10 From Secondary to Tertiary Education in Russia: Bridging the Academic Writing Gap

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In this chapter, I provide a case study of my experience helping Russian undergraduate students adjust to the requirements of higher education within first-year academic writing courses. Transition problems are largely accounted for by mismatches between students' and instructors' expectations, which originate from Russian historical features and educational policies. The mismatches include imposed lack of responsibility, poor commitment, misunderstanding the role of the instructors, grades, the writing process, and general unfamiliarity with academic conventions. Awareness of these mismatches can help instructors adjust their attitudes to undergraduates and adapt their teaching approaches. The author recommends a few easy-to-implement techniques which proved helpful in the classroom. By raising students' awareness of expectations at university, delegating some of the instructors' tasks to students, incorporating opportunities for making choices, encouraging independent work, and facilitating peer-assessment and reflection, academic writing instructors can help their learners become more responsible writers, which is likely to ensure their successful performance in the university.

There are many cases in which miscommunication takes place. The experience of not being heard and understood is not only uncomfortable for communicants from a psychological point of view but is highly unlikely to produce desired results. Unfortunately, this is what most university professors experience when working with first-year undergraduates in Russia (Maloshonok & Terentev, 2017). The process in a way resembles cross-cultural communication between representatives of two different cultures, who, being eager and generally effective communicators, have different backgrounds and experiences, and, consequently, different expectations. Unawareness of such "gaps and gulfs" (Clerehan, 2002, p. 72) can result in communicative failures which might lead to serious ramifications (Lowe & Cook, 2003). This miscommu-

nication tends to be the case at the initial stages of Russian higher education and is also manifested in academic writing courses delivered to first-year undergraduates.

This "cognitive dissonance between the two parties of the learning process" (Leontyeva, 2018, p. 12) and its causes are more commonly referred to in the literature as a gap between two educational levels, secondary-tertiary transition, or underdeveloped academic literacies in first-year students (Agosti & Bernat, 2018; Chokwe, 2013; Parker, 2003; Wingate, 2012). Regardless of how it is described, transitioning from school to university has been a challenge not only for many students (Kyndt et al., 2017), but for all parties involved (Briggs et al., 2012).

Transition between educational levels is a complex process which is manifested in students' performance in various courses, including academic writing. Academic writing is not purely a written productive skill. Seen as a process, it encompasses and brings into play reading, listening, speaking, and then writing itself. From the perspective of academic study, these would be referred to as academic literacies in the British and European traditions. The concept of academic literacies is defined as a set of social practices associated with different cultures, situations, and communities (Lee & Street, 1998). Writing in this case is the culmination of a process involving academic reading, listening, discussion, and presentation. As a form of communication, or discourse, academic writing can be seen as a way to produce and share knowledge (Lea, 1998; Lea & Street, 1998, 2006), which is critical in academia for progress and achievement (Foster & Russell, 2002). It is not surprising that many first-year students have identified academic writing as their main challenge in adapting to the new stage of education and constructing their new identity as a university student (Gourlay, 2009; Miller & Pessoa, 2017). Consequently, helping students develop the necessary academic literacies significantly improves their performance as writers not only in academic writing, but also in other subjects. This strategy has been widely implemented in the Writing across the Curriculum pedagogy in the U. S. tradition (Russell et al., 2009).

In this essay, I will present the results of a case study conducted with first-year bachelor students during an introduction to academic writing course in a Russian university. This study enabled me to single out the problems the students felt they had with transition from secondary school into higher education. In an attempt to understand what causes difficulties in communication between professors and first-year students, I will start at the national institutional level and describe the situation with higher education and teaching academic writing in the Russian context. I will also present the pre-

ceding stages, namely, high school and standardized school-leaving exams. Finally, I will look at a profile of a first-year university Russian student that was developed as a result of the case study. I will identify the expectations with which students enter the university and compare them with the expectations of faculty. This information will help me discuss problems that arise in student-professor interactions and formulate some techniques that I found helpful in my teaching of academic writing courses to undergraduates. These are based on my own experience and observations and those of other instructors working in a similar context.

It is important to state that the aim of the paper is to present the challenges that university professors face with undergraduate students, so I do not cover the strengths and benefits of Russian secondary education in the current paper, which does not mean that there are none. Moreover, the presented tendencies by no means serve as indicators of the quality of Russian secondary school education. They attest more to the gap between the two educational levels, or as Smolentseva (2015) puts it, lack of consistency and continuity between them.

Higher Education in Transition

For the past 20 years, higher education in Russia has been going through a transition from the closed national model well-established in the Soviet Union to a more open and flexible model based on the Bologna system (since 1999), as it facilitates global integration. As I see it, there are two major trends that affect teaching academic writing at the university level.

One important trend is the shift from oral examinations as a dominant assessment form in the USSR to written examinations at the entrance level and within degree programs. For a long time, a discussion with the course instructor served as the main assessment tool. This discussion was graded based on the professor's impression. The test would start with one question and then might go in any direction determined by the professor or the student. As a result, at the undergraduate level, students could do without well-developed academic writing skills, as writing played a marginal role in assessment. The writing skill that was commonly required was summarizing and reviewing literature for the so-called report, so argumentative and research writing was rarely explicitly taught at the secondary school level with the exception of literary text analysis (see Chapter 2). It was not until the last decade that various kinds of essays became more widespread in multiple disciplines, causing the need for students to possess good academic writing skills and contributing to the gap between school and university.

The second trend affecting writing practices and requirements in higher education is the need to boost the visibility of Russian researchers in the global community. During the Soviet period, Russian research in several fields was barely available to the global audience, partly due to political reasons, which made Soviet academia quite a closed local community (see Chapter 1). In late 2013, the Russian government launched the Academic Excellence Initiative 5-100, which ensures financial support to leading Russian universities. The participating institutions are required, among other imperatives, to integrate into global research communities and to make Russian research more visible. These both require very high standards of research presentation, which sets the writing bar very high and puts extra pressure on academics. That is why as early as the undergraduate level, future academics could be required not only to conduct world-class research, but also to be able to present it well in writing.

