**Anna Abramova**

**Accommodation of Students from Former USSR Countries   
to Academic Writing in English in a Non-Anglophone Environment**

Research Proposal towards a Ph.D. degree in Applied Linguistics (draft)  
University of Klagenfurt, Austria

**1. Introduction**

Among the many ways in which globalisation affects academic life (such as joint study programs, collaborations, joint research projects and publications), two aspects are particularly relevant for the proposed dissertation project. One is the growing number of international students and researchers from diverse cultural backgrounds and research traditions. The other, partially related to the first, is the central (and ever growing) role of the English language as the academic *lingua franca.* The use of English plays an important role in non-anglophone context, enabling the students and researchers from diverse backgrounds to collaborate and to exchange ideas and information. English is essential for academic communication, publication (Lillis, 2010), and in many cases, also studies.

However, growing academic mobility can bring new challenges: students who go to study abroad find themselves in a new, unfamiliar environment, to which they need to adapt. The process of accommodation to a new cultural and linguistic context and adapting one’s academic practices, including academic writing, is not always smooth and easy. In academic writing, challenges may be related to L2 proficiency, to the writing structure, to differences in genre conventions, to cultural context, or to research approaches.

*In the proposed dissertation project, I intend to study the accommodation of students/young academics from several former USSR countries to the new cultural, academic, and linguistic environment, as reflected in their academic writing which usually takes place in English.*

Since the 1990s and until recently, the students and researchers from the former USSR have been a part of the academic globalisation process. However, since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, it seems entirely possible that Russia (and possibly Belarus) might cease to take an active part in this process. The Russian Federation has already severed many ties with the West, including the academic ones. As of July 2022, the Russian Federation membership in the Bologna academic system has been suspended (<https://ehea.info>), and the possibilities of student exchange for students from Russia in Western universities have become relatively scarce. However, this does not necessarily mean that the overall number of students and researchers with the post-Soviet academic background will decrease in the coming years.

First, the majority of other post-Soviet countries will continue to be a part of the international academic community. Moreover, the number of students from Ukraine, but possibly also from Russia, might increase in the very near future, due to the influx of political and war refugees. While psychological differences might be quite profound for exchange students and migrant or refugee students, their academic background remains essentially the same.

**2. Background**

***Add: Historically, “continental”*** *tradition (Smirnova and Lillis, 2022)****.***

**2.1 Soviet period**

The research and academic writing culture in the former USSR have been quite isolated for a long period of time, until the fall of the Iron Curtain in late 1980s. The publishing and research in the USSR took place predominantly in the Russian language, with relatively little exchange with the Western scientific community. The results of this separation meant, on the one hand, lagging behind in some spheres (such as sociology and psychology), and on the other hand, producing some original research not known in the West in such spheres as mathematics and linguistics.

During the period of isolation, a separate (and rich) scholarly tradition has been developed, with its own approach to genre conventions and forms in the academic writing in Russian. ***Add Heigl.***

The Academy of Sciences: “wide network of research centers (Altbach, 2013)” – creating a large amount of research output (Smirnova et al., 2021).

The influence of Russian as the language of science and academic publishing was not limited to the Republics of the Soviet Union; it expanded to other Socialist countries, as well as to Asian and African countries under Soviet influence. Some genres (such as “avtoreferat”) were exported to other socialist countries.

In fact, for a certain period (1970s), Russian has been the second largest language in academic publishing (Smirnova et al., 2021). Third largest printed output (after US and UK) according to WoS (ibid).

At the same time, reading matter in foreign languages, including English, was scarce (Smirnova and Guseva, 2021). Due to the abundance of publications in Russian language and in view of low probability of communication with western colleagues, proficiency in English was not perceived as necessary for a successful academic career. In the university context, only reading competence in English was required at PhD level. Using the help of a professional translator with foreign language articles and for publishing in international journals was common practice (Smirnova and Guseva, 2021).

**2.2 Post-Soviet Period**

After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, its academic system underwent a serious crisis. Numerous connections between its former republics, including the academic ties, were dissolved. The number of scientific publications in Russian decreased significantly (from 40.000 in 1990 to 25.000 in 1993) (Smirnova et al., 2021).

However, Russian language and the educational and academic system created during the Soviet period continue to play an important role in the majority of the former Republics. Many elements of the old structure including scientific genres, terminology, style, and schools of scientific thought, have been preserved and continue to exist to this day.

