

Review research paper

## INTERNATIONAL STUDENT CONFERENCE AS A MEANS OF DEVELOPING ACADEMIC COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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**Abstract.** *The study highlights 20-year experience of organizing international student conferences in foreign languages as a framework for holistic development of academic communication skills. Conventional ESP syllabi suggest passive learning strategies, which replicate those of general English courses. Students are offered pedagogic materials which aim at reiterating the knowledge that instructors and textbooks provide. However, there exists a substantial gap between reproducing academic knowledge and becoming an independent actor in the selected field of expertise. In this sense it seems crucial to outline a framework for active independent learning for budding professionals to achieve academic autonomy at a reasonable pace. To reach this objective, we have been organizing international student conference for the LSP students at RUDN university, which is not a standalone event, but a part of ESP curriculum. Conference preparations are designed as multiple interventions aimed at developing linguistic and extra linguistic skills alike. The course on conference preparation is designed in line with the major subjects and overall academic competence of the participants. Every year Bachelor's students write and present a research paper, which starts as a teamwork on a synopsis of studies on a given topic and eventually results in successful defense of a Bachelor's thesis in a foreign language of the student's choice.*

**Key words:** *student conference, academic communication, ESP*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The paper investigates potentials of undergraduate research in ESP acquisition, as well as development of overall academic communication skills. The positive impact of undergraduate research has been discussed in past literature extensively (Kuh 2008). It has been noted that having students' voices heard builds self-confidence, increases motivation and fosters engagement among the learners (Hunter et al 2007). Moreover, it has been claimed that student research is the XXI century pedagogy (Council on Undergraduate Research 2005). Meeting the academic demand for the new age pedagogies a number of events which foster dissemination of learners' findings have emerged. Such gatherings organized by leading universities provide a platform for maximum exposure of the participants to the budding professional community (Spronken-Smith et al 2008). This

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Submitted September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2022, accepted for publication November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2022

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perspective is a major development on the conventional education framework which fosters passive learning strategies of replicating knowledge fed by the instructors and textbooks (Jones 1998), (Smith et al 2009).

Apparently, such events are of great value only in case the studies presented comply with high academic standards. Therefore, it is essential to establish a preparatory framework to facilitate successful completion of a research project. The educational philosophy which stands behind the concept of a research project was summarized in (Matsagouras 2011) as indicated in Fig. 1

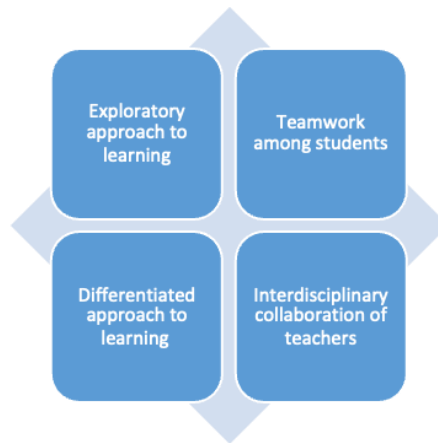


Fig. 1 Educational Concept of a Research Project

The key features of the research project as highlighted in (Matsagouras 2011) are the active participation of the learners as opposed to traditional passive acquisition paradigm, as well as retaining meaningful knowledge which has positive impact on the overall learning process, as illustrated in Fig. 2

