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The Effect of Genre-based Learning on Teaching Academic Email Writing

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Abstract

Although email correspondence is a common means of communication between scholars from different cultures, little attention is paid to writing academic emails in tertiary education. The present investigation is aimed at studying the influence of genre education on the formation of academic writing skills and understanding the principles of academic correspondence. The main methods used in the study were experiment and survey. The research was carried out on the basis of National Research Nuclear University MEPhI. The participants of the study were postgraduate (PhD) students ($n = 100$) with a major in Physics, Electronics, Computer Science, and other technical areas. The results of the study show that the students made considerable progress in their academic email writing skills even after a short period of explicit instruction applying the genre-based approach. Most of the students changed their way of thinking about writing emails for academic purposes in English and became aware of the norms of formal writing. Moreover, the results of the experiment and survey justify the necessity of including academic email writing in the curriculum of teaching Academic English and demonstrate strong potential of genre-based learning in other genres involving academic writing.

Keywords: academic email, academic writing, genre pedagogy, L2 teaching, higher education

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1. Introduction

Due to the global trend in higher education towards an increase in publication activity, academic writing courses at universities primarily focus on the formation of the language skills necessary for scientific publication purposes (Shpit & Kurovskiy, 2020; Zashikhina, 2021; Zashikhina & Pechinkina, 2022) and are often narrowed down to writing a research article, a scientific essay or a synopsis (Dudnik & Putilovskaya, 2020). However, in this paper, we will argue that writing academic emails is an equally important area of professional activity in science. As a lot of today's interaction is taking place online, in modern reality email is becoming a well-established means of communication in all spheres, including the academic one (Chen, 2016). In addition to submitting manuscripts to journals and conferences, emails can also be of great use in initiating and sustaining collaborations between scientists worldwide (Pagliaro, 2020).

Despite the growing interest in various aspects of teaching academic email writing in English as a second language (L2), the results of recent studies indicate that a lot of participants in this kind of interaction lack the necessary knowledge of how to write academic emails properly (Chen, 2006; Philip, 2020). This is mainly explained by the difference in email conventions: as compared to informal messages, academic emails are characterized by a higher degree of formality, more sophisticated vocabulary and more focused attention to grammar (Lancaster, 2011). Harrison and Vanbaelen (2011) demonstrate a high frequency of omitting some parts of L2 students' emails and link this tendency to the overall regression to informal mobile phone habits. According to Biesenbach-Lucas (2007), students are often unaware of email etiquette and appropriate academic email models due to the lack of experience and explicit instruction. Students may organize their emails in accordance with what they normally receive from their equals. Yet, to write a formal email to a superior or an authority figure requires much more care than an informal message to a friend.

Teaching postgraduate students to write academic emails is not only about teaching more complicated vocabulary or grammar, which in its turn requires sufficient time devotion (Esmaeeli & Sadeghi, 2020). Yasuda (2011) argues that writing expertise in English as a second language "could be less a function of overall

vocabulary size than a function of the specific knowledge of the genre or the recognition of the roles language plays in performing speech social actions” (p. 126). In this respect, the aim of teaching academic writing is primarily to raise L2 learners’ awareness of different conventions within a particular genre (Aleshinskaya, 2023). Genre-based instruction consists in providing a model necessarily followed by its thorough analysis and imitation (Bolsunovskaya & Rymanova, 2020). Recently the effectiveness of using the genre-based approach to teaching and learning academic writing skills has been extensively researched by the examples of various genres, including recounts texts (Martínez-Lirola, 2015; Mastura et al., 2020), research proposals (Wijayanti et al., 2017), expository essays (Burgos, 2017), discussion genre essays (Nagao, 2019), and research articles (Arsyad et al., 2021). The researchers stress that the implementation of genre-based teaching yields positive results, enabling the students to see the connection between academic writing and social life. However, writing academic emails has not been paid enough attention. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to examine how L2 learners’ ability to write academic emails and their awareness of the conventions within the genre can be improved. Based on the results of our experiment and survey among postgraduate students, we argue that it is essential to include academic email writing in the curriculum of L2 academic writing at a technical university.

Research Questions

In our paper, we aim to provide answers to the following questions: “Can the ability to write academic emails be improved during an intervention session at a technical university?” and “What is the role of genre pedagogy in enhancing academic email writing at a technical university?”.

