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DEVELOPING ACADEMIC WRITING SKILLS THROUGH REFLECTION

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Abstract

Today, there is a need to rationalize the organization of educational and cognitive activities aimed at the formation and development of the academic competence of students. This proves to be a challenging task as there is a contradiction between the need to master the knowledge and skills of academic writing and the insufficient development of modern programs for teaching academic writing in a foreign language in Russian linguodidactics. Therefore, there is a necessity of search for efficient ways of developing students' argumentation skills through teaching them writing academic essays. It is compulsory from the early stages of higher education to develop the skills necessary for mastering academic competence, such as the ability to self-educate, orientation in the electronic educational environment of the university, and work with the resources of the electronic library. In this regard reflection as a means of taking a research position is considered to be a helpful method of developing academic communication skills. The present paper explains the role of reflection in the process of mastering the skills of writing an academic argumentative essay in a foreign language.

1.   Introduction

The processes of globalization have affected not only the economy, but also the activities of the university. Currently, the problem of teaching academic writing in a foreign language is relevant. Russian monthly scientific and pedagogical journal "Vysshee obrazovanie v Rossii" (Higher Education in Russia) that publishes the results of fundamental, search and applied problem-oriented studies of the current state of higher education now has a section dedicated to academic writing. It is the concept of teaching academic writing that is the object of research in this article. Lack of academic writing skills in English can become a significant obstacle to the implementation of written communication within the research environment, and therefore research activities in general.

The fundamental conditions for the introduction of efficient approaches to teaching academic writing will be the readiness of the subjects of the university environment to teach, as well as the readiness of students to study. An important condition for the formation of developing academic writing skills in a foreign language is the use of the capabilities of the resources of an electronic library (Skiadas, 1999). It provides an opportunity for effective training focused on the needs and capabilities of students, which affects the quality of training (Hart & Kleinveldt, 2011). In fact, supporting the technical aspects of research, libraries often do not support other aspects, such as distributing the information and ensuring more comprehensive data organized for academic researchers (Gabbay & Shoham, 2017). In this regard it is beneficial for students to be able to analyze the sources and instruments that are provided by an electronic library from the view of their adequacy for their academic essays. In this research electronic library is an object of a reflective analysis. According to Holly (1989), through writing students consciously focus their attention and thereby do assert and establish their ideas and the mind itself. The process of reflection provides an incentive for critical thinking, as well as the analysis of one's own learning activity, the result of which is a more accurate understanding of the concept of learning outcomes (Kalugina, 2014).

2.   Problem Statement

The academic writing performance of students reveals a gap between writing skills learned at school and writing skills required at a university level. One of the reasons for not being able to construct a high-quality academic text is weak or absent knowledge of how to use library system and its sources and little awareness of the benefits of the reflection process.

Reflection in this respect becomes a powerful tool for self-education and self-development. 'Reflection is an ability of an individual to take a research position in relation to his/her cognitive activity, that allows him/her to analyze, comprehend and evaluate its effectiveness, and, therefore, to predict his/her further development on the basis of self-education' (Khuziahmetov & Valeev, 2020). According to Gibbs (1988), reflection is an essential part of a complex process of a learning cycle, being a connecting link between experience and conceptualization. Bound et al. (1985), created a model representing reflection in learning exercised in three related stages: returning to experience, attending to feelings and re-evaluating experience. In my view, they are right in saying that student's reflection should

include recollecting their learning experience to notice exactly what occurred and one's reactions to it, for example, by committing this description to paper.

Raven (2014) describes three types of reflective methods which include interpersonal reflection, which involves interaction with others, different written format variations, such as notebooks, and finally another written form of a file or a folder where reflective thoughts are recorded. In the context of teaching academic writing, it is important to introduce relevant reflective techniques on the stage of pre-writing and analysing useful electronic library sources. Various writing strategies should be considered, such as the strategy of writing directly from sources when current and extensive information can be easily inserted or edited in electronic texts (Kirkpatrick & Klein, 2016). The effectiveness of such strategy depends on students' knowledge of the topic, knowledge of the Web, skill, and the type of information being searched (Kirkpatrick & Klein, 2016). Students can make judgments in terms of internal evidence which may be either quantitative or qualitative, and can assess accuracy in reporting facts, the ability to apply some criteria based on internal standard to the judgment of the work, etc. The criteria may be either those determined by the students or those which are given to them (Bloom, 1956).