Secondary Schools and University Admission

In Russia, as in many other countries, it is the last stage of secondary school that focuses on preparing students for university. After 9 years of instruction, more academically inclined students proceed to grades 10 and 11, which are generally equivalent to the sixth form and high school in the UK and US, respectively. The national syllabus for those two years is designed so that the learners revise and extend most of the knowledge they have gained in all subjects. At this stage, students do not usually have a choice of the subjects they focus on unless they transfer to a specialized school—an option that is not widely available and therefore not very common across the country. This has generally stayed the same throughout the transition from the Soviet to the Russian education system, while admission procedures have changed dramatically.

Historically, each university in the Soviet Union conducted a set of examinations for potential students. Although the exams were based on the national secondary school curriculum, they could take very different forms and require different skills; for example, some language and linguistics programs required an interview and a reading test, others just a grammar and vocabulary test; still others offered a more language theory-oriented exam. All these subjects are supposed to be covered at school, but there is no specific focus. That is why students had to first select a university, then find out entrance exam requirements, and only then could they start to prepare. On the one hand, this system kept leading universities elitist and contributed to de-massification (Smolentseva, 2016); on the other hand, students were encouraged to make a conscious decision about what university and what program they would like to apply to and to take more responsibility for the decision.

In 2009, a unified state exam was introduced, which marked a dramatic change in secondary school education. Now school leavers take written standardized tests to graduate and to enter universities. This test generally enables applicants from various backgrounds to apply to any university in the country and ensures fairer competition. However, along with the many benefits, one of the disadvantages has been that now high school education tends to focus on training exam skills rather than developing academic literacies. Like any test, it requires preparation for the test format, test-taking strategies, and endless drills. These skills have not necessarily been helpful in universities. Overall, the national school curricula did not change greatly because of the exam, and they still require a wide range of skills, including those necessary for higher education. However, since everyone has to take the unified state exams, high school has tended to focus on the exam rather than more abstract and less tangible academic literacies, which will be needed later.

The format of the English exam is similar to international language exams in that it consists of five parts: grammar and vocabulary, reading, listening, speaking, and writing. The writing part involves writing an informal letter and a short argumentative essay. The assessment rubric for the essay activities is designed so that the focus of assessment is mainly language and adherence to the guidelines (Federal Institute for Pedagogical Measurements, 2020). This focus is understandable for a national-level exam, as these criteria are the easiest to mark and to account for, but it means that students have gotten used to placing a lot of emphasis on accuracy and mechanics instead of content, which is paramount in university level courses, including academic writing.

Case Study

The case study was conducted in the 2018–2019 academic school year when delivering an Introduction to Academic Writing course to first-year undergraduates majoring in international relations and economics at one of the leading universities in Moscow, Russia. The entire program was taught in English, so it recognized academic writing in English as an essential part of the curriculum. The course was 102 academic hours long and started at the very beginning of the program, spanning the fall and spring semesters. The class was divided into three groups of students, so I shared the three sections with a colleague.

The case study involved 78 students, 52 females and 26 males, aged between 17 and 18, who joined the program right after high school. All students passed three unified state exams to enroll: English language, history, and Russian language. They had to achieve at least 70% in English and 60% in history and Russian.

Throughout the course, I observed students' attitudes to learning and expectations that they had formed prior to college. These observations were registered in my journal, which enabled me to identify key attitudes and expectations. These findings were further confirmed during unstructured or semi-structured interviews with individual students. One more step in validating the observations was a long semi-structured interview with my colleague who taught other sections of the course to the same class of students. After that, I matched the findings with the education trends in Russia in order to try to establish a rationale behind the observed attitudes and expectations of our first-year students.

Having established the expectations that were harming the learning process, I conducted a pilot study attempting to mitigate the effects of mismatches through classroom practices within the same introduction to academic writing course delivered in the 2018–2019 academic school year. Based on my prior experience of teaching in a similar context, I selected and implemented several classroom procedures and activities, observed their effect on students' behaviors, and then confirmed my observations with feedback from students. Since these mitigation attempts are not the key focus of the case study, I did not conduct additional quantitative assessment of their effectiveness. However, the results of the pilot study can serve as a starting point for further research into best practices, as they uncovered specific teaching techniques that helped my students overcome the secondary-tertiary gap in the context of the Russian education system.

Students in Transition and Education Trends: Case Study Observations

High school policies and university entrance requirements contribute significantly to the study patterns and expectations the students have (Laing et al., 2005). As a result of these, freshmen often come in with a pre-defined set of beliefs and attitudes, which are not necessarily helpful in undergraduate studies (Lowe & Cook, 2003). The discrepancies become apparent in students' work in academic writing courses, as, like I established earlier, successful performance in these courses requires well-developed academic literacies and academic skills other than writing.

The case study enabled me to uncover several expectations that first-year students have, and the following aspects of the Russian education seem to have shaped those expectations. The first is the optional status of higher education. Students seem to struggle with the fact that degrees are not compulsory, and those who decide to obtain them are expected to demonstrate a

higher level of awareness and responsibility. Secondly, massification of higher education in the USSR led to the long-lasting belief that everyone should go to college regardless of their readiness, abilities, and inclinations; ideally, it would happen straight after high school. Thirdly, according to the students, both the secondary school teachers and the student's parents seem to place a great emphasis on the test score, rather than on the tested skills and knowledge. This attitude has also affected the perception of the teacher and their role. Finally, the standardized school-leaving tests have played a role in shaping students' attitudes to studying.

The students reported that getting a place in a university after leaving secondary school was crucial, and obtaining an actual degree seems secondary to that. This attitude appeared to be informed by what is probably the biggest issue underpinning the secondary-tertiary gap—the status of higher education in Russia. On the one hand, higher education is optional and is now becoming less accessible and more elitist. On the other hand, historically the USSR made significant effort to ensure massification of higher education, so that in the 1960s and 1970s it was one of the first countries to achieve this mass stage (Smolentseva, 2016). Yet, due to the massification propaganda, the idea that higher education is obligatory for any decent and respectable individual has now been firmly ingrained in Russian people's minds. As a result, university was seen as non-compulsory and compulsory at the same time in the sense that, unlike secondary school, a university degree was not part of compulsory education, but there was an assumption that those who do not hold a degree have failed just because of that. Moreover, students have believed that they have to do it straight after high school without having much time to properly consider this option. To prove that it is now not a necessity, but a belief held by students and their parents, the results of the unified state exams are valid for four years after obtaining them, so there is every opportunity to postpone the decision without the need to retake the exams (Federal Education Act, 2012).

