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Challenges of Teaching Academic Writing Skills in ESL Classroom (Based on International Teaching Experience)

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Abstract: The painstaking effort to teach academic writing skills to EFL/L2 students is rewarding when learners are aware of the need to improve their English language skills and gain the mastery of key academic genres required both for their academic and professional life. The majority of Western communities/employers first evaluate novice specialists by their writing ability: CVs, statement of purpose, personal statement, cover letter, etc. This article draws a modest comparative analysis of approaches to teaching academic writing skills in European universities (Ukrainian and Slovak) based on personal experience; it makes an attempt to engrasp key principles of teaching some challenging aspects of academic writing skills in European university classroom, highlights most common students' mistakes, and ways of avoiding them. The purpose of this study has been to identify the most challenging writing aspects for L2 learners, mainly a range of Ukrainian and Slovak EFL students. To do so, the most frequent errors of the students' essays were collected and analysed based on language study discrepancies, which affect L2 learners' acquisition of literacy of the target language. The most palpable gaps appear in register and punctuation fields of the students' knowledge, which implies an application of powerful tools to deal with these errors.

Keywords: *Academic writing; L2 writer; register, EFL classroom; punctuation.*

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1. Introduction

1.1. The scope

In 2012-2013, as a Fulbright fellow from Ukraine, I was selected to conduct research in Academic Writing at Monterey Institute of International Studies (MIIS) in Monterey, CA, USA. That was a great chance to break the stereotypes about both teaching and acquiring academic writing skills in Ukraine and the USA. One of the most seemingly impossible ideas was realized into life: among other important courses such as Rhetoric and Genre Analysis, Academic and Policy Writing, Business Writing and Teaching of Writing, we were able to study Presentation and Writing skills as a wholesome separate course.

Belonging to L2 writer (the one who learned to write in a second/additional language), I had to take the above-mentioned courses along with other L1 (native learners) and L2 learners and comprehend major curricula discrepancies, which set up the effectiveness with which L1 and L2 started and followed the courses. Fortunately, US professors are far-sighted enough and always study the audience ahead to adjust their curricula to the students whom they teach, because instructional strategy for one student might be off-putting and ineffective for another one. Teachers must consequently "consider a variety of approaches, their underlying assumptions, and the practices that each philosophy generates" (Raimes, 1991, p. 412). Another functional approach applied lies in a healthy combination of theory and practice in class. Grabe and Kaplan (1996) cautioned that "one does not simply 'apply' a theory and thereby produce a means of instruction" (p. 235). A simple theory-practice distinction is not a productive way to think in L2 writing and teaching. Instead, it is the speculative and thoughtful nature of theory combined with practice - and the lively and necessary dialogue between them - that gives them an invaluable place in helping teachers and researchers do what they do.

Surprisingly, teaching writing to L2 students is a relatively new discipline in American academic practices, but rapidly developing one. At the end of the 20th century, Cumming and Riazi (2000) remarked that this discipline still lacked a common apprehension how learners acquire writing skills in their second language. However, considerable progress has been made toward constructing a rigorous research agenda (Leki, Cumming, & Silva, 2008).

Yet another thing that shattered my Eastern European vision in today's US classroom was the fact that despite the focus of major syllabus

(either it is Non-proliferation or Translation Studies), a student SHOULD take up one of writing courses beside rhetoric or presentation skills. This proves that a contemporary educational world tends to prepare strong specialists who will also be able to negotiate their ideas to the public. Presentations, debates, panel discussions and various types of public occasions compose a usual EFL classroom environment in the American university. This valuable experience inspired me to introduce a new course on academic writing skills at my home Ukrainian university, publish a special workbook for EFL learners and keep on doing my research in this field based on American, Ukrainian and Slovak university experience. All acquired expertise sheds more light on the current situation in European classroom on academic writing and gives a chance to inspect regularities and hence build up proper curricula and syllabi for a long neglected academic discipline in European educational establishments.