At the same time, a trend was established towards the integration with the global scientific / academic community. In 2000–2021, all former USSR countries, except Turkmenistan, showed a tendency towards the integration with the global academic system. A significant step in this direction was joining the international Bologna system. Participation in Bologna system makes it much easier for the students to study abroad, either as short-time exchange students or as long-term research students. Most former USSR countries joined Bologna system by 2005, with the exception of Belarus (2015) (<https://www.aacrao.org/edge/country/bologna-process>).

This, in turn, resulted in the growing need for foreign languages, especially English as the academic *lingua franca*, and led to reforms in education aiming to improve English proficiency. In Kazakhstan, English was even declared the third state language, and most universities introduced learning curricula in English. However, the reform in university education cannot proceed successfully without significant changes in school education and considerable improvement in the students’ English proficiency (Montgomery et al., 2019).

The same tendency towards the integration with the international academic community has been visible in the realm of scientific publishing. Two initiatives were launched in 2013 and 2017 by the Russian government, and new guidelines were issued, encouraging scholars to publish in the international academic journals (Smirnova et al., 2021).

***Add: Yakhontova and Kruze’s book (Russian and Ukrainian).***

**3. Literature / Previous Studies**

In their 1998 article, Lea and Street outline three possible (and, in their view, complementary) approaches to academic writing: writing as skill, as a form of socialisation, or as a literacy form. Such frameworks as ESL and EFL (English as a Second Language, English as a Foreign Language) normally view academic writing as a set of skills that can be taught and learned (or “transferred” from teacher to student). In this approach, emphasis lies on text (writing product).

SFL (Systemic Functional Linguistics) favours the socialization approach, with the emphasis on exploring academic genres and conventions and their underlying principles, or functions.

John Swales describes genre as grounded in shared communicative purposes and discoverable through text analysis. He also analysed elements (steps and moves) in specific genres and text forms (Swales, 1981; Moreno and Swales, 2017).

Nesi and Gardner (2012) have studied the student writing genres across the curriculum in British university system. In their survey, they link particular genres to certain disciplines, as well as to the stages of educational process and position in the curriculum.

***Add: Hyland’s Discourse Community***

***Add: Writing process***

Finally, in the younger fields of **EAP and ERPP** (English for Academic Purposes, English for Research and Publication Purposes), academic writing is viewed as a social and cultural practice embedded into practices and traditions of a certain community (Lea and Street, 1998; Donahue and Lillis, 2013).

***Add: Different traditions, approaches, emphases, and voices in the academic writing****: Slobin, Englander (2014, 2016, 2011), Kaplan (1966), Lillis and Curry (2022).*

Students / academic writers who enter a different linguistic environment are usually in need of adaptation.

* 1. **Approaches to Studying Writing Adaptation**

**3.1.1 Transfer of Competences**

A possible approach to studying the (writing) adaptation is to apply **Beaufort’s** **Model of** **Writing Expertise (1999**) which describes five interrelated key knowledge domains that inform the cognitive processes of expert writers: subject matter knowledge, genre knowledge, rhetorical knowledge, writing process knowledge, and discourse community knowledge.

Subject matter knowledge is the most obvious element that is necessary for good writing.

Genre knowledge: In Beaufort’s model, the term genre is used, following Hyland (2004), for classification and grouping texts together, representing how writers typically use language to respond to recurring situations. Genre knowledge is important for the writers in order to stay within the genre conventions or in order to consciously break them.

Rhetorical knowledge is specific knowledge of an audience and its expectations, as well as the communicative purpose, tailored to a specific instance of communication (Beaufort and Iñesta, 2014).

Writing process knowledge encompasses multiple, complex procedural activities that take a writer from the “first thought” to final product (Beaufort and Iñesta, 2014).

Discourse community knowledge refers to the social context of writing (values, goals, preferences for particular modes of communication, typical genres, norms for “good writing” that are typical for a given discourse community. Discourse community knowledge is the broad overarching domain which informs each of the other knowledge domains essential to composing.

According to Beaufort and Inesta (2014),all five domains of writing knowledge /expertise are involved in transfer of skills and knowledge across tasks. Transfer of expertise would involve “selecting which existing knowledge is relevant to the current writing task” (Beaufort and Iñesta, 2014). The most effective transfer across tasks is *strategic* and includes the following elements:

1. Analysis of the writing task in order to identify challenges.
2. Intentional selection of efficient solutions and strategies.
3. Assessing effectiveness of a chosen /current solution and readiness to look for a new one if necessary.

**3.1.2 Language resources**

Insight can also be gained from applying certain notions from the multilingualism studies, such as language resources and linguistic repertoire (Busch, 2012, 2015), to the study of writing adaptations in a new linguistic environment.