2. Literature Review

In the recent years, formal academic writing has received increasing attention, especially in tertiary education, as the publication of research articles has become a prerequisite for obtaining a PhD degree (Flowerdew, 2022). The submission of research articles to international journals is often accompanied by writing covering

emails, and the review and revision process also requires formal email writing. 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, as well as formal email 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).

The genre-based approach to teaching academic writing is gaining popularity worldwide, and among the top six countries publishing studies on the application of the genre-based approach in writing pedagogy are China, the USA, Japan, Thailand, Sweden, and Hong Kong (Zhai & Razali, 2023). Genre pedagogy is based on the presupposition that discourse is conventionally patterned and recurred, so it is necessary to explore the recurring ways in which language is used in a particular socio-cultural context (Wen et al., 2022). The effects of the genre-based approach have been studied in the development of academic writing skills. The study by Samsudin and Arif (2018) demonstrated the great potential of the genre-based approach in the development of academic writing competence through the enhancement of grammar, subject knowledge, and awareness of the academic style. Based on the qualitative analysis of unpublished research articles written by non-native speakers, Rustipa et al. (2023) revealed some problems related to employing competent rhetorical patterns and tense choice, especially in citations. The study of particular text genres and grammatical characteristics typical of these genres helped improve second language learners' literacy and academic writing skills (Martínez-Lirola, 2015; Mazdayasna & Ghane, 2022). The genre-based approach was also shown to be effective in increasing the awareness of the schematic (or rhetorical) structure of the required genre (Phichiensathien, 2016; Sritrakarn, 2020) and the overall writing quality (Zhang & Zhang, 2021), which enabled students' development of their own models for step-by-step writing academic texts (Kuzmenkova & Erykina, 2022).

The investigations into the second language students' perceptions of the genre-based academic writing course reveal their overall positive attitude toward this

approach to writing pedagogy and provide further evidence supporting its effectiveness (Bin-Hady et al., 2020; Mirallas, 2021). From the point of view of academic writing teachers, despite the pedagogical benefits of the genre-based approach, this approach requires second language students to be more aware of grammatical movement, text genres, and sentence-building patterns (Cholifah et al., 2022). Based on in-depth interviews with academic writing teachers, the effective implementation of the genre-based approach is shown to depend on the proper organization of the stages of instruction as well as the use of technology tools (Wardani et al., 2021).

The use of a genre-based approach in teaching second language students how to write formal emails has attracted the attention of researchers in recent years. Hartle (2017) studies the effect of genre pedagogy on teaching Italian speaking students how to write “emails for the world of work” (p. 63), which fall under the broader category of formal emails. She carried out an experiment consisting of several stages, which, among others, included the students’ writing an email without any initial explanation; analysis of a model email provided by the teacher; guided discussion of the students’ mistakes; the students’ writing an improved version of the email based on the model and analysis. The researcher stresses that the final version of the email written by her students was incomparably better than the initial one, thus proving the effectiveness of genre-based pedagogy in teaching formal writing and demonstrating the necessity of including genre and register teaching in the tertiary education curriculum.

Blinova (2021) describes her experience of using the genre-based approach in teaching a group of Turkish speaking students how to write an email of complaint, which is another type of formal email. She outlines the elements that need to be taken into consideration when writing a formal email, such as organization and content, language, style and tone. Then the author elaborates on the learner issues, such as genre awareness, proof-reading and self-editing skills, lack of system knowledge, and lack of process knowledge, and offers possible solutions, such as introducing topical lexis and functional language, developing the learners’ proofreading and/or (self-)editing skills, developing pre-writing strategies such as brainstorming. Blinova stresses the necessity of taking all the above-mentioned issues into account and using

the suggested techniques to make the process of teaching formal email writing efficient and relevant to the demands of modern society.

