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**ACADEMIC COMMUNICATION ONLINE: AN INTERCULTURAL
ASPECT**

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the peculiarities of academic communication in the time of new external challenges. Internationalization and digitalization of education are important factors. The spread of infection caused by the coronavirus COVID-19 has become the reason for the transition to distance learning, in which written academic communication is becoming increasingly important. However, there are certain differences in national academic cultures, which in turn affect the construction of written communication. An important aspect of successful academic communication is the formation of academic literacy, which implies mastery of academic discourse. As part of the study, an analysis of written communication in the academic environment was carried out on the basis of correspondence between students and teachers on various academic issues, as well as communication during training sessions in a distance form. When analysing the materials, it was considered to what extent students' skills in written academic speech are formed, whether they possess elements of a business and scientific style, whether they have formed the ability to think critically, which is necessary for the implementation of academic activities both in Russian and foreign universities. The main emphasis in this study is placed on the intercultural aspect of this communication. The difference in academic communication between different cultures has also been the subject of research. The results of the study showed that students with the necessary knowledge and competencies and experience in a foreign-language academic environment are better prepared for successful academic communication abroad.

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Keywords: Academic communication, academic discourse, academic literacy, intercultural competence, online learning



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1. Introduction

The study of the intercultural features of academic communication and academic discourse has acquired particular importance in the context of the internationalization of education, which entailed active academic and scientific contacts, as well as an increase in the number of foreign students and teachers. For the successful integration of students into the new academic environment of a foreign university, it is necessary to form intercultural academic competence, which includes intercultural communicative competence and academic literacy.

Students, both at their own university and abroad, inevitably find themselves involved in several types of academic communication related to educational, research, and organizational activities. The digitalization of education and challenges such as the coronavirus pandemic are increasingly transferring academic communication to an online format, which requires students to have special communication skills, primarily, written communication and academic literacy skills.

2. Problem Statement

Academic communication is part of academic discourse. Over the past five years, the number of Russian research publications devoted to academic discourse and comparative studies of various forms of academic communication has increased (Amerkhanova, 2016; Cheremokhina & Stebunova, 2018; Dronov, 2018; Kazakova, 2012; Obdalova & Kharapudchenko, 2019; Smirnova, 2015, 2017; Surkova & Latysheva, 2017; Velikolug, 2018).

There is no consensus among scholars about the essence of academic discourse. Quite often, “academic discourse” and “scientific discourse” are considered contiguous and have practically identical properties and functions, although some Russian researchers share them. The features of academic discourse are presented in the works of Kazakova (2012) and Obdalova and Kharapudchenko (2019), who see in it a combination of scientific and educational discourse, that is, a set of texts that meet the goals of scientific communication and verbalize scientific knowledge, and texts of a descriptive-prescriptive nature that do not imply equality of the addressee and the addressee used for learning and educational purposes.

Analysis of current publications by Russian researchers allows us to highlight the main difference between the two discourses: scientific discourse covers a wider range of scientific knowledge, academic discourse is focused on scientific communication aimed at achieving educational goals.

Academic discourse is associated with the formation of academic literacy, which is understood, first of all, the mastery of academic discourse: receptive and productive skills and abilities of oral and written academic speech; a certain way of thinking that meets the requirements of a given cultural environment; the ability to think critically, necessary for the implementation of academic (educational and scientific) activities; acceptance of value attitudes and norms of behaviour in a specific academic environment (Smirnova, 2017; Velikolug, 2018). The intercultural aspect of academic literacy is emphasized by

Smirnova (2017), who calls it metasubject competence, a kind of complex structural education that combines both knowledge and worldview, as well as intellectual and communication skills” and considers it as “the ability to function effectively in a multilingual academic environment: carry out intercultural communication based on professionally oriented texts of different genres. (p. 142)

In an intercultural context, we are talking, first of all, about the mastery of a foreign language written speech as the main component of academic literacy. Communication via e-mail and educational platforms is an integral part of academic communication in Russian and foreign universities today.

