

## PRACTICAL CHALLENGES OF THE CENTER OF ACADEMIC WRITING IN RUSSIA: SOUTH URAL STATE UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE

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The literature about writing centres is dominated by research into the American experience, but although this literature provides a rich bank of insights, it is of questionable relevance to current developments in Russia. Much of it concerns tutoring undergraduates who are not aiming at publication, and the majority of whom are native English speakers. By contrast, a principal aim of the Project 5-100 modernisation programme in Russia is to secure increased publication rates in English by non-native speakers who are faculty members. The aim of this paper is to consider which lessons of the existing literature are most applicable to the Russian case, and which questions will have to be re-examined. As a stimulus to opening up this debate, the author surveyed and held discussions with candidates wishing to become professional writing tutors at South Ural State University, Chelyabinsk. The paper identifies practical challenges and directions for future research.

*Keywords: writing center, academic writing, academic English, tutoring, writing tutor.*

### Introduction

The expansion of international activities and the nature of scientific and technical cooperation with foreign partners require a high level of specialist knowledge of the English language. In particular, for university researchers and professors oral and written foreign speech is one of the main factors of their professional development.

A great deal of academic researchers' working time is spent on writing academic texts. These include grant applications, abstracts, some types of correspondence with colleagues, and research papers. The new contract for the university's academic staff, introduced in 2016, lists publication activity as the key indicator of the effectiveness of research activity. Thus competence in academic writing, defined as the willingness and ability to present research results in writing to the international scientific community, has become one of the priority competences of professional research activity.

Papers in peer-reviewed journals indexed in the Web of Science and Scopus reflect both the quality of the study and the presentation of the results in a foreign language. Currently, the con-

tributions of individual researchers to the development of their field of knowledge are evaluated by both their quantity and their level of citation. Published in 2010, a Thomson Reuters report cited data on the dynamics of the number of publications by Russian researchers in the most recent thirty years.

The total contribution of Russian research to the number of publications in the most recent five years was about 2.6 %, which corresponds to approximately 25,000 publications per year [1].

The views of academic staff and graduate students at SUSU about the difficulties of writing articles for publication in English reflect these broader patterns. According to the survey, the main difficulties in preparing articles for publication include:

- 28 (47.5 %) level of English proficiency;
- 26 (44.07 %) lack of material resources;
- 13 (22.03 %) awareness of the peculiar characteristics of academic discourse;
- 7 (11.9 %) access to the latest research in the subject area;
- 5 (8.5 %) difficulty in correspondence with editors and reviewers;

– 4 (6.8 %) difficulties in the interpretation of comments of reviewers and editors.

The results of the survey reinforced our conviction that there is a need for establishing an academic writing centre at the university. The aim of further research was to develop define the principles that can become the basis for a model of the CAW and help to define its mission, objectives, and the services the centre can provide.

In Russia, CAWs at universities are a relatively new phenomenon. The first two CAWs in Russia were opened at Moscow's leading universities of economic orientation – the Higher School of Economics (HSE) and the New Economic School (NES). Both work to develop writing skills in the English language and use English-language techniques and materials. However, the goals and objectives that these centres are designed to address and solve are significantly different.

The Academic Writing Center (AWC) of HSE was established in 2011 in order to increase the publication activity of the academic staff in foreign scientific journals. The target audience was the academic staff reserve (young researchers and pedagogical university staff), and the basis of the methodology is English academic writing skills and related competencies, such as presentations and speeches at international forums and conferences. As teachers and researchers are busy people, the AWC has developed short blocks of workshops, training courses, as well as self-study materials, which involve the development of on-line resources, podcasts and expert lecture videos, as well as individual consultations for the authors preparing for foreign publication of texts. Remote format allowed to cover the faculty of the University in its campuses located in other cities of Russia. It should be emphasized that the AWC website is open to members of other universities regardless of their institutional or professional affiliation, age and place of residence [2].

Almost at the same time with the HSE AWC a Centre of the New School of Economics (NES) was founded that provides services in written and oral communication. The peculiar feature of NES CAW is that it is directed by American specialists who organize its work in accordance with the United States writing centre pedagogy. This pedagogy provides tutorial assistance based on the principle of taking a hands-off approach, which means that the tutor asks questions to the author so that the author realizes the shortcomings of their text in terms of its organization, clarity, coherence, and logical sequence.

The CAW's activity according to the American model includes not only tutors' assistance to students, but also active assistance to the faculty. This interaction includes, for example, seminars on the use of a variety of formats and writing tasks by teachers of technical disciplines, and the development of principles of a unified and objective evaluation of academic works. Initially the centre's target audience was students enrolled in joint programs and writing their academic texts (essays, reports, term papers) in English. Today HSE CAW helps both students and academic staff in both languages, Russian and English.

