

HOLDING THE KEY TO SUCCESSFUL ACADEMIC COMMUNICATION**Boryana KOSTOVA¹**
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Abstract

Internationalization of higher education and the impact of English in academic communication have resulted in opening a niche in language education. First, this involves a growing interest in studying academic discourse and rhetorical practices in order to support not only foreign and exchange students but mainly those academics who wish to publish in English and are apprehensive due to the widely acknowledged inequality in academic publishing in relation to discursive norms of languages different from English. Second, studying academic discourse involves studying language in action, looking at texts in relation to the social contexts in which they are used and the social relations they construct. Third, to meet the demand for formal language instruction targeting academics in non-English speaking countries, a handbook of academic communication in three languages was devised. Using the genre based approach it leads learners through academic genre moves and lexical bundles to strategies for academic communication.

Keywords: academic communication; academic discourse; pragmatic competence.

1. Introduction

Communication is a truly interdisciplinary scientific area. A survey of the ways in which scholars use the word shows that there is no single, universally accepted usage of the term. Psychologists, for instance, define *communication* as ‘the process of human beings responding to the symbolic behavior of other people’ (Adler et. al., 2006: 4). Indeed it is well accepted by linguists that communication as a complicated process refers to an exchange of meaningful information among people during which the message, constructed as a composite of signs and symbols, both verbal and non-verbal, is transmitted through various communicative channels and is received selectively. Such an understanding of the way communication operates is represented in the transactional communication model according to which communication is simultaneous, fluid and relational (Adler et. al., 2006: 15). This reflects the fact that people usually send and receive messages simultaneously, the importance of context is tremendous, and the way people communicate varies with different partners and situations.

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When defining *academic* communication we should consider the current understanding of human communication focusing on the social aspect of disseminating ideas and constructing knowledge and on the specific ways of thinking and using language that exist in the academy. Another consideration should be the fact that academic communication has become 'communication beyond national borders' controlled by the rules of political and sociocultural globalization. The main factor in the process has been the promotion of English as the language of scientific exchange. This results in the internationalization of communication practices and leads to functional marginalization of other languages like Bulgarian. Indeed research shows that academics all over the world are increasingly less likely to publish in their own languages to find their English language publications cited more often. This makes authors more visible on the world stage and their work receives the most credit (Hyland, 2011: 175).

As the impact of English in academic communication has become 'self-perpetuating' (Hyland, 2011: 175) at the expense of other languages the metaphorical expressions we use in the title (the *key* and *success* metaphors) with their positive connotation as if they clash with the bleak picture we painted of the linguistic aspect of academic communication. The presupposition that academic communication is something difficult to understand or achieve, something associated with apprehension or even threat is central to our study as is the presupposition that there is a way to approach it. One of these ways is to realize the growing demand for study materials to back language courses in academic communication.

The point where academic communication, academic discourse and pedagogy meet is the handbook *Key to Success: the Language of Academic Communication*³ (Шамонина, Костова, 2013). The article paper will focus on the implications of the internationalization of universities and the emerging niche in language education in academic contexts. It will briefly discuss the theoretical framework that underpins the handbook and consider the structure of the book. Finally, it will suggest some ideas on how the book can be used as a learning tool.

2. Academic contexts and the niche in language education

An idea that is common to many universities today is the increasing internationalization of higher education. This process involves international cooperation within the scientific and business communities and encourages academic and student exchange among European universities. On the other hand universities attract foreign students from various countries who demand instruction not in the local, national language but in an international one. Internationalization

³ This is a translation of the title. The original title is in Bulgarian: *Ключ към успеха: Езикът на академичната комуникация*, as listed in the bibliography.

implies adherence to common values, attitudes and norms. For university lecturers, however, this means that they should deal with the higher and higher expectations posed by their institutions. To be in line with these expectations they should be well prepared in their narrow professional field; at the same time they should possess some additional, but very essential skills of giving lectures and publishing in a foreign language.

This situation is perceived by many university lecturers in Bulgaria as threatening and causes a great deal of anxiety. There are several reasons for that. First, university lecturers should provide instruction both in their mother tongue and in English or another foreign language, which requires extra efforts. Second, many of these lecturers come from a generation which lacks the privilege to have been immersed in the Western academic culture but they are experienced in the Eastern academic conventions. This makes them well aware of the fact that academic cultures vary tremendously in terms of rules, conventions and language schemata and they might not feel at ease when being outside their L1 academic culture and rhetorical practices. Third, university lecturers are conscious of their disadvantaged position as native speakers of a 'small' language. As more and more of them wish to publish their findings in international journals, it becomes obvious that there is a great inequality in academic publishing in relation to discursive norms of languages different from English (Flowerdew, 2013: 301). To be able to cope with this situation, academics should possess not only a high level of communicative competence in a foreign language, but also the ability to use it appropriately according to its various contexts of use and for various communicative purposes.