Delante (2017) claims that learner dependence, passiveness and receptiveness can entail poor academic performance and low English proficiency, as well as a low level of readiness. Cahusac de Caux successfully adapted Jay and Johnson's (2002) three-dimensional typology of reflection to academic writing context in doctoral writing group settings. Working in the framework of descriptive dimension implies answering such questions as 'What is happening? Is this working, and for whom? For whom is it not working? How do I know? How am I feeling? What am I pleased and/or concerned about? What do I not understand? Does this relate to any of my stated goals of my research, and to what extent are they being met?' (Cahusac et al., 2017). Descriptive dimension can be realized in different forms such as a reflective journal or a reflective essay. According to Cooper and Stevens (2006), reflective practices help learners in 'holding a conversation with themselves about their work'. These conversations appeal to their consciousness which assist in controlling and organizing their experiences.

Hence, the relevance of the problem of studying the possibilities of reflection in developing academic communication skills is linked to the improving of the methodology of teaching academic writing in a university.

3. Research Questions

The hypothesis of this research can be formulated as follows: teaching academic writing in a foreign language will be efficient if certain pedagogical conditions such as organizing work with electronic library system of a university and applying reflective methods in academic writing practice are implemented in the learning process.

This study addresses the following questions:

- How is the role of electronic library system of the university in developing academic writing skills perceived by the students?
- What are the advantages of implementing reflective techniques such as reflective questionnaire and reflective essay in teaching academic writing?

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■ How does reflection on researching the sources of electronic library system of the university affect the quality of academic texts produced by students?

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study is to distinguish and analyze the role of the reflection process in the framework of developing academic communication skills through using sources of the electronic library system of a university.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Materials

In order to investigate the scope of the library as an element of electronic information educational environment of a university, we organized students' work with the electronic library system (ELS). Then before writing an interim academic essay the students analyzed the system, functions and capabilities of Novosibirsk State Technical University (NSTU) ELS using the resources of the library that are relevant for working on an argumentative essay in a foreign language. After that we collected their reflective feedback and made conclusions about the interconnection between students' reflective analysis of the sources of NSTU ELS and the quality of academic writing skills.

5.2. Data collection and analysis

The study used qualitative data collection methods which included both primary and secondary data. Primary data collection entailed the use of reflective essays (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Secondary data was collected through review of questionnaires (Burns, 2010) and academic essays as the interim product of the learning process. The data were analyzed by statistic data processing and the generalization of the data (Nuzhnova, 2005).

6. Findings

This study took place in the formative stage of our pedagogical experiment aimed at identifying the organizational and pedagogical conditions that ensure the formation of young researchers' readiness for written academic communication in a foreign language. The stage described in this article implied exploring the possibilities of high-quality argumentation, support of arguments and practical work with literature. It was implemented in the form of analysis of resources provided by electronic information and educational system of NSTU.

According to Hyland, it is essential to recognize that any form of feedback or reflection should be aimed at increasing the role of students' independence and critical evaluation of their work in context of learning L2 writing (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). In this regard such methods of researching learners' experience as reflective essay and reflective questionnaires were chosen for this study. Firstly, students are familiar with these formats of evaluation since school which can provide exact results of analyzing

students' thoughts and opinions. Secondly, these methods do not require teacher's interference in the reflection and analysis process which enhances the level of students' responsibility and independence.

Nowadays a question of internet research performed during academic writing courses needs to be discussed as the emergence of e-journals, e-books, and the many other genres found on the Internet denote a new type of media that provides immense potential. Thereby university libraries ensuring access to electronic sources display a paramount step towards the Internet performing the role of a traditional library (Stapleton, 2003). Cumming et al. (2016) claims that students experience difficulties with the complex processes of writing from sources, as well as knowledge and experience influence students' performance in writing from sources. Thus, finding the methods of facilitating working with sources is of particular importance.

Prior to writing an interim argumentative essay, students were asked to analyze the structure, functions and capabilities of the electronic library system (ELS) of NSTU in order to familiarize themselves with the sources of the ELS. The students analyzed the following sections of the ELS that are relevant for working on an argumentative essay in a foreign language, such as scientometric systems, digital catalogue, periodicals, library fund, electronic scientific resources, electronic educational resources and Internet resources. At the first stage of reflection on the ELS resources, students freely reflected on their impressions of how these resources helped them in writing argumentation in an essay. The results show that the most frequently used resources include Russian Science Citation Index, eLibrary.ru, 'Digital catalogue', Znanium.com, ScienceDirect, Google scholar, Google Academy, Springerlink, OATD (Open Access Theses and Dissertations), Electronic educational and methodological complex, Znanium.com, Web of Science. Students' essays distinguish several types of reflective areas. For instance, these areas comprise