***Add: Definitions language resources, linguistic repertoire:*** *“the set of skills and knowledge a person has of one or more languages, as well as their different varieties”* (<https://www.upf.edu/>)

***Expand; maybe add*** *a few different definitions starting with Gumperz (1964).*

Participants select and apply resources from their linguistic repertoire as a way to respond to challenges which arise in a new linguistic environment.

**3.2 Studies of adaptations to academic writing in L2**

Dengscherz (2019) conducted a series of narrative interviews as well as writing observations with the advanced (Master’s and PhD) students at the University of Vienna. One of the important conclusions is that their writing process is intrinsically multilingual. Different stages of the writing process could take place in different languages.

Broido and Rubin (2020) conducted interviews with L2 academic writers in Tel-Aviv University. They describe multilingual writing practices of their participants as extremely varied and discuss the desire for “the own voice” which some of their respondents express.

***Add Göpferich, Flowerdew.***

**3.3 Academic Writing in English in the countries of the former USSR**

In the 2021 edited volume “*Emerging Writing Research from the Russian Federation*” (ed. A. Squires), Korotkina (2021) provides an overview of the academic writing development in the Russian Federation. As she and other authors in the same volume remark, in FSU, writing had been regarded as a matter of individual talent or of general education level and writing experience. English teachers became acquainted with concept of “academic writing” in the early 1990s, but it did not become more widely known until 2013, after the launch of RF government decree aimed at increasing scientific publishing. Even then, the problem with academic publishing was formulated in terms of English proficiency rather than academic writing.

Korotkina argues that problems with English proficiency co-exist with problems related to academic writing. She mentions problems with structure, terminology, style and punctuation, and publishing conventions, which can all prevent a publication in an English-medium academic journal. Korotkina advocates the view of academic writing as a “grapholect” and proposes teaching it mostly/primarily in Russian as a shortcut / time-saving measure.

Other participants of the same volume discuss specific problems of Russian writers (Vinogradova et al., 2021; Bogolepova, 2021; Suchkova, 2021), students’ motivation (Golechkova, 2021), learning experiences of individual writers (Smirnova and Guseva, 2021), and writing centers and their functioning (Suchkova, 2021).

Writing Centers (6 or 8) work only with faculty, in order to help with publication. For students, in most cases there are no expectations nor additional help with writing and publishing at least until PhD level (Suchkova, 2021).

Various aspects of scientific publishing in Russian and English are discussed in Smirnova and Lillis (2022), Smirnova et al. (2021), Ryabtseva (2018).

**4. Novelty of Research**

Students from the former USSR “grow up” within Russian writing tradition, and usually with Russian as the language of education. After moving to a Western university, they need to adapt their writing to a different writing tradition. Such an adaptation involves change and accommodations in multiple areas and domains, including language proficiency, discourse community knowledge, genre and rhetorical situation knowledge, writing process, and possibly even subject matter knowledge. In order to meet the challenges of such an adaptation, students will need to transfer their competences and to use resources available to them from the previous experience. Their practices of composing need to include more than one language at different stages of text production.

***Add transition.***

In the existing research on adaptation to academic writing in L2, participants come from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

However, no studies exist that investigate the adaptation of students with a uniform linguistic background (in this case, Russian) to a different writing tradition (Western, or more specifically, to the academic writing in English as a lingua franca). ***Develop an argument out of this!***

I plan to conduct interviews with selected students at the University of Klagenfurt who come from countries of the former USSR and have Russian as the language of education, in order to study their adaptation to the new environment.

**5. Research Questions**

My investigation of the adaptation of the students from the former USSR countries to academic writing in English in the international non-Anglophone environment will be guided by the following research questions:

***RQ 1*:** How do young scholars/students from countries of the former USSR with Russian as the / a language of education employ their linguistic resources (from their linguistic repertoire) for writing academic texts in English as part of their accommodation to the new discourse community?

***RQ 2:*** What strategies do students employ in their writing? To which degree can this adaptation be described as “strategic”?

***RQ3***: What forms/types of the writing adaptation can be discerned?

**6. Methods**

1. Analysis of the semi-structured / narrative (?) interviews. Ethnography

The interview schedule will be / has been designed which would include questions about various aspects of the students’ adaptation to the academic writing in the new environment. Using the interview schedule, I will conduct the interviews with the participants and record them in audio- or video-format. The recorded interviews will be transcribed, coded in MAXQDA software, and analysed using the methods of Content Analysis. For the interview schedule, see Appendix 1.