Another obvious issue is that there is a niche in university language education. The prospect learners are not only those whose purpose is entry to student exchange programmes or bachelor and post-graduate courses in overseas universities, but rather a wider group of well-established academics. The niche arises from the fact that the effectiveness of academics' work is assessed by their ability to give lectures in a foreign language, to present their research at international forums and to publish in international journals. Language instruction which targets these learners should focus on building specific competences such as awareness of the schematic structure of academic genres, skillful usage of various rhetorical devices, and confidence to communicate ideas in a foreign language. Understanding of the need for such additional competences is at the heart of our book.

3. An approach to academic communication and academic discourse

Academic discourse is the language code of academic communication and is 'at the heart of academic enterprise' (Hyland, 2011: 171). The term covers the whole environment, setting or context where written and spoken academic texts are realized; it is also 'the way that individuals collaborate and compete with others, to create knowledge, to educate neophytes, to reveal learning and define academic

allegiances' (Hyland, 2011: 171). Studying and presenting academic discourse as part of a language course involves studying language in action, looking at texts in relation to the social contexts in which they are used. A methodology that is widely acknowledged is genre analysis (Swales, 1990, Flowerdew, 2013) as a specific form of discourse analysis. It considers particular academic genres, such as the research article, conference presentation, discussion session, and others, and focuses on recurrent language use, lexico-grammatical regularities, schematic structures, frequent choices of four-word collocations, or lexical bundles.

This same methodology underpins *Key to Success: the Language of Academic Communication*, which presents academic discourse in three languages: Bulgarian, English and Russian. It should be noted that the role of Russian as a second foreign language is important in Bulgaria as many academics use it in their professional communication. Although there are numerous textbooks and self-study materials published by various British and American publishing houses, such a publication and an approach is quite useful in the Bulgarian academic setting as it reflects academics' needs as speakers and learners of a foreign language.

The idea to collect a corpus in three languages is based on the belief that scholars from one language background may transfer features of academic language and genres in their L1 into the foreign language they use. However, the handbook is not merely a dictionary providing translations in three very different languages. By collecting texts from the same genres in the three languages the rhetorical differences are made visible and can easily be compared and contrasted. This platform of comparison between texts helps to identify equivalencies and differences at three levels: at the text level, at the conceptual level, and at the linguistic level. Many academics today are well aware that reliance on the practices in one's native language can lead to mismatch with the expectations in the foreign language. Thus knowledge of norms and variations of genre across cultures can be expected to help them avoid potential pitfalls in the formulation of specific text types. Thinking within the frame of the success metaphor in academic communication this would involve awareness of academic genres, conscious use of set phrases, models and prototypes of written and spoken academic communication, effective use of academic style with a focus on the specific thinking, judgment, writing and speaking that differentiates one academic discourse community from another.

4. A handbook of academic communication

Research shows that genres, especially academic ones, should not be taken in isolation but viewed in their interconnectedness. There are various instances of how a genre relates to other genres. Therefore the handbook is structured so as to present the linguistic realizations of patterns in academic discourse as a full set of genres that constitutes a complete academic interaction. Thus the seven chapters of

the handbook represent a genre chain which is a chronologically related sequence in academic communication:

Chapter one is devoted to first contact that precedes the conference participation. The genres discussed are the formal email, telephone conversation, introduction and acquaintance.

Chapter two presents all the stages of a scientific conference – opening, sessions and closing.

Chapter three covers the discussion session and focuses on asking and answering of questions, expression of agreement, doubt, disagreement, comment, recommendations and gratitude.

Chapter four highlights such genres as the scientific article, academic lecture, PhD and master dissertation with their three-partite organizational structure of introduction, main body and conclusion.

Chapter five focuses on the genre of academic presentations.

Chapter six is a glossary and successfully has divided into ten rubrics useful vocabulary in the field of academic communication such as scientific forums, organizers, participants, publications, scientific establishments, academic staff, degrees and higher education.

Chapter seven includes a number of useful appendices – models of conference calls for papers, abstracts, lists of commonly used abbreviations in academic language and cohesive and rhetorical devices. Advice for the translators appears as a natural end of the handbook.

The handbook has a number of features which are considered as strengths and opportunities if used for self-directed learning. *Key to success* is:

Systematic. It provides a coherent framework for focusing on both language and its contexts of use. It also provides instruments and formulae for successful communication.

Needs-based. Its objectives and content are derived from particular learner needs, i.e. Bulgarian academics who deliver lectures in English and/or Russian.

Critical. Provides resources for learners to understand and challenge valued discourses. It builds positive attitude to the differences.

Consciousness raising. Increases awareness of text features. Highlights text structure and choice of language in relation to communicative purpose of the text. Regards text as a set of choices to be made in order to deliver content more convincingly.

Empowering: Increases learner self-confidence by opening possibilities of variation of language use.