This urge to get into a university brings about a few serious consequences. Since this step is more of a status move, students appear to treat entering the university as an end in itself, rather than the beginning of a challenging learning process. The case study showed that students have often come in unprepared for commitment and hard work. In addition, according to a survey at a Russian university, students might demonstrate high satisfaction rates when they do not have to put a lot of effort into studying (Chirikov, 2015), proving that they have not been ready to take responsibility for their own learning. Such limited responsibility could also be partly caused by the students' general immaturity and lack of informed decisions at the stage of

choosing a university. Since the social pressure to get in has been very high, the students have opted for any program that would accept them regardless of whether this is something they want and have been inclined towards. This was hardly possible before the introduction of the unified state exam because of the differences in entrance exam formats, which required special preparation for each particular program. During this targeted preparation the students had a chance to become more conscious and responsible about choosing a program. Now, according to my observations, having secured any place in any program, the students relax and believe their goal to be fully achieved. Another study showed clearly that Russian first-year undergraduates tended to expect education to happen to them, which was manifested in their unwillingness to participate actively in classes. The students expected to sit through classes and be passive recipients of knowledge (Maloshonok & Terentev, 2017) or at the very best to be guided by the instructors. This is partly something that they would have been used to in the controlled environment of secondary school. However, this expectation does not appear to be common only among Russian students. Similar attitudes to self-regulation and increased workload were reported among British students (Money et al., 2019).

Apart from this passivity, Russian students bring from secondary school a firm belief in do-overs and make-ups, which was another observation that became apparent in the case study. This seems connected with high school being compulsory, meaning that there is no selection and mixed-ability classes. In this case teachers tend to help learners by giving them an opportunity to study more, rewrite tests, and make up assignments. However, being helpful in the short term, it can prove counterproductive in the long run. My experience teaching first-year students has shown that this practice has encouraged some learners not to take tests seriously and, therefore, not to prepare well, hoping that they will pass somehow. They believed that there would be another chance if they did not get away with little preparation the first time, and they could put in real effort at that point. This sounds very logical from the students' point of view, and since they have been given these opportunities, they take advantage without thinking about their responsibility to study well all the time. Moreover, students seem to have found it acceptable to ask explicitly for a make-up if they are not satisfied with the test result. This practice also has taught them not to respect the time it takes to design several versions of tests and to mark them.

One of the reasons for frequent requests for a make-up in case of a satisfactory or even good grade is attitude towards grades and grading systems. This attitude has been the second major issue underpinning the mismatch in

student-professor expectations. The interviewed students noted that Russian school children have often been encouraged by the schools and families to get the highest scores possible and not to be content with anything less than excellent. This may be possible at secondary school where the amount of information to digest and the skills to develop are tailored to average abilities so that every child can exercise their right to secondary education. In this case, an excellent mark can be quite easily achievable and does not require outstanding performance, especially on the part of brighter, more academically inclined children. However, in highly specialized university programs, the amount of material and required depth of analysis is much greater, which means that each higher grade requires a substantial investment of effort and time. That is why a pass, not an excellent grade, should be treated as the baseline, while everything above is a significant achievement.

This mismatch in expectations has been supported by research. According to a survey carried out at a Russian university, 43% of first-year students overestimated the grades they were likely to obtain (Maloshonok & Terentev, 2017), as they were used to getting very high marks quite easily at school. Moreover, the researchers have proven statistically that the mismatch between expected and real grades affected students' academic performance (Maloshonok & Terentev, 2017). Compounded by the social pressure to get into a university and the consequent need to receive the highest scores possible on the unified state exam, the case study showed that the importance of assessment has tended to be inflated to the degree that it starts interfering with the performance. This attitude among students adds extra stress and shifts the focus from learning to scoring high on tests. Similar trends were reported in other higher education contexts (see DeFeo et al., 2020; Khan, 2014; Romanowski, 2004), making it a global problem that requires attention.

Another consequence of this shift in focus is the effect it has on relations with professors. The case study revealed that first-year students have tended to see teachers as grade-givers who introduce various assessments in order to prevent students from receiving the desirable highest grade. Indeed, when a grade has been treated as the ultimate goal of education, the role of the person who gives it is bound to change. Instead of mediators and facilitators of learning, teachers seem to become power wielders, sources of fear, and obstacles to getting a higher grade. Unfortunately, this attitude has not helped build a healthy student-professor relationship, which would involve open discussions, constructive debates, meaningful guidance, and advice-seeking. A study conducted at Russian universities reported that few students took advantage of professors' office hours to come and discuss research and professional questions: 18% of surveyed undergraduates discussed course concepts or ideas with

their professors and only 6% talked about career plans (Chirikov, 2015), which indicates that students are unlikely to benefit from the opportunity to communicate with academic staff. In American and Australian universities, for example, attendance at office hours has also appeared infrequent (Briody et al., 2019; Robinson et al., 2014).

The last significant expectation that high school graduates in my class demonstrated was reluctance to engage with the class materials. The education trend accounting for this could be the impact of standardized tests and their format. While preparing for unified state exams in high schools, students are exposed to a large number of closed types of questions, such as gap fill, matching, and multiple choice. In any context, these are unlikely to encourage critical analysis of material widely required at universities (Watkins, 2018). On the contrary, these tests are likely to promote surface-level engagement and rote learning, which is what high school graduates seem to expect at university as well. Secondary school students have usually been geared towards clear-cut questions with straightforward answers. Additionally, being used to dealing with these closed questions, students in the case study showed a significant level of intolerance of ambiguity. Ability to operate in conditions of disorder and ambiguity is essential for formulating research questions, as well as conducting and writing up research, as this is one of the goals of academic study—to systematize, identify trends, classify, etc. the seeming chaos. In general, secondary school students tend to rely excessively on models, clear explanations, and well-documented expectations. If any of these are missing, students have appeared unable to cope by themselves and to formulate questions to professors that would guide them towards the necessary information. This does not seem to be a uniquely Russian issue, as similar attitudes have largely been present in various countries, for example, in Australian high school graduates (Clerehan, 2003).

