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Academic literacy skills among PhD medical and dental students

Medical researchers in Ukraine as well as throughout the world are facing now the growing demand to publish their research results in international journals switching to an English-only policy that puts many authors whose native language is not English at a disadvantage compared to their English-speaking counterparts. Thus, one of the problems encountered by novice researchers is how to master academic writing. Moreover, there have been a number of reports confirming the strong relationships between academic literacy skills and progress in a university degree program [4].

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the English academic writing proficiency among PhD medical and dental students; to highlight the commonest weak points in their academic writing and to offer some pieces of advice based on our own experience to promote academic multi-literacy of junior researchers.

Engaging in academic discourse involves the creation of a high-quality written product, furthermore, 'publish or perish' approach forces young researchers to create more both in their native languages and English having vague ideas of academic writing conventions. To date, a large body of research has established the fact that effective academic writing in foreign language is only possible at the comparatively advanced language proficiency [6]. Therefore, we measured General English language proficiency of PhD course applicants according to Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [3] and academic writing proficiency of PhD medical and dentals students of Ukrainian Medical Stomatological Academy (n=100) by using the writing and speaking tasks of [1; 9]. The data were obtained over the period of four years, from 2013 to 2018. Over a third of the informants (35%)

demonstrated A2 level skills in General English proficiency, about a half (56%) ranged within A2- B1 level, and 9% of the PhD students the showed B2 level that further was confirmed by APTIS test from the British Council. The situation with academic writing skills was found out to be somewhat worse. Having scrutinised the findings obtained through the observation, data from questionnaires, interviews, and writings we made an attempt to pinpoint the causes of such unsatisfactory results in academic writing.

According to the results obtained, there were roughly equal shares of the participants who had little experience in native-tongue academic writing through their undergraduate courses (57.8%) and 43 % of those had to present their research reports in English (67%). Most of the participants were unfamiliar with international professional and research journal publications until their senior years. Moreover, they showed little or no familiarity with the academic conventions and effective use of scientific discourse in their native Ukrainian or Russian languages. Graduate courses in Ukrainian medical universities do not include disciplines whose aims are to develop the students' writing skills, not even in their mother tongue. However, students are supposed to publish the results of their investigations.

The problem is that the conventions and standards of academic discourse are often implicit and students are expected to gain a grasp of academic literacy without necessarily being given instruction in how to utilise these conventions of effective writing [7]. Some journal editors have revealed that, at the level of a junior researcher, writing problems experienced by native and non-native writers are nearly similar, especially in terms of proper using of rhetorical techniques and functions when describing own results, uniting knowledge from multiple sources into some sort of coherent organizational pattern focusing on the central idea, drawing conclusions, etc [2]. To overcome these drawbacks, it seems quite reasonable to devise a course aimed at developing the students' skills in academic writing in their mother tongue and to implement principles of basic academic writing through the disciplines instructed. Students have to negotiate the genre conventions, the knowledge and standards of academic writing through the framework of a discipline in which expert and practical knowledge is internally

organized, and to be aware of the core values of academic communication (principles of honesty, integrity, probity, truthfulness, promotion of ethical and social goals). This also implies focusing on the ability to identify the building blocks in designing discipline-specific texts, identify and critique thematic and rhetorical structures, to choose and employ proper language means and meta-language, to recognize expository and argumentative discourse patterns.

Writing high-level academic papers involves innumerable, simultaneous skills that require intensive knowledge and practice. And the question about who can teach English academic writing to medical and dentals students is therefore acute. It is quite clear that academic writing is best taught by someone who combines disciplinary expertise and writing experience. But few discipline insiders have a good command of academic English to implement rules of academic literacy. On the other hand, most English language teachers are not the best candidacies for this because of the lack of discipline-related training. Following experts in writing across the curriculum pedagogy and in academic writing, we believe that the most realistic approach for Ukrainian educational settings at present is to engage English language teachers and instructors who are writing experts in creating cooperation with experts in medical and dental disciplines. A lot of English language instructors in medical universities are quite proficient in medical concepts and terminology due to regular assistance in translating and interpreting special discipline-related literature or the work with the physicians / scientists by helping present the information in an appropriate manner. The course 'English for Scientific Communication' designed in our Academy three years ago set an ambitious goal to develop academic writing skills of PhD students. This course was developed based on the principles of genre-based approach elaborated by Swales and Feak [8], Hyland [5], Yakhontova [9], Armer [1]. Ever year the course has been improved based on the results demonstrated by PhD students. Activities to raise the students' awareness about academic literacy were carefully selected according to the findings of the needs analysis.

Thus, we may suggest that the courses specially designed to familiarize novice researchers with conventions of academic

discourse and develop academic writing skills underpinned by strong motivation and self-learning can contribute much in the development of academic writing proficiency and increase chances of getting published.

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