- deeper understanding of the topic (*Having studied many resources of the NSTU electronic library system before writing my essay, I realized how extensive this topic is; I read the materials and they inspired me with thoughts for argumentation. I also understood how I can support my argumentation. In short, these resources put me in the right direction of thought for writing an essay*);
- assessing the quality of the argumentation of your draft essay (*This statement allows me to support my argumentation in the essay, and also reflects well my point of view that economic development does not interfere with the development of important social values, but rather the opposite; Then I turned to the key words of the argument with which I wanted to reinforce the essay, namely: spiritual and material*);
- confirming the relevance of the arguments (*Thus, relying on the statements of these sociologists and researching this source, I can confidently use this in my argumentation to write the final essay and prove my point of view; Based on the selected criteria, the scientific work of the professor of New York University Ritty Lukose approached me ... Thus, I was able to confirm my hypothesis based on the work of Ritty Lukose*);
- awareness of the simplicity of the task (*Thanks to the preparation of finding the necessary electronic resource, writing an essay will not be a great difficulty*);

- matching your arguments with the opinions of authoritative authors (*In the end, I chose such a resource as the methodological manual of the candidate of economic sciences Voronkov O. V. ... This resource is suitable for arguing my point of view and reveals many reasons that I would like to convey in my essay*).

At the second stage of reflection procedure, the students filled out a reflective questionnaire which was specially created. The questionnaire was based on an interval scale with five options which provided an opportunity for expressing a sufficient range of feelings (Burns, 2010). The results of the questionnaire are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Reflective questionnaire results

	1 - strongly disagree	2 - disagree	3 - partly agree	4- agree	5 - strongly agree
significance of answers	1,35	1,73	6,49	7,68	6,00

The results show that students reveal a great level of awareness and satisfaction with sources of NSTU ELS. As it is shown, most answers illustrate agreement with the offered statements. They indicate students' understanding possibilities of application of these sources to finding support and justification for their own theses and arguments as well. Furthermore, students had an opportunity to rethink the following aspects of working with ELS in process of preparing a draft of their argumentative essays: the number of sources for writing academic essays, their availability and reliability, the existence of electronic scientific sources and their types, simplicity and comfort as well as convenience of using ELS. In addition, students obtained the experience of analysing the scientometric systems, abstract and bibliographic databases and informational systems and their possible use in their current or further academic papers.

This reflective experience is vital on the early stages of formation students' argumentation and academic writing in L2 skills. Deep understanding and evaluating personal experience from the perspective of personal progress in developing argumentative essay writing skills ensures self-development and self-efficacy in this area of studying. Knowledge and understanding of the choice of library sources as well as understanding how they can be implemented accelerates the process of drafting and encourages to write more logical and makes them feel informational support, independence and self-confidence. Students who practice such reflection during the learning process show better results in writing academic essays in the long term.

The results of an interim essay analyzed application of Student's *t*-test display the following numbers.

Table 2. Interim essay results

	first interim essays errors (control group) N=49	first interim essays errors (experimental group) N=43
	number of students	number of students
language criteria		
grammar errors	39	35

vocabulary errors	25	15
spelling errors	10	6
stylistic errors	32	21
punctuation errors	8	10
t	0,7	
argumentation and justification criteria		
poor argumentation	29	11
irrelevant justification of an argument	25	11
absence of reference list	43	2
unreliable citation	28	1
superficial understanding of the topic	14	9
t	4,1	

The first obtained empirical value of t (0.7) is in the zone of insignificance. Since this research is focused on developing argumentation skills and electronic library as a reflective analysis object, errors from this section are not considered. The second obtained empirical value t (4.1) is in the zone of significance. It means that the results of writing an interim essay after exercising reflection indicate significant improvement in skills connected with argumentation and justification in academic essay.

7. Conclusion

I believe that reflective practice has a significant role in acquiring academic writing skills in L2. This session has proven to be a useful exercise applicable to teaching writing not only academic essay but also other genres of academic texts as it implies work with library sources at any rate. Reflective analysis of ESL sources provides students with understanding of existing possibilities that can help in creating a quality academic text, as well as an author's personal view on a problem under consideration. Therefore, if a university provides students with complex electronic educational environment, it can play a crucial role in formation of students' academic writing skills in L2.

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