One more CAW was opened in February 2015 at Moscow State University of Steel and Alloys (MISIS). The strategic goal of the centre is to educate undergraduates, graduate students, young researchers and the teaching staff of the University in scientific foreign language discourse as well as to form their competencies to improve the quality of scientific texts for publication in international journals indexed by analytical databases, including Web of Science and Scopus. The CAW provides the following services: organization of multi-level academic writing courses for the integrated development of academic literacy; selection and training of tutors on academic writing; consultations (individual and group) for graduates, post-graduates, academic staff on writing scientific articles, abstracts, applications for grants, Master's or Doctoral thesis in English; organization of lectures and scientific workshops involving external experts and editors of international journals; creation and implementation of short-term tailored courses for young researchers such as Engineering Writing, Metallurgy Writing, Materials Science Writing; development of educational video and audio podcasts; provision of editing and proofreading services for the papers written in a variety of academic genres [3–6].

The Center of Academic Writing at South Ural State University was established in September, 2016. The authors want to explore some of the challenges facing the CAW at South Ural State University and how they differ from those described in the existing literature about writing centres. The data used was gathered through a survey of tutors who will work for the centre.

Writing centres began to flourish at American universities in the 1960s and 1970s. Their initial mission was remedial: to bring the writing of weaker students up to the level that faculty expected of their written assignments. Because

of the stigma involved for students in seeking help, writing centres instead emphasised the idea of partnership. Tutors were partners, not supervisors; the student, not the tutor, made alterations to the draft; and tutor consultations were to be non-directive, asking questions of the student rather than providing answers. Another strong theme was that the aim was to create a better writer rather than a better text, by inculcating good habits. This might take place over multiple consultations. The tutors were often unpaid fellow-students (peer tutors). Writing centres saw themselves as outsiders, facing battles to obtain funding, to prove that they delivered results, and to earn the respect of the university authorities. The literature about American writing centres is often inflected by a concern with social justice: whether the tutor has too much power over the student, or whether ethnic minorities and women are marginalised by mainstream academic writing standards. There were even discussions of whether creating a homely atmosphere with soft furnishings might prove damaging to students from broken homes. To Russians, discussion of the psychological effects of comfortable chairs must seem rather esoteric [7–9].

There are many differences between the situations of writing centres in the USA and the one at SUSU. SUSU's centre has substantial funding and has a central role in the university's modernisation programme. It will employ professional writing tutors in different disciplines, train faculty and postgraduates but not (at least initially) undergraduates in writing, and offer translation and proofreading services to its clients. Rather than struggling to prove its value, the centre has demanding and clear targets. Its target audience is not inexperienced students writing term papers, but well-qualified and busy individuals writing for publication in English. Unlike American centres, where native English speakers predominate, all its users will be non-native speakers [10–12].

### Methods

The survey was made to find out the differences between tutoring in the American context and at SUSU. To illustrate these, the authors conducted a survey of a small cohort of nine new writing tutors at the university. The questionnaire focused on four topics: the motives for becoming tutors, the difficulties facing the faculty colleagues in getting published in English, the publication difficulties facing tutors as individuals, and their attitudes to specific problems. The first

three involved making multiple choices from a list of pre-defined options, with the possibility of writing in an additional option, while the fourth was assessed using a Likert scale, with the option of expressing no opinion.

### Results

If we start with the characteristics of the group, eight were female, one male, with teaching experience ranging from zero years to 30 (median eight). One was from the humanities; four were social scientists, two linguists and two scientists. The centre is making efforts to recruit more tutors, particularly scientists. Research suggests that disciplinary knowledge can indeed be an advantage to writing tutors. The group's language skills are good, six having upper intermediate English and three advanced. Their publication records in Russian are varied, ranging from four articles to 80 (median 16), while their publication records in English are predictably lower, ranging from zero to 16 with a median of two.

Turning next to their motives for becoming tutors, the most popular reasons were to become better writers themselves, to further develop their careers, and to earn extra money. Four wanted to challenge themselves, four to gain satisfaction from helping colleagues, and four to help the university to improve.

Moving on to the difficulties that their faculty colleagues face in being published in English, they were asked to choose the top five difficulties. Joint top were 'Lack of money for publication fees' and 'Level of English language ability', followed by 'Lack of English native-speaker co-authors' and 'Not enough time for articles to be written'. Four items, 'Difficulty getting articles proof-read to the required standard', 'Difficulty getting articles translated to the required standard', 'Not enough time for research to be carried out' and 'Preference for teaching over research and writing' tied for fifth place.

As for the difficulties facing the tutors as individuals, the results were somewhat similar, with 'Lack of money for publication fees' again coming top jointly with 'Not enough time for articles to be written'. Next came 'Lack of English native-speaker co-authors' followed by 'Difficulty getting articles translated to the required standard'. Three items, 'Level of English language ability', 'Lack of money for research to be carried out' and 'Not enough time for research to be carried out' tied for fifth place.

The final results show that clear majorities

of tutors believe that their colleagues are aware of their role and think that tutors will be of practical benefit, but the tutors themselves do not know what tutors do in other universities. Clear majorities are confident that their English language abilities and knowledge of the structure and style of English-language articles are adequate. A clear majority believe a strong publication record in English is necessary, but they are divided as to how far their own experience of publication in English will help them. Clear majorities disagree that techniques for tutoring students are equally applicable to faculty members, and agree that advising a more senior colleague is difficult.

### Discussion and conclusion

What are the implications of these results for a comparison of the American experience with SUSU's situation? Starting with the tutors themselves, the results suggest that the professional status and training involved in the role are important parts of the attraction, although we must remember this was a self-selecting sample. It is also notable that tutors disagree that faculty can be tutored in the same way as students can, think it is difficult to advise a more senior colleague, and while agreeing that a strong publication record in English is necessary, are less confident that their own publication record in English will help them. Taken together, these results suggest that power and authority in this particular Russian context may often lie more with the tutee (a faculty member) than with the tutor. These features do not resemble the American experience, though they may reinforce the importance of the American tradition of respecting the tutee.

Another striking feature is how different the challenges are in a Russian context to an American one; indeed, some of the difficulties may lie outside the remit of the writing centre altogether. The issue of publication fees is perhaps one such difficulty. It may be that the tutor needs to spend time carefully selecting journals to avoid this problem, perhaps in close cooperation with the library, which has a crucial role to play in its own right. The issue of time pressures is also one, which may not lie wholly within the remit of the writing centre, although writing tutors in the USA are used to encouraging good time management. It could be that busy faculty members are unwilling to follow the slow Socratic method and will want the tutor to get to the point quickly. The high profile given to lan-

guage ability is also notable. Where American research has addressed this, it has suggested that a more directive approach may need to be taken, as non-native speakers cannot always be expected to notice their own grammatical and lexical errors. Even where similar services exist in the USA, such as proof-reading, the scale of the activity and underlying assumptions will differ. However, American research may be of relevance in some respects: for example, two tutors listed lack of self-confidence as their chief difficulty in being published, which is a problem often discussed in US literature. Finally, the concern about a lack of English native-speaker co-authors suggests that writing tutors need to focus not only on texts but on methods of dissemination and academic networking.

In conclusion, the challenges facing the writing centre at SUSU differ in many respects from those researched so extensively in the USA. New research priorities emerge, such as the dynamics of the relationship between tutors and faculty, and the most appropriate techniques to use. The downside is the highly demanding targets. Some of these targets, requiring 90 % acceptance rates in a publishing world where 40–60 % is the average, and the best journals accept only 10 % of submissions, are perhaps unrealistic. The price of professionalism is high expectations.

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## ЗАДАЧИ ЦЕНТРА АКАДЕМИЧЕСКОГО ПИСЬМА В РОССИИ: ОПЫТ ЮЖНО-УРАЛЬСКОГО ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОГО УНИВЕРСИТЕТА

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В научной литературе, посвященной работе центров академического письма, преобладает опыт зарубежных, в частности, американских вузов. Хотя зарубежный опыт представляет интерес и содержит ряд ценных идей, далеко не всё можно реализовать в российской действительности. Большее внимание в американских вузах уделяется развитию умений академического письма студентов старших курсов бакалавриата, где основная цель – написание и защита магистерской диссертации, а не публикация статьи в научных журналах с высоким импакт-фактором. В противоположность этому, одна из основных целей Проекта 5-100 в России – повышение публикационной активности научно-педагогических работников вузов на английском языке. Цель статьи – изучить опыт существующих в России центров академического письма и проанализировать, что из него можно реализовать в ЮУрГУ. Авторы провели анкетирование среди преподавателей ЮУрГУ, планирующих публикации в зарубежных печатных изданиях, данные которого анализируются в статье. Результаты исследования можно использовать при создании и проектировании центров академического письма в российских вузах и разработки программ дополнительного образования.

*Ключевые слова: центр академического письма, академическое письмо, академический английский, тьютор, тьютор по письменной речи.*

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