

DOI: 10.31862/2500-297X-2025-2-184-198

УДК 372.881.111.1

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From challenges to solutions: Investigating academic writing errors to enhance curriculum focus

Studying academic writing equips university students with the skills to effectively communicate their research, arguments, and findings in a clear and structured manner, in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. Within the framework of the educational paradigm of the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE), the development of academic writing skills is becoming an essential requirement for undergraduate students in all educational programs, since the HSE institutional certification protocols require that students' Final Year Research Proposals (FYRP) are presented in English in accordance with the standards of scholarly writing. Despite the importance of this academic task, students often encounter linguistic and structural difficulties that compromise the clarity and coherence of their research proposals. The aim of the study was to identify the most frequent errors in student FYRPs and propose pedagogical solutions for improving the Academic Writing Course curriculum. A corpus of FYRPs ($N = 68$), with a total of 160,000 words, submitted by fourth-year undergraduate students, was analysed using the Grammarly Premium technological platform, which incorporates artificial intelligence and natural language processing algorithms to facilitate comprehensive textual diagnostic interventions. The results obtained indicated that the top three error types (wordy sentences, word choice and ungrammatical sentences) together exceed the 70% threshold. Including punctuation and determiners, the cumulative percentage reaches approximately 90%, suggesting that focusing on these five areas would address the majority of writing deficiencies. This research enriches

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the existing scholarly discourse on academic writing challenges within the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context by presenting empirically derived insights into prevalent error typologies. The findings underscore the necessity for targeted instructional interventions. The study recommends that academic writing curricula integrate systematic error analysis practice and develop precision-focused instructional exercises designed to enhance students' linguistic competence and mitigate the pervasive effects of language interference.

Key words: academic writing skills, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Final Year Research Proposal error analysis, language interference, higher education, targeted instructional interventions

CITATION: Popova A.O., Stognieva O.N. From challenges to solutions: Investigating academic writing errors to enhance curriculum focus. *Pedagogy and Psychology of Education*. 2025. No. 2. Pp. 184–198. DOI: 10.31862/2500-297X-2025-2-184-198

DOI: 10.31862/2500-297X-2025-2-184-198

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От проблем к решениям: анализ ошибок в академическом письме в целях оптимизации программы учебного курса

Владение навыками академического письма позволяет студентам вузов понятно, логично и аргументированно представлять результаты своих исследований на английском языке. Для студентов всех образовательных программ бакалавриата Национального исследовательского университета «Высшая школа экономики» формирование универсальной академической письменной компетенции приобретает особое значение, т.к. в соответствии

с нормативными регламентами итоговой аттестации, студенты должны представить проект выпускной квалификационной работы (проект ВКР) на английском языке, следуя международным стандартам академического письма. Однако в процессе написания проекта студенты демонстрируют лингвопрагматические и структурно-композиционные несоответствия, которые влияют на восприятие и оценку их работы. В рамках исследования была проведена комплексная диагностика и систематизация доминантных дисфункций академической письменной коммуникации с последующей разработкой стратегий оптимизации содержания курса академического письма. Методология исследования основана на контент анализе массива студенческих проектов ВКР ($N = 68$; 160 000 словоупотреблений). Верификация ошибок проводилась с использованием платформы Grammarly Premium, интегрирующей современные методы машинного обучения для комплексной лингвистической диагностики текста. Полученные результаты свидетельствуют о том, что три доминантные категории лингвистических дисфункций (коммуникативная избыточность организации текста, нерациональный выбор лексических единиц и грамматическая деструкция) кумулятивно превышают 70% порог лингвистических девиаций. При интеграции параметров пунктуационных и артиклевых репрезентаций совокупный процент лингвистических дисфункций достигает значения 90%, что доказывает методическую необходимость использования корректирующих стратегий в обозначенных лингвистических кластерах. Данное исследование расширяет существующий научный дискурс в отношении лингводидактических аспектов академической письменной коммуникации в контексте изучения английского языка как иностранного. Эмпирические результаты подчеркивают необходимость внедрения целенаправленных образовательных стратегий, предполагающих систематический лингвистический анализ коммуникативных девиаций, для предотвращения лингвистической интерференции. Научная новизна исследования заключается в комплексном подходе к выявлению и нивелированию лингводидактических барьеров в процессе обучения академическому письму в вузе.

