendations were introduced. Making students aware of the existing requirements with respect to the composition of projects proved one of the most obvious and possibly easiest tasks. Having grasped those peculiarities, students soon mastered the accepted norms of logical organisation, proper paragraphing, the use of discourse markers and the like. Special efforts were taken to explain existing cross-cultural differences between English and Russian academic discourse. The task of instructing students to be tentative while expressing criticism proved to be most time consuming because straightforwardness is very typical of the Russian communicative style.

The other issue concerning assessment resulted in creating a list of criteria based on British and American sources and adapted to the needs of the Russian audience (see App. 2). At the examinations 95% of 400 students' works were assessed positively and approved by another external expert invited by HSE authorities from Manchester; some variants of those proposals were published (Kuzmenkova, 2010). The new criteria elaborated revealed another essential feature of the approach under study concerning plagiarism. The requirement to use a certain proportion of pattern phrases corresponding to particular discourse function within the frame set banned the option of copying fragments from other authors' works. Moreover, the demand to present electronic versions of the projects for them to be stored in the department's library enabled identification of the cases of plagiarism.

During the third stage (2011 – 2012) the focus was shifted to postgraduates, false beginners being of prime concern. The analysis of their progress during 6 months of tuition (2 hours a week) emphasized the necessity to turn to rendering. Sets of extracts from academic texts were designed for rendering from Russian into English; to simplify the task of finding appropriate equivalents (without turning to word for word translation) learners were advised to consider the corresponding blocks of recurrent sequences. As a result, they could get a detailed plan to rely on while writing a proposal as those extracts were thematically organised and illustrated the actual use of the pattern phrases already discussed.

The proposals completed by the group of 10 false beginners majoring in electronics surpassed our expectations. After the tedious process of redrafting, their works (performed within a limited two page format) contained a good proportion of the lexical material considered and revealed logic and coherence. For the first encounter with academic writing it was a 100% success; all participants demonstrated visible efforts to start thinking in English and use the language appropriate for the purpose.

Thus, it can be assumed that five years of implementing the approach under study demonstrated its positive effects especially on pre-intermediate (and lower level) students training.

In conclusion, it should be mentioned that the number of students who need competence in EAP to become fully-fledged members of the academic community is now increasing dramatically. For them fluency in the norms of writing acceptable by the English academic culture is a prerequisite. Helping these students not only to develop academic writing skills but also to adapt themselves with the above norms is a challenging task to be pondered by language teachers. The results of the study formed the basis for the course for learners interested in acquiring professional English language competencies. It provides a framework for reporting on original scientific research that has been lacking in the Russian academy. The step-by-step method employed walks students through the conventional research process aiding them to be adequately understood in English. It appears that the issues discussed can help to teach students make their academic papers acceptable for publication in the international format.

Appendix 1. The classification of recurrent sequences

1. The literature review: positive comments.
2. The literature review: the theoretical and empirical parts.
3. The literature review: critical evaluation.
4. Methodology.
5. The results anticipated.
6. Introduction: the background of the study.
7. Introduction: the problem statement and scope of the study.
8. Introduction: the professional significance of the study.
9. Conclusions.
10. Abstracts.
11. Dealing with terminology and defining key concepts.
12. Handling arguments and examples.

Appendix 2. Criteria for evaluating written projects

Aspects	points to consider / evidence of:
Organization	logically structured and easy to follow, well-paragraphed, cohesive and coherent (throughout and within the parts)
	well-organized submission, ideas effectively linked together, lines of thought clearly discernible, connection between sections and sub-sections well-reasoned
	parts proportional, no structural elements missing, headings appropriate, references faultlessly presented
Content	appropriate to the purpose and relevant to the subject: clearly focused, relevant to title; length, scope and level of detail appropriate / relevant; supporting material suitable
	adequate subject knowledge, (critical) evaluation of ideas and awareness of complexness of the topic, results specified
	argumentation effective, clear and logically expressed (arguments well-presented and developed, supported and relevant, conclusions following from premises)
Language	the effective use of an adequate range of grammatical structures, errors do not impede communication, complex ideas clearly expressed
	control of vocabulary and stylistic awareness (appropriate academic style, with good grasp of hedging etc.; a wide range of connectors used to link ideas at paragraph and sentence level)
	the adequate range of terms and common clichéd expressions corresponding to a particular section
Academic writing skills' acquisition: the initial variant and final products	certainty in / focus on independent work and ability or willingness to follow directions in academic writing skills' acquisition
	the level of the drafting techniques and academic writing skills mastered
	clarity of thought, accuracy and logic in expression

Overall	clarity of message (conveyed with / without difficulty)
	achievement of objectives
	the desired effect on the target audience (reader should be able to easily apprehending the general line of the argument)

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ПРО НАПИСАННЯ АКАДЕМІЧНОГО ПРОЕКТУ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЮ МОВОЮ

В статті йдеться про результати впровадження нового підходу до навчання старшокурсників та аспірантів написання наукових проектів англійською мовою. Пропонований підхід, що базується на аналізі типових для академічного письма мовленнєвих зворотів, які виконують різноманітні дискурсивні функції у процесі огляду літератури, опису методології дослідження тощо, сприяє ефективному формуванню навичок професійного письмового спілкування.

Ключові слова: академічне письмо, науковий проект, частотні мовленнєві звороти, навички академічного письма.

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О НАПИСАНИИ НАУЧНЫХ ПРОЕКТОВ НА АНГЛИЙСКОМ ЯЗЫКЕ

В статье рассматриваются возможности обращения к новому подходу в обучении старшекурсников и аспирантов писать научные проекты на английском языке. Предлагаемый подход, основанный на использовании характерных для стиля современного англоязычного научного письма речевых оборотов, выполняющих различные дискурсивные функции при обзоре литературы, описании методологии исследования и т.п., способствует эффективному развитию навыков профессионального письменного общения.

Ключевые слова: научное письмо, научные проекты, частотные речевые обороты, навыки академического письма.

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