Despite the acknowledged effectiveness of the genre-based approach in teaching academic writing, including formal email writing, the effect of genre pedagogy on academic email writing has not been described yet. This study focuses on the way the genre-based approach can be implemented in teaching academic email writing and on its overall effect on the quality of formal writing.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The findings in this article are based on a study, which took place in the spring of 2022 at National Research Nuclear University MEPhI located in Moscow, Russia. The focus of the study was on the progress made in writing academic emails by first-year PhD students of a course in L2 academic writing. The study employed an experimental pre-test/post-test design supplemented by a survey and a delayed post-test. The participants of the study worked on two tasks during the class (a pre-test before the intervention and a post-test after the intervention) and then practiced writing an actual email outside the classroom in a situation close to professional reality. The intervention session lasted 90 minutes, during which the students were informed about academic email conventions: how to properly open and close an email, what to write as the subject of an email, how to structure an email and what content to include depending on the situation. The students were provided with the layout, style and appropriate language necessary for various professional purposes. Prior to the three email writing assignments, the students had had 20 classes devoted to academic vocabulary and grammar, formal style, as well as the basic principles of academic writing (describing the subject and purpose, methods and results of scientific research) and the conventions of various genres within a scientific paper corresponding to such sections as abstract, methodology, results. At the end of the class, the participants of the experiment were asked to complete a survey about their perception of the genre and their progress.

3.2. Participants

The research sample comprised 100 participants of the experimental group, who were first-year PhD students of National Research Nuclear University MEPhI and specialized in various fields related to Physical sciences (e.g., Theoretical Physics, Experimental Physics, Nuclear Physics, Laser Physics, Radiobiology, Physical Chemistry), Computer science (e.g., Cybernetics, Information Systems, Information Security), and Economic sciences (e.g., Economics, Management). To determine the initial level of academic email writing proficiency and to enhance the credibility of the research findings, a control group was also recruited, which was not subjected to experimental exposure. The control group consisted of 100 first-year PhD students majoring in Physical, Computer, and Economic sciences. Informed consent was obtained from the participants from both the experimental and control groups to participate in the experiment and to process their answers. Table 1 demonstrates the frequencies (percentages) of the variables distributed among the experimental and control groups.

Table 1
Sample Profile

	Variables	Experimental	Control
Gender	Male	78	82
	Female	22	18
Age	23-25	70	78
	26-30	19	13
	31-35	5	4
	36-40	5	3
	41-50	1	2
Major	Natural Sciences	74	62

Variables		Experimental	Control
Proficiency Level	Computer Sciences	18	30
	Economics, Management	8	8
	Beginner	2	1
	Elementary	16	14
	Pre-Intermediate	34	37
	Intermediate	27	23
	Upper-Intermediate	17	18
	Advanced	4	7
	Proficiency	0	0

The uneven distribution of gender variables in the sample can be explained by the general observation that the majority of students and especially PhD students at National Research Nuclear University MEPhI, which is a technical university, are male. The most common age of the participants in both the experimental and control groups was between 23 and 25, and most of the participants majored in Natural sciences, which is fully consistent with the profile of the university. They all had a different level of English proficiency, from Beginner to Advanced, as some of them had had English instruction before enrolling on their postgraduate studies, while others had learned another foreign language (German, French or Spanish). Before the experiment, almost all students had had some practice in writing emails, mostly informal, while doing their general course in English as a second language. Some students had practiced writing business emails at work or private emails to foreign friends. However, none of them had a course in Academic English.

3.3. Data Collection

The participants were asked to write three emails and had to make appropriate

structural and linguistic choices in response to the given tasks. The tasks were produced at different points in time: at the beginning of the class on academic email writing (Email 1), at the end of the class (Email 2), and within two weeks after the class (Email 3). The complexity level of the three tasks was different: Emails 1 and 2 were rather straightforward and could be completed within 10 or 15 minutes, while Email 3 was intended as a more complicated assignment and required more time and effort. The emails were collected through the corresponding Google forms.

At the beginning of the experiment, the participants were asked to write an academic email on a given assignment as a pre-test, i.e. without having discussed the basic linguistic, structural, and stylistic characteristics of this type of communication. The task was to write a short email to a professor to inform them about an online workshop that would soon take place at the university and invite them to participate as a keynote speaker. After the treatment, the postgraduate students were asked to write another email on their own, which was intended as a reply to an invitation and was expected to include a refusal explaining the reason, a suggestion of a colleague to present a talk, and an inquiry about the publication in absentia.

At home, the participants had to write the third email. It was a mock electronic mail assignment (Kedrowicz et al., 2017) that imitated one of the most frequent situations that the students would come across in their professional lives. They had to respond by email to the call for papers sent by their teacher after the class. The call for papers contained certain instructions on what to include in the main body of the students' reply. This assignment was much more complicated than the previous two as the students had to make the right decisions on their own to complete the task. Below is the fragment of the call for papers containing the instructions for the main body of the response:

All abstracts should be submitted in the English language in the form of an attached file that contains the title of the paper, the text of the proposal, and 5–7 keywords. All submissions should be anonymous, i.e. the name and affiliation of the author should be removed from the name and content of the file. All authors are kindly requested to provide the following information in their cover emails: the author's name and affiliation, the title of the paper, and the preferred strand.