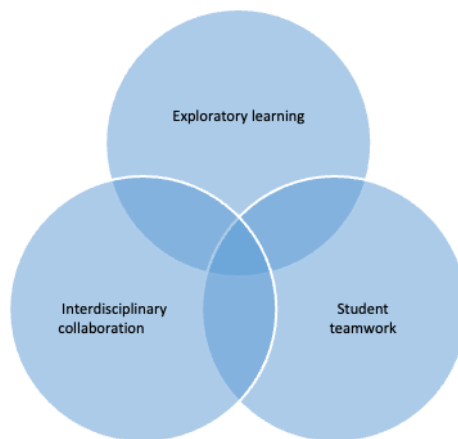


Fig. 2 Key Features of a Research Project

On the participants' side, conferences also provide a unique opportunity to contextualize their research within state-of-the-art disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspective. This is even more true for the events that are conducted in foreign languages, which allow to attract broader audience and shape multifaceted perspective on the matters discussed. Having said that, writing up and presenting a research project in a foreign language adds another dimension to a preparation process. Multiple benefits of foreign language research projects have been discussed in literature, they increase motivation for ESP students, broaden their outlook and engage those who would be willing to opt for an international academic career (Avdonina et al 2016, 2020), (Bytyqi, 2021). On the extra-linguistic level joint research fosters teamwork skills, which have a great potential to evolve into productive outputs (Balula et al, 2019).

Apart from numerous benefits, conferences in foreign languages present multiple challenges to an ESP instructor. Preparation for such events requires interdisciplinary cooperation, smooth introduction of learners to international publication standards, shaping up academic reading, writing and presenting skills in a very practical manner, engaging those who are reluctant to do research and encouraging the students to present in public. In this paper we would like to showcase our approach to a multi-stage conference preparation process highlighting our strategies to tackle challenges, which inevitably occur.

## 2. METHODS AND OBJECTIVES

The study intends to showcase a 4-year workflow with a number of stages arranged in ascending order to replicate the standard research process in a bottom-up perspective, shown in Fig. 3

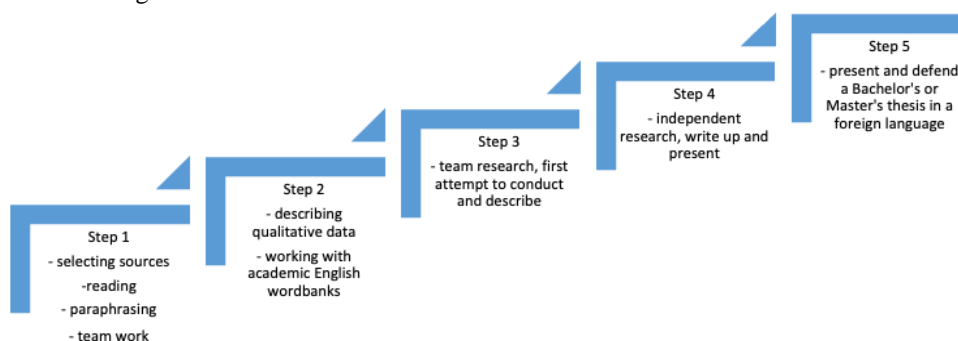


Fig. 3 Development of Academic Communication Skills

### 2.1. Participants

Participation in the conference is obligatory for all students, their age is between 18 and 23, language proficiency varies between A2 and C1 according to CEFR.

### 2.2. Layout

An international student conference is an annual event, which is held onsite or online, depending on the current regulations for the universities in Russia. The participants are

suggested to present their talks in 4 languages: English, German, French and Spanish. Since the event is hosted by the Institute of Environmental Engineering of RUDN university, the scope of the conference embraces a vast range of topics in natural sciences. However, since the students also minor in specialized translation, they can present talks on translation theory or social sciences alike. The multidisciplinary nature of the event allows to attract a substantial number of international participants as well, in the past decade the conference evolved from a minor domestic event into a major platform for the international exposure. The event is organized by a foreign languages department; all other departments of the Institute provide academic support to the RUDN participants.

Participation in the conference is an obligatory part of the LSP syllabus. Since the number of hours allocated for foreign languages is rather limited, the conference preparation is arranged as a number of interventions, each year the level of complexity and student autonomy is increased. In 4 years the students transition from producing a guided derivative synopsis in a team of 3-4 participants to a fully independent research in a foreign language of their choice to present and defend as their graduate thesis. At RUDN university all graduate theses are presented in a foreign language, which challenges an LSP instructor with a rather complicated task of developing academic literacy of the students to the extent that they would be able to talk about their findings in a meaningful manner. In this respect a student conference is viewed as a platform for practicing public speech in a foreign language, answering questions and overcoming stage fright.