2. Analysis of the academic writing samples, with the purpose of studying the participants’ (strategic) use of language resources at different stages of the writing process.

***Add*** *Resources: L1 and L2, styles, genre conventions, “voice”, technology.*

For this purpose, I plan to collect and study the students’ texts produced at different stages of the writing process, such as excerpts, notes, outlines, drafts, and revisions.

**7. Participants**

***The criteria for participants’ selection:***

Sincethe focus of the study is on adaptation from one system to another, participants are expected to do at least some part of their university education in the former republics.

I plan to interview 10 participants from the University of Klagenfurt who started their university education in the countries of the former USSR.

***Information about the Participants*:**

The participants come from different research fields (Mathematics, Applied Linguistics, English Language and Literature, Informatics, Teaching of Informatics, Media and Communication, and Radio Electronics).

Age: 25–40

Languages: all students are proficient in Russian and in the languages of their countries. English proficiency level is variable, but usually higher than B2.

Academic degree: Most participants are the advanced degree students (Master or PhD). Two of the participants have an academic degree in English (1 PhD, 1 BA) and now study towards a degree in Informatics / Teaching of Informatics.

Number of years in Austria: from 2 to 10.

Countries of origin: Ukraine (3), 1 Belarus (1), 1 Kazakhstan (1), Russia (2).

**8. The interview**

The purpose of the interview is to explore the various aspects of the students’ adaptation to the academic writing in the new environment. The interview is going to include questions concerning the differences perceived by the writers in the discourse community, genre and style conventions, English proficiency expectations, rhetorical approaches, and their specific areas of study. The participants will be asked questions about the influence of these factors on their writing process, about adaptations they need to make, and about the strategies and resources they employ.

**9. The approximate Schedule:**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Winter and Summer 2021/22 | Preparing Research Proposal, preparing the Interview questions, taking part in PhD courses |
| Winter 2022/23 | taking part in PhD courses. Conducting and transcribing the interviews, |
| Summer 2023 | taking part in PhD courses  Transcription and coding of the interviews |
| Winter 2023/24 | Interview analysis, writing of the PhD thesis |
| Summer 2024 | Interview analysis, writing of the PhD thesis |

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**Supporting Information:**

***Institutional Description***:

I am a PhD student in the Alpen-Adria University of Klagenfurt, Austria. This university is situated in the region of Carinthia, close to Slovenia and Italy. Multilingualism, code-mixing, and minority languages are the subject of many research projects running in the university. The university Writing Center also continually runs projects related to the academic writing. My project is a PhD dissertation in Applied Linguistics, but my affiliation is with the Department of Slavonic Studies. The participants of my project are MA or PhD students at the University of Klagenfurt who come from the counties of the former USSR.

***Key Theorists:***

1. **Anne Beaufort**

Beaufort’s *Model of Writing Expertise* (1999) lists five interrelated key knowledge domains of writing: subject matter knowledge, genre knowledge, rhetorical knowledge, writing process knowledge, and discourse community knowledge.

Beaufort studied transfer of knowledge / expertise across tasks and situations, which involves all five knowledge domains described in her model.

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2. **Brigitta Busch**

Busch is an expert in intercultural communication and multilingualism. Her research interests include multilingual education, minorities, and migration. In her studies of linguistic biographies, she explores and expands the notion of linguistic repertoire and individual linguistic resources, in view of modern conditions of super-diversity.

Busch, Brigitta (2012). “The Linguistic Repertoire Revisited”. *Applied Linguistics,* 33:5, 503–523.

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***Glossary*:**

***Discourse community knowledge***: The social context of writing (values, goals, preferences for particular modes of communication, typical genres, norms for “good writing” that are typical for a given discourse community.

***EAP and ERPP***: English for Academic Purposes, English for Research and Publication Purposes.

***ESL and EFL***: English as a Second Language, English as a Foreign Language.

***FSU***: Former Soviet Union

***Linguistic repertoire***: Collection of linguistic resources that a person has accumulated over the course of their life and that they utilize and interpret in their interactions with other people (Blommaert & Backus 2011).

***Linguistic resources***: All languages and their varieties, dialects, styles, and registers that are available to an individual.

***Rhetorical competence***: Specific knowledge of an audience and its expectations, as well as the communicative purpose, tailored to a specific instance of communication.

***SFL***: Systemic Functional Linguistics

***Super-diversity***: Current socio-demographic situation, in which levels of population diversity that are significantly higher than before (Vertovec 2007).

***WoS (Web of Science)***: A paid-access platform providing an access to reference and citation data from academic journals, conference proceedings, and other academic documents.