Although the expectations of students participating in the case study presented above pertain to general academic literacies and can hinder undergraduates' performance in any subject, they appear to have been tackled explicitly mainly in academic writing courses in Russian universities. The students reported that in very few other subjects were they explicitly taught to present their thoughts in a well-structured, coherent way that was consistent with academic conventions. To be able to demonstrate these skills, students need to overcome the fixation on mechanics and grades, develop deeper and more active learning, become self-sufficient, take responsibility for their own learning, and be ready to build a partnership with the instructor. Lack of these abilities in high school graduates presents serious obstacles for their successful performance in academic writing, which encompasses all academic literacies.

Apart from poorly developed general academic literacies, secondary school graduates have tended to have specific expectations of writing in English. Preparation for the unified state exam in English appears to have notably affected the students' general perception of writing in English. The participants of the case study had to pass this exam in order to be enrolled in the bachelor of arts program. The exam requires a short, very controlled essay of 200–250 words. This is a task designed to test the learners' ability to write in a language accurately and within the given limits. The assignment clearly specifies the type and the structure of the essay down to the number of paragraphs, number of supporting ideas, and the way ideas should be organized into paragraphs (Federal Institute for Pedagogical Measurements, 2020). Any deviation results in a score deduction, so the focus of the task is often shifted from informing, convincing, etc., to getting the grammar and order of paragraphs right at the very best. This essay might serve the purpose of assessing writing proficiency, but students get used to it, and for them an essay becomes writing for the sake of writing or a formality. Later on, it takes time to convince students that the essay is a form of thinking and a manifestation of their thought process, so the target audience is actually interested in their ideas. Besides, this national exam essay, like in almost any international exam, does not require knowledge of academic conventions, research, or analytical skills. However, these are the pillars university-level academic writing is based on.

Faculty Expectations

Like students whose behaviors are largely shaped by the expectations formed in secondary school (Lowe & Cook, 2003), faculty also have specific ideas concerning what qualities and skills students should possess to do well at the university level. Wong and Chiu (2018) present an up-to-date comprehensive overview of professors' expectations of what they call an "ideal student." The researchers believe that such an articulation of the characteristics that are valued by lecturers can help students focus their efforts and not only build effective relations with the faculty, but eventually become better learners.

Although in their study Wong and Chiu (2018) interviewed academics in British universities, they show that the characteristics they uncovered seem to be shared by professors of different disciplines in different countries (Abdulghani et al., 2014; Thinyane, 2013; Thunborg et al., 2012; Vinther & Slethaug, 2014; Wong & Chiu, 2018). These findings are in line with my experience and appear as an accurate summary of the opinion of Russian university instructors.

Wong and Chiu (2018) divided the U. K. professors' expectations into two groups related to either personal or academic skill sets. The former involved

characteristics often associated with the general maturity of an individual. Mature students were expected to perform well and to take full responsibility for their learning. According to the surveyed professors, this should be implemented in their preparation for teaching sessions, which mainly involved topic awareness through assigned reading or presentation slides. The professors also noted that today, academic reading has declined substantially among undergraduates, and this has complicated teaching. The second highly desirable characteristic was engagement in learning and motivation to work independently beyond regular classes and assignments. This proactive approach leaves the instructor in the role of facilitator and mentor rather than knowledge resource and manager. Students are also expected to manifest commitment, work ethic, and good time management skills so that the work is done to a high standard and no disciplinary measures are required.

The second group of skills was academic (Wong & Chiu, 2018). Students should be able to engage in analysis of concepts, not only description. They should be willing to critically evaluate and challenge ideas both orally and in writing rather than perform passive representation of information. Apart from critical thinking and analysis of course content, students are expected to be critical of their own work. They should have the ability to reflect on their performance, identify flaws, and try to take care of them, thus developing a sense of self-awareness of their progress. This awareness should enable students to learn to improve their skills continuously as a life-long process. At the same time, students should be able and willing to accept suggestions for improvement from their instructors and should not take them as personal criticism, which is also a sign of maturity.

Interestingly, university professors appeared less interested in test performance and resulting grades than secondary school teachers, which was partly caused by the national education assessment system. Schools are generally ranked by the attainment of their graduates, while at a university, students' GPA plays a relatively small role in the university's standing. Another important explanation is that in tertiary education, the learning process is often more important and has more educational value than the product. That is why an ideal university student, according to Wong and Chiu (2018), should make an effort and engage in the learning process rather than just produce results, however good they are.

Possible Solutions to Transition Problems

The practices Russian students are used to at the secondary level are the expectations they tend to transfer to their university studies. Since these ap-

pear to be different from what is actually expected at the university level, these mismatches cause problems for students when moving from secondary schools to university.

In general, the problems of transition from secondary to higher education are faced by schoolchildren in most education systems. To varying degrees, this seems to be a global concern that requires special attention. The most commonly identified issues have included unrealistic pre-transfer expectations, secondary-tertiary gap in learning approaches, cognitive challenges, uninformed decision-making, poorly developed academic literacies, and emotional challenges (Briggs et al., 2012; Lowe & Cook, 2003; Money et al., 2019).

To solve transition problems, a range of initiatives have been widely implemented in different countries, of which Britain and Australia have appeared to be the leaders (Agosti & Bernat, 2018). These initiatives are introduced by universities and vary in focus, duration, set-up, participants, and types of support. Clerehan (2003) identifies six main approaches to facilitating transition. The most common strategy is running orientation sessions lasting from one day to about a week. Their primary aim is to familiarize new students with university policies, while more extended orientation programs can focus on some academic conventions as well. A longer version of this initiative is a British and Australian foundation course, British pre-sessional course or American pathways program, which normally runs for up to a year and aims at preparing students for university in a broader sense. It includes content knowledge building and general academic literacies development. Both initiatives, shorter orientation sessions and longer courses, take place before the beginning of the main undergraduate program.