However, there are certain differences in national academic cultures, which in turn affect the construction of written communication. For example, in German universities, the following communication situations can be distinguished, typical for written communication between students and teachers using e-mail: "request for an appointment", "confirmation or cancellation of an appointment" (Terminbestätigung, Terminabsprache), "apology for absence from class" (Entschuldigung für Abwesenheit), the question of the approval of graduate thesis or an exam (Frage nach Einverständnis für die Abschlussarbeit, für die Prüfung), consent or refusal to conduct an exam (Prüfungsabsprache, Prüfungsabsage), etc. Some of the above situations are unfamiliar to Russian students due to the difference in the educational process, while others they prefer to resolve orally.

However, there are also common features in academic communication. So, Surkova and Latysheva (2017), in their research, analyzed the electronic correspondence of students and teachers in Russian and German academic discourses and identified a number of linguocultural features. In both linguocultures, while reducing the academic distance, researchers found “violation of the norms of business correspondence in academic discourse, written communication acquires the features of verbal friendly communication or becomes emotionally colored” (Surkova & Latysheva, 2017, p. 129).

3. Research Questions

This study is based on the assumption that the successful participation of students in a variety of academic mobility programs will be more successful if foreign language academic literacy and intercultural competence are previously formed (Ushanova et al., 2019). The empirical research carried out helped to answer the following questions:

- 3.1.** What problems of written academic communication between students and teachers appeared after the transfer of training to a distance format?
- 3.2.** How to develop intercultural competence sufficient for successful entry into a new academic culture before starting study abroad?
- 3.3.** What is the role of (self) reflection in the process of intercultural academic communication?

The authors of the study pose the third question, assuming that the stage of reflection plays a special role in the development of intercultural competence, which is necessary for successful academic communication of students in a foreign university.

For the formation of intercultural competence, it is important to have the ability to flexibly adapt to new intercultural situations, to correlate your system of values with a new one, i.e. reflect. Reflection can

lead to an affective reassessment of other people's ways of thinking and behaviour, which is a prerequisite for the development of empathy and the acceptance of foreign behaviour into one's own repertoire (Deardorff, 2006).

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify the characteristic features of written academic communication based on the analysis of written texts implemented in academic discourse, and to identify factors that interfere with the implementation of communicative goals, including in an intercultural academic context.

5. Research Methods

The main research methods are discourse and stylistic analysis. The features of academic communication in the online format are analysed using examples of texts created in the process of distance learning for the first- and second-year bachelor students with the major in Linguistics, Philology, Journalism and Culture Studies and Master students of the first year with the major in Linguistics. In total, more than 900 messages were analysed, selected according to two criteria: 1) written organizational-academic communication "student-teacher", 2) written academic communication in training sessions in the format of distance learning (forums).

It should be noted that in distance courses on the Moodle platform, the "Forum" module is used to discuss the course content, conduct an online discussion, for example, a report or presentation, cases for discussions, etc., therefore, this type of educational activity demonstrates students' communication skills and their ability to reflect.

It is assumed that the first-year undergraduate students are not yet familiar with intercultural communication. At the start of the study, the second-year students had already been studying the course "Introduction to the theory of intercultural communication" for two months. In addition, some of the students have already had experience of staying in a foreign-language academic environment. Master students have already formed competences in the field of intercultural communication, business communication, foreign language speech culture. At the first stage, in order to find answers to the first and second problematic questions, the written messages of the first- and second-year students were analysed. At the second stage, the written messages of undergraduates were analysed, both in educational forums and in electronic correspondence, as well as messages from the final forum, which are reflections of students after completing the course "Intercultural communication in academic discourse".

6. Findings

At the first stage, tests of e-mails of the first-year students were analysed. In general, the elements of business style characteristic of academic communication are present in most letters. However, there are also deviations from business correspondence standards.

First of all, violations concern the formulas for greeting, addressing and going directly to the subject line. Only 30% of the letters contained the classic greeting and address to the teacher by name and

patronymic. In the rest, there is no appeal by name, patronymic, and after the greeting, a question or an explanation of the reason for the letter immediately follows. For example:

Здравствуйте, я перевелась с 1 курса...

Здравствуйте. Просрочила задание на пару часов, но скинула его вам на почту 13 числа днём.

Извините за опоздание.

