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On using the results of the SWOT analysis for Academic Writing Syllabus Design

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Abstract:

The article looks into how the SWOT analysis can be used for educational purposes - namely for Academic writing course and course materials design. The introduction into the teaching process a specifically designed for the course textbook which has been tailored to the needs of a particular group of teachers and students can raise the level of attractiveness of a difficult course and facilitate the attainment of the course goal saving time and effort both for teachers and students.

Keywords: SWOT analysis, academic writing, course design, textbook

1. Introduction

Teaching academic writing in English is a new educational practice, requiring a lot of effort on the part of teachers who have to deal with numerous challenges ranging from the problems connected with the complexity and multitude of the tasks which the subject poses both for teachers and students to the necessity to overcome the students' resistance, who might see little practical value in the subject. As one of our colleagues put it: "We have to teach to write well in English those who have little or no idea about how to write well in their own native language" [1, p.140].

The debate on academic writing and more generally on academic literacy of Russian students launched by the magazine Higher Education in Russia in 2011 has thrown light on the most problematic areas in the sphere of teaching of writing academic texts both in Russian and in English. It appears that researchers of education in Russia don't have a universally accepted system of terms to talk about various aspects of academic writing; the prevailing atmosphere at the majority of mass universities is not conducive to doing research or writing about research; research competences of Russian students are significantly underdeveloped and generally speaking there is no systematic approach to teaching academic writing at Russian universities [2] (For summary of the first round of the debate see issues №8-9 2012).

When we began teaching academic writing to students of Higher School of Economics three years ago we were faced with the majority of problems our colleagues had discussed in their articles and had a few more which were specific to our educational establishment. After the first year of teaching the subject to fourth year students of HSE at Nizhny Novgorod it was felt that there was an atmosphere of general discontent. The students were mostly dissatisfied with the volume and complexity of the material they had to process; they did not see how the knowledge that they had gained while studying the subject could be used in their further personal and professional lives; and in many cases they felt that their work had been underappreciated by their teachers. The teachers' complaints mostly dealt with the low level of attainment of their students – despite all the effort they had put into trying to get the message across to their students, many of them still preferred to resort to translation of previously created in the Russian language texts with little regard to Western conventions of the academic style of writing. Our colleagues felt that the texts that their students had produced proved to be inadequate to the time and effort spent on their preparation for the lessons and trying to deliver the materials to the students.

It became quite clear at that time that the course needed thorough re-thinking in terms of how to raise its attractiveness both for teachers and students. One of the ideas was that we could do it with the help of introduction into the teaching process a specifically designed for the course textbook which must be tailored to the needs of the particular group of students and teachers. The question was how to identify the needs of our students and how to specify the most problematic areas. Then it was necessary to see if we had enough resources to implement our ideas into practice.

When confronted with the need to re-design the Academic Writing syllabus and create our own materials, we decided to view the task as a project whose feasibility could be tested with the help of a well established in business method of the SWOT analysis. We became familiar with the method as teaching ESP to third year students of our university previously we helped them prepare case studies connected with the use of the SWOT analysis for various projects the students were involved in.

SWOT is an acronym for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Opportunities and threats refer to factors external to an organization, while strengths and weaknesses describe the situation inside an organization.

In this article we give a brief overview of the method used and show how the analysis results helped us to design the course syllabus and select the materials for the course textbook [3] which ultimately helped us cope with many of the problems we were confronted with during the first year of teaching academic writing in English to students of economics at HSE in Nizhny Novgorod.

2. The SWOT analysis

2.1. External factors

2.1.1. Threats

(1) Unlike reading or, with some reservations, speaking, writing as a part of foreign language communicative competence had been neglected in the Soviet-Russian tradition of teaching foreign languages. S.G. Ter-Minasova points out to the negative features which characterize the Soviet foreign language educational paradigm: formalism which hampers genuine communication, language courses which ignore the real needs of various groups of students, a marked trend towards teaching reading, while paying little attention to other language skills [4]. Those of us who graduated from teacher training universities thirty or twenty years ago must remember that writing in English at that time was largely confined to writing dictations, reproductions, and essays as almost the only kind of creative writing. Teacher students leaving universities were supplied with the knowledge that a good essay was the one that had a three part structure, it was written logically and it was free of grammar and lexical errors. The idea that writing was rather an art than a skill that could be successfully taught dominated both the teaching and the students' communities.

