

METHODOLOGICAL MODEL OF TEACHING ACADEMIC WRITING TO UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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Abstract. Methodological model of teaching academic writing to undergraduate students is presented and explained in this paper which intends to re-emphasize the role of academic writing at the beginning of university studies in Russian universities. The paper suggests an overall methodological framework for developing undergrads' writing skills and competencies and offers some practical suggestions on its implementation. The proposed model of teaching academic writing has been piloted throughout the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course for the 1st year students of the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences at St Petersburg State University and the pilot study outcomes are reported and discussed in this paper. This article is aimed at university faculty who help undergraduates improve their academic writing for further education. The target readership includes EAP and academic writing teachers, academic writing tutors and all those who see pedagogic value in academic writing as a university course.

Keywords: *academic writing, teaching writing, methodology of teaching writing, English for Academic Purposes (EAP), methodological model*

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Introduction

Academic writing often comes into focus of an EAP course since among all the language skills academic writing has proved to be the biggest challenge for both teachers and learners. Academic literacy became a requirement at the beginning of university studies in the US, where such courses are called “freshman composition” or first year writing and are aimed to help students acquire academic literacy, particularly academic writing, and to expose them to some of

the assumptions and practices of the academy. For many of the same reasons, UK universities began to provide courses in academic writing not only to international students but to English-speaking students as well and so did many universities in Central and Eastern Europe [16, 19] and in Asia [17, 20, 29, 30]. Various approaches and techniques have been introduced with the purpose of making the task of teaching academic writing manageable for both teachers and learners [9, 13, 21, 27].

According to some researchers [1, 24, 25] academic writing should become one of the priorities in the era of increasing academic mobility and educational globalization, hence, teaching academic writing in Russian universities should be improved. Schemeleva and Smirnova in their study have confirmed that Russian students do not have sufficient support in academic writing skills development due to the widely shared assumption that “at university level, students’ ability to write is very often viewed as something that naturally develops and does not require any training” [25, p.90]. The existing gap between the demand for academic writing skills and the lack of competent instruction on how to develop them calls for revision of the existing approaches to teaching academic writing and rethinking its overall methodological framework.

Hence, the primary aim of this paper is to suggest a general framework of methodology of teaching academic writing to undergraduate students in a form of a methodological model which is both theory-based and practice-driven. As the primary focus here is teaching academic writing at the beginning of university studies, this paper is aimed primarily at all those working with undergraduate students.

Theoretical framework overview: product, process, genre/model

Throughout the history of teaching writing in a foreign language the pendulum swung from one approach to another, and academic writing textbooks

were published throughout the world incorporating different approaches with a unifying purpose of developing academic writing skills among university students. In this section of the paper the main approaches to teaching writing will be briefly discussed. Academic writing practice varies across regional and institutional contexts. However, there are three most influential approaches to teaching writing that are useful to consider: writing as product (text), writing as process and genre/model-based writing. These approaches have developed over time and in varying educational contexts but to a greater or lesser extent they inform how academic writing should be currently taught to undergraduate students whose first language is not English.

The product approach is one of the traditional approaches that emphasize the outcome of writing. In this approach, teacher-supplied materials are imitated, copied, and transformed by the learner, while writing is viewed as being mostly about linguistic knowledge with the proper use of syntax, words, and the unified strategies [23]. Hence, the primary goal of product approach is an error-free and coherent text [27]. Obvious limitations of this teacher-centered approach are that it does not offer students opportunities to interact, discuss, or receive feedback from the teacher or peers [18]. All the four stages of the product approach - familiarization, controlled writing, guided writing, and free writing – are well described in Steele [26].

Process writing emphasizes essential writing skills and the stages involved in writing, such as planning, drafting, revising, and editing rather than linguistic knowledge [4, 30]. The teacher's role within the process writing paradigm is that of a facilitator who draws out the student's potential. This approach requires linguistic skills rather than linguistic knowledge. Peer review and teacher feedback help students improve their writing [10, 12]. The process approach initially consisted of the four stages: prewriting, composing/drafting, revising, and editing

[4]. However, as the approach was being developed, more stages were added to finally reach the number of thirteen [28, 14, 26]. Although the process approach was supposed to overcome the limitations of the product approach, it was criticized. The main criticisms are that process approach often regards writing as being produced by the same set of processes, that it overlooks the kind of texts writers produce, and finally it may not provide students with sufficient input to carry out the writing tasks successfully [18].