It is a violation of business style to greet: *Добрый вечер. Я из группы 9221. Добрый вечер, я не могу записаться на ваш курс истории*, as this assumes that the teacher will read and respond to the letter in his spare time. Such a greeting would be extremely negatively perceived in a different academic culture, for example, in German.

The general nature of the remarks is polite, which once again confirms the fact that the category of politeness is very important for academic communication, and students are aware of this. The analyzed letters of students contain the following clichés: *Здравствуйте, извините за беспокойство. Заранее спасибо за ответ. Здравствуйте, спасибо большое за реферат.*

Analysis of messages from the first- and second-year students in educational forums showed that this type of communication is perceived differently than correspondence by e-mail. In the written speech of students, an active transfer of the style of communication in ordinary chats to written academic communication is revealed. A characteristic feature is the simplification of communication, expressed in the use of emoticons or graphic symbols for depicting emotions, and excessive parceling of sentences. In discussions on forums, students rarely greet each other, despite the greetings from the teacher. As an introduction, instead of a greeting, the introductory phrases *на мой взгляд, я полагаю, думаю* are sometimes used. One of the two groups of the second year is characterized by the absence of controversy with each other and criticism regarding the answers of groupmates, that is, communication on the forum was carried out mainly in a pair of student-teacher. The exception was a few clichéd remarks as a reaction to previous messages: *Присоединяюсь к мнению выше. Полностью согласна с мнениями, представленными выше.*

The second group is characterized by a clearer positioning of their opinions. So, the message often begins with *я думаю, что ..., я считаю, что ...* (the most common variant), *на мой взгляд....* As a reaction to the previous remarks, *согласен, я согласна, что, верное замечание насчёт того, что, согласна насчёт того, что* are used. As for the elements of commenting on the speeches of classmates and statements of critical opinion, they appeared only after special reminders from the teacher. For the most part, these are positive assessments, reflecting the students' unpreparedness for a critical attitude:

*Мне понравилась презентация Н**, все очень понятно и интересно!*

Хорошая презентация, информативная, освещены все важные аспекты, интересная.

Мне презентация понравилась, я узнала много новой информации. К тому же презентация красиво оформлена, из-за чего (лично у меня) знания закрепились.

Criticism is expressed cautiously and in a mild form: *Немного не хватило информации, например, касающейся Канады с точки зрения теории Э. Холла, особенностей невербальной коммуникации. А так презентация понравилась.*

One of the objectives of the course was to get acquainted with the specifics of communication in Germany. It has been repeated many times that the Germans are characterized by a direct communication style and an open expression of their opinions, including in the academic environment. Perhaps this knowledge contributed to the fact that by the end of the course students' comments became more critical. At the same time, the sharpness of criticism was compensated by highlighting the positive aspects of the report or presentation:

Презентация подробная, достаточно информативная, составлена луковица Хофстеде, чего не было в предыдущих презентациях, но немного не хватило информации по аспекту-невербальная коммуникация.

Доклад был менее интересным для меня из-за некорректного оформления и подачи темы. ...Также качественная проработка материала, хороший доклад, оформление, единственное иногда не совсем "русские" формулировки.

... Отсутствует оформление, материал изложен понятно, но в пункте рекомендаций не совсем корректные формулировки.

... В целом доклад понятен, хорошо оформлен, но местами есть повторы (согласился с соглашением, при нарушениях или нарушениях...), неточности в формулировках, не совсем подходящие эквиваленты подобраны, не очень хорошо сформулирован пример про чехов и ярмарку.

В докладах есть некоторые некорректные формулировки, но, тем не менее, материал докладов понятен.

Reflection on the complexity of the online class format is also present, albeit in an insignificant amount:

Мне нравится больше оффлайн занятия, так как живое общение - это очень удобно, можно сразу спросить и уточнить что-то, легче обсуждать доклады/презентации. Также, информация на лекциях запоминается при живом общении лучше, чем в онлайн форме. Очень не хватает лекций и семинаров в их классическом понимании.

Оффлайн занятия, по моему мнению, однозначно лучше. Живое общение предоставляет возможность незамедлительно уточнить что-то, устранить недопонимания, быстрее обмениваться информацией и мыслями. Обсуждение докладов, презентаций, кейсов онлайн неудобно (...) не хватает пояснений и вставок, возможных при живом взаимодействии.