Worth to mention that Slovak and Ukrainian educational systems are similar as they apply very homogeneous methods and approaches to curriculum development which are a way different from those in the US classroom. Overall, teaching academic writing principles in EFL classroom environment in Ukrainian and Slovak universities is both challenging (being new) and fun experience. The interference of the mother tongue often hinders EFL students on the way of mastering this technical skill.

One more missing reality in Eastern European universities is so called *support services* affiliated at most American colleges and universities. They exist for those who need extra help with writing or with other coursework. These include writing centers, learning skills centers, and other types of tutoring or advising services. In some contexts, writing and academic support centers employ consultants with specialized training in working with L2 writers, but in others, consultants often feel unprepared to work with the diverse needs of multilingual students (Ferris, 2009).

Hence, teaching academic writing in Eastern and Central European EFL classroom today goes on a very narrow scope as it is not often a part of a university curriculum even. Thus, a possibility of introduction of writing courses for EFL students might become a real rescue. There is a big hope that European universities will introduce writing into general syllabus irrespective of the major study focus or program as all engineers, pilots, IT workers as well as doctors and other professionals must have a certain background of acadmic writing principles at least in one foreign language today to stay competetite on the world's business arena.

1.2. Literature review and aim

A common scholarly opinion is that improving literacy in any language requires learning not just its calligraphy but also the social practices and cognitive functions necessary to decode and produce written texts (Barton, Ivanič, Appleby, Hodge, & Tusting, 2007; Cook & Bassetti, 2005). To learn writing system requires undergoing socially mediated processes including formal instruction (usually in school), sustained observation, imitation, and practice – an effortful process that can take many years.

Prior knowledge about various textual aspects: genres, purposes, rhetorical patterns of academic, professional and online discourses plays a key role in distinguishing learners in a composition classroom. This prior knowledge makes up learners' schematic knowledge. Schema, a "script" or "frame" consisting of a mental framework that organizes prior knowledge, refers to an individual's knowledge about a topic, text, or experience. According to schema theory, a person's expectations and assumptions about a text or speech event are "externally constructed and impose external constraints on the ways in which we understand messages". Successful apprehension of texts can depend on schemata (the plural form of schema), "which help us make sense of new facts, text types, formal patterns, and practices" (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009, p. 26).

Schematic knowledge is classified into a few subcategories, among them a *content schemata*, an individual's prior knowledge of the ideas expressed in an oral or written text. Content schemata are of key importance for both readers and writers of any language, and they are especially vital for L2 readers and writers, as incomplete content knowledge can sometimes cause serious comprehension gaps when students encounter unfamiliar texts (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009). *Cultural schemata,* another name is abstract schemata, consists of knowledge about culture-specific practices, identities, beliefs, traditions, relationships, and values. A third category, *formal schemata*, implies what individuals know about how texts and speech events are constructed (their rhetorical structure, for instance). The next category, *linguistic schemata*, includes knowledge of the morphosyntactic properties and lexical choices associated with particular genres and speech events.

Investigations of the influences of schematic knowledge on language learning reveal that extensive and efficient schematic knowledge facilitates text comprehension and literacy skills more broadly. A schema theory implies that teachers should follow logical series of acts to be sure that learners detect educational materials of a course accessible from cognitive and developmental viewpoints (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009).

While teaching L2 learners effective writing techniques, FL instructors must not underevaluate the following aspects:

1) Language and culture: it is essential to prior analyse cross-linguistic differences that may have an impact on students' writing as well as understand cultural norms that can affect students' responses to texts, tasks, topics, and instructional approaches;

2) L 2 status and resources: L2 can be taught in English or any other language, however, anglomania is a recent phenomenon worldwide. Children start learning English from an early age as the language of opportunities. Besides, 13 resources in English (or another L2) are readily available in many settings outside of school, such as television programs, movies, books, magazines, newspapers, and Internet-based materials;

3) Approaches to writing: Composition or writing the way it is taught in the USA is often different from that in international/foreign/outside US academic settings. Thus, it is L2 teachers responsibility to investigate how writing is approached in FL contexts;

4) External expectations: in some locations, government ministries control educational curricula and may include level-based examinations. Thus, young people travel worldwide with the purpose to advance their English language proficiency.