Besides or in addition to pre-course programs, some universities have offered support throughout the academic year. This support can take the form of mentoring by a professor or an older student, who is available to help individual students deal with the academic problems they may face. Another approach has been building academic literacies development into the curriculum or into content discipline syllabi, in which students have been offered either a series of focused sessions to develop the necessary skill set throughout the year or the skill set development has been integrated into core disciplines. In the latter case, subject professors have had to be trained to do it consistently and effectively. In fact, professional development of faculty in this area is a standalone initiative that can significantly improve students' experience, especially during the first stages of transition. Apart from professor- or mentor-led adaptation, universities may also provide a variety of offline and online support materials that can be accessed by students on their own (Laing et al., 2005).

In North American universities, traditionally the problem of adaptation to post-compulsory education has been dealt with through rhetoric and composition courses. Each program, regardless of the major, offers an early introduction to academic writing course, which may focus on discipline-specific genres or on writing as a way to process information and produce knowledge. The latter is known as writing across the curriculum (WAC), as it focuses on academic writing as a broad discourse type that enables students not only to join the academic community, but also to process information better. The first approach is referred to as Writing in the Disciplines (WID), and courses within this framework introduce first-year undergraduates to the conventions of research and analytical writing dominant in a particular field of research. WAC and WID pedagogies make it possible to combine teaching essay writing and broader academic literacies that are required to perform well in the particular field (for example Enoch & VanHaitsma, 2015). Writing courses delivered at the start of a program can prepare students for more complex and research-intensive disciplines, thus facilitating the transition process.

Perhaps due to this focus on first-year writing, pre-program initiatives appear to be less relevant in the American context. Agosti and Bernat (2018) provided an overview of global pathway programs and noted that 12% of all English-speaking programs were offered in the US, while Britain and Oceania account for the remaining 88%—72% and 16%, respectively. The pathway programs that were introduced in the US were modelled on the UK and Australian transition initiatives described above (Agosti & Bernat, 2018).

Overall, the choice of transition initiative depends on the understanding of whose responsibility it is to ensure access to university and a smooth transition from secondary school to university. Historically, as higher education was perceived as elite, it was believed that if the student was not adapting well, it was their fault, and this fact served as a direct indication that they were unsuitable for higher education altogether. Later on, with the adoption of the more constructivist view of learning as a social contextual practice (Clerehan, 2003), global massification of higher education (Agosti & Bernat, 2018), and the changing of its role to service provision, the responsibility for ensuring access and support was shifted to the universities, motivating much of the research on transition. However, there is an opposing opinion that if students do not realize that preparing for university, adapting to its culture, and devoting more effort to studying is their personal responsibility, neither staff or peer support nor training in academic skills will solve the transition problem. The latter view has been generally supported by university content lecturers (for example, Kajander & Lovric, 2005).

In Russian education, very little has been done on the government or institutional levels (Smolentseva, 2019) to ensure smooth transition from secondary school to universities. Existing pre-program courses for high school students planning to pursue degree programs are geared towards helping students pass the unified state exam and being admitted. It is also consistent with the idea that the focus here seems to be on getting in rather than getting through higher education. Some universities have offered inductions or mentoring schemes by older students, but these have been few and far between.

Proposed Solutions within Academic Writing Courses

The second part of the case study was a small pilot study of possible classroom practices that could help mitigate the mismatched expectations that seemed to affect students' performance. It had the following stages: identifying and grouping expectation mismatches, determining teaching techniques that have the potential to mitigate the effects of the mismatches, implementing them in the remaining part of introduction to academic writing, observing their effects, and collecting students' feedback.

After comparing the differences in students' and university professors' expectations of one another and the learning process, I can single out five key groups of mismatches typical of the Russian education system: general behavioral expectations, students' engagement, approaches to learning, roles of teachers, and grades (see Table 10.1).

Table 10.1. Expectation Mismatches Between First-Year Students and Faculty

Students' expectations	Professors' expectations
Behavioral expectations	
Choices are imposed on students by the parents or by the system, causing lack of responsibility.	Students should make informed decisions and are prepared to take responsibility for consequences.
Students tend to look for shortcuts in the form of cheating or finding loopholes.	Students should demonstrate commitment to studying and high work ethic.
Students are used to clarity and straightforward answers to questions.	Students should be tolerant of ambiguity and able to accept that not every question has an answer.
Expectations of teachers	
Teachers serve as controllers and assessors.	Teachers serve as facilitators of learning.
Students are over-reliant on the teacher to take charge and manage learning.	Students should engage in independent and self-directed learning.

Students' expectations	Professors' expectations
Grading	
Students can learn solely to get a grade.	Students are less focused on grades and attainment.
Students are content only with excellent grades.	Passing grades are the baseline with higher grades requiring more investment of time and effort.
Involvement and focus	
Students expect to be taught and to be passive recipients of knowledge.	Students should participate actively in learning.
Students focus on the mechanics of the task.	Students should pay attention to content and topic development.
Learning process	
Students place the focus on product regardless of the way it was produced.	Students should be able to value the learning process.
Students expect rote learning.	Students should be able to challenge the concepts.
Students expect mechanical repetition and memorizing.	Students should be able to apply analytical approaches.
Students are familiar with simplified secondary school requirements.	Students should be familiar with academic culture and conventions.

Each group of mismatches was a point of departure in building a facilitation strategy that would help students adapt to higher education. Each of the problems presented a research question in itself, but this part of the essay does not attempt to provide a research-informed comprehensive overview of possible solutions. Here I summarize my experience in dealing with the identified mismatches within the case study. The proposed solutions may seem obvious and be already widely used in some education systems, but in Russian universities they have appeared less frequently. I based the choice of techniques on my own classroom observations and the students' feedback. However, to prove conclusively the effectiveness of the presented teaching techniques, a separate study should be conducted comparing skills and attitudes before the measures were taken and after.