Not all of the instructions were listed directly. Since abstracts were expected as attachments, the students were supposed to include a verbal reference to the enclosed file containing an abstract of their future presentation. They also had to include a proper salutation, polite opening and closing remarks, an ending and signature. The students were given two weeks to complete the third assignment.

In accordance with a student-centered approach, particular attention was given to students' perceptions that would enable a better understanding of the teaching and learning process (Hassan et al., 2020). After collecting the students' actual written emails, the participants of the experiment were asked to respond to a survey, which contained four questions. The survey was based on Yasuda's survey designed to identify L2 learners' perception of their development as academic email writers (Yasuda, 2011, p. 117). The aim of the survey was to complement the analysis of the students' actual written emails and receive the students' feedback explaining their perception of their improvement in writing skills and the genre of academic email in general. The survey contained three closed-ended questions on the participants' experience in formal email writing, their evaluation and understanding of the improvement in their formal email writing skills. These questions were provided with a four-point Likert scale, i.e. to answer the suggested questions, the respondents had to choose from the following four options: (a) Not at all; (b) A little; (c) Somewhat; (d) A lot. Additionally, an open-ended question was used to supplement Question 3 in case the students would choose options b)-d) to answer it. No options were provided for the final question, and the respondents were expected to give their own detailed answers.

3.4. Intervention

After the participants completed the task, the main characteristics of the academic email were discussed in class. Classes devoted to writing academic emails were built taking into account 5 stages of the educational cycle within the framework of genre pedagogy (Hyland, 2007). First, the context of the genre was defined, i.e. its goals and conditions for implementation. Then, an analysis of representative samples of the genre (modeling) was carried out, when its main nuances were discussed, including

the main stylistic and structural norms and norms of politeness. The participants of the experiment were provided with accompanying materials with key phrases for their further use, several well-written and not very well-written emails were analyzed, and the students' attention was drawn to the most frequently made mistakes in terms of style, content and structure. At the stage of joint construction, practice was carried out in this genre, when the teacher led a discussion of how best to write an academic email to achieve a particular purpose. At the stages of self-construction and comparison (correlation with other genres and contexts), the postgraduate students were asked to independently write Email 2 on a given assignment making use of the knowledge they had just acquired (post-test).

3.5. Data Analysis

In our analysis of the qualitative data, we tried to maintain both emic and epic perspectives to ensure reliability and validity in mixed methods research. The emic approach was based on the analysis of the subjective data provided by the students in their emails and surveys, especially in their responses to the open-ended question at the end of the survey. The qualitative data of the survey were analyzed by doing a thematic analysis based on the deduction of the meanings in the respondents' comments to Question 4 (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). As a result of the qualitative analysis, the following themes were identified: the respondents' experience in email writing, mistakes initially made by some students before the class on academic correspondence, the role of the treatment in the improvement of formal email writing skills, the importance of the list of useful phrases for formal academic correspondence. To enhance the credibility of the results of the qualitative analysis, we made use of member checking by asking the respondents to review and confirm the accuracy and completeness of the data collected through the survey.

The epic perspective involved the objective evaluation of written texts generated by the participants of the study using standardized measures. The written texts of all three emails generated by the participants of the experimental and control groups were marked by both the researchers independently of each other. To enhance the trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis, an inter-rater agreement was reached

regarding the assessment criteria. The fulfillment of the task by the participants of the experimental and control groups was assessed according to two main groups of criteria: the structure/content of the email and the style of the email. The former group comprised such criteria as task fulfillment and organization, and the latter focused on mechanics (accuracy of spelling, punctuation, and grammar) and tone. Inter-rater reliability was determined by using the consensus approach (Brown & Marshall, 2012). The consensus scores indicating the degree to which the raters gave the same scores were over 70%. Such scores were sufficient to establish the credibility of rating the students' assignments. In cases of different opinions, the raters agreed on a common score to reach the same conclusion. Table 2 details the criteria that were taken into account when assessing the students' emails.