Indeed, writing represents a profoundly influential technological innovation that serves modern cultures in easily overlooked ways: Writing "increases human control of communication and knowledge" (Birch, 2007, p. 15). Hence, developing literacy in any language requires learning not just its orthography but also the social practices and cognitive functions required to decode and produce written texts (Barton, et al., 2007; Cook & Bassetti, 2005). Writing systems must be learned through socially mediated processes, such as formal instruction (usually in school), sustained observation, imitation, and practice - an effortful process that can take many years.

Hence, observing English academic writing class in the US /vs. Slovak or Ukrainian one, it is worth mentioning that a primary feature distinguishing novice L2 writers from developing L1 writers lies in the prior experience (which makes up learners' schematic knowledge) that they bring to the composition classroom.

Being non-native speakers of English, both Ukrainian and Slovak learners lack fundamentals while applying writing skills in academic or professional spheres of life. The culture of writing always yields to the culture of reading or speaking in a classroom (Metruk, 2018a). This creates certain lacuna and consequently makes learners apply prior knowledge of

their language to the patterns of the English language. Certain interference brings linguistic and cultural confusion.

2. Method

2.1. Participant characteristics

The participants of the present study were 50 Bachelor degree university students majoring at the English Language both at Ukrainian (Kirovohrad State Pedagogical university) and a Slovak one (the university of Zilina). All the participants speak English as a foreign language, having Ukrainian or Slovak as the mother tongue. The participants were supposed to have relatively high language proficiency (B2 and C1 level) as they study English on extended program aiming at future teachers.

Data for this study were collected by means of writing an expository essay, which is meant to present a balanced analysis of a topic. In an expository essay, the writer tends to explain or define a topic, applying facts, statistics, and examples.

Data collection and analysis procedure

Data collection lasted for two last weeks of the summer semester at two different universities within Academic Writing curriculum of the English language departments. The essay was meant to be the finalizing product, which had to reflect all the academic writing skills students were supposed to acquire during the semester. Thus, much effort was put into the preparation during the semester classes (studying of writing process, its major principles, academically specialized terms, crafting sentences, and depths of punctuation).

The data collection procedure was carried on during the regular class hours and the participants were informed about it in advance. The essay covered 30% of the L2 learners' wholesome success. The data analysis procedure included the descriptive statistics, correlations, error analyses and treatment. The descriptive analysis revealed the mean scores, standard deviations, maximum and minimum scores achieved in each test. However, the major purpose of our study was to collect "chronic errors" of L2 writers in both Ukrainian and Slovak EFL classroom and find holistic approach to their eradication. The author of the article presumed at the start of the research that L 2 learners will make similar mistakes due to the interference of common characteristics of the Slavic languages (Ukrainian and Slovak) as mother tongues of the participants of the study group.

3. Results

Hence, a critical review of 50 essays proved the above-mentioned hypothesis: both Ukrainian and Slovak students were apt to make similar mistakes in their essays due to the lexical and syntactical divergences between English, Ukrainian and Slovak. A scrupulous language and grammar analysis of the students' essays helped us arrive at the following decisions:

One of the most challenging academic writing issues for L2 learners is certainly punctuation. Intense practice of academic writing with senior students of European EFL department revealed a number of typical errors, which can be eliminated by focusing students' attention on the divergences of the native and target languages (Hundarenko, 2013).

Another most provocative writing standpoint is academic register, which often implies not pure linguistic knowledge but rather strong awareness of a current political, social and cultural situation of the localities where the language exists and develops. With cultural shifts, the language mirrors all the changes. To be politically correct today means to be tolerant and polite in language use trying to avoid any negative connotations in oral or written discourse. Let us analyse the most evident instances of L2 writers' gaps in academic writing today.