Transition effects have been shown to last for at least one semester, as this has been the period during which secondary school study habits persist (Lowe & Cook, 2003), but it has taken as long as the first two or three semesters (Clerehan, 2003), making the first years of undergraduate programs critical (Briggs et al., 2012) and particularly susceptible to their negative effects. The conclusion to draw here is that the mismatches in expectations have to be dealt with very early to minimize their effects on the students' subsequent

performance. From this point of view, my mitigation attempts in the first-year academic writing courses appear relevant and timely.

In this case study, mitigation of the secondary-tertiary transition problem took two main directions: through targeted training or by raising awareness. The latter proved effective with expectation mismatches in which no habits or skills were involved. Simply by raising awareness of what was actually expected at the tertiary level and showing how it was different from what the students were used to, professors could help them adapt to the new learning environment and its requirements.

These five groups of suggestions and recommendations by no means constitute an exhaustive list. These particular recommendations and techniques were selected because they appeared to involve very little administrative effort. Not every professor has the opportunity to change the syllabus, and even if they do, they might not have the resources. That is why the proposed solutions were chosen due to their ease of use. These ideas do not entail changes in course focus, outcomes, or topics; in most cases materials and activities stay the same. Only the format of in-class activities, interaction patterns, and home assignments needs amending, which should not add significantly to professors' workload.

All these techniques have been tried out and proven effective in my introduction to academic writing classes at a Russian university. I am aware that other contexts might already rely on these practices in regular teaching, so some amendments or completely different approaches might be required in such cases. At the same time, the proposed techniques seem in line with the learning styles of current generation Y and Z students described in the literature. It is believed that these cohorts have required greater clarity in course structure and assessment, they have wanted rationale for professors' decisions, they have appreciated opportunities for student initiative and choice, they have needed to make an impact and have required recognition through feedback, they must synthesize and experience knowledge in order to understand it, and they have liked assignments that connect course content to problems that require a solution (Purcell, 2019; Thacker, 2016; Wilson & Gerber, 2008).

Mitigating Expectations of the Learning Process

Raising awareness appeared particularly effective in dealing with expectation mismatches connected with the perceptions of the learning process in the case study. According to students, it seems that Russian secondary education instills the idea that education is mainly about increasing their knowledge base, which can be done mechanically. That is why the expectations that they come into university with are those of mechanical repetition, rote learning, and re-

producing a required product. The university professors, in my experience, on the contrary, have tended to expect students to actively engage in the process of producing knowledge, rather than regurgitating it. That is why students are encouraged to challenge concepts, analyze phenomena, and develop their own well-grounded opinion that they would be ready to defend. Although the value of the product of these thought processes cannot be underestimated, the actual thinking, questioning, analysis, synthesis, and other higher-order thinking skills involved have tended to be the major focus of the learning process. As a result, students are likely to present different products, each having no less value than others. For Russian students this fact has appeared very confusing. In my course, I had to devote a sizeable part of class time to spelling out my expectations. Initially, when giving instructions for assignments, I not only commented on the procedures and outcomes, but also raised their awareness of the skills that we were developing through these assignments; for example, writing a summary was meant to develop information analysis and synthesis skills. In addition, I showed students examples of different approaches to the same task and commented on the results, highlighting the fact that all are acceptable despite the differences. It seemed important to help students understand that it is the process of arriving at a solution that they are likely to need in their further studies or work, as the tasks and problems are going to be different. This skill and approach can be transferred to other situations, while the product, be it an essay, presentation, study project, cannot. My students reported that they found these comments, examples, and explanations helpful and that understanding the priorities helped them to avoid frustration.

In addition, freshmen students come in with little to no familiarity with academic conventions, so in the first year, a major task for their instructors is to make the students aware of academic requirements. This gap may seem obvious, as the secondary school has not been expected to be responsible for building this culture, so it has had to be built at the university level. However, in my experience, Russian professors have been likely to assume that this culture will develop by itself without explicit instruction. Such an approach has been generally less effective and takes a lot of time.

Familiarizing students with academic culture is fully in line with the key objectives of academic writing courses. While preparing to write academic essays, students can and should get acquainted with a range of concepts and develop multiple skills, ranging from basic writing conventions (rhetoric, text organization, referencing, etc.) to research ethics and academic integrity. Therefore, it seems reasonable to add extra emphasis on building general academic culture within writing courses in the first year, to make teaching this as explicit as possible, and to highlight the fact that this culture is relevant not

only to all other subjects, but also to academia in general. Within the introduction to academic writing course, the students and I focused on and tried to understand the rationale behind referencing conventions, standards for academic communication, academic genre features, and the target audience.

Mitigating Mismatches in Behavioral Expectations

Work ethic and commitment are one of the general expectation mismatches that I have identified, the others being taking responsibility for decisions and tolerance of ambiguity. Similar to overcoming learning process related mismatches, the first technique that proved helpful in the case study was raising students' awareness of these differences and reminding them of the expectations and rationale behind them. I explained to my students that at the level of higher education, which aims at preparing students for further graduate-level education or employment, they should be ready to accept ambiguity and lack of universally correct solutions. Since it is quite different from straightforward problems dealt with within secondary education, initially, this fact caused frustration, which was to be expected. Taking responsibility for decisions and actions appeared to be a more complex challenge connected with students' psychological development and general maturity, but addressing it also seemed to start with raising awareness of the issue. The students in my course were very familiar with work ethic, commitment and responsibility, but did not fully understand what was involved and somehow did not expect it to apply to them directly. The latter could stem from their expectation of multiple opportunities for make-ups, which I discussed earlier.

Students' general behavioral expectations can also be modified through a set of measures and classroom practices. Avoiding commitment and low academic integrity has been generally eliminated by watertight course regulations that clearly stipulate intolerance of such practices and impending consequences. Unfortunately, at the Russian university level enforcement has proved more challenging, as it usually has involved a lot of effort and patience on the part of the professors due to students' prior experiences.