### **2.3. Workflow**

Based on our experience, to successfully participate in a conference the students need to acquire a number of linguistic and extralinguistic skills, which are arranged in stages to progress at reasonable pace in line with linguistic and academic competences alike.

#### *2.3.1. Stage 1*

In the first year of Bachelor's studies the students are offered basic skills to develop their perception of academic literature and make their first attempt in academic writing. There are several aspects to consider in this respect:

- Team work. At this stage, students work in a team, the LSP instructor offers to team up and select a topic for the synopsis based on the interests of the small group.
- Selecting sources. The LSP instructor teaches a webinar on features of google.scholar and cyberleninka search engines, provides recommendations for selecting relatively recent, highly cited and relevant sources.
- Academic reading. The teams are offered to read for the gist to grasp overall concepts of the research on the selected topic.
- Academic writing. The participants are offered an intervention on paraphrasing, summarizing and citing.

As a result, the team is supposed to produce a brief synopsis of the sources they read, avoiding plagiarism.

#### *2.3.2. Stage 2*

In the second year the students are offered 2 interventions to make their writing more sophisticated:

- Describing qualitative data: tables, graphs, diagrams, flowcharts. The rationale behind it is that in natural sciences most research is based on numerical data, which needs to be efficiently demonstrated and described.
- Academic English Phrasebank: the students are instructed on the freely available phrasebank by the Manchester university and encouraged to incorporate selected phrases into their writing.

On this stage the students are offered to produce a more sophisticated text, in a team or independently, which summarizes findings of several studies, incorporating qualitative data and paying specific attention to academic clichés.

### 2.3.3. Stage 3

In the third year the students select their major department and concentrate on a specific discipline, such as waste recycling, natural resources management, etc. Therefore, their overall academic literacy evolves to the sufficient level for an independent research to be conducted. The objectives for the third year are:

- Select a research topic of interest, as a team or independently.
- Collaborate with the professors of the major department on the content of the research project.
- Conduct an experiment, as a team or independently.
- Write up the results of the experiment in proper academic fashion, including past literature overview, research methodology, discussion and results.
- Present the findings at the conference.

In the third year the students are encouraged to present their findings in public. Their first attempt of independent research does not always go smoothly, therefore presentation is not obligatory yet.

### 2.3.4. Stage 4

In the fourth year the students work towards their graduate thesis. They all select a research topic at the beginning of the year and work on it independently. The objectives for the fourth year students are:

- Conduct a supervised individual research.
- Write up the results.
- Present the findings at the conference (obligatory).

Fourth year students serve as role models for the junior courses, hence they all have to prepare and polish their presentations to be presented at the conference.

### 2.3.5. Stage 5

This stage does not belong to the student conference per se, however it draws on the 4 years of previous work, as all students at RUDN university have to present their graduate thesis in a foreign language of their choice. They arrive at this stage having written 4 research papers and having presented in public and done Q&A at least once. Most of the graduates are able to produce a decent report on research findings due to previously acquired experience.

As for the Master's and PhD students, they also participate in the student conference, but they already have solid research experience, therefore the involvement of LSP instructor into their preparation is limited to proofreading the paper and the presentation.

