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**COMMUNICATIVE ASPECT OF ADAPTATION OF FIRST-YEAR  
STUDENTS TO THE UNIVERSITY EDUCATIONAL  
ENVIRONMENT**

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*Abstract*

The article provides an update on the issue of the first-year students' adaptation to the academic educational environment, presenting theoretical grounds and working solution models to this problem.

In the present study, the authors identified the causes of the gap between the school and university communicative space. We consider the objective causes to be the differences between the pedagogical discourse at school and at university (academic) level, namely, the mismatch, or partial match, of the participants' statuses and roles, communication goals, leading concepts, genre system, etc. The subjective causes are the specifics of schoolchildren's communicative competence development, when the actual purpose for developing verbal communication skills is to pass the attestation and the Unified State Examination successfully, as well as other utilitarian educational tasks, but not the graduate's future in communication. The article pays special attention to the communicative aspect of the school inquiry-based learning, which often only mimics research, aggravating the communicative gap between the school and university (academic) discourse.

This article reveals two interrelated tasks, accomplishing which will contribute to overcoming the communicative barrier between school and university educational space in modern Russian education. At school: the necessity to create a cultural and verbal environment introducing academic culture to the pupils. At university: development and implementation of a special adaptation training course. The article provides a detailed overview of the *Speech Practices* course, run in the Moscow Pedagogical State University, which aims at improving the communicative competencies of first years for successful education and further professional engagement.

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## 1. Introduction

The continuity of education in the Russian Federation is ensured by smooth succession between educational levels. At each stage, the educational space is substantially complete and self-sufficient, whilst being open for the next level, creating inner prerequisites for the student's upcoming transition. It is obvious that special conditions should be created in order to ensure the continuity in the actual educational process. This article provides an overview of the model of developing the first-year students' discursive competencies, required in new academic educational environment (in comparison with school).

## 2. Problem Statement

Having sufficiently mastered at school the communicative competencies ensuring successful interaction in the university (academic) communication space, the student will not experience serious communication problems during the adaptation period at the university educational space.

However, the observation of the communicative behaviour of first-year students at the MPSU, interviews, analysis of their diagnostic and current work on different educational disciplines allowed drawing a conclusion on the absence of continuity between the school and university communicative spaces. Above that, arguably, there exists a communicative barrier between these educational environments. Students have difficulties in various cases of verbal and written academic communication; they are incapable of creating texts in genres of academic discourse, and are unable to analyse their own communicative behaviour during academic interaction.

To illustrate the point, we quote here the students' answers to the open questions from the questionnaire on the first years' readiness to successful interaction in university (academic) communicative space. "Before I started my studies at the university, I had never made a viva voce report without a written paper." (Irina K.) "I did not know how to listen and write the abstracts correctly, although it seemed to be quite easy." (Daria M.) "I thought that the genre of essays is exactly what we had written for the Unified National Exam in the Russian language." (Maria T.) "I was not familiar with the academic genres, I had no idea, how to create such texts. I was as narrow-minded as a schoolchild." (Ekaterina L.) "I could not analyse the text in detail; I had a template thinking of a pupil." (Anna S.) "The lecturer at the university is different from the school teacher; he communicates with students almost as with equals." (Anton B.) "Many lecturers treat students as adults and communicate on equal terms, as adult to adult." (Maria N.)

Apparently, it is necessary to comprehend theoretically the phenomenon of the communicative gap between the school and university space, to develop the precise lingua-didactic and rhetorical models to overcome it, to create special communicative adaptation programmes for students in the conditions of new discourse, entirely unknown to them.