Meeting the second expectation, that of students' being able to bear consequences for decisions, can also be encouraged through classroom practices. My case showed that students tended to come in unable and unwilling to participate in constructing their learning partly because all these choices were made for them by parents and secondary school teachers. I observed that first-year undergraduates genuinely did not expect to be involved in such decisions, which university professors, who expect more initiative and responsibility, have found quite annoying. This mismatch could be mitigat-

ed by explicitly giving students opportunities to make decisions and then dealing with their consequences. I started with offering my students minor classroom choices (e.g., about the order of activities, interaction patterns, topics, tests, or deadlines): Would you like to do a discussion or further language practice at the end of the class? Would you like to work individually, in pairs or in larger groups? Would you prefer to discuss this or that topic? Would you prefer to write the test next week or the week after? Although initially my students looked confused and unwilling to participate in the classroom decisions, with time, they got used to this practice. The students even mentioned that they felt more respected, they saw that their opinion on what happens in class mattered, so they were willing to play a more active role. These choices encouraged students not only to take ownership of their learning, but also to negotiate decisions with others, who were likely to have other preferences.

Apart from smaller classroom choices, students can be encouraged to take responsibility for adjusting the course syllabus wherever possible before finalizing it. Quite often, syllabi allow for flexibility in the order of topics, practice activities, types of essays, input formats, etc. If the changes proposed by students cannot be implemented, this discussion will be a good opportunity to get them on board by explaining the rationale behind the policies. When the students have been involved in such seemingly big decisions, they have tended to be more motivated and engaged.

Since Russian education has a long history of very teacher-centered instruction, it appears difficult for teachers to implement fully student-centered teaching. It becomes particularly apparent when delegating choices to students about the courses, as even when delegating, it seems that teachers try to claim control. However, when training students to become more responsible and active learners, it is essential to step back and not to interfere while students are trying to deal with negative outcomes of their seemingly poor choices and to let students own the consequences. In my course, some of these situations included choosing an inefficient number of students for a small group that complicated assignment completion, leaving more challenging activities for the end of the class when everyone was tired, and postponing tests after material revision. At first, careless poor decisions negatively affected the class, but with time and practice, students took this responsibility more seriously and started making more thought-out choices in order to avoid undesirable consequences. These student-centered teaching techniques have been widely encouraged within such approaches as active learning, universal design for learning, differentiated instruction, and flipped classroom, as they rely on students' responsible choices and active role, which prove helpful

in mitigating this behavioral mismatch. Towards the end of the course, my students visibly manifested higher levels of responsibility and engagement in the ways they made classroom choices, selected materials, participated in assessment criteria development, and gave peer feedback to each other.

The third general mismatch is connected with tolerance of ambiguity. Apart from raising awareness, I encouraged my students to overcome frustration with everything ambiguous by offering them more activities that either have several right solutions or do not have any correct answer by definition. The activities the students found helpful included making lists of associations, brainstorming, organizing and structuring information, creating mind maps, classifying, interpreting verbal or visual cues, personalizing information or applying what has been learnt to their own lives, and trying to prove and disprove statements. Once the students saw that ambiguity can be acceptable, they showed more tolerance and were ready to produce deeper and more creative responses instead of looking desperately for the one correct solution.

Mitigating Mismatches in Expectations of Teachers' Roles

In higher education, professors have been expected to play the roles of facilitator and mentor. Surprisingly, at the beginning of the case study, students showed two extreme opposing views on the teachers' role: depending on students' previous experience, they tended to treat professors either as the ultimate authority who has the final say in everything or as someone with limited credibility deserving of little respect on their part. As a result, their attitudes can potentially create an atmosphere either of fear or excessive familiarity. Either way, none of the scenarios involve self-regulation, trust, and willingness to build a constructive dialogue with professors. The latter can seriously hinder learning and should be addressed as early as possible. In my course, one of the most effective ways to show that the dialogue between the professor and the student could be constructive was individual tutorials. They are not very common at Russian secondary schools and universities. Partly because of that, students tended to apprehend tutorials as an opportunity for me to point out mistakes and scold. However, they appreciated friendly meetings with the focus on areas for improvement, ways to achieve it, and general recommendations for becoming more effective autonomous learners. My case study demonstrated that it is advisable to make the first tutorials obligatory to encourage students to come to the office so that they could overcome their fear and see that individual feedback sessions could be helpful. Once they saw it, most of my students sought individual feedback sessions after each paper, which contributed to our constructive dialogue.

Tutorials help to reinforce the role of the professor as a mentor. Establishing the professor as a facilitator is closely related to promoting self-directed learning and learner autonomy in students, which will in fact enable the professor to facilitate learning instead of imposing it. Introduction to academic writing has lent itself well to this task. I found a few techniques especially suitable for reaching this goal. The first technique was individual reflective home assignments based on a prior writing assignment, in which students selected one of their weaknesses, analyzed it, and took measures to eliminate it. It involved the following: they identified a weakness they wanted to focus on, read theory if applicable, and then did practice activities of their choice. My students valued this opportunity. According to their feedback, they perceived it as something that catered for their specific challenges and therefore had immediate benefits, unlike general home tasks that were set to the whole class. Another effective way to promote self-sufficiency and responsibility was giving non-specific assignments, such as asking students to find some information in any source of their choice as opposed to retaining teacher control over assigned reading down to pages. When the goal was clear, but the way to achieve it was not specified, students tended to display higher levels of autonomy in working with sources. The work proved effective, as this information prepared at home was successfully used to complete a class assignment. Depending on the group level, this assignment could be broken into stages of first getting the professor's approval on the sources and selected information, and only then sharing it with other students. Eventually, the pre-approval stage could be eliminated and, ideally, the class verification and practice should be omitted as well, leaving only students' individual self-sufficient work.