The genre approach to teaching writing was developed to overcome the drawbacks of the process approach and it has some of the features of both product and process approaches, so, “like the product approach, the genre approach regards writing as a linguistic activity, but unlike the product approach, it emphasizes that writing varies with the social context in which it is produced” [4, p.155]. The genre approach emphasizes successful communication while teaching a specific genre [8, 11, 15]. In this approach, Reppen argued that “with the direct instruction of particular text features, students can better understand how to make a piece of writing more effective and appropriate to the communicative purpose.” [22, p.322]. The genre approach pays more attention to the reader and the writer-target readership relationship. According to Badger & White [4], genre approach has three stages of writing. In the first stage a model of a specific genre is examined and explored, the second stage is devoted to text construction through doing exercises and acquiring relevant language forms and, finally, in the third stage, an independent text is constructed as a finalised product. So, the genre-based approach “acknowledge that writing takes place in a social situation, and is a reflection of a particular purpose, and understand that learning can happen consciously through imitation and analysis” [5, p.157]. Since every approach has its critics, Paltridge argues that, firstly, it may be difficult to identify the linguistic input the students need, and secondly, it may be difficult for

non-native teachers to understand fully certain genres [21]. On the contrary, Hyland [15] claims that genre-based approach can provide teachers with a deeper understanding how writing is shaped by individuals making language choices to achieve their purposes. Moreover, deeper understanding of the ways of the language can be used by teachers to analyse texts to reflect on how written language works so that they can provide more targeted support to their students and their ambitions to write academic texts in a foreign language. Dudley-Evans [11] recommends using genre-based approaches to teach academic writing to novices as this approach promotes teaching students to recognize the recursive features of any genres through the analysis of sample texts. The analysis of sample texts provides students with guidance on how to improve their own writing and ultimately promotes their confidence and positive attitude towards writing. The main criticisms are that genre approaches underestimate the skills needed to produce a text and view students as largely passive. This may result in students' ability to produce only the kinds of genres they have dealt with in the classroom but their inability to deal with any unfamiliar texts they may come across outside the classroom on their own.

All three approaches to teaching writing within EFL and EAP - product, process and genre – have their strengths and weaknesses. They have often been regarded as mutually exclusive and there has been an on-going debate between their proponents and opponents. Among the researchers investigating writing there have been those advocating the pedagogic benefits of a particular approach [7, 9, 13, 14, 16]. However, there have also been those attempting not only to compare the product and the process approaches [23], but to facilitate the move from product to process [18] or to combine the two [2]. One can also find thought provoking papers on the comparative analysis of the process and genre approaches [15], on balancing of both approaches [17], on genre as process and

on the combination of the two [8]. There are still diverse, often conflicting views as to the best way to teach writing to students. This paper does not attempt to identify the most efficient approach among the three but rather it attempts to draw on the best of all three.

Teaching Academic Writing to Undergraduate Students in Russian universities: challenges

Most Russian higher education institutions offer EAP courses at the beginning of university studies which is before undergraduates decide what they are going to major in and before they join a particular department to specialize in their further studies and research. For their EAP course undergrads are often grouped according to their language proficiency and not according to their subject specialisation. EAP teachers, therefore, often have a class that is determined by language level with a course aim to prepare them for academic writing in a variety of academic contexts. So, one obvious challenge is to make EAP course relevant for undergrads with varying English proficiency levels and from a wide range of academic disciplines.

In the EFL context, undergraduate students face difficulties primarily with structural aspects such as selection of appropriate vocabulary, use of correct grammar, and creation and development of ideas and thoughts around themes or topics. It is more difficult for students to develop functional language skills; thus, this paper discusses the different approaches to teaching academic writing while addressing their strengths and weaknesses in a theoretical sense as well as based on classroom experience and undergrads' needs. The 1st year students in Russian universities often see their needs as exclusively linguistic, however, they also need to learn how to produce academic texts that will meet the requirements of the scholarly communities into which they intend to enter. This involves not only reaching a sufficient level of linguistic competence in academic English, but

also mastery of the academic writing conventions those communities follow. If students are to produce texts that will satisfy academic standards, they need to develop an understanding of what academic writing involves [1].

Preparing undergraduate students for the challenges of academic writing is not an easy task. One difficulty here is that their schooling provided them with a lot of writing practice, but the focus was usually on the text as a product and not the writing process. Various rhetorical aspects of the texts or the social contexts in which the texts functioned were rarely analysed. The focus instead was on linguistic features of the texts, for example, spelling, text structure, vocabulary, grammar, register and no attention was typically paid to the decisions that writers make to communicate for different purposes and to different audiences. The assumption was that students could pick up how to do academic writing through this process of imitation.