The process of writing in the native language did not differ much from that one of writing in the English language. Course papers, final papers and later dissertations were written and submitted in due time with little instruction being passed over to us on how to write them. We were lucky if our scientific supervisor made it a point to correct our writing from the point of its conformity to the conventions of the academic style of writing or the impact it could produce on the target reader. As a consequence, the quality of academic writing of university subject teachers suffered, thus they could do little to influence their students' writing in a positive way [5]. Most teachers of English had little or no experience of creating their own academic texts in English, that is why at best what they could do was convey to their students the knowledge they had obtained from various textbooks on academic writing which varied greatly as far as their aims and target audiences were concerned.

(2) Another threat is rooted in the fact that the academic writing groups tend to get bigger while the teaching load for Academic Writing Course consists of contact hours only, without a single hour being allocated to teachers for reading and marking the students' project proposals. Undoubtedly, papers will be reviewed and marks will be given, as the students have a right to know about all the aspects of their writing as they have been assessed and evaluated by their teachers. Marking will be done in their teachers' "free time". Although with the lack of time it will be quite problematic for teachers to provide either close supervision of the students' writing or more detailed

evaluation of fragments of their work in process.

(3) Students have to write and submit their project proposals long before the actual research and the final paper are completed. It puts additional stress on the writer of academic texts. The time lag between deadlines for both papers can run up to 4 months – most productive time for writing the bachelor theses.

2.1.2. Solutions

(1) If the problem with the attitude still persists, the answer to the problem could be a course textbook which clearly and coherently leads both teachers and students through all the stages from preparation for writing to editing a finished text, providing extensive practice on every aspect of academic writing ultimately leading to the creation of the targeted academic text. This must be a practical product-oriented course. Every task that is given to the students must bring them closer to their target – successfully writing a project proposal of their final paper.

(2) The response to the second threat could be teaching students become active readers and reviewers. After students have been taught the peculiarities of the academic style of writing and have been exposed to a number of model academic texts from their field of interest, they could be given exercises where students are requested to comment on how successfully the academic text has been written, and if necessary make improvements to make the message more efficient. An assessment matrix specifying and explaining the features of academic writing their teachers are going to evaluate could be of help. When students become aware of the conventions of the academic style of writing and the importance of considering the target reader while writing, they may begin peer reviewing referring to the teacher for help when they need it.

(3) Above all make it clear to the students that writing can and must begin before the research has been done. Explain to the students that they are not expected to produce the finished results in their project proposal. This part of the paper is called «Results anticipated». Results anticipated can be different from the results obtained. Help students organize their time, prepare them for work which requires concentration on a goal over a long period of time. Teach them the basics of time management. Explain what each part of the project proposal means and what its role in the paper as a complete piece of writing is. Offer them a comprehensive and comprehensible algorithm of working at every part; provide support and encouragement throughout the period of writing.

2.1.3. Opportunities

The attitude to teaching writing is being changed. The Federal Educational Standards of the third generation envisaged that school children now begin studying English when they are in the second form and in the first form if they go to specialized language schools [6]. While English as one of the exams of the Unified State Exam now belongs to the group of optional subjects, there are plans to make it one of the obligatory ones as for example, Mathematics or the Russian language are now. The English language as a part of the Unified State Exam treats writing in English as an equally important skill along with reading, speaking and listening. The format and the contents of the Unified State exam in English are quite close to these ones of the popular everywhere in the world FCE examination. New generations of teachers realize the importance of teaching writing and they are equipped with the necessary techniques of how to do it effectively.

2.2. Internal factors

2.2.1. Weaknesses

(1) Many researchers of education have pointed out to the generally low level of development of Russian students' research competence and our students are not an exception.

Only from two to five percent of senior bachelor students are actively involved in research work and could be planning an academic career. A vast majority of students fail to see any practical application of academic skills, and, consequently, have a negative attitude to the subject and a low level of motivation for studying it.

(3) The Academic Writing group is a mixed level and ability group, while streaming is applied

for other English groups at HSE in Nizhny Novgorod. Some of the students are likely to have a level of English which is hardly compatible with the complexity of the tasks they will have to solve.

(4) Despite a large number of textbooks on academic writing, most of them do not efficiently contribute to the achievement of the practical aim of the course - writing a project proposal in accordance with the international standards of writing academic texts. Most complaints that we heard from our students dealt either with the fact that the theory on academic writing was difficult to comprehend because of the complex and highly specific language used by the authors of such books, or that while doing exercises they had to overcome a similar problem, as the texts they had to read were not relevant to their area of interest. Consequently a lot of time was spent on reading without getting results either in the form of knowledge obtained or skills acquired.

(5) The lexical area may prove to be difficult, as this is the area where students will find the biggest number of differences from what they have studied before. They may find it confusing to deal with a large number of vocabulary units and their collocations from the sphere of their research area and academic vocabulary.

2.2.2. Solutions

(1) Explain the algorithm of research work. Design exercises which help develop the students basic and more advanced relevant for doing research analytical and critical skills. Use authentic academic and scientific texts from their research field to mold the skills.

(2) Explain to your students how the skills obtained at the Academic Writing class can be used in their future careers. Draw parallels between writing the project proposal and the final paper (the bachelor thesis), let them see how writing the project proposal can improve the quality of their final paper.

(3) Design exercises for practicing various aspects of academic writing at different levels.

(4) Explaining theory on academic writing use simple vocabulary and clear style of writing. Choose a friendly and encouraging tone of narration, making an effort to establish rapport with the student who is reading the text you have written. Use only relevant for students of economics authentic texts while designing exercises.

(5) Help students build their own vocabulary trajectory. They select academic vocabulary blocks and compile their own glossaries of terms from the articles they have read for their project proposal.

2.2.3. Strengths

Foreign languages have traditionally occupied a significant place in the curricula of all faculties of Higher School of Economics in Nizhny Novgorod. The length of the course and the number of contact hours in every year of study are traditionally bigger than those ones at other higher educational establishments in Nizhny Novgorod region. In the course of studies at HSE fourth-year students have been exposed to a variety of «Englishes». By their fourth year at the university they have already studied General English, Academic English (preparation for IELTS) and Business English (English for Occupational Purposes).

The Unified State Exam in a foreign language is a requirement for entry at HSE. The requirement to produce Unified State Exam results in English has attracted to HSE students whose level of English is seldom lower than B1, which is significantly higher than that one at other higher educational establishments where English exam results are not required. By the end of their second year of studies students must achieve the level B2/C1 ("Common European Framework of Reference: Learning, Teaching, Assessment") [7]. The level they achieve determines the mark they get for the course, but it can't be lower than B2. Some of the lectures and seminars are delivered in English. Students may experience the practical need for writing academic texts.

The staff of the English Department are all well qualified and motivated to continue their professional training. Among 22 members of staff there is one colleague with a doctoral degree and nineteen associate professors with degrees in Linguistics or Pedagogy. About a quarter of the staff members have their articles published in English.

The students have taken their IELTS examination in the second year of studying at HSE. They

have some knowledge about the basics of academic writing.

3. The textbook

Having performed the SWOT analysis, which helped us to identify the major challenges posed by the introduction of the new subject into the university curriculum, we could come up with a number of solutions which enabled us to define the contents of the course syllabus and design course materials. Knowing the favourable and unfavourable factors which could facilitate or hamper the achievement of the objective, while designing the syllabus and course materials we attempted to rely on the former ones and to minimise the latter ones, seeing a tailored to the needs of our students textbook as a solution to the majority of problems we managed to detect after the first year of teaching academic writing in English.