### 3. DISCUSSION

In our experience, international student conferences have multilateral positive impact on the learners' engagement and motivation. Besides, they foster students' LSP/LAP proficiency and facilitate smooth introduction to academic research and speaking in public. However, multiple potentials of such events are paired with certain challenges, which the LSP/LAP instructors should address. The first factor that is always mentioned in this respect is *teamwork*. Indeed, collaborative activities are of great importance for those who are willing to become members of the professional community. Having said that, in many groups it is usually the case that one or two members complete the majority of chores, whereas the rest of the team are just being passive co-workers. In some cases, instructor's intervention is required to resolve such discrepancies. It should be noted though that the students who fall behind on team work inevitably face complications when they move onto the more advanced level of an individual research project, simply because they lack the necessary experience. Hence, in the first year we offer the students to work in a fully guided manner, for the LSP instructor to control distribution of chores within a team. Secondly, authentic academic reading might be complicated for the students of lower language proficiency. In this respect it is essential to offer the students full freedom of choice when it comes to selection of research topic. It is often the case that they opt for interdisciplinary papers of more understandable nature, e.g. green fashion or protection of rare species. In this case they draw their projects on the background of the common knowledge. The most problematic aspect is academic writing and we would like to shed light on the reasons for such state of affairs. Russian students normally take oral examinations at school and university alike. This means that their experience with writing in L1 or L2 is limited to discursive essays and emails. They do not have any consistent scholarly training on the matters of synthesizing and paraphrasing academic texts and preparation for a student conference is, as a rule, their first encounter with academic writing. Thus, there are a few key areas of improvement on the learners' side:

1. Understanding academic register. The learners are offered numerous samples of fiction texts compared to academic ones and are asked to formulate key features of the academic text, such as terminology, specific syntax, hedging and linking devices, etc.
2. Selecting a topic. Budding researchers tend to pick very broad issues to write about, e.g. *Global warming* or *Greenhouse gases*, which cannot be properly described within 3-4 pages of a short paper. It is essential to encourage the participants to narrow down the scope of their research towards their personal experiences, e.g. *Global warming in Perm in 2010-2020*.
3. Learning to critically access information. Authorial stance is rarely present in novice writing, it is limited to paraphrased or direct quotations. Hence the learners are asked to formulate their standpoint on the matter discussed in a paper and critically assess past literature based on the selected stance.
4. Writing up the research presents multiple challenges. We would recommend to write up and assess each part of the paper separately, paying specific attention to the layout and relevant clichés for abstracts, introduction, conclusion, etc.
5. Complying with publication standards. This seems a very obvious and simple requirement, however, very few participants manage to format a paper properly at once and the editing process requires multiple reiterations.
6. Reluctance to present in public. Many students tend to undermine their findings and are unwilling to present those at the conference. However, thorough preparation,

which involves editing of the presentation and rehearsing with the LSP instructor beforehand, allows to relieve the stage fright.

Apart from the issues summarized above, there are multiple other issues that need to be addressed individually. The key to success, in our opinion, is gradual progress from fully guided preparations to learner autonomy.

On the LSP/LAP instructors' side, there are a few challenges that need to be considered as well:

1. Limited hours allocated for LSP/LAP. At RUDN university Bachelor students learn foreign languages 4-6 hours a week, Master's and PhD students – 4 hours a week. The syllabus includes general English training, Cambridge exams preparations and LSP/LAP. In this respect it seems suboptimal to allocate time for conference preparations on a permanent basis. Hence, we arrange the process as numerous interventions during LSP/LAP classes.
2. Substantial overload on the organizing department. Apparently, organizing a conference for 300-400 participants is a massive undertaking as it involves interacting with participants before, during and after the event, collecting conference proceedings, relentless editing of students' manuscripts. In this respect it is essential to plan the event well ahead. External funding might also be helpful as some of the chores can be delegated.
3. Content-based complications. An LSP/LAP instructor is not an expert in the major field of natural sciences and sometimes is incapable of providing sound advice on the content of the research paper. Having said that, the overall purpose of the event from the LSP standpoint is training academic writing and speaking, thus for the foreign languages department the content of students' papers is of secondary nature.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

An international student conference serves multiple purposes in tertiary education. It introduces learners to academic research, provides a platform for their voices to be heard, fosters better understanding of a major discipline, develops cooperation and learner autonomy skills. There are several problematic issues on the learners' and instructors' sides alike, which can be remedied by thorough planning of all processes, as well as continuous support of the budding researchers on every step of the way.

**Acknowledgements.** The authors are grateful to Dr. Klaus Staubermann for the exceptional support without which this paper would not have been possible.

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