At the second stage of the research, about 200 messages from the educational forums of undergraduates were analyzed. The results confirmed that students have academic literacy, developed

communicative and intercultural competencies. According to the students, the main characteristic features of communication realized in academic discourse are:

- Compliance with the linguistic and stylistic norms inherent in academic communication in general.

For example, an address as *Вы [You]* not only to the teacher, but also to each other:

*Да, О**, ваше мнение насчет гендера полностью разделяю.*

*Д**, согласна с вами. Спасибо за ответ!*

*Д**, спасибо за ответ! Согласна с вашими комментариями.*

- Implementation of politeness. For any speeches, questions, remarks, students thank each other, which in some moments is even unnecessary:

*О**, спасибо за дополнение.*

*А**, спасибо за комментарий!*

*А**, спасибо, что отменили такой фактор, как разница во времени.*

*Д**, спасибо за ответ! Согласна с тем, что положительный настрой очень часто помогает справиться с волнением.*

*Спасибо за ответ, Л**! Я согласна со всеми ответами на этот вопрос. Но хочу добавить также...*

- Expressing your own evaluative narrowing, critical objections. Students, obviously, are aware of the importance of critical opinion, but in practice they rather do not criticize each other, but only complement. However, evaluative components are present:

*Д**, спасибо большое за интересную презентацию!*

*О**, спасибо за развернутые комментарии и дополнения к теме занятия.*

Спасибо большое за выполненную работу. Благодаря вашей презентации я поняла то, как определяется реализация вежливости в академическом и научном дискурсе. Более того, вам удалось донести главное из статьи автора.

Добрый вечер! Спасибо за такой тщательный и продуманный доклад!

Добрый вечер, спасибо за презентацию! Очень полезный материал.

*О**, А**, спасибо за доклад! Представленная информация будет очень полезна нам в практических целях.*

Of greatest interest are the messages of Master students from the final forum, aimed at reflection on the entire course. Unlike the second-year students, for whom offline communication would be preferable, Master students rated the advantage of the online format positively:

This type of communication, in my opinion, differs in that it:

- *reduces time costs*
- *helps to avoid mistakes*
- *maximally allows each participant to be involved in the discussion.*

In my opinion, we have completed all the tasks set. In the process of discussions, they openly shared their opinions, supported the theory with experience and analysis of cases (which, I think, was especially interesting and informative). Also, this type of communication made it possible to use the rules of the business style of communication in the online environment. Another of the features of written academic communication via the Internet, I would like to highlight the fact that when composing an answer to a question, students have more time to think about the answer, to compose several options. Thus, the answers and other messages are extremely clear for understanding, they can be read several times in order to understand the essence of the text.

The already existing experience and knowledge about the features of academic communication in other countries allowed students to highlight the "Russian" feature:

There were no harsh statements / criticism ... One can associate such restraint with the manifestation of collectivist cultural features.

I would attribute the lack of open expression of disagreement to the "Russian" characteristic features of academic discussion ... During our online discussions, situations of disagreement between communicants very rarely arose. At the same time, in cases where a participant wanted to correct or supplement a friend's answer, he used polite formulations, necessarily thanked the addressee for his opinion, but at the same time directly expressed his own point of view on this or that issue.

The study showed that the first- and second-year bachelor students, feeling the lack of offline communication with teachers, tried to compensate for it through written academic communication after the transfer of training to a distance format. At the same time, for the Master students, the format of written communication turned out to be comfortable and convenient.

7. Conclusion

In the modern educational environment, successful intercultural academic communication requires all participants to have developed communicative competence, academic literacy, knowledge of business correspondence features. The success of academic communication is largely due to the observance of the normative and communicative aspects of speech. Academic discourse intersects with discourses of other types, absorbs their elements, and in such discourse violations of communicative, linguistic and even ethical norms arise.

The experience and knowledge about the peculiarities of academic communication in other countries, obtained in the classes on intercultural communication, allow us to form intercultural competence, sufficient for a successful entry into a new academic culture before starting study abroad.

(Self) reflection plays an important role in the process of intercultural academic communication and allows us to critically reflect on previous negative experiences and use positive experiences.

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