Table 2
Criteria for the Assessment of Written Assignments

Criterion	No of points	Interpretation
Task fulfillment (TF)	2 points	The communicative task is fulfilled, the content reflects all the aspects specified in the task.
	1 point	The communicative task is partially fulfilled, the content reflects some aspects specified in the task.
	0 points	The communicative task is not fulfilled, the content does not reflect the aspects specified in the task.
Organization (Org)	4 points	All the rhetorical moves are present (salutation and opening, body containing a reference to the attached abstract, ending and signature); very good paragraphing (a separate paragraph for a new idea).
	3 points	Almost all moves are present with one-two minor errors (e.g., a polite final phrase and/or a point in the body is missing), or some inconsistencies in paragraphing.
Major	2 points	Not all moves are present; faulty paragraphing.
	1 point	One-two moves are present; one paragraph.
	0 points	No identifiable moves.
Mechanics (Mec)	2 points	Competent control of spelling, punctuation and grammar, suitable for the context with only few unobtrusive errors.
	1 point	Fair control of spelling, punctuation and grammar, suitable for the context but with considerable errors.

Criterion	No of points	Interpretation
Tone	0 points	Poor control of spelling, punctuation and grammar, errors interfere with the reader's comprehension of the text.
	2 points	Consistent formal academic language and advanced vocabulary.
	1 point	Conversational elements (e.g., contractions) and general vocabulary.
	0 points	Basic 'street talk' (e.g., colloquialisms or slang).

To analyze the quantitative data, a series of paired *t*-tests were used to explore the differences within the experimental and control groups at three different times (Email 1, Email 2, Email 3). If the *p*-value was less than 0.05, then there was a statistically significant difference between the pre-test and post-test mean scores. If the absolute value of the test statistic *t* was greater than the resulting *p*-value, then there was a statistically significant difference between the pre-test and post-test mean scores. Unpaired *t*-tests were applied to investigate the between-group differences by conventional criteria. To ensure data validity, the pre-test scores were compared between the experimental and control groups to ensure that they both started off at an equal level of proficiency. The quantitative data of the survey were analyzed by using the Google spreadsheets, which enabled the calculation of the frequencies and proportions of the responses to Questions 1-3 in the survey. Such a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses enabled us to obtain reliable and trustworthy data about the role of genre pedagogy in teaching academic email writing in tertiary education.

4. Results

Table 3 shows the differences in the mean scores and statistical values *p* and *t* for the experimental group (EG) and the control group (CG) at three different times (Email 1, Email 2, Email 3) across four criteria: task fulfillment, organization, mechanics, and tone. The results of the *t*-tests show that the difference between the experimental and control group was not statistically significant, where the two-tailed *p*-value was above 0.05. This suggests that the two groups broadly equaled across all the four criteria before the intervention.

Table 3*Students' Performances in the Experimental and Control Groups*

	1				2				3			
	EG	CG	p	t	EG	CG	p	t	EG	CG	p	t
TF	1.7	1.7	0.81	0.24	1.9	1.8	0.001	3.290	1.9	1.1	0.000	19.76
	6	8	1	0	6				9	8	1	6
Org	2.2	2.2	0.67	0.41	3.4	2.2	0.000	10.39	3.7	2.1	0.000	15.72
	3	8	6	8	8	4	1	9	0	6	1	3
Mec	1.3	1.3	0.93	0.08	1.8	1.3	0.000	6.892	1.9	1.3	0.000	11.78
	3	2	4	3	3	4	1		6	2	1	2
Tone	1.7	1.6	0.50	0.67	1.9	1.4	0.000	9.138	1.9	1.4	0.000	10.21
	3	9	3	2	6	4	1		9	6	1	9
Total	7.0	7.1	0.96	0.04	9.2	6.8	0.000	12.62	9.6	6.3	0.000	21.80
	5	1	3	6	3	2	1	8	4	4	1	4

For Email 2 and Email 3, the differences between the scores of the experimental and control groups across four criteria were extremely statistically significant, with the two-tailed p -value being much less than 0.05. Such discrepancies can be accounted for by the generally more complicated nature of the second and especially third assignment, which the participants of the control group found difficult to work out without explicit step-by-step instruction. The experimental group significantly outperformed the control group across all the specified criteria. And the greatest achievement was demonstrated by the experimental group in task fulfillment and email organization.