Ключевые слова: академическое письмо, английский язык как иностранный, анализ ошибок выпускных квалификационных работ, лингвистическая интерференция, высшее образование, образовательные стратегии

ССЫЛКА НА СТАТЬЮ: Попова А.О., Стогниева О.Н. От проблем к решениям: анализ ошибок в академическом письме в целях оптимизации программы учебного курса // Педагогика и психология образования. 2025. № 2. С. 184–198. DOI: 10.31862/2500-297X-2025-2-184-198

Introduction

Academic writing is one of the essential skills in higher education, as it serves a means of scholarly communication. It involves presenting ideas, observations, and research findings to the academic community [24; 30]. Academic writing proficiency is crucial for HSE University students, particularly when drafting their Final Year Research Proposals (FYRPs) in English. A FYRP is a formal document that outlines a proposed research objectives, strategies, and anticipated outcomes [11]. It serves as a blueprint for initiating, planning, and executing a bachelor thesis, aiming to demonstrate student academic capabilities and to secure approval from the supervising board of the Educational Program. Although this academic practice is highly important, students often face linguistic and structural difficulties that hinder the clarity and logical flow of their research proposals. To understand these challenges, it is important to examine existing research on academic writing errors.

A considerable amount of literature has been published on academic writing errors, revealing a complex landscape of linguistic, cognitive, and rhetorical challenges [1; 4; 11; 20; 23]. These studies systematically explore the multidimensional nature of academic writing deficiencies, demonstrating that errors are not merely technical aberrations but manifestations of deeper cognitive, cultural and communication barriers [2; 7; 16].

Building on these findings, researchers have also explored the role of technology in addressing academic writing challenges. While existing literature has extensively examined automated writing assistance technologies and their potential impact on academic writing quality [22; 34; 40], no previous study has investigated the application of AI-powered writing tool as Grammarly in analyzing the errors in FYRPs. This study aims to identify the most common errors in student FYRPs from the HSE University, using Grammarly as an AI-powered checker. Additionally, it proposes supportive strategies that can be integrated into the *Academic Writing* course curriculum and bridge the gap between linguistic challenges and academic excellence.

This research addresses the following questions:

1. What are the most frequent errors found in student FYRPs?
2. What pedagogical solutions for redesigning the *Academic Writing* course curriculum could be proposed based on these findings?

The study offers some important insights into the specific linguistic challenges students face in academic writing, particularly in the context of FYRPs and targeted pedagogical interventions to enhance students' proficiency in academic writing and adherence to scholarly conventions.

Literature review

Academic writing requires the development of both linguistic and meta-linguistic competencies in order to facilitate effective communication within the academic community [19]. Bakhtin's dialogic theory of language provides a foundational framework for understanding academic discourse as a complex, multidimensional communicative practice that extends beyond mere linguistic transmission of information [3]. Swales and Bazerman have further elaborated on the concept of genre-specific academic communication, emphasizing the importance of understanding disciplinary discourse conventions [4; 32].

The theoretical landscape of academic writing competence is characterized by multifaceted approaches to skill development. According to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, academic writing skills are not innate but develop through social interaction and mediated learning experiences [35]. Zamel and Kroll have extensively explored the cognitive processes underlying second language (L2) writing, highlighting the complex interplay between linguistic knowledge, cognitive strategies, and cultural understanding [21; 38].

Empirical studies by Bereiter and Scardamalia distinguish between knowledge-telling and knowledge-transforming models of writing, demonstrating that advanced academic writing requires sophisticated cognitive processes [5]. These processes involve not just linguistic reproduction but critical analysis, synthesis, and original knowledge construction. Flower and Hayes further developed this perspective through their cognitive process theory, which maps the complex mental operations involved in academic writing [13].

Interdisciplinary research emphasizes the importance of meta-linguistic awareness in academic writing competence. Hyland argues that successful academic communication depends on understanding disciplinary-specific rhetorical conventions, citation practices, and discourse norms [17]. Kramsch extends this perspective by highlighting the role of cultural and linguistic mediation in academic text production, suggesting that academic writing is fundamentally a cross-cultural communicative practice [20].

The multidimensional nature of academic writing presents significant challenges for university students, as they must simultaneously navigate linguistic, cognitive, and technological dimensions of scholarly communication.

When writing their FYRPs, students also encounter significant challenges due to fundamental differences between Russian and English academic discourse conventions. If the writing process goes beyond linguistic translation, it involves complex cognitive and rhetorical transformations

such as restructuring argumentative logic, adapting stylistic conventions, recalibrating citation practices, and modifying syntactical patterns [36]. These challenges are rooted in the fundamental differences between language systems, where terminology, structural nuances, and semantic interpretations significantly diverge. The interaction between native (L1) and target (L2) languages generates multifaceted communication barriers. Dechert and Ellis have identified significant linguistic interference phenomena characterized by structural transfer, semantic misinterpretations, and grammatical inconsistencies emerging from linguistic divergences [9; 12]. This linguistic transfer process manifests through multiple mechanisms, including direct terminology translation, structural incongruences, and the loss of subtle semantic nuances during cross-linguistic communication.

Lexica-grammatical interference represents a critical dimension of these challenges. Students often encounter difficulties when inappropriately applying linguistic rules across language systems, engaging in calquing (direct structural translation), and struggling with limited lexical cohesion strategies. Dobrynina indicates that students frequently struggle with subject-predicate agreement, which further complicates their writing [10]. Contextual misunderstandings of polysemous words and temporal form misapplications further compromise the clarity and persuasiveness of academic writing.

Another significant challenge for novice writers lies in references to the sources in academic discourse. Citation errors, such as improper paraphrasing, inadequate source attribution, and unintentional plagiarism, can undermine the academic integrity of students' work [27]. Aksenova highlights that failure to follow citation style guidelines, like those of the APA, compromises the credibility of research papers [1]. Students often struggle to differentiate between direct quotes, paraphrases, and their own analysis, which leads to citation inconsistencies and potential academic dishonesty. Thompson et al. identified that approximately 62% of non-native English-speaking students commit citation-related errors, with Russian students showing a higher propensity for literal translation of source material that disrupts proper academic attribution [33].

Moreover, Hundarenko emphasizes that punctuation errors compound these citation challenges, creating additional layers of potential misinterpretation [15]. Students frequently misuse quotation marks, struggle with integrating source material seamlessly into their own text, and fail to maintain consistent citation formatting throughout their academic documents. The complexity is further exacerbated by varying citation styles across different academic disciplines, requiring students to demonstrate remarkable adaptability and attention to detail.

Comparative studies by Flowerdew and Li suggest that cultural differences in academic writing traditions significantly contribute to these citation challenges [14]. Russian academic writing traditions, which often emphasize collective knowledge and less explicit source attribution, clash with Anglo-American academic expectations of individual scholarly contribution and precise source acknowledgment. This cultural dissonance creates additional barriers for students attempting to navigate international academic writing standards.

Challenges faced by multilingual writers highlight the need for instructional strategies to address cognitive and contextual demands of academic writing [36].

Recent studies suggest that effective interventions must adopt an approach that integrates metacognitive skill development, contextual understanding of academic genres, critical thinking enhancement, technological literacy, and adaptive learning strategies [25]. The transformative potential lies in developing instructional frameworks that recognize individual learning differences and provide scaffolded support that acknowledges the multidimensional nature of academic communication [26; 28].

Brown highlights the need for diverse teaching strategies that promote student engagement with various writing improvement techniques [6]. Instructional approaches such as Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) have gained significant attention. De La Paz and Graham evaluated the SRSD program, which trains students in planning, drafting, and revising texts [8; 39].

Peer feedback can significantly enhance writing quality by providing immediate and constructive criticism [29; 31]. This approach aids students in recognizing errors more efficiently while fostering deeper material understanding and critical thinking skills. Wischgoll recommends a scaffolded approach that combines observational learning with hands-on practice, encouraging the development of academic writing skills through model texts and incremental practice [37].

Together, these studies suggest a paradigm shift from punitive error identification to constructive, supportive strategies that recognize errors as essential components of the learning and academic communication development process.

Methods

To identify the most common errors in FYRPs a mixed-method approach was employed, combining automated analysis with manual evaluation to ensure comprehensive error identification and categorization.

The sample consisted of sixty-eight FYRPs, with a total of 160,000 words, submitted by undergraduate students who had completed the Academic Writing course at the HSE Graduate School of Business. The selection criteria ensured that only recent submissions from the 2023/2024 academic year were included in the study. Participants provided informed consent, and all submissions were anonymized to maintain confidentiality.

The error analysis followed a two-step process. First, each FYRP was processed using Grammarly, an advanced digital writing assistance technology developed in 2009 that provides comprehensive linguistic support through artificial intelligence and natural language processing algorithms. Machine learning algorithms and real-time writing analysis enabled the identification of a wide range of linguistic errors, including grammatical, stylistic, and punctuation-related mistakes. Second, a manual review was conducted based on the classification frameworks proposed by John & Woll to identify errors not detected by Grammarly, such as formatting inconsistencies and citation inaccuracies [18]. After that, the frequency of each error type was recorded and visualized using the Pareto chart, which is an effective tool for illustrating error frequencies and their cumulative impact. This approach ensures that interventions target the most significant writing challenges for maximum impact.

Results

The analysis of academic writing errors in FYRPs revealed 1.575 errors, visualized using a Pareto chart (Figure 1). This chart consists of blue bars, representing the frequency of each error type, and a red cumulative percentage line, showing the accumulated impact of errors.

1. Most Frequent Errors

The three most frequent error types that accounted for the majority of writing challenges are *wordy sentences* (524 occurrences) emerged as the most dominant issue; *word choice* errors (247 occurrences) and *ungrammatical sentences* (244 occurrences) followed closely. Together, these three categories comprised 67.4% of all errors, indicating that clarity, precision, and grammatical accuracy are primary concerns for students.

2. Moderately Frequent Errors

Punctuation errors (147 occurrences) and *determiners* (93 occurrences) were observed moderate level. Stylistic concerns, such as *register* (65 occurrences) and *tone misuse* (57 occurrences), suggest that maintaining an appropriate academic style remains a challenge. Collectively, these errors account for 20.3%, underscoring the importance of both grammatical structure and stylistic appropriateness in academic writing.

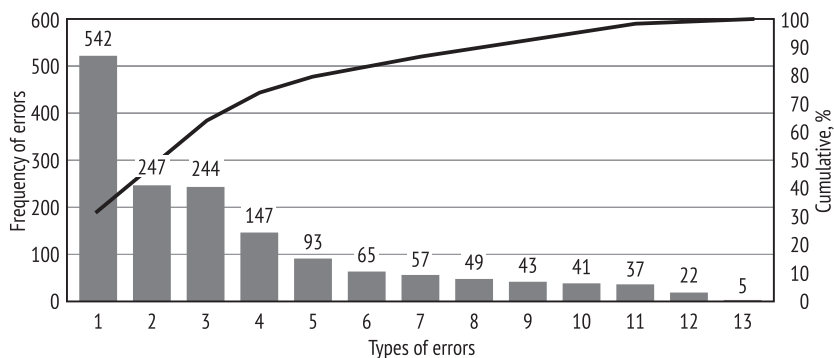


Fig. 1. Pareto analysis of common errors in academic writing:

- 1 – wordy sentences; 2 – word choice; 3 – ungrammatical sentences;
 4 – punctuation; 5 – determiners; 6 – register; 7 – tone; 8 – mixed dialects of English; 9 – misspelled words; 10 – prepositions; 11 – incorrect verb forms; 12 – incorrect noun number; 13 – outdated language

3. Less Frequent Errors

Mixed dialects of English (49 occurrences), *misspelled words* (43 occurrences), *prepositions* (41 occurrences), and *incorrect verb forms* (37 occurrences) represent less common errors. *Incorrect noun number* (22 occurrences) and *outdated language* (5 occurrences) represent the least frequent issues. These errors collectively contributed to 12.3% of the total and had a minimal impact on overall writing quality compared to more prevalent issues.

4. Cumulative Impact and Threshold Analyses

The cumulative percentage line in the Pareto chart highlights the distribution of errors. The top three error types (*wordy sentences*, *word choice*, *ungrammatical sentences*) together exceed the 70% threshold. Including punctuation and determiners, the cumulative percentage reaches approximately 85-90%, suggesting that focusing on these five areas would address the majority of writing deficiencies. The remaining error have a marginal impact and do not require the same level of emphasis in instructional interventions.

Implications for Teachers

Based on the results of the analysis, several pedagogical solutions can be proposed. Integrating error analysis into the Academic Writing curriculum can help students understand the specific types of mistakes they make. By identifying, analyzing and correcting recurring errors students can

develop a deeper understanding of their writing challenges and learn how to avoid them. For example, a Russian teacher instructing students might analyze a sentence (Figure 2):

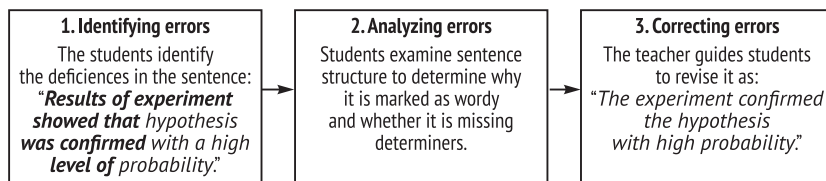


Fig. 2. Error analysis as an instructional strategy

Incorporating the following strategies and exercises into the error analysis framework can help students refine their academic writing skills more effectively.

Conciseness and clarity workshops. Given that wordiness accounts for 33.2% of the errors, targeted workshops should be integrated into the curriculum to teach students how to write concisely. Russian academic writing often favours long, complex sentences, whereas English writing prioritizes clarity and conciseness. Educators should directly address these differences between Russian and English academic writing. Teaching students to recognize and revise wordy structures can help reduce interference. For example, such activities as sentence restructuring exercises, word economy drills, and editing techniques can help students eliminate redundancy while maintaining clarity.

Lexical precision training. As 15.4% of errors stem from inappropriate word choice, specialized modules should focus on academic vocabulary development. Assignments could include context-based vocabulary exercises, word substitution tasks, and comparative analysis of synonyms to help students select precise and discipline-specific terminology.

Syntactic awareness and structural improvement. To address syntactical irregularities (15.2%), explicit instruction on sentence structure, parallelism, and cohesion should be reinforced. Activities such as sentence-combining tasks, clause analysis, and guided rewriting exercises can improve students' ability to construct well-formed sentences. A task where students rewrite a direct translation of a Russian paragraph into more natural English phrasing, focusing on word order and logical flow can help students become more aware of linguistic differences.

Punctuation mastery sessions. As punctuation errors contribute to 9.3% of total linguistic deviations, targeted instruction on common punctuation

rules, interactive punctuation quizzes, and peer-reviewed proofreading exercises such as inserting commas, semicolons, and apostrophes, correcting quotation mark usage, distinguishing between hyphens and dashes, and revising punctuation errors in sentences and paragraphs should be incorporated into the course.

Integration of automated feedback. Since AI-powered tools such as Grammarly were used in the study, students should be trained on how to critically engage with automated feedback. Teachers can encourage students to use Grammarly, Hemingway Editor¹, or Write & Improve² (Cambridge) to help them identify and correct errors related to interference. For example, Grammarly might flag a sentence as “*According to the opinion of the researcher, it can be assumed that...*” and suggest a clearer revision: “*The researcher suggests that...*”. Students analyze Grammarly’s suggestions and determine whether to accept or reject corrections based on academic writing conventions.

Peer review and collaborative writing. Implementing peer feedback activities can enhance students’ ability to identify and correct errors in their own and others’ writing [30]. Structured peer review sessions using checklists aligned with common errors (e.g., conciseness, word choice, syntax, punctuation) can promote active learning and self-correction.

Genre-specific writing practice. Since academic writing requires adherence to specific conventions, genre-based writing tasks (e.g., research proposals, literature reviews, abstracts) should be included. By analyzing model texts and engaging in guided writing exercises, students can develop a stronger command of the expected structure and style of academic discourse.

By implementing these pedagogical solutions, teachers can significantly enhance the *Academic Writing* course curriculum and equip students with the skills to produce high-quality FYRPs.

Conclusion

The findings of this study contribute to the understanding of the specific challenges faced by EFL students in writing their FYRPs. By identifying common errors and proposing targeted assignments, this research provides a valuable framework for enhancing the Academic Writing curriculum.

Several limitations to this study need to be acknowledged. First, the sample size of 68 FYRPs may not fully represent the broader undergraduate student population. Second, the reliance on Grammarly, while beneficial, does not

¹ URL: <https://hemingwayapp.com/> (accessed: 27.05.2024).

² URL: <https://writeandimprove.com/> (accessed: 27.05.2024).

capture all nuances of academic writing, particularly regarding citation accuracy and formatting.

Future research should consider a larger sample size and potentially include comparative analyses using different AI writing tools, such as Virtual Writing Tutor³ and Hemingway Editor. Additionally, longitudinal studies could assess the effectiveness of implemented curriculum changes on student writing outcomes over time.

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³ URL: <https://virtualwritingtutor.com/> (accessed: 27.05.2024).

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The article was received 21.02.2025, accepted for publication 23.04.2025

Статья поступила в редакцию 21.02.2025, принята к публикации 23.04.2025

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Заявленный вклад авторов

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All authors have read and approved the final manuscript

Все авторы прочитали и одобрили окончательный вариант рукописи