The material of the textbook is arranged as a sequence of steps which lead our students to the creation of their project proposals in English. We call the approach we used “learning by doing”. We try to assist our students throughout all the stages of working at their project proposals. At the preparation stage students are taught how to use library and internet resources and databases, how to store and arrange information both on their computers and on paper, preparing them to work with vast masses of information. Then we think it important to teach them how to work with selected source materials, that is why the next step is to teach students to process the information collected using one or several organizing principles. After that the students get familiar with the layout and the major parts of the project proposal as a specific genre of academic writing. The chapter «Features of Academic Writing» provided information and practice on various characteristics of the academic style of writing. Actual writing begins after the working hypothesis has been formulated by the students. The first part to be written is Literature Review. Next students pass over to the description of research methods, data and results. Introduction, Conclusion and Abstract are written after the main body of the paper has almost been completed. The textbook and work on project proposal concludes with the chapter «Editing».

We believe that the layout of every chapter contributes to the attainment of the goal. There are 10 chapters in the textbook. Each chapter centers on a single topic, which can be subdivided into subtopics which define the number of sections in every chapter.

Each section begins with warming up discussion questions which make the students think about the problems of the section. The reading part of every chapter summarizes the theory on the topic. This part is followed by comprehension and discussion questions. The questions highlight the most important content points of the section. The exercises which follow this part target a certain skill to be molded. The «Take home message» part precisely and concisely formulates what the students need to know in order to be able to do their homework successfully. Home task is given in the final part of every section. The layout of every chapter described above is unified. It makes it easy for students to navigate the textbook “Writing a Research Proposal in English”.

4. Students' feedback on the course

The feedback described in this article is based on 86 responses, given by last year fourth year students of the faculty of economics of HSE in Nizhny Novgorod who studied academic writing and who agreed to answer the questions of the questionnaire. The questionnaire aimed to measure the students' level of satisfaction with the course and to detect the remaining difficulties to be dealt with later.

The first question finds out how much our students had known about the conventions of the academic style of writing before they took the course and whether they found the materials presented in the textbook “Writing a Research Proposal in English” sufficient for writing their papers. For the majority of students the rules of academic writing turned out to be complete terra incognita. 98 percent of respondents admitted to knowing nothing or very little about the rules of academic writing. 95 percent of students said that they did not need to use any additional materials for writing their project proposal, as the information provided by the textbook proved to be sufficient for the purpose. The remaining five percent commented that they needed to consult some dictionaries and

grammar books for reference. They consulted the APA style manual when they needed some information on how use in-text citations and on how to compile reference lists as the information in the textbook did not cover citation for all possible types of source material.

Poor translation from Russian into English was one of the problem areas last year that is why we wanted to know what the actual process of writing looked like after the introduction of our textbook which used the guided writing approach “learning by doing”. 72 percent of students followed the suggested procedure and kept writing their project proposal part by part as it was recommended by their instructors. The rough copies were later edited and corrected. 26 percent of respondents said that the most difficult parts either from the point of view of language or the content, were first written in Russian, and only then they were translated into English. 4 students found it easier to follow the more familiar to them algorithm: they first wrote their texts in Russian and then translated them into English. As the questionnaire was an anonymous one, we cannot be sure about the reason for their doing it. We see it as that either the students’ attendance of the lessons was not high enough for them to understand and follow the instructions, or that their low level of English did not allow them to participate in class discussions and follow the recommended procedure effectively.