3.1. Punctuation as the greatest challenge for L2 writer

The purpose of punctuation is to make clear the meaning of sentences and texts. This is achieved by controlling the shape of sentences through the use of periods, commas, semicolons, and so on, thereby breaking up texts into manageable pieces. Punctuation enables important phrases to be emphasized and connections to be made between clauses and sentences so that they combine to form an intelligible narrative. Punctuation in writing plays the role that is fulfilled in spoken English by pauses and changes in intonation. As such punctuation is as essential as grammar and vocabulary. A proper understanding of punctuation is important because inadequate or incorrect punctuation can result in ambiguity and misunderstanding.

Below is the analysis of the most neglected rules of punctuation in both Ukrainian and Slovak university classrooms which are mainly the result of language interference issues or of cultural differences in L2 perception of writing pieces. Based on our personal observations, L2 writers tend to overlook:

1. Commas after introductory a) clauses, b) phrases, or c) words that come before the main clause., but not OTHERWISE, e.g.:

To study well, you must complete all the assignments in time.

Avoiding a comma after the main clause when a dependent (subordinate) clause follows it (except for cases of extreme contrast).

When the success comes, one might feel elated. (BUT: One might feel elated when the success comes).

After our conversation, he rushed to a backyard and disappeared. (BUT: He rushed to a backyard and disappeared after our conversation).

Using commas to set off essential elements of the sentence, such as clauses beginning with *that* (relative clauses) (Note the difference with Ukrainian counterpart –щоб and Slovak counterpart – že, aby, where it is a common rule for a comma usage). *That* clauses after nouns are always essential (Leláková, 2019). **That** clauses following a verb expressing mental action are always essential (see Purdue Online Writing Lab), e.g.:

She heard that she would have to propose another strategy the following day. (Compare: Ukrainian: Вона чула, що їй доведеться запропонувати іншу стратегію наступного дня; Slovak: Počula, že bude musieť navrhnúť ďalšiu stratégiu nasledujúci deň); It is likely that the whole operation will be procrastinated. (Ukrainian: Схоже, що вся операція буде відкладена; Slovak: Je pravdepodobné, že celá operácia bude prerušená.).

Commas before the adverbs *also, as well, too* or *yet* at the end of the sentence: *Roberto Dumas came to an event, too. He has not encountered these difficulties, yet.*

2. Commas to separate/divide all geographical names, items in dates (with the exception of the month and day), addresses (except the street number and name), and titles in names.

*July 25, 1961**,** was a momentous day in his life.*

Ukrainian: 25 липня 1961 року було важливим днем у його житті.

Slovak: 25. júla 1961 bol v jeho živote významný deň.

Use a comma to shift between the main discourse and a quotation (mind the difference with Ukrainian punctuation mark in this case). Mind: in Ukrainian and Slovak the position of quotation marks and the punctuation marks preceding them differs from that of English).

John said without emotion, "I'll see you tomorrow."

Compare with Ukrainian:

Джон сказав беземоційно: „Побачимося завтра.”

Slovak: John bez emócií povedal: „ Uvidíme sa zajtra.”

In February 21, 1848*, in his Communist Manifesto, Marx wrote, "Workers of the world, unite!"*
Compare with Ukrainian: У 1848 Маркс у своєму Маніфесті Комуністичної Партії написав: „ Працівники світу, єднайтеся!".
Slovak: V roku 1848 Marx vo svojom Komunistickom Manifeste napísal: „ Pracovníci sveta zjednot'te sa! "

These are a few major instances of punctuation challenges, which might an EFL professional encounter while teaching the fundamentals of academic writing in a Ukrainian and Slovak academic setting. Mostly they are caused by differences of linguistic schemata of L2 writers. The possible treatment can be constant focus of learners on these occasions and thorough choice of practical assignments, which can further develop their implicit memory (Hundarenko, 2013).

3.2. Academic register as another major challenge for L2 writer

The term *academic register* is used to describe the linguistic elements that define a text in its genre. Quite logically, academic writing varies significantly from daily conversation due to the medium of writing as well as the assumptions of the reader.