These features make it especially suitable for application to pedagogy. As the handbook represents a corpus of sentences distributed according to the genres they belong to the handbook could be used not only for self-study but also as part of

courses in verbal communication or academic language. Especially useful for this purpose is chapter three which is dedicated to the language used during a discussion session. The set of phrases presented in the chapter focuses on the use of language in the particular situation of chairing, entering and participating in a discussion session and aims to give insight into how factors outside of language can contribute to both literal and nonliteral meanings which speakers communicate using language. Through the various uses of questions, answers and statements language learners should be made aware that there is a relationship between sentence meaning, context of use and speaker's meaning.

Contemporary linguistics has theorized and exemplified that the meaning of a sentence is not always built up from the meanings of its parts. The idea that the smallest parts get their meaning from the lexicon, and then these meanings get put together according to rules which pay attention to the grammatical structure of a sentence cannot explain all aspects of meaning. A complementary view of meaning should be taken into consideration which focuses on the intentions of language users (Portner, 2006: 157-159). Here are a couple of examples from the handbook to illustrate the idea.

If discussion participant A asks the following question:

Български	English	Русский
Сравнявали ли сте Вашите експериментални данни с тези, получени с помощта на класическия метод?	Have you compared your experimental results with those obtained by means of the classical method?	Вы сра́внивали Ва́ши экспериме́нтальные результа́ты с те́ми, что́ были полу́чены класси́ческим ме́тодом?

he/she might aim at clarifying the truthfulness of the information presented.

If discussion participant B says:

Български	English	Русский
Бихте ли казали още веднъж кой метод считате за най-добър?	Could you tell us once again which method you found / consider best?	Вы не могли бы ещё раз сказа́ть, како́й ме́тод Вы счита́ете наилу́чшим?
Не ми стана ясно какво имате предвид, когато казахте, че ... Бихте ли повторили тази част?	I wasn't sure what you meant when you said that ... Can you go over / run through that part again?	Для меня оста́лось неясным, что́ Вы имели ввиду́, когда́ говори́ли, что́ ... Не могли бы Вы повто́рить э́ту часть?

he/she might require information that was left unclear or underdiscussed.

If discussion participant C enters the discussion by saying:

Български	English	Русский
Съгласен ли сте, че ... ?	Do you agree that ...?	Согласны ли Вы, что ...?
Прав ли съм да мисля, че Вие предлагате ... ?	Am I right in thinking that you're proposing ...?	Я прав, полага́я, что Вы предлага́ете ... ?
Струва ми се, че имате предвид ...	You seem to be implying that ...	Ка́жется, Вы имее́те ввиду́ ...

he/she might intend to create a positive atmosphere of mutual understanding or make the speaker comment on what has already been discussed.

Obviously questions during a discussion session have various functions like clarifying a certain aspect of the issue, requiring additional details or even acquiring strategic benefits in the debate. These are “extra meanings” which go beyond what the words literally say.

The examples given above point to the fact that using the handbook for pedagogic purposes involves going beyond teaching vocabulary, set phrases or formulaic language and genres. This creates a platform to discuss strategies for participation in a discussion session. These communication strategies are primarily techniques of managing the ongoing meaning creating interactional process rather than elements of speakers' knowledge. Although there are no strict rules, but rather flexible assumptions about how speakers behave in such communicative situation, language learners should be familiar with the main principles that underpin the behavior of the participants. They should also be aware that if these principles of rationality and cooperativeness are violated, intentionally or due to lower linguistic proficiency, their contribution to the discussion will be considered as manipulative. Therefore the ability to answer questions can be viewed as a strategy for participation in a discussion session. How to avoid answering a difficult question or how to provide a relevant answer to a complicated or unclear question are important aspects of academic communication. Here are some examples:

Български	English	Русский
Не разбрах добре въпроса Ви.	I haven't quite understood your question.	Я не совсе́м по́нял Ваш вопро́с.
Повторете, моля, въпроса.	Could you, please, repeat your question?	Повтори́те, пожа́луйста, вопро́с.
Може би ще поговорим по този въпрос веднага след дискусията.	Perhaps we'll talk about this issue after the discussion is over.	Мо́жет бы́ть, мы погово́рим по э́той пробле́ме сразу́ по́сле оконча́ния диску́ссии.
Искам да разделя въпроса Ви на две части.	I would like to answer your questions in parts.	Я хочу́ раздели́ть Ваш вопро́с на ча́сти.

5. Conclusion

Research in human communication, academic discourse and pragmatics have shown that central to all aspects of academic communication in a foreign language remains the ability to understand language in context and use it appropriately, effectively and confidently in order to achieve specific purposes. These involve not simply producing texts, oral or written, that represent an external reality, but use language to acknowledge, construct and negotiate social relations. Developing understanding of the world of academia and pragmatic competence requires a great deal of insight and preparation on the part of the learners covering the acquisition of academic language together with the development of attitudes, approaches and strategies. It seems to us that an easy way to achieve this is to use the *Key to Success: the Language of Academic Communication* both inside and outside formal language instruction.

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