As in the first year of studying academic English most students saw little or no correspondence between their final papers in Russian and project proposals in English we were interested to know if the situation changed after the introduction of our textbook. It turned out that 98 % of all students who answered this question pointed out to both the papers’ positive influence upon each other. Among the comments stressing the positive impact of the project proposals on their bachelor theses were: a considerable expansion of their reference lists in final papers due to the students’ familiarity with the source material which was published in English. They also pointed out to the fact that they could get a better and more profound understanding of the topic researched. The project proposal helped the respondents understand the concept of the final paper and what each part meant in the framework of the academic work as a whole. They also felt the positive organizing influence of the course on their day to day routines. The necessity to come to the lesson every week and bring something that ultimately contributed to writing their project proposal, had a beneficiary influence on their theses as they had to get down to business significantly earlier than if they had done it if they didn’t have to write their project proposals. The remaining two percent still blamed the time lag between the deadlines for submission dates for little connection between the two papers. “I lacked more research to be able to describe what I had meant to do to the best advantage”; “I don’t know how to speak about anticipated results if the research hasn’t been completed” – could illustrate the reasons why some respondents felt as if they were involved in doing two different jobs while working at their final paper and research proposal in English.

At the same time, commenting on the connection between their theses in Russian and project proposals in English many respondents pointed out to the relevant for writing their theses academic skills which they had acquired while writing their research proposals. Getting ready for and attending the lessons of academic writing course our students learnt how to organize their time, search for new materials, how to evaluate the sources, how to use a critical approach while dealing with materials from different sources, what criteria to use for making a decision about the reliability of a source for using it in a scientific work. Our respondents most frequently pointed out to the abilities they have either acquired or further developed in the course of studying academic writing: the ability to accumulate knowledge, the ability to synthesize and analyze information, the ability to build logical arguments. All of these are the components of the research competence. It was generally felt by the students that these skills and abilities will prove to be useful in their personal and professional lives. Among other useful acquisitions students also reported that their level of English had gone up significantly. One of the unexpected for us benefits of the course was that several students referred to psychological benefits they had obtained while studying academic writing. The successful completion of the course helped them to overcome the feeling of insecurity connected with the lack of self-confidence and it also helped them to overcome the fear of public speaking, as academic presentations were also a part the course. The acquisition of presentation skills was considered by many to be a valuable asset for their future careers. Several respondents believed that that the skills

and knowledge obtained would make them more successful magistrates' students. One student even wrote that taking the course of academic writing was the most important argument for her in favor of taking a post-graduate course.

The next question of the questionnaire aimed to reveal our students' emotional attitude to the course: "What do you feel finishing the course?" The dominant emotions were joy, pride and satisfaction. Some students even experienced a feeling of superiority over the students of other higher educational establishment of our city who did not have the subject of academic writing in their curricula. Seeing it as a "logical completion" of the course of English, they expressed regret, that their formal studying of English was over: "I feel satisfaction as everyone would after finishing serious work, but at the same time I sort of started missing English already", or "I am going to miss my English classes in the future".

The last question was: "Do you justify including the academic writing course into the fourth year curriculum of our university? What is your attitude to it?" The overall majority – 93% gave positive responses to the question. Seven percent of the respondents said that it would have been more useful if the course had been included into the curricula earlier – when they were in their first or second years of studies.

The question concerning the most difficult aspects of the course revealed that 62% of respondents found it quite easy; 22% of respondents found the vocabulary area to be the most difficult for them, 16 % of students complained about the necessity to work under stress as they had to strain themselves to the limit trying to obtain research results for their projects proposals long before the deadline for their final papers.

5. Conclusion

As the surveys of the students' opinions before and after the introduction of several important changes into the Academic Writing syllabus have shown, the course can be made attractive to students despite a small number of those bachelor students who are planning to take up an academic career. Academic writing can be interesting even to the students for whom it is the first and only experience of creating their own academic text in English. The emotional reversal from mainly negative to almost universally positive attitude can be achieved if the difficulties and challenges which students experience while studying the course have been revealed and dealt with at the stage of selection of teaching materials and designing teaching techniques to be used in class. The SWOT analysis appears to be an efficient tool for the evaluation of the educational environment when it is necessary to develop a new academic course which will meet the unique needs of all the participants of the educational process. Our experience of using the SWOT analysis proves that it can be successfully applied for educational purposes - namely for course and course materials design. The introduction into the teaching process a specifically designed for the course textbook which has been tailored to the needs of a particular group of teachers and students will raise the level of attractiveness of a difficult course and facilitate the attainment of the course goal saving time and effort both for teachers and students.

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