For the experimental group only, the difference between Email 1 and Email 2 can be considered extremely statistically significant. Right after the explicit genre-based instruction, the participants significantly improved their email writing in all four aspects, especially in that of email structure. This suggests that during the class the participants found out all the necessary information about the basic norms of academic email writing and its organization and got the list of "Useful Phrases" they could utilize while completing the task, which played a key role in the process of establishing successful communication. Having this information, the students were able to write a successful email straightaway, and the fact that they had more time to concentrate on the third email as it was their home assignment was not of vital importance. The difference between the mean scores for Email 2 and Email 3 was statistically significant for most aspects except task fulfillment and tone, where the

two-tailed p -value was slightly above 0.05. These aspects appeared to be the most complicated part of the third assignment, as the students had to make serious communicative decisions on their own. All in all, the quantitative analysis of the scores obtained by the students participating in the experiment revealed significant progress in their academic email writing. Table 4 illustrates the differences between the scores obtained by the experimental group for three emails.

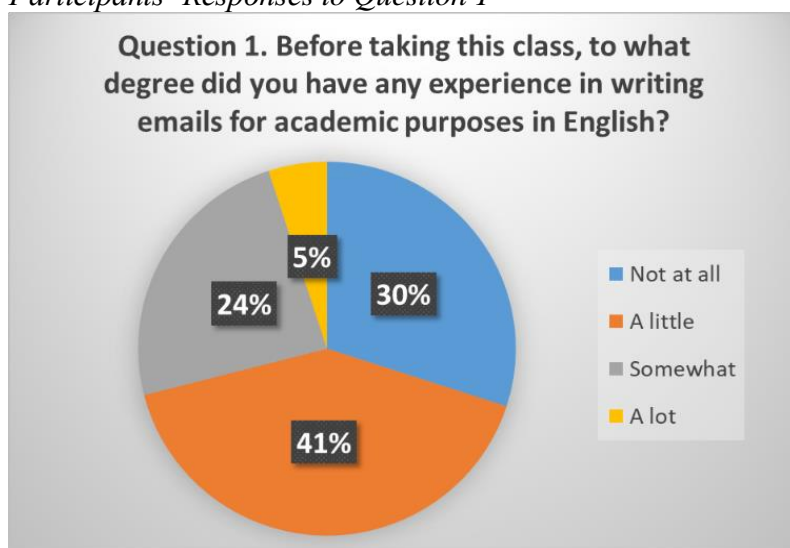
Table 4
Students' Improvement in the Experimental Group

	Email 1 Mean	Email 2 Mean	p	t	Email 3 Mean	p	t
Task fulfillment	1.76	1.96	0.0001	4.969	1.99	0.1810	1.347
Organization	2.23	3.48	0.0001	15.819	3.70	0.0010	3.383
Mechanics	1.33	1.83	0.0001	10.099	1.96	0.0013	3.304
Tone	1.73	1.96	0.0001	5.430	1.99	0.1832	1.749
Total	7.05	9.23	0.0001	19.596	9.64	0.0001	4.657

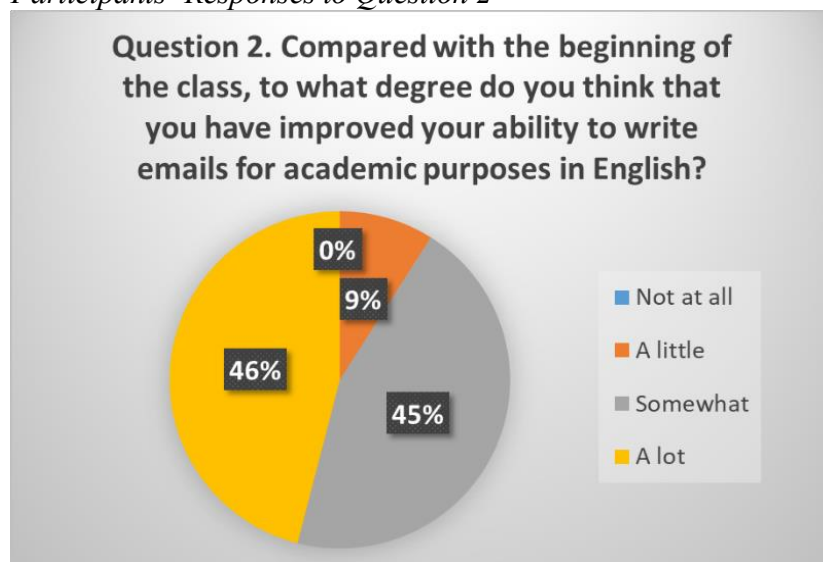
The results of the survey revealed the participants' perception to their own progress and the change in their attitude to the genre of academic emails in general. In their responses to the first question of the survey regarding their experience in formal email writing, 30% of the respondents admitted they had had no such experience before the class, and 41% replied they had had only a little practice in writing emails for scientific purposes. According to the students' explanations, before taking the academic writing course and the class on formal email writing, there was no actual need for them to study formal email structure and format. However, for some respondents, such experience was not new, as they had had to deal with academic paper submissions to a scientific journal published at the university and scientific events organized at their departments, or inquiries from international students concerning their studies and admission to the university. Yet, those who had had a lot