In writing process, it is very significant to apply language that fits both your audience and purpose. When language is used inappropriately, this can damage your credibility, undermine your argument, or alienate your audience. Academic writing is structured, formal and objective. Its language is often abstract and complex. The following is a short survey of the various aspects of using appropriate language (Hundarenko, 2015, p. 21):

1. Levels of Formality: Writing in a style that matches your audience expectations along with your purpose makes it a successful instrument of communication.

2. In-Group Jargon: Jargon assumes specialized language used by groups of like-minded individuals. Keep off using jargon for a general audience without first explaining it to them.

3. Slang and idiomatic expressions: they shoul be avoided in general academic writing.

4. Deceitful language and Euphemisms: Evade using euphemisms (words that conceal the truth) and other deceitful language (Hundarenko, 2015, p. 21).

5. Biased language: Avoid using any biased language including language with a racial, ethnic, group, or gender bias or language that is stereotypical (Hundarenko, 2015, p. 21).

6. Contractions: Avoid using contracted forms of the words.

7. Colloquial abbreviations and shortened words: Avoid using such words in academic writing, instead use full forms of the words: TV→ television,' cause → because, fridge→ refrigerator.

8. "Run-on" expressions ("and so forth", "etc.").

9. Personal pronouns (*I, we),* especially in more formal papers.

10. Meaningless, vague, simplistic and/or weak words: "very", "really", "pretty much", "sort of", "kind of", " it is interesting to note", "you know", "well", "good", "bad", "thing".

11. Addressing the reader directly, especially in more formal papers: "as you know", "as you can see".

12. Personal pronouns (*I, we),* especially in more formal papers.

Out of the 12 mentioned aspects, one that permanently causes significant difficulties for L2 writers is application of gender-inclusive language/biased language. This is the result of L2 writers prior knowledge (patterned one – which is the reflection of gained skills at school and academia in general) or so-called cultural incompatibility. To be precise, Ukrainian and Slovak have long been gender-neutral languages, the fact that was mainly predetermined by political circumstances and regimes. Sexist language is language demeaning to either sex, particularly words and phrases that mark women as inferior to men or restrict them because of their gender. Ukrainians long used the male-marked vocabulary (no typical ending –а/я a for female sex) such as *доктор (doctor), вчитель (teacher), перукар (hairdresser), інженер(engineer), міліціонер (policeman), кухар (cook), перекладач (translator), director (директор)б etc.* for the groups of professions as if no women were engineers or cooks. Since the 21st century, gender-inclusive language has become a topic of inspirational discussions in Ukraine. To reach the widest possible audience, to attract and persuade readers of different ethnic backgrounds, religious affiliations, physical conditions, or sexual orientation, and to show consideration for people in general, one should use terms respectful of any group. Generally, these are terms that members of groups use to describe themselves.

Groups deserving of respect include not just races, religious organizations, and ethnic minorities but also other minorities such as those commonly called "elderly" or "handicapped". This is ongoing research which requires thorough attention to etymology of Ukrainian/Slovak vocabulary and thus effective approach while teaching gender-inclusive language of this or that culture to L1 (native speakers) and L2 learners.

Most recent linguistic attention in the English-speaking world was drawn to a gender neutral or gender inclusive pronoun, which is a pronoun which does not associate a gender with the individual being discussed. A few

languages, English included, lack a gender neutral or third gender pronoun, which has been criticized, since in many instances, writers, speakers, etc. use "he/his" when referring to a generic individual in the third person (Milwaukee Research Center, 2016). Thus, there has been made an attempt to create gender neutral pronouns in the interest of greater equality.

Table 1 Gender Neutral Pronouns

HE/SHE	HIM/HER	HIS/HER	HIS/HERS	HIMSELF/HERSELF
Zie	Zim	Zir	Zis	zieself
Sie	Sie	Hir	Hirs	hirself
Ey	Em	Eir	Eirs	Eirself
Ve	Ver	Vis	vers	verself
Tey	Ter	Tem	Ters	Terself
E	Em	Eir	Eirs	Emself

Overall, the topic of register and biased language in particular has always been a sensitive one. It is often a challenging task to teach L2 learners unbiased language in English since his/her schemata differs (both cultural and linguistic ones).