Mitigating Involvement and Focus Mismatches

The above-mentioned activities not only develop higher self-sufficiency, they also ensure more active participation. Having shifted the perception of professors from authoritarian figures to facilitators who support learning, students need to see what it means to be active in a way that is conducive to learning. In the case study, to get students more involved in a productive way, I occasionally delegated to them preparing inputs, managing classes, and selecting topics and materials. I discussed the last two in the previous sections. In case of the first technique, I assigned to students the input, or mini-lectures in class, that I would normally give myself. They had to take full responsibility starting from familiarizing themselves with the topic and finishing with presenting it to other students. My experience showed that it is advisable to select topics relevant to key course theory so that subsequent

work depends on everyone's understanding of this theory; otherwise, students were not motivated to apply themselves. Students found guidelines for delivering this input helpful, including the time limit, key points to be covered, and other requirements. The amount of detail in my task instructions depended on the students' maturity and responsibility and was greater towards the beginning of the course, going down towards the end. This peer-teaching appeared to be effective in motivating the students as well. It is worth noting that my students reported that they preferred delivering these presentations in smaller groups rather than as open-class talks, because it not only made them feel more confident but also helped establish better interaction with other students in the small group and offer necessary clarifications.

A sadly common misconception that students often bring from secondary schools is the focus on mechanics and accuracy rather than content and development. It is no secret that assessing the former and accounting for the resulting grade is much easier. The number of language errors, formatting, punctuation, word count, and other features that go into the mechanics section are easily quantifiable and hardly lend themselves to misinterpretation. According to the students, these safe assessment criteria tend to be relied upon in school, so it takes some time to shift the focus to ideas and reasoning. Having raised their awareness of this focus, I drew the students' attention to assessment rubrics. The assessment supported this shift by assigning much more weight to the content criteria compared to the grammar and mechanics sections. Initially, I even removed mechanics from the assessment criteria altogether to show more clearly where the priorities lay. Another technique that I used was stressing content aspects at feedback sessions and elaborating on them more, which reinforced their value and significance, compared to mechanics which could be mentioned briefly at the end. My observations showed that it took about two months to shift this focus.

Mitigating Expectations in Grading

Grading is perhaps the most sensitive issue of all because mismatches in expectations here not only cause demotivation, but they can also affect students' GPA, rating, scholarship, or even lead to expulsion. The general trend has been that current generations of students want to know their grades at any point in time, and they have been used to frequent feedback, possibly due to the development of digital tools with frequent automated feedback (Wilson & Gerber, 2008).

I stated earlier that one of the most common misconceptions has been misinterpretation of the grade value. When "good" and "satisfactory" are taken as a disaster, students tend to expect only very high grades. In the case

study I used the awareness raising approach to mitigate this expectation. I continuously reminded the students of the real value of each grade (in Russia it is "excellent," "good," and "satisfactory") and explained that "satisfactory" means that they have mastered the required amount knowledge and developed skills to the required standard; therefore, there is no need to stress over grades that are lower than "excellent." Students should also understand that compared to secondary school, the courses tend to be more challenging and more intensive, so it is next to impossible to excel in all of them. Overall, this attitude to grades has seemed to take a very long time to overcome, as even at the end of the year-long introduction to academic writing course, a lot of students still struggled with accepting "satisfactory" and "good."

Conclusion

In this essay, I presented a case study conducted at a Russian university in Moscow in the 2018–2019 academic year. The study enabled me to describe expectations that Russian students have brought into higher education and to match these with trends and features of the national education system. I saw that students' expectations differed from those of university professors in five areas: learning process, students' involvement and focus, the role of teachers, grading, and general behavioral expectations. The major mismatches lie in students' insufficient responsibility, limited commitment and work ethic, low tolerance of ambiguity, inadequate self-sufficiency, unwillingness to participate in learning, overreliance on grades, underdeveloped analytical thinking, and unfamiliarity with academic culture. I am not trying to say that secondary school in Russia is incapable of preparing students for universities. I am fully aware that school teachers' work in different circumstances and have to adjust learning goals and approaches to teaching to the general mixed-ability student population. University professors, on the other hand, deal with selected cohorts, so they have tended to assume that students enter universities possessing the necessary academic literacies and are fully prepared for learning. Unfortunately, these differences in expectations persist and can cause miscommunication and lack of understanding, which can eventually build up and start affecting learning outcomes.

However, it seems that just by being aware of these gaps and expectation mismatches, as well as the underlying reasons and circumstances that brought them about, university professors can not only better understand the origins of some potential problems but also help undergraduates deal with them and be ready to support students in the most effective ways. If we are aware of these "gaps and gulfs" (Clerehan, 2002, p. 72), we as professors can be more understanding of where our students' attitudes and behaviors come from. This

awareness can spare us a lot of frustration, annoyance, and anger, as these negative feelings tend to come from lack of understanding. In this case, we will be better equipped to facilitate the secondary-tertiary transition, as it will put us in a better position to establish and maintain a productive dialogue with students that is conducive to learning. Awareness is the first step in eliminating communication challenges. Apart from adjusting our expectations, we can potentially raise our students' awareness of their own beliefs, so that they start shifting them to those more appropriate for a mature university-level student.

Awareness of the mismatches can also help us adjust our teaching techniques to help our students get from where they are to where they are supposed to be without lowering the bar. Universities should not have to lower requirements for first-year undergraduates to mitigate the effects of transition problems, as has been sometimes suggested. After all, higher education is higher education, and it is meant to take the students to the next level not only academically or professionally, but also personally.

To facilitate this process, in the pilot study I applied several teaching techniques that appeared effective, according to my observations and the students' feedback. I have shared this set of simple, non-intrusive techniques that can complement raising awareness and can both demonstrate to students what they should be focusing on and help them develop the missing skills. Overall, involving students in planning the course, encouraging them to engage with each other and the materials through group work and peer-teaching, setting out clear rules and following them consistently, and showing to them that professors are there to help them become better and more independent learners can eventually help ease the transition and maximize the learning. Overcoming mismatches in expectations among professors and students involves regular, consistent and step-by-step work, which can take time and effort, but can potentially reduce the stress that builds due to miscommunication in all the parties involved.

This problem has seemed to be particularly important in the first semesters of a bachelor's program, in which introduction to academic writing courses are taught, making mitigation efforts appropriate and timely. Ultimately, as Hyland (2013) puts it, we are what we write, so if the students become more mature and responsible writers in our classes, we can hope that they will generally perform better as students of other disciplines.

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