of experience in academic email writing constitute only 5% of the respondents. The proportions of answers to Question 1 are provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Participants' Responses to Question 1

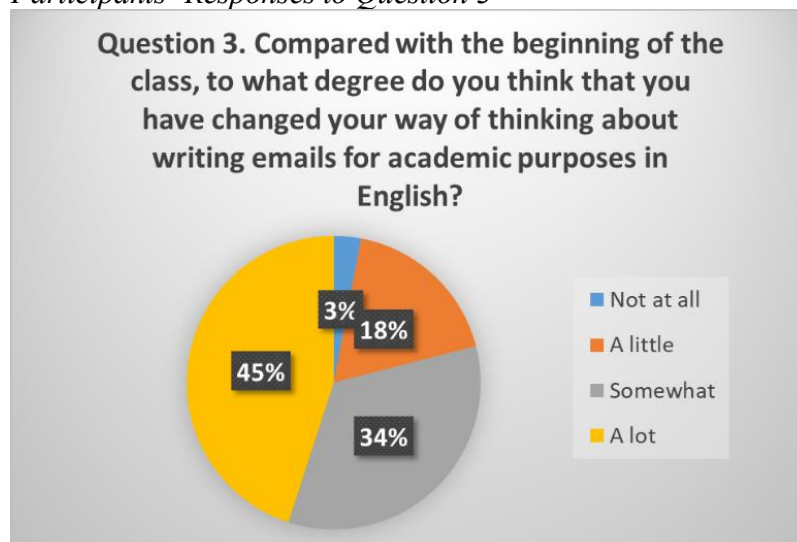


In their answers to the second question regarding their enhancement in writing academic emails, almost all respondents admitted that after the class they improved their ability to write emails for academic purposes in English to a considerable extent (45%) or to a large extent (46%). For instance, some of the respondents further commented as follows: *"In my practice, I have never had to write emails in English, so for me today's skills are a big leap forward!"*; *"A lot of useful information, expressions and phrases were demonstrated. In addition, the structure of the email was shown, which is useful for an adequate perception of the email by the addressee"*; *"I learned a lot of useful information that made me think differently about writing and formatting an academic email"*. Moreover, none of the students chose option "Not at all", and only 9% of the respondents stated that their writing ability had improved to a small degree. The respondents' answers are summarized in Figure 2.

Figure 2*Participants' Responses to Question 2*

Interestingly, progress in academic email writing was observed even by those respondents who stressed in their answers to Question 1 that before the class they had had somewhat or a lot of experience in writing emails for academic purposes in English and hence they chose options “Somewhat” or “A lot”. For instance, as one of the students further explained: *“I have some experience because I have organized several events of Young Nuclear Society. But now I’ve realized that I made lot of mistakes in these emails. After this class I will try not to make so many mistakes”*. Another student emphasized the importance of enriching the appropriate vocabulary: *“Since I have experience of business correspondence with international organizations in English, there were many familiar phrases. However, thanks to additional materials (useful phrases), my vocabulary has increased. I will use these phrases in my work correspondence as well”*.

Finally, in their responses to the third question of the survey, 97% of the participants of the experiment admitted that after the class they changed their way of thinking about writing emails for academic purposes in English to at least some degree. The responses to Question 3 are given in Figure 3.

Figure 3*Participants' Responses to Question 3*

In their comments to Question 4, the respondents provided detailed explanations of the ways their understanding of academic email writing changed. Thus, the students mentioned that they found the information about the structure of the English academic email, its cultural and content-related aspects and the norms of politeness characteristic of this type of communication interesting and useful. