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Research Paper

Designing an Academic Writing Course Tailored for Postgraduate Students at a Technical University

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Abstract

Building academic writing skills in engineering postgraduate students encounters major obstacles, including diverse English proficiency levels, low motivation, and restricted teaching time. This study, following a sequential mixed-methods design, proposes an effective approach tailored to the linguistic needs of engineering postgraduates to improve their academic writing skills while optimizing time efficiency and sustaining motivation. The research involved theoretical analysis of relevant literature, qualitative examination of 100 writing samples, and a student survey aimed at assessing the effectiveness of the designed academic writing course. Conducted at National Research Nuclear University MEPhI, the study engaged 100 first-year postgraduate students from physics, astronomy, informatics, and other technical fields. The study comprised two stages: the qualitative analysis of

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deviations in language skills from the authentic academic norms, and the quantitative measurement of language proficiency gains. The qualitative examination of writing samples revealed dominant errors in the lexical, grammatical, stylistic areas, as well as problems related to structure, cohesion, and punctuation. This enabled the development of a curriculum focused on the identified problem areas and closely aligned with students' individual needs. The results of needs analysis raised students' awareness of their weaknesses and course content, contributing to increased motivation. By the end of the course, students were able to independently correct writing errors using the developed materials, which was confirmed by the quantitative data of the survey. It is concluded that a personalized, research-driven pedagogical approach demonstrates measurable success in advancing the academic writing proficiency of technical university postgraduates.

Keywords: Academic Writing, Genre-Based Approach, Lexical Approach, Needs Analysis, Technical University

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1. Introduction

One of the United Nations' initiatives in higher education focuses on diversifying and making knowledge generation and sharing more inclusive (Parr et al., 2022). This goal can be achieved by addressing inequalities and reducing power imbalances in publishing opportunities. Expanding international publishing access involves not only making journals openly accessible but also supporting non-native English speakers in enhancing their academic writing skills in the English language, which serves as the global lingua franca of science and is the standard language for international publications and conferences (Alhasnawi, 2021).

In recent years, academic writing has gained increasing attention, especially in higher education, as publishing research articles has become essential for earning a PhD degree (Flowerdew, 2022). Academic writing is often viewed as one of the most challenging skills to master, and developing competence in this area presents numerous obstacles (Abdul Rahman et al.,

2025; Gupta et al., 2023). Several studies have explored the teaching of academic writing in English as a second language (ESL) to postgraduate students at Russian universities. It is recognized that L2 learners in Russia often lack a solid foundation in academic writing due to imbalanced syllabi and outdated teaching methods (Bolsunovskaya & Rymanova, 2020). While many Russian universities include ESL academic writing either as a standalone course or part of a “Foreign Language” program (Shpit & Kurovskiy, 2020; Zashikhina & Pechinkina, 2022), ESL instructors frequently lack a deep understanding of pedagogical approaches that effectively prepare students to write quality research articles in English (Dudnik & Putilovskaya, 2020). Furthermore, at technical institutions like MEPhI, first-year PhD students display varied English proficiency levels and often lack motivation to study English in postgraduate courses (Aleshinskaya & Vasilieva, 2025). Considering these challenges and the limited instructional time, educators must carefully design the academic writing curriculum to maximize its effectiveness.

Various teaching techniques have been employed in designing university courses to form academic writing competence, including the task-based approach (Farahi & Kargozari, 2023), genre-based approach (Vasilieva & Aleshinskaya, 2024), lexical approach (Chen et al., 2023), reading and writing integration (Rochma, 2023), and mini revision lessons and feedback (Dorji, 2021). These methods have been reported to demonstrate efficacy in specific contexts such as enhancing practical application through task-based learning and improving structural awareness through genre-based instruction. At the same time, some limitations of these techniques have been reported, including overemphasis on form at the expense of content creativity (Zhai & Razali, 2023) and insufficient adaptation to diverse learners’ backgrounds (Chen et al., 2023). It has been shown that strategies effective for one group

may not work for another, as different groups of learners have unique problems and needs in writing (Ismaiti & Pebriantika, 2020). Chujkova (2015) emphasizes the importance of understanding students' expectations through experimental results, yet the small sample sizes and lack of longitudinal data seem to limit generalizability of such an approach. These insights can significantly influence the design of academic writing courses by allowing adjustments to both the content and the order in which materials are presented.

Therefore, this research focuses on how English language instruction can be effectively tailored for engineering postgraduate students to enhance their progress in academic writing (Akopova, 2023). Since first-year engineering graduate students have no or very little experience in academic writing in English and thus lack a clear understanding of their linguistic needs for developing academic writing competence, we decided not to ask them directly, for example through a survey or interview (Sağlamel & Aydoğdu, 2022), but rather to explore these needs indirectly, through a qualitative analysis of their texts. The identified knowledge gaps would enable us to plan the structure and content of an academic writing course and select effective approaches for addressing specific methodological challenges, taking into account the educational context of a technical university. In our article, we demonstrate that, despite varying levels of linguistic background and time constraints, it is possible to design a successful academic writing course that can result in students becoming knowledgeable in various genres and contexts of scientific communication and significantly improving their writing competence, enabling them to independently and effectively pursue international professional research.

The following research questions are formulated to guide this study:

RQ1. What are the primary linguistic needs and common errors in academic writing among first-year engineering postgraduates at a technical university?

RQ2. How can an effective academic writing course be designed for engineering postgraduates to address diverse proficiency levels, low motivation, and time constraints?

RQ3. Does the proposed course improve students' academic writing proficiency and raise their motivation and awareness of individual weaknesses, leading to sustained engagement in academic writing?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Academic Writing Development

Academic writing is considered a complex construct that integrates key components such as knowledge of the scientific discipline, research methodology, statistical understanding, and familiarity with the cultural aspects of both the first and second languages (Lamanauskas, 2019). Recent research has emphasized the need to develop particular language skills to successfully establish ESL academic writing competence. These skills include vocabulary and grammar proficiency, coherence and cohesion (Bolsunovskaya & Rymanova, 2020), paraphrasing abilities (Eragamreddy, 2025; Tri Than & Nguyen, 2022), rhetorical and organizational skills (Rabbi, 2020), and proper citation formatting (Suleimanova & Lykova, 2023). Additionally, academic writing competence encompasses the ability to generate ideas, structure thoughts and arguments, and support critical analysis (Alova & Alova, 2023). Furthermore, it requires skills to formulate ideas and construct facts in accordance with academic conventions and specific writing guidelines (Montaner-Villalba, 2021).

Academic writing requires students to be able to use precise language, a formal style, and an objective tone (Stewart et al., 2023). Formal academic

writing faces challenges connected with academic writing teachers' lack of experience (Sudimantara, 2021), a limited number of classes in academic writing (Lelakova & Toman, 2023), and general confusion over the connection between language, content, and context resulting in the lack of explicit teaching of the linguistic and semantic choices for particular purposes in academic writing (Liu & Chen, 2022). There is an urgent need in the development and use of innovative tools to enhance writing development in terms of complexity, accuracy, and fluency (Modarresi, 2021). Special emphasis is given to the importance of engagement with instructor feedback (Nobakht, 2025) and the improvement of language testing practice (Ghanbari, 2025). The acquisition of academic writing skills should be learned with the help of explicit instruction and useful approaches that will help L2 learners understand all the subtleties of the complex process.

2.2 Developing Methods and Materials for Writing Courses

The development of an effective academic writing course meets certain challenges, which are of particular significance in relation to a technical university. The first challenge academic writing course developers face is related to time aspects. Time constraints in teaching academic writing arise in numerous ways and may be connected with restricted classroom hours, fixed semester timelines, and pressure to achieve targeted proficiency within periods set. Most language curricula allocate time across diverse skills like reading, writing, listening, speaking, and grammar, leaving little space for practicing in-depth academic writing. Consequently, instructors often hurry through writing tasks or prioritize simpler exercises that align more readily with measurable outcomes, sidelining complex genre mastery or revision processes (Hossain, 2024). Yet, a significant positive effect of a short-term course in academic writing on the enhancement of academic writing competence in five instruction days is claimed in the research by Mlundi

(2025). Moreover, the effect of the explicit instruction during one class of teaching academic email writing is underlined by Vasilieva and Aleshinskaya (2024). This indicates the need to choose an instruction method that would be effective in a short period of time.

Various pedagogical approaches to designing an academic writing course across various learners' contexts have been shown to exhibit both advantages and disadvantages. Genre-based instruction demonstrates a clear advantage in teaching rhetorical structures like IMRaD; however, it often seems to prioritize formulaic templates over creative adaptation. This may potentially constrain innovation in engineering genres that require technical precision (Zhai & Razali, 2023). On the other hand, the lexical approach (Chen et al., 2023; Lewis, 2000) proves to be effective for non-native speakers by addressing vocabulary gaps through collocation-focused materials. However, this approach may lead to mechanical memorization without integrating genre awareness, which means superficial fluency rather than genre mastery. Another pedagogical approach is task-based learning (Farahi & Kargozari, 2023; Willis, 1996) that promotes authentic writing tasks that mimic a real publication process. The main disadvantage of this approach is that it demands extensive scaffolding that creates additional burden on courses with time constraints (Ismaiti & Pebriantika, 2020). Integrated reading-writing models (Rochma, 2023) utilize input-output cycles for genre exposure, but insufficient attention is paid to correcting errors specific to L1 interference, such as Russian speakers' over-literal translations (Dudnik & Putilovskaya, 2020). Feedback mechanisms like mini-revisions (Dorji, 2021) are reported to facilitate iterative improvement; yet, without in-depth needs analysis, they remain too generic and seem to fail in targeting conventional norms in engineering disciplines.

Despite numerous attempts to design a course that would be effective for teaching academic writing, little attention has been given to using hybrid models. A few studies have combined lexical, genre, and motivational elements (Akopova, 2023; Aleshinskaya & Vasilieva, 2025) to tailor materials for engineering postgraduates, optimizing for time efficiency and sustained engagement. This research addresses this gap by developing and evaluating an academic writing course specifically for first-year engineering postgraduates at a technical university, demonstrating measurable improvements in their proficiency and motivation within a time-constrained context.

2.3 Theoretical Framework of the Study

To avoid the potential challenges conditioned by the use of one approach in designing an academic writing course, we opted for a combination of approaches where the demerits of one approach could be compensated by the merits of another approach. Theoretically, we based our investigation on the combination of the lexical approach, genre-based approach, and needs analysis approach.

The lexical approach is founded on the idea that the fundamental units of language learning and communication are not grammar or forms but lexis, or words and word combinations (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). This approach highlights the central role of vocabulary in language structure, second language learning, and language use, with a special focus on multi-word expressions or chunks that are acquired as single units. It prioritizes teaching words together with their frequent collocations in natural patterns, rather than in isolation (Lewis, 2000). L2 learners also receive ample opportunities to encounter authentic examples and usage patterns of these words. Research has shown that lexical chunks play a significant role in improving writing proficiency. Through lexically based teaching, EFL learners and university

students have demonstrated notable improvement in their lexical resources for writing, as they better manage lexical complexity and range (Momeni & Ahmadian, 2022). Improvements observed in students' writing include enhanced lexical awareness, cohesion, coherence, accuracy, variety, and sentence construction, alongside increased confidence as a positive outcome of focused instruction. Instruction on chunks has also been found to positively impact grammatical accuracy, particularly in describing pie charts. Researchers recommend combining the lexical approach with other teaching methods to create a more comprehensive program for academic writing instruction (Chen et al., 2023).

Alongside the lexical approach, our explicit instruction incorporates genre-based teaching, which involves presenting a model followed by detailed analysis and imitation (Bolsunovskaya & Rymanova, 2020). The genre-based approach to academic writing instruction is increasingly popular worldwide, with China, the USA, Japan, Thailand, Sweden, and Hong Kong among the leading countries publishing research on its application in writing education (Zhai & Razali, 2023). This pedagogy is founded on the idea that discourse follows conventional and repetitive patterns, making it essential to examine how language is consistently used within specific socio-cultural contexts (Wen et al., 2022). Recent studies have extensively explored the effectiveness of genre-based teaching across various genres, such as recount texts (Mastura et al., 2020), research proposals (Wijayanti et al., 2017), expository essays (Burgos, 2017), discussion essays (Nagao, 2019), formal emails (Aleshinskaya & Vasilieva, 2025), as well as research articles (Arsyad et al., 2021). Researchers emphasize that using genre-based instruction produces positive outcomes, helping students understand the link between academic writing and social contexts.

An essential part of creating an academic writing course involves performing a needs analysis of students' real writing samples and their material learning needs. Needs analysis helps to better understand what L2 learners already know and what they need to learn (Greenwood, 2022). The error analysis approach is effective in predicting and understanding the unique characteristics of different academic genres and guiding appropriate responses (Norrish, 1983). This method helps reveal weaknesses that might otherwise be overlooked. It serves as the foundation for course design by guiding teachers in selecting appropriate tasks and content, clarifying instructional goals, and helping learners understand the purpose of the instruction (Darici, 2016). By identifying and analyzing learners' needs, interests, and learning objectives, it becomes easier to set clear goals, foster a positive language learning environment, boost learner motivation, and enhance specific skills like reading and writing (Rostami & Zafarghandi, 2014). Additionally, needs analysis supports setting learning objectives, creating a motivating environment, monitoring student progress, and providing teachers with a clear understanding of students' needs, desires, and gaps in knowledge. When integrated as an ongoing part of teaching, it also allows learners to have more control over their learning (Ilham et al., 2020).

This paper highlights pre-testing as an essential tool for assessing students' needs when learning academic writing in English as a second language. Pre-testing is commonly employed in pre/post-test study designs to evaluate various aspects of second language (L2) acquisition. In such studies, pre-tests are typically viewed as baseline measures that do not influence learning directly. Comparing pre-test and post-test outcomes usually reveals participants' progress and demonstrates the effectiveness of specific L2 teaching methods. However, pre-tests have intrinsic value as they can actively enhance learning. While many scholars consider post-testing to have

a stronger testing effect, pre-testing is shown to promote better retention of material (Latimier et al., 2019). Research by Richland et al. (2009) indicates that pre-testing positively impacts long-term learning, with even incorrect responses serving as valuable learning opportunities. Additionally, pre-testing is believed to optimize learning outcomes, particularly when immediate feedback is not provided after the test (Sana et al., 2020).

Pre-testing also serves a vital diagnostic role by revealing general weaknesses or errors among individual students and the group as a whole. This process aids in identifying academic language needs and establishing assessment criteria aligned with language proficiency standards (Read, 2008). Diagnostic assessments must be followed by effective interventions tailored to address the identified issues, with these interventions conforming to the principles of the specific curriculum and teaching approach within the discipline (Harding et al., 2015). Nevertheless, further research is needed to explore how diagnoses are successfully translated into treatments across different educational settings. This paper examines one such example, focusing on how pre-testing involving needs analysis informs the design of an academic writing course by identifying problem areas for L2 students.

3. Materials and Methods

This study followed a mixed-methods design, in which the qualitative phase included the analysis of deviations from the authentic academic norms, and the quantitative phase included the measurement of progress in academic writing competence. It employed an experimental pre-test/post-test design supplemented by a survey. The study investigated how first-year postgraduates performed the task of writing a scientific research essay at the start and at the end of the course on English as a foreign language.

3.1 Participants

One hundred postgraduate students enrolled in 2024 participated in the study. All of them are non-native English speakers. The vast majority of participants (91%) were between 22 and 25 years of age. In terms of gender, the majority of participants (79%) were male, which is typical for technical universities in general (Vasilieva & Aleshinskaya, 2024).

The postgraduate students participating in the study specialized mostly in Physics, Astronomy, Technology, Information Security, and Computer Science. Before being enrolled, the students had studied English for at least five years: four years during their bachelor’s program and two years in their master’s program, or five years in their specialist’s program. Additionally, most had learned English as a foreign language for several years in secondary school. Throughout their university education, many had taken English exams multiple times, after each year of the bachelor or specialist’s program and after the first year of the master’s program.

To determine their perceived language proficiency, a questionnaire was distributed among the students participating in the study. The questionnaire contained statements adopted from the self-perceived language proficiency questionnaire originally developed by Sudina and Plonsky (2021) to focus on the students’ self-perception of their academic language skills. The respondents rated their abilities on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = very poor to 5 = excellent. Table 1 presents self-assessments from 100 engineering postgraduates participating in the study.

Table 1.
Students’ Perceived Language Proficiency

	Very Poor	Poor	Satisfactory	Good	Excellent

1. I can understand basic phrases in scientific articles written in the English language.	16	38	37	9	0
2. I can ask/answer questions about my scientific research.	14	25	42	16	3
3. I can hold a conversation on my scientific topic.	19	31	35	13	2
4. I can read scientific texts in the English language.	7	11	21	37	24
5. I can write scientific texts in the English language.	22	49	16	12	1
6. I can describe the purpose, subject, results, significance of my scientific research.	10	24	31	28	7
7. I can understand the main points of clear standard input on scientific topics.	16	19	22	25	18
8. I can produce a connected text on topics of scientific interest.	14	57	15	13	1

Table 1 reveals a pronounced hierarchy of language skills, with receptive skills outperforming productive ones. For the majority of students, the skill of reading scientific texts was stated to be well or excellently developed. Quite a lot of students reported good or excellent proficiency in understanding the main points on scientific topics. On the other hand, speaking skills display moderate competence, as satisfactory ratings dominate for statements 2, 3, and 6. For the research sample, productive writing was stated as the weakest area, with 71% rating scientific text production below satisfactory.

3.2 Writing Samples

There were 100 samples of the writing task. The task was given as homework after the first introductory class. The postgraduate students were asked to write an essay about their research work. They were allowed to use the materials of their master graduate thesis. The essay was limited to 300-500 words and had to contain the following components: the topicality and novelty of the study; the purpose and objectives; the subject, materials, and methods of the study; the main stages and results of the research; the theoretical and/or practical value of the study.

3.3 Procedure

The study took place in the autumn of 2024 (pre-test) and then in the spring of 2025 (post-test) at National Research Nuclear University MEPhI located

in Moscow, Russia. The essays generated by the participants of the study were checked for problematic areas or deviations from the linguistic norms of the scientific style in English. To assess students' writing assignments, we adopted the ESL Composition Profile developed by Jacobs et al. (1981) to serve diagnostic criteria for the enhancement of academic writing competence and applied them to identify and profile discourse problems in L2 postgraduate students' English academic writing. The ESL Composition Profile contains analytic rubrics that assess core writing components on a 100-point scale, allocating 30 points to content, 20 to organization, 20 to vocabulary, 25 to language use, and 5 to mechanics. We adapted the rubric for the 5-point system of evaluating student works accepted by the university, i.e. we converted the scale from 100 points to 50 points, which could be further converted into a 5-point rating system. Moreover, to address the specificity of academic writing, we combined rubrics into two main categories: content and organization (30 points), and language skills (20 points).

The organization and content comprised such criteria as task fulfilment, structure, length, cohesion, and flow. The L2 students' writing assignments were assessed on all of these criteria with a maximum score of 5 points, except for task fulfilment with a maximum score of 10 points. In this set of criteria, we included the length of the essay, as for a scientific author it is essential to be able to meet the requirements of the text length. The second set of criteria focused on the use of lexical and grammar resources, spelling and punctuation (mechanics), and correspondence to the stylistic norms of academic writing. The term "grammar" was used instead of the original term "language accuracy", which was originally utilized by Jacobs et al. (1981) as a label for traditional grammatical attributes (Lötscher et al., 2025). In addition, we singled out style as an important aspect to be assessed in

academic writing, since the ability to observe stylistic norms is of utmost significance for a scientific author. Each criterion in this group was assessed with a maximum score of 5 points.

The students received feedback from their teacher via email. The teacher's email contained the student's text in an attachment and a table showing the student's mark and general comments on the quality of the written work. An example of the teacher's comments on a pre-test performed by one of the postgraduate students participating in the experiment is given in Table 2.

Table 2.
Results and Comments (Example)

Criterion	Max.	Result	Comment
<i>A. Organization and content (30 points)</i>			
Task Fulfillment	10	10	All parts of the task are addressed.
Structure	5	1	The organizational structure is not appropriate (one paragraph).
Length (300-500 words)	5	5	The number of words is sufficient.
Cohesion	5	1	Cohesive devices are practically not used.
Flow	5	2	The answer is followed with considerable effort.
<i>B. Language skills (20 points)</i>			
Vocabulary	5	2	The range of vocabulary is mostly not appropriate for the task (word choice, repetitions, word-for-word translations).
Grammar	5	2	The range of grammar is mostly not appropriate for the task (word order, prepositions, agreement).
Style	5	3	The register is more or less appropriate, however the essay contains conversational elements.
Mechanics (Spelling and Punctuation)	5	4	The spelling and punctuation are mostly accurate.
		Total	30
		Mark	3

The students' written assignments were not corrected by the teacher. Instead, in addition to the mark and comments, the students received their essays back as an attached Word file with the highlighted problematic areas.

The fragment of a student's essay below shows problematic areas including the choice of parts of speech, use of articles and conditionals, which were highlighted by the teacher and returned to the student as an attachment to the responding email:

"To test theories, the scientific community projects various experiments. It is shown that in search for inconsistencies one must look very **accurate** at something frequently occurring or hunt for some extremely rare events. **In** **second case** the matter would be if the theory predicts the same rate and **amount** of events as the experiment shows. **Fixed target and collider experiments serve great** for that purpose.

For instance, **acceleration facility** NICA (Dubna, Russia), would house SPD, MPD and BM@N detectors. **First two** are collider experiments and currently under construction, the **last** is fixed-target and has just been upgraded. **BM@N's goal** is to study the properties of quark-gluon plasma or quark-gluon matter, which is formed in nuclear collisions and **with color glass condensate** represents **the extreme density matter**."

In total, around 300 contexts containing problematic areas were identified and then systematically categorized into lexical, grammatical and stylistic areas. The areas were further divided into subtypes. For this paper, the most common mistakes were selected.

Having identified the main problematic areas and typical errors, we adapted the academic writing course to the identified students' needs and tested its effectiveness by the conventional criteria. At the end of the academic writing course, the students were asked to do the same assignment again (post-test) and afterwards complete a short questionnaire containing five questions: (1) Did the introductory assignment help you see your problem areas in academic writing? (2) Did the teacher's feedback help you understand what to focus on in the academic writing course? (3) Was the

instruction helpful? (4) At the end of the course, were you able to correct the initial texts on your own? (5) Did you improve your academic writing in general? The questionnaire was specially developed for this research by the authors of this paper. To ensure the content and construct validity of the questionnaire, a panel of subject matter experts was gathered consisting of 10 professors of MEPhI who have numerous publications in highly ranked scientific journals and are members of the editorial boards of the scientific journals published at MEPhI in technical subjects. The interpretations of the students' responses to the questions were based on a Likert scale measuring the answers in terms of five degrees of agreement: "A lot", "Somewhat", "Undecided", "Not really", "Not at all".

3.4 Data Analysis

The qualitative analysis involved the evaluation of the actual written texts produced by the participants using the adopted version of ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs et al., 1981) as a standardized analytic tool. Three researchers independently assessed these texts based on the pre-established evaluation standards to ensure unbiased and reliable results. To improve the credibility of the qualitative analysis, inter-rater reliability was assessed using a consensus method (Brown & Marshall, 2012). A 70% agreement level was considered adequate to confirm the reliability of scoring the students' assignments. When raters disagreed, they discussed and agreed on a shared score to reach a unified conclusion.

To compare the results of the qualitative analysis of the students' writing samples, chi-square tests were conducted. For the quantitative analysis of the results of the design academic writing course, multiple unpaired t-tests were performed to investigate group differences in pre-test and post-test scores according to the criteria set. The quantitative data in the questionnaire were

analyzed by calculating the frequencies and percentages of responses to five closed-ended questions using Google spreadsheets.

4. Problem Areas in the Students’ Written Assignment

One of the United Nations’ initiatives in higher education focuses on diversifying and making knowledge generation and sharing more inclusive (Parr et al., 2022). This goal can be achieved by addressing inequalities and reducing power imbalances in publishing opportunities. Expanding international publishing access involves not only making journals openly accessible but also supporting non-native English speakers in enhancing their academic writing skills in the English language, which serves as the global lingua franca of science and is the standard language for international publications and conferences (Alhasnawi, 2021).

4.1 Lexical Area

The findings of the qualitative analysis of students’ writing assignments showed the following frequencies of problems in the lexical area. Across 100 essays, lexical errors totaled 296 instances, with word choice errors occurring most frequently (161 instances), followed by calquing (82) and repetition (53). To compare the findings, a quantitative analysis was performed of the data obtained. Table 3 provides the results of the chi-square test for lexical errors in the writing assignments completed by the participants of the study. It shows that word choice dominates significantly among patterns typical in Russian-English academic writing.

Table 3.
Lexical Errors

Error Type	Observed (O)	Expected (E)	(O-E) ² /E
Word Choice	161	98.67	8.20
Calquing	82	98.67	2.46
Repetition	53	98.67	8.20
Total	296	296	$\chi^2 = 18.86$

The qualitative analysis allowed identifying a few instances of misusing words that are similar in sound and spelling but significantly different in meaning or usage patterns (*rise* vs *raise*, *base* vs *basis*, *perspective* vs *prospective*). Another difficulty is connected with bilingual homophones, or false friends of a translator, which look/sound similar in English and Russian but have different meanings. The most widely misused is the English adjective *actual* that looks similar to the Russian adjective *актуальный* [aktual'niy] meaning “current, of current interest, topical”: “...and their improvement is an *actual* task” (Excerpt 33); “...using generative networks, is an *actual* task” (Excerpt 34). The noun *theme* is also frequently confused with the Russian noun *тема* [tema] denoting the title of the thesis: “The *theme* of my master’s thesis was <...>” (Excerpt 22); “The *theme* of my dissertation work is <...>” (Excerpt 75).

Another set of problems in the lexical area consists in calquing from L1. When students do not know authentic scientific phrases conventionally used in English-language research papers, they tend to translate the phrases word for word from their native language. This tendency is observed in other spheres as well (Aleshinskaya, 2020). Some of the most frequently used calqued phrases are “on the example of” (Rus. *на примере* [na primere]), “what about” (Rus. *что насчет* [chto naschet]); “in result of” (Rus. *в результате* [v rezul'tate]); “meet with difficulty” (Rus. *встретиться с трудностью* [vstretitsya s trudnost'yu]).

Another common shortcoming in the student-generated texts is repetition when a word and its derivatives are used in a short context very often. This indicates insufficient lexical diversity. Among the words that are most frequently repeated in one sentence or in neighboring sentences are *research*, *obtain*, *include*, *use*, *conduct*, *consider*, *calculate*. In the following fragment,

the verb *obtain* and its derivative *obtained* in the past participle are repeatedly used:

“Density, electric conductivity and hardness of *obtained* sample were measured after polishing. Diagrams of properties of *obtained* samples were build based on *obtained* results. *Obtained* results shows that density of samples increases with voltage on capacitors” (Excerpt 63).

4.2 Grammatical Area

Regarding grammatical errors made by the participants of the study, articles appeared the most frequent problem across 100 essays. Table 4 provides the results of the chi-square test for grammatical errors in the writing assignments completed by the participants of the study.

Table 4.
Grammatical Errors

Error Type	Observed (O)	Expected (E)	(O-E) ² /E
Word Order	243	216.71	8.20
Passive Forms	82	216.71	42.99
Verbals	317	216.71	17.49
Articles	471	216.71	117.85
Agreement in Number	36	216.71	50.81
Possessive Case	27	216.71	55.41
Prepositions	325	216.71	15.37
Total	1517	1517	$\chi^2 = 301.40$

As seen from Table 4, articles, verbals and prepositions reveal the dominance of L1 Russian interference, while low-frequency errors are exhibited by such grammatical features as possessives and agreement. The highest frequency of errors connected with article use can be explained by the fact that the Russian language lacks articles, and it is not surprising that articles present another set of difficulties for Russian students. The definite article is quite often omitted: “The characteristics of spent nuclear fuel is *object* of the research” (Excerpt 2); “The main aim of *research* was to...” (Excerpt 5); “Thus, the master’s thesis consists of two parts: *part* devoted to

the study of...” (Excerpt 6). The indefinite article can be omitted or mistakenly used before an uncountable noun or a noun in the plural form: “The main tasks of the research were creating *computer model* for scattering of protons... (Excerpt 17); “The LIBS technique is based on recording the emission spectrum of *a plasma*” (Excerpt 67); “As a result, metastable phases can form in the alloys, which have *an unstable and unsatisfactory corrosive properties*” (Excerpt 14).

Verbals, especially the gerund and infinitive, are some of the most challenging grammatical forms for Russian students. Since nouns are more characteristic of the Russian language, in translated texts nouns are more commonly used instead of the gerund: “*Creation* a calculation model of a high-power BN-type reactor in the RTM-2 software package (basic version)” (Excerpt 3). The verb *allow* is among the most frequently misused verbs, especially when it is followed by an infinitive without an object: “The framework will *allow to simulate* sequentially the following processes and stages of a cosmic ray particle propagation through the near-Earth space” (Excerpt 9); “It *allows to work* with nonstationary time series and extract variation’s characteristics for different time moments” (Excerpt 12).

Prepositions are frequently used incorrectly when translating from Russian into English. In English, the “of + Noun” construction is considered equivalent to the Genitive case in Russian. Probably that is the reason why the preposition *of* tends to be omitted in translated texts in the function of the Genitive case: “*In framework this research* we have used the Baisan theorem” (Excerpt 5); “Binary *alloys zirconium* with niobium have an important drawback” (Excerpt 13). Other prepositions can be mistakenly used in set expressions due to calquing preposition patterns: “Research focused *at* one particle species is driven mostly in the context of applied

sciences” (Excerpt 9); “All work is divided *on* solving two tasks” (Excerpt 75).

Other common grammatical mistakes are related to the position of the subject and predicate in the sentence. In standard English sentences, the subject and predicate usually appear close together, whereas in Russian they can be separated by many words. Unlike Russian, which is an inflectional language, English relies on a fixed word order, and deviations from this can make sentences difficult to understand. In the following example the position of the predicate *remains* is hard to identify due to numerous subordinate words inserted between it and the subject: “*Clarification* of the causes and mechanisms of this resistance as well as the search for ways to reduce it *remains* an urgent task of experimental and clinical oncology and radiation biology for many years” (Excerpt 22).

The habit of translating literally is also evident in the reversed word order, which sounds unnatural in affirmative English sentences. Thus, following the reverse word order typical of Russian sentences starting with an adverbial modifier, the students often use the predicate before the subject: “In the diploma work *was analyzed the radiation characteristics* of spent nuclear fuel (Excerpt 2); “During the work *were studied the theoretical questions* regarding approaches to automation...” (Excerpt 39); “For diagnostics *was calculated collective objective* ...” (Excerpt 71); “In this work *was performed analysis* of blockchain technology...” (Excerpt 85). Moreover, in translated sentences, the subject may be mistakenly omitted: “Also *was decided* that the verification of software would operate within one channel of the safety system” (Excerpt 88).

Passive forms also present difficulties for the students. In some texts, reflexive verbs, which have a passive meaning in Russian, are mistakenly translated using the active voice: “Step engine is impulse-managed device. It

calls 'step' engine because..." (Excerpt 90). Sometimes the second participle is not used or the auxiliary verb *to be* is omitted: "The reactor control system has something types of detectors, some of which *are locate* in the reactor core" (Excerpt 59); "Model development *based* on logistic regression with ROC-analysis, regularization and cross-validation" (Excerpt 20). In some works, the passive voice is confused with the present continuous form: "Attempts to solving this problem are *connecting* with other cosmological and astrophysical issues" (Excerpt 6); "Now this robotic system *is using* for teach students and participates in various robotics competitions" (Excerpt 80).

The use of nouns in translated texts is also characterized by certain inaccuracies. In some works, nouns do not agree in the number with attributes or verbs: "Many efforts have been made for explanation of *this phenomena*" (Excerpt 6); "This corresponds with earlier results for *another powders* sintered by this method" (Excerpt 63). Sometimes nouns in the possessive case are erroneously used in the attributive function: "Implemented *algorithm's* efficiency was explored through experiments with the developed system <...>. Exploration of the developed *system's* efficiency showed the applicability of VCS-based algorithms in the field of user data storage" (Excerpt 40); "There is opportunity to precisely determine *particle's* energy and type and to obtain daily differential energy spectra in the experiment" (Excerpt 12).

4.3 Stylistic Area

In general, due to a large number of technical terms and complicated constructions, the style of the students' texts looks rather formal. However, there are quite a lot of informal insertions such as contracted forms of verbs (*don't, didn't, can't, isn't, aren't, 'll*), colloquial words and phrases (*wanna, kind of, sort of, you know, and all those things*) and personal pronouns (*I, me,*

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my, you): “I am modeling the magnetic field of Earth’s liquid core at *my* scientific work. I want to answer the question...” (Excerpt 100); “I propose there will be several exploration phases...” (Excerpt 55); “Based on this fact I assume that *me* and *my* laboratory will receive more requests for creating sustainable processing approaches” (Excerpt 70). The students’ texts are also characterized by poor hedging skills as they lack devices that allow softening the level of categorical statements.

4.4 Structure, Cohesion, and Punctuation

Most of the PhD students’ works lacked a clear structure of the text and cohesion: there was no logical development of the idea from the first to the last sentence. In the written response to the task, the participants gave answers to the questions strictly according to the items of the task, making use of multiple lists with bullet points. So, instead of the detailed sentences “*The purpose of this study was ...*” and “*To achieve the set goal, it was necessary to solve the following tasks: ...*” quite often there were enumerations: “*Aim: ... Tasks: ...*”. In addition, in some works there was no division of the text into paragraphs, or, on the contrary, each sentence began with a new paragraph. It turned out that not all students are familiar with the rules of punctuation in English: the main difficulties are associated with the use of commas, which does not always correspond to the norms of the Russian language.

5. Adapting the Course to Learners’ Needs

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“The purpose of this study was ...” and *“To achieve the set goal, it was necessary to solve the following tasks: ...”* quite often there were enumerations: *“Aim: ... Tasks: ...”*. In addition, in some works there was no division of the text into paragraphs, or, on the contrary, each sentence began with a new paragraph. It turned out that not all students are familiar with the rules of punctuation in English: the main difficulties are associated with the use of commas, which does not always correspond to the norms of the Russian language.

Table 5.
Course Program (adapted)

Week(s)	Content
<i>Semester 1</i>	
1	Introduction: Academic English
2	Word order
3-4	Tenses
5	Passive
6-8	Verbals
9-10	Articles
11	Noun strings, possessive case. Punctuation
12-14	Academic vocabulary
15-17	Basics of paraphrasing
<i>Semester 2</i>	
18-20	Describing the subject
21-22	Describing the methodology
23-25	Describing the results
26	Writing an abstract
27-28	Cohesion
29	Overview of a research paper
30-32	Writing a literature review
33-34	Writing an introduction

Methodologically, the lessons focused on writing parts of a scientific article were designed around five stages of the educational cycle within genre pedagogy (Hyland, 2007). The first stage involved defining the genre’s context, including its purpose and conditions for use. Next, representative examples of the genre were analyzed (modeling), discussing key features such as structural and stylistic conventions. Study participants received

supporting materials containing key phrases for future use, examined well-written and poorly written article fragments, and were alerted to common errors. In the joint construction phase, students practiced writing this genre while the teacher facilitated discussions on how to create effective sections of a scientific article. In the self-construction and comparison stages, which involved relating the genre to others and different contexts, postgraduate students completed independent tasks either in class or as homework. Genre-based learning was strengthened through targeted teaching of lexical structures, which contributed to faster development of academic writing abilities, including grammar and stylistic elements. Using the lexical approach (Chen et al., 2023), considerable attention was given to lexical chunks related to achieving particular goals in writing (e.g., articulating the purpose or results of the research), so that the students became aware not only of the co-occurrence of words, but also their contexts.

6. Course Results

Upon the completion of the designed course, to measure its effectiveness, we asked the students to write about their research again (post-test) and compared the texts according to the same assessment criteria. The findings of the qualitative study show that as a result of the well-planned instruction the students considerably improved their writing skills: they advanced on average from 22.27 (74.23%) to 29.1 (97%) out of 30 points in the organization and content of their essays and from 15.95 (79.75%) to 19.67 (98.35%) out of 20 points in their language skills. Table 6 shows the differences in the mean scores and standard errors of difference, as well as statistical values p and t for participants at two times (pre-test and post-test) across two sets of criteria: organization and content, and language skills.

Table 6.

Essay Assessment Results

Criteria	<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	Mean	Std.
<i>Organization and Content</i>				
Task Fulfilment	<0.0001	8.6863	-1.69	0.195
Structure	<0.0001	8.9281	-1.37	0.153
Length	<0.0001	4.0249	-0.75	0.186
Cohesion	<0.0001	17.6670	-2.07	0.117
Flow	<0.0001	8.7792	-0.86	0.098
Total	<0.0001	14.2550	-6.83	0.479
<i>Language Skills</i>				
Vocabulary	<0.0001	19.6022	-1.46	0.074
Grammar	<0.0001	12.6107	-1.25	0.099
Style	<0.0001	11.8176	-0.90	0.076
Mechanics	0.0017	3.1875	-0.11	0.035
Total	<0.0001	18.0853	-3.72	0.206

Overall, the difference between the pre-test and the post-test can be considered extremely statistically significant, as the two-tailed p-value for all the criteria was less than 0.001. The only exception was the “mechanics” criteria, where the difference is very statistically significant, with the two-tailed p-value being slightly above 0.001 but still considerably lower than 0.05. As the results of the second writing assignment (post-test) show, the largest progress was observed in the use of cohesive devices, the use of grammar and lexical resources, as well as the task fulfilment and structure of the postgraduate students’ essays. Furthermore, as a result of the explicit instruction and understanding of the assignment, the students significantly improved such aspects of academic writing as the appropriate style and flow, paid more attention to writing mechanics including punctuation and the correspondence with the requirements of the task regarding the length of the essay. Thus, the quantitative analysis of the scores obtained by the participants of the experiment revealed significant progress in their academic writing competence both in general and in relation to each of the specified criteria.

The questionnaire helped measure the students' attitude to their progress as a result of the explicit instruction involving genre-based and lexical approaches. The results of the questionnaire conducted at the end of the course following the post-test are presented in Table 7.

Table 7.
Questionnaire Results

	A Lot	Somewhat	Undecided	Not Really	Not at All
1. Did the introductory assignment help you see your problem areas in academic writing?	64	27	9	0	0
2. Did the teacher's feedback help you understand what to focus on in the academic writing course?	85	15	0	0	0
3. Was the instruction helpful?	100	0	0	0	0
4. At the end of the course, were you able to correct the initial texts on your own?	100	0	0	0	0
5. Did you improve your academic writing in general?	100	0	0	0	0

The results of the questionnaire revealed the participants' perception to their own progress in academic writing in general and the role of the explicit instruction in enhancing their academic writing competence. The questionnaire results demonstrate overwhelmingly positive responses from students regarding the academic writing course. All the respondents gave positive answers to all the five questions, and none of the respondents chose the variants "Not really" or "Not at all" to any of the five questions. In their responses to the first question of the survey, 64% of the participants admitted that the introductory assignment helped them a lot to become aware of their problematic areas in academic writing, while only 9% were not sure of their response. In answers to the second question, 85% of the respondents admitted the great significance of the teacher's feedback on the introductory assignment in making them focus on specific problematic areas during the

academic writing course. Interestingly, all the respondents (100%) admitted they found the instruction helpful, were able to independently correct their initial essays by the course's end, and believed they improved their academic writing overall. No respondents expressed disagreement or neutrality in these last three questions, indicating unanimous satisfaction and perceived improvement.

The questionnaire results indicate that the course's initial diagnostic tasks, ongoing feedback, and teaching approaches were very effective in increasing students' awareness of writing difficulties, directing their learning efforts, and promoting significant progress and independence in academic writing. The vast majority of positive responses confirmed that the introductory assignment allowed students to identify their problem areas in academic writing, the teacher's feedback helped clarify their focus for the course, and the explicit instruction was beneficial. Students' responses also show that the pre-test and teacher's explanations during classes helped them recognize their writing challenges and highlighted specific course content areas. Students also noted that pre-testing helped them focus not only on the general aspects of writing a scientific article in English, but also on certain individual aspects that are their "weak points". At the end of the course, they were able to correct their errors on their own, and they all felt their academic writing had improved to a large extent. The uniform positive feedback also reflects increased student motivation and engagement with the course content.

The overall findings of the present investigation show that throughout the academic writing course consisting of 34 weeks (68 academic hours), the L2 students' written texts have become more communicatively effective and shaped to meet the communicative situation. The benefits in terms of using cohesive devices, grammar and lexical resources, style and structure should be understood on an increased attentiveness towards the problem areas that

the postgraduate students had initially on entering the course. The results of the post-test highlight the positive influence of explicit instruction based on the curriculum designed with an account of the deviations from the norms accepted by the international scientific community, which were identified by means of the pre-test. This allows us to conclude that the explicit instruction taking into consideration the postgraduate students' problematic areas significantly contributed to the development of their academic writing skills and increased their motivation to study the features of writing scientific articles in English.

7. Discussion

The qualitative examination of 100 writing samples revealed dominant errors in the lexical, grammatical, stylistic areas, as well as problems related to structure, cohesion, and punctuation. The problems identified in the study mirror L1 Russian interference patterns such as complex sentences and calquing noted by Shpit & McCarthy (2025). Moreover, the findings emphasize the significance of recognizing the differences between English-language and Russian-language scientific discourse. Thus, Hyland (2011) outlined key characteristics of scientific discourse common to all English-language scientific texts, including a clear structure and defined objectives, regular repetition of the study's main claims, avoidance of deviations from the central idea, limited use of absolute statements with frequent use of hedging, frequent cohesive and transitional devices, and overall textual clarity. In contrast, Russian scientific writing is marked by an overuse of "of" phrases, nouns or verbal nouns in place of gerunds or infinitives of purpose, and nominalized forms instead of relative clauses (Shpit & McCarthy, 2023; Kolesnikova, 2022). Additionally, Russian scientific texts tend to avoid explicitly highlighting research gaps or justifying the study's relevance

through a literature review (Aleshinskaya, 2023). Knowledge of such differences is necessary for improving the quality of corrective feedback and, accordingly, student awareness, which will contribute to improving the quality of academic writing.

In this study, the integration of teaching approaches through lexical and genre analysis with indirect corrective feedback has been shown to work well to effectively design an academic writing course for engineering postgraduates and address diverse proficiency levels, low motivation, and time constraints. Compared to Chujkova's (2015) small-scale experiment, we demonstrate the efficiency of a hybrid approach over single-method curricula (Akopova, 2023).

The findings obtained align well with previous studies emphasizing the importance of needs analysis. Do (2023) explains that needs analysis identifies learners' specific requirements to ensure the course content is relevant and useful for their particular context. When classes address the language learning needs and expectations of L2 learners, students tend to be more motivated, engage more actively, and find meaningful purpose in their course activities (Macalister & Nation, 2020; Graves, 1996). Likewise, the qualitative examination of students' actual writing helped pinpoint their needs by revealing problematic areas, allowing for the development of targeted lessons tailored to the specific context. Evaluating students' writing errors and challenges through their actual writing offered a more objective and comprehensive assessment of their writing strengths and weaknesses.

In this regard, our study is closely related to the concept of corrective feedback, specifically focusing on indirect corrective feedback (Soodmand Afshar et al., 2025; Supiani et al., 2025). This type of feedback does not provide the correct form or explanation directly; instead, it typically marks errors less explicitly (Nguyen, 2021). Indirect corrective feedback may

simply highlight the mistake or include an additional comment, which helps learners better understand the nature of their errors (Nassaji, 2016). By encouraging self-correction, indirect feedback can support second language acquisition (Ferris, 2007). Patra et al. (2022) note that using appropriate corrective feedback enhances learner performance and boosts their confidence in achieving educational goals, leading to greater effort, efficiency, and self-assurance. Mosek and Gilboa (2016) also suggest that accurate use of corrective feedback by teachers increases students' academic motivation and enthusiasm. Furthermore, effective feedback models promote "feeding forward" by offering strategies for improvement, helping students plan their next steps, and fostering a more interactive learning process (Carless et al., 2011).

Finally, taking the third research question into consideration, the results of the pre/post t-tests demonstrated significant proficiency gains across the standardized criteria, with particular advances in the use of cohesive devices, grammar and lexical resources, style and structure. This aligns well with Song and Song's (2023) findings on AI-assisted feedback boosting EFL writing skills and motivation through personalized error correction. The questionnaire data further revealed increased self-awareness of weaknesses, extending Mlundi's (2025) evidence that a targeted scientific writing program based on genre mastery may enhance postgraduates' readiness for high-quality publication.

8. Conclusion

This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of a customized academic writing approach to improve English proficiency among engineering students. The primary research question examined whether a teaching method tailored to address specific language needs would lead to a statistically

significant enhancement in academic writing skills. As a result of the qualitative analysis of the students' essays, we were able to identify problem in specific areas. This allowed us to adjust course content accordingly to prepare students for professional academic work. Moreover, it enabled the design of a curriculum that focused on identified problem areas and better aligned with their individual requirements. The results of the needs analysis heightened students' awareness of their weaknesses and the course content, boosting their motivation. Consequently, by the end of the course, students were able to independently correct their writing mistakes using the course materials. The researchers of the current study came to the conclusion that personalizing English language instruction to meet the specific needs of engineering students significantly improves their academic writing competence and enhances their readiness for future professional activities. This study has provided a deeper insight into tailoring academic writing instruction for engineering postgraduates. It has demonstrated that a combination of needs-driven and hybrid lexical-genre approaches contributes to measurable proficiency gains and enables fostering sustained motivation notwithstanding time constraints.

This research offers practical implications for ESL courses in technical universities by supporting a needs-driven hybrid approach that integrates lexical and genre-based instruction to address gaps in proficiency, limited classroom hours, and low motivation among engineering postgraduates. Educators can use the described sequential mixed-methods design as a template to tailor course content, placing emphasis on high-frequency problems like article misuse and calquing. Theoretically, the findings of this study contribute to the current literature by demonstrating the important role of indirect feedback in fostering self-correction and awareness, as well as

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increasing students' motivation and professional readiness for international publication.

This study is limited by its single-institution focus at the university of MEPhI, potentially restricting generalizability to other technical universities or non-Russian L1 contexts, where error patterns like article misuse and calquing may differ. The short-term pre/post design (autumn 2024-spring 2025) captures immediate gains but seems to lack longitudinal tracking of retention or publication success. This could be done as a possible direction of further research. Moreover, future research should expand the scope of teaching techniques enhancing language proficiency and academic performance by involving artificial intelligence. For instance, employing an intelligent system of excerpts from authentic data in various academic genres (Shtanko & Kulik, 2021) would ease the process of extracting and systematizing necessary data (Rybina et al., 2022) such as lexical chunks and in this way provide automatic assistance in teaching students to paraphrase and write a synopsis of their research work. Furthermore, using a cognitive model of a scientific text reflecting its intelligent structure (Aleshinskaya, 2024) will enable a better understanding of categories signaling various mental operations (or moves) and their sequence (Wei et al., 2022; Tikhonova et al., 2023), thus contributing to the enhancement of academic writing skills.

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