Methodological Model of Teaching Academic Writing

The suggested methodological model of teaching academic writing to undergraduate students is eclectic and uses the pedagogical strengths of all the existing approaches to teaching writing. It is a synthesis of product, process and genre approaches, which should be mutually complementary rather than contradictory. I fully agree with those researchers and educationists who argue that it is not necessary to stick with just one approach all the time. All three approaches discussed earlier have received various criticisms for their limitations. The incorporation of all the three approaches' strengths into the classroom practice can help overcome those limitations and bring far better learning outcomes.

It is important to re-emphasize that the proposed model is viewed as relevant and appropriate for the target learner group of undergrads at the beginning of their university studies. This methodological model is relevant for

teaching undergraduate students. It consists of 10 stages and is presented in the form of a table (fig.1) where linguistic and pedagogic objectives are outlined for each stage. This model is linear in its first five stages, but throughout stages 5 to 9 it can also be cyclical if there is a need for more peer or teacher feedback.

<i>Methodological Model of Teaching Academic Writing to Undergraduate Students</i>		
<i>NN</i>	<i>Stage</i>	<i>Aims and objectives</i>
1	Introduction to academic genre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● to identify the purposes of the academic genre under consideration ● to discuss its role in academic writing ● to acquire genre conventions and requirements ● to identify the suggested structure of a particular academic genre text
2	Model (models) analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● to recognize genre conventions in the provided models ● to identify a thesis statement, a hook and topic sentences in each model ● to make the most of a model as a linguistic resource of appropriate academic writing patterns
3	Task introduction and planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● to establish the communicative purpose and context for each academic writing task ● to set up a word/page limit and submission deadlines ● to work with student expectations ● to explain the marking criteria and the grading policy ● to help students understand a writing prompt ● to facilitate students' choice of the essay focus and/or theme and issue ● to ensure students are aware of the small-scale research and/or search for the supporting evidence to strengthen their academic writing ● to encourage students to be searching for valid and reliable evidence
4	Focused language work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● to search for the relevant and appropriate academic vocabulary (general and topic-specific)

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to revise the relevant and appropriate grammar structures • to expand students' repertoire of cohesive devices and linking phrases to make their writing more coherent
5	1 st draft writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to introduce students to the peer review process • to explain how students can benefit from the peer review process • to highlight the differences between reviewer and reviewee roles • to familiarize students with the ways of responding and peer review strategies (sharing, descriptive, analytic, or reader-based responding) • to identify the most appropriate ways of responding to each other's drafts
6	Peer review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to manage peer review process • to ensure peer positive and constructive feedback • to encourage students' response to peer feedback • to create a learning environment conducive to learning
7	2 nd draft writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to improve the 1st draft in the light of the peer feedback comments • to radically revise the language and the structure • to identify areas for improvement • to avoid plagiarism
8	Teacher feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to provide teacher feedback as developmental stimulus • to offer criterion-based and judgement-based responding
9	Self-editing and self-correction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to ensure that students make the most from teacher feedback to further improve their text • to develop students' skills and abilities to self-correct and self-edit through noticing their own lapses and inaccuracies

10	Academic essay submission	<ul style="list-style-type: none">To assess the progress each student has made working on their 1st draft through to their finalized and polished academic essay
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Figure 1. Methodological Model of Teaching Academic Writing to Undergraduate Students

The proposed model is quite transparent for the university faculty to clearly identify the priority tasks of each stage and instructor's primary role that requires several teacher competencies within each of the stages. And at the same time a few issues have been experientially discovered and the discussion follows.

Pilot Study Results Discussion

This pilot study aimed to ascertain the effectiveness of the proposed methodological model of teaching academic writing to undergraduate students. It was piloted at the St Petersburg State University at the Faculty of Liberal Arts where there is an EAP course offered to 96 1st year students throughout the 2020/2021 academic year. The entry level of English language proficiency typically ranges between B1 through to B2+ CEFR. Academic writing course is supposed to enable undergraduate students to define, to compare and contrast, to summarise, to respond, to define a problem and offer solutions, to build an argument, to exercise their persuasive power, to incorporate other people's ideas avoiding plagiarism, etc. Academic writing is assessed through a portfolio of written assignments and students must demonstrate their ability to produce an essay of each above-mentioned genre. The pilot study included focus groups with faculty, undergraduate students and the student portfolio analysis. Faculty focus groups listed the issues that had been experientially discovered throughout the pilot study and needed to be addressed, some of which are shared here.