In overseas education, this problem is solved by implementing the academic literacy model: in order to study at the university successfully, the student must master the language competence, the communication skills in current discourse, the text information processing technologies (Green, 1999). After enrolling at a university, the first-year student takes TALL – the Test of Academic Literacy Levels. In particular, the test reveals the level of proficiency in academic vocabulary; reading competence; understanding the polycode texts; cognitive skills; competence in creating one's own argumentative text; level of abstract thinking ability, etc. (Weideman, DYK van, 2016; Slik van der & Weideman, 2010; Pot,

2013, 2014; Butler, 2013, 2014). It is important that the first year, who had demonstrated an insufficient level of academic literacy, gets an opportunity to improve, while studying at the university in the course of special classes. (Goodfellow, 2004, 2011; Lindermann, 2005; White & Wright, 2015). Such adaptation programmes, as a rule, are unavailable in Russian universities' educational space.

### **3. Research Questions**

The essential aims of this study were to:

- identify the causes of the gap between the school and university communicative space;
- identify the ways to overcome this gap;
- design the first year's adaptation programme at the university educational space.

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

Thus, the purpose of the study is to define the theoretical grounds and principles of the adaptation programme development for the first-year students, aimed at developing their communicative and verbal skills, essential for the successful training activities in the university educational space.

### **5. Research Methods**

The principles of Taisa A. Ladyzhenskaya's rhetorical school constitute the methodological basis of the study. These are rhetoric of effective communication, conceptual positions of pedagogical rhetoric and pedagogical discourse study. The present article develops the author's scientific ideas, providing update on the communicative aspect of the schoolchildren and students' academic culture. The following research methods were applied: study and comparative analysis of psycho-pedagogical, speech study, and methodical literature; monitoring with documentation; analysis of text production results.

### **6. Findings**

The difficulty of students' adaptation during the transition from school communicative space to the university is the result of two groups of causes:

- Objective causes related to the differences between the school pedagogical discourse and the university pedagogical discourse, having signs of academic discourse;
- subjective causes, consequent to the way the school educational process is organized, when the purpose of developing verbal communication skills is to pass the attestation and the Unified State Examination successfully, but not the graduate's future in communication.

Let us reveal the mentioned causes in detail.

The school communicative space and the university communicative space are different types of pedagogical discourse: "the semiotic process of formation and interpretation of educational texts in a holistic, closed communicative situation, immersed in the sphere of organized learning" (Gabidullina, 2009). The school discourse is characterized by the following statuses and roles: teacher – teacher, teacher – pupil, pupil – pupil, teacher – parent, etc.; the communicative goal is to adapt the person to living in the society; the concept is training; the high priority values are related to mastering skill and knowledge, improving qualifications, etc. (Scherbinina, 2015). The university (academic) discourse, as rightly argued

V.V. Maximov, E.V.Naidyon, A.N. Serebrennikova, "arises at the intersection of an open set of primary discourses: academic, educational, administrative, managerial, etc." (Maximov, Naidyon, & Serebrennikova, 2010). The collective monograph *The University Linguoculture* enumerates "the features of the academic discourse: 1) specific purpose of communication, consisting in socialization of new members of society and in rendering of educational services; 2) the communication circumstances taking place in a higher educational institution, and the resulting style formality, predetermined subject, presence of institutional symbols; 3) characteristics of the participants of communication, acting in accordance with their status and role function; 4) texts containing signs of belonging to the social institution (forms of documents, certificates of gratitude, greetings, invitations, etc.); 5) established genres within a certain type of discourse (journal, examination sheet, student record book, qualification work, diploma, etc.)" (Pitina, 2016).

Our comparative analysis of the corps of studies on pedagogical discourse study allows to conclude that effective verbal interaction in the university (academic) discourse requires from yesterday's pupil special conversational skills: awareness of his/her new communicative role, a communicative goal, different from the one in school, a leading concept of discourse, essential speech genres, etc. The basis for these skills is formed at the previous educational stage, at school. However, during the interviews and in questionnaires, the first-year students report, in particular, that they face problems with creating educational and academic texts even in the familiar genres of report, summary, and review.

Moreover, the communicative gap between the school and university space is aggravated by the phenomenon existing in the school educational process nowadays, which can be called pseudo-scientific activity, simulating research. This results, in particular, in the mass generation of pseudo-scientific profane texts, devoid of communicative concept, having only external signs of the text, built on the basis of templates and clichés. Below are some examples of the research work of schoolchildren sent to scientific and practical conferences and approved by their teachers in charge: "The hypothesis is that the scope of this study will not only broaden my horizons, but also will become my first step towards achieving the goal of becoming the oceanologist." – The student has a misconception of the essence of the hypothesis in the scientific (academic) discourse; "The obsolete lexis in Pushkin's oeuvres as a subject of research was repeatedly mentioned in the scientific literature. The opinion that Alexander Pushkin is the creator of the modern Russian language is an axiom. However, the language is a constantly evolving phenomenon, which exists historically, and therefore, the topic does not lose its relevance." – The student does not understand the meaning of the term "axiom" and violates causal relationships in discourse; "Robert Burns's oeuvres have never before been studied in terms of metaphor usage, since the metaphor is organically linked to the poetic vision of the world. Burns's oeuvres are characterized by the extremely frequent use of botanical, that is, floral metaphor. Apparently, this is the result of his rural ancestry. Consequently, the poet was close to the world of nature and deeply understood its essence. This explains the nature of world-view of Burns's lyrical hero." – Numerous logical inconsistencies in the text composition, presumptuous statements, indicating the writer's lack of academic culture ("Robert Burns's oeuvres have never before been studied in terms of metaphor usage.")

The solution to the problem of adaptation of the first-year student at the university (academic) communicative space can be found by accomplishing two interrelated tasks:

- the creation of a cultural and verbal educational environment at school, forming the basis for the pupil's successful communication outside school communicative space, in the conditions of academic communication at the university;

- the development of a special adaptation training course in the university educational programme, aiming to adapt the first-year students to the university communicative space.

The first task is aimed at creating the prerequisites of the pupil's communicative success at university (academic) discourse, which are formed in the specially organized school educational environment, in particular, in the environment of inquiry-based learning, which forms the academic culture of a schoolchild-researcher. We regard the academic culture as "the system of values, norms, rules, patterns of behaviour, methods of activity, principles of communication based on pedagogically adapted experience of scientific and educational activity" (Erokhina, 2014).

The continuity of the culture and verbal educational environment of inquiry-based learning is ensured by the intersection and interrelation of its three components: "the lesson's educational environment, based on the teacher's use of problematic teaching methods and his or her command of means of dialogization of education and skills of rhetorical provision of creative interaction between the teacher and the pupil; students-researchers' activities outside of class hours (expeditions, workshops, conferences, gatherings, forums, etc.), during which their academic culture is being formed systematically; all other forms of verbal interaction carried out in the school communicative space, based on the academic culture values and traditions" (Erokhina, 2014).

The accomplishment of the second task will allow creating conditions for the first-year students' on-the-spot adaptation to the university (academic) discourse. The model of the adaptation course aimed at improving communicative competencies for successful education and subsequent professional activities of students is the obligatory discipline of the curriculum of all directions and profiles of learning at the Moscow Pedagogical State University – the Speech Practices course.

The course consists of the following modules.

Reading strategies. Topic 1. Reading in modern society: reading in information society; reader's culture and its components; various information sources in modern society (audiovisual, electronic, hypertext, multimedia); techniques of working with different information sources; stages of working with text. Topic 2. Strategies for reading and comprehension of educational and academic texts: ways of information presentation in educational texts; the ratio of textual and non-textual information (graphic, tabular, iconic) in academic documents; composition of the main kinds of academic documents; productive pretext strategies: creating a glossary of terms, required to read the text; using preliminary reading "organizers"; posing the pre-reading questions, etc.; reading with memos and questions; strategies OBZOR, INSERT, SMART; strategies for working with info text: "information map", "facts pyramid", "concepts pyramid", etc.; strategy for posing questions and formulating responses; strategy for after-reading activities dealing with educational and academic texts; formalized and non-formalized methods of processing (summarizing) of educational and academic information; graphic information organizers, providing text comprehension: clusters, tables, flowcharts, etc.

Methods of creating texts of different genres in the course of educational and academic communication. The content of each topic in this module necessarily includes mastering the genre-creating

strategy, speech presentation; analysis, self-evaluation, peer analysis, reflection. Topic 3. Self-presentation: speech cases, which require self-introduction; avoidance of self-praise in self-introduction. Topic 4. Summary: cases of educational activity requiring summarizing skills; types of summaries. Topic 5. Presentation, report: cases of educational activity requiring presentation or reporting skills; ways to establish and maintain contact with the audience during the report. Topic 6. Dialogue, interview, listening: meaning of the listening skill; choosing an interviewee; questions to be asked; interviewer's speech behaviour; common mistakes of a first-time interviewer. Topic 7. Review, feedback: differences between review and feedback; methods of expression and argumentation of the follow-up appraisal in the review; essential compositional parts of reviews; types of modern reviews. Topic 8. Public Speaking: types of speakers; ways and methods of maintaining contact with listeners while speaking; types of public speaking; main ways of influencing the audience; speech development techniques.

Spelling and Punctuation training. Topic 9. Tricky spelling cases. Topic 10. Tricky punctuation cases.

We emphasize here that the theoretical basis of this course is instrumental knowledge promoting the development of students' communicative competencies; the course is distinctly practice-oriented.

A very important part of this course is devoted to self-evaluation training (unfortunately, reflexive skills associated with creating text are not developed in yesterday's schoolchildren). The reflexive skills are the cornerstone of the first years' future communicative development. Each student's text created in the course of Speech Practices undergoes inevitable collective discussion and self-evaluation. Below are some examples: "First, I should answer the question: have I achieved the goals, which I had set before the presentation? The first one was to convey the information, and I believe that I have coped with this task: my presentation contained extensive information on the subject that I had chosen, I tried to speak simply and clearly, it was obvious, that the listeners understood the information and nobody stayed indifferent. The second one was to spark the audience's interest, and I think that I have coped with this task, too – I had specially chosen the topic, which was not widely known, so the information was new to the audience. Judging by the reaction of the audience, my subject was interesting to them, they listened carefully." (Irina A.); "I would like to start analysing my presentation by acknowledging the fact that I did not like it at all. However, I managed to attract the audience's attention. I saw excited eyes, which certainly was an advantage of my presentation. I succeeded in choosing the so-called "fun facts and highlights" from a huge flow of information, so the audience listened with interest. However, I did not succeed in presenting a competent conclusion of the text. Due to this failure, most likely caused by agitation, I could not make a point in my text, as was supposed. As a result, I lost the train of thought, which was a huge disadvantage of my presentation. As I have already said, I am not happy with my performance. I got lost in emotion, and I failed to deliver the text. Knowing myself, I could have performed much better. I need to control my emotions, so as not to get overwhelmed. Perhaps, such behaviour was influenced by agitation, which I tried to hide in my emotionality." (Maria S.).

The model of Speech Practices course provides for delegation of responsibility for the implementation of each programme module to the corresponding specialized chair. All the Speech Practices lecturers are united into a temporary laboratory. Peer training, peer consulting, sharing theoretical and practical experience for lecturers from different specialized chairs are organized. Moreover, during the

Speech Practices course students interact with lecturers not only in class, but also in the Moodle distance learning space.

## 7. Conclusion

The innovative approach to developing students' communicative competence requires the content and methodology revision of the educational discipline in the aspect of strengthening the activity approach, together with a fundamental change of the university communicative space. The implementation model of the Speech Practices course, discussed above, assumes the following changes to the existing boundaries of the university communicative space:

- open communicative space of each chair, overcoming traditional information and communication isolation of chairs;
- decentering from pragmatic chair-related tasks to the goal of creating culturally developing verbal environment at university;
- bridging and expansion of communicative spaces of chairs on the basis of constructive professional dialogue;
- integration of the real and virtual academic communicative space.

The change of university communicative space as a basis for effective implementation of new models of developing students' communicative competence is a long, labour intensive process that requires overcoming many subjective and objective barriers.

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