Hence, studying politically correct language, one should be very careful with word choice within this or that community determined by cultural, religious and other principles. Incorporating register peculiarities into curriculum, a teacher should try to incorporate many various practical assignments based on register differences and language choice in the situations requiring specific gender-marked or politically correct vocabulary.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study has been to identify the most challenging writing aspects for L2 learners, mainly a range of Ukrainian and Slovak EFL students. To do so, we collected the most frequent errors occurred in the students' essays and tried to make their comparative/contrastive analysis based on language study discrepancies, which affect L2 learners' acquisition of literacy of the target language. The most palpable gaps appear in register and punctuation fields of the students' knowledge, which implies an application of powerful tools to deal with these errors. Apart from usual grammar practices, which are meant to work out mechanical approach for

dealing with any type of error, there exist other important clues for L2 instructor to follow to make the outcome really meaningful.

In his book, the professor of MIIS, CA, John Hedgcock (2009, p.29), the one I owe a lot for comprehensive approach and explicit knowledge shared during the classes of writing, mentioned a few hints for a prospective successful L2 instructor to follow in his or her practice: first, you should reflect on your experiences as a student writer. Then, you should speculate over a few important questions: how would you characterize your prior instruction as an L1 or L2 reader and writer? What theories of writing do you believe motivated the instruction that you underwent? Next, you should analyse how the principles and agendas L1 rhetoric and composition studies, in contrast to linguistics and applied linguistics inform your beliefs and practice as an L2 composition instructor. The next step should include an identification of the major features of the theoretical focus regarding L1 and L2 composition and rhetoric. Hence, the final stage will be the comparison and contrast of these theoretical orientations: what are their common and divergent theoretical, ideological, and practical qualities? How will you describe your own theoretical and pedagogical orientation as a teacher of writing? These stages of reflection might help in identifying efficient approaches and tactics in teaching L2 learners writing skills.

Another considerable obstacle of L2 instructors is error treatment technique. As learners' L2 proficiency increases, they should become more responsible for their writing product. Techniques such as guided writing exercises, identification of error patterns, text analysis, and grammar mini-lessons can help a lot with constructing learners' editing skills (Hedgehock, 2009, p. 16). The aim of this method should be rather a decrease in L2 writers' error frequency than creation of ideal written products. Of utmost importance is for teachers to take into consideration their students' academic backgrounds along with mother tongue peculiarities while planning and choosing class materials as well as assessing the learners' final success.

Notably, an effort of giving feedback on errors is multiplex, involving teacher decisions about what constitutes an "error," which errors to highlight and how, what specific groups and individuals need most (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009, p. 271). Furthermore, teachers should not only pay attention to these "what, how, who, and why" questions, but also make certain that they are fairly ready to provide both assessment as well as relevant instruction for students' writing products (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). Second language acquisition (SLA) research, for instance, demonstrates that adult learners need to have explicit understanding of the errors made in order to further successfully develop their L2 competence

(Doughty & Varela, 1998; Doughty & Williams, 1998). L2 writing studies have made considerable breakthrough in pursuing robust theory and research directed toward developing effective instructional models for a diverse population of L2 writers (Hedgcock, 2009, p.29). We still lack a definitive understanding of optimal methods for enhancing the composing skills of L2 writers (Leki, Cumming, & Silva, 2008).

5. Conclusion

My experience of studying a number of courses in Academic Writing as part of Fulbright program has altered my attitude to this discipline and made me reconsider approaches I previously applied, and hence encouraged me to the following conclusion: Introducing courses in academic writing in EFL curriculum at any European university is a *must* of current reality. If European educators tend to upbring competitive professionals in any field of study, they should start with developing literacy and speaking skills (Metruk, 2017; Metruk, 2018b). Still a cherished dream remains a Writing Centre affiliated at any University. Accomplishing this task, we can think of cultivating the generation of persuasive writers and inspiring public speakers who can not only do substantial research in their areas of science but also make it comprehensible and tolerable within any linguo-cultural community.

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