The 1st stage went far beyond introducing them to an academic genre but required an introduction to academic writing on a bigger scale. It also involved helping undergraduate students become aware of the differences between their

previous experience of writing and what was expected at the university level. Apparently, academic writing turned out to be a fundamental aspect of students' integration into the academia and there was clearly a need for systemic and planned support for developing undergraduates' academic writing competencies.

The 2nd stage surprisingly involved a lot of academic reading. Undergraduates were encouraged to read academic texts to see how academic prose was constructed in English. Students were expected to find out what good academic writing was from being exposed to academic writing through reading, but this was not at all sufficient for acquiring academic writing skills. So, at later stages they compare model texts with their own writing, read each other's essays, offering constructive criticism, guided by the teacher through checklists and native speaker model texts so that they see how they tackled the task. After this, they write another draft, building on all the reading and follow-up discussion. The new thing to most undergraduate students was that linguistic accuracy was left to the later stages and that they needed to focus on their content and text structure and organisation before focusing on accuracy.

The 3d stage is focused on tasks and writing prompts which should be suitable for the students' future needs, intellectual level, and maturity. Since topics and tasks should also be feasible for everyone in the class, this inevitably leads to a predominance of general topics that can be dealt with in a "pseudo-academic" way but building up to writing in their subject area. This issue could be addressed through implementing a student-centred approach which allows students to choose the theme, the problem and the issue to explore, research and write about.

Unlike teacher feedback stage (stage 8) which was fully up to their expectations, the peer review stage (stage 6) caused tensions and revealed a couple of issues which needed to be addressed. Firstly, there was a clear need to

introduce undergrads to the idea of peer review in a very fundamental way by discussing the reviewer/reviewee roles, kind of feedback [5, 10, 12]. Teachers had to work with students' concerns such as "Who am I to judge?", "I am not competent enough to review other students' essays", "I can't review a friend of mine not to damage the relationship", etc. (quoted from student focus groups). Secondly, undergrads needed to extensively practice various kinds of feedback, such as descriptive, analytic, criteria-based, reader-based response as they are described in Elbow and Belanoff [12]. Due to their insecurity and lack of peer review experience the preferred format of peer review was face-to-face or online pair work which was time intensive but quite efficient.

Student focus groups were aimed at finding out what caused students' tensions and difficulties throughout academic writing course. Interestingly, peer review became central to this discussion and on top of all that has already been discussed above, undergrads shared their disappointment about the lack of responsibility and involvement which manifested itself through some students missing peer review sessions and/or providing "sugar" feedback or "empty" feedback comments ("Your essay looks OK to me", quoted) none of which is helpful.

Interestingly, both faculty and undergraduates were unanimous in identifying self-editing as the biggest challenge and the least developed writing skill to be made a priority with extensive practice. Faculty self-diagnosed the under-developed ability to create writing prompts.

Student portfolio analysis indicated that the methodological model of teaching academic writing to undergraduate students has brought impressive learning outcomes in the form of students scores for the graded essays. The improvements the faculty have seen in their undergrads' academic writing are quite impressive.

Conclusions

Teaching academic writing has reached such an impressive level of maturity internationally that it has become feasible to come up with a generalized methodological model that is grounded in theory and has practical value. The initial hypothesis as to the importance of blending the three approaches has worked throughout the pilot study and have provided sufficient evidence to suggest the proposed methodological model for the consideration of a wider professional community. The positive response of both faculty and undergraduate students focus groups has enthused this paper and further experimental research of the proposed model on a bigger scale.

Introductory teacher development seminars/workshops with a closer look at the proposed methodological model are highly recommended to all the faculty with a specific training in writing prompts/rubrics as a perceived need among the faculty.

The successful implementation of this model should be supported by providing the appropriate and relevant teaching materials to both faculty and students: *Final Draft 4* [3] and *Grammar and Beyond 4* [6].

In conclusion it should be stated that the successful implementation of the proposed model depends on many variables of the institutional context. This small-scale experimental research has convincingly demonstrated that students' academic writing skills blossom, they write and beautify their academic essays and gradually build up their confidence feeling well-equipped for the rigours of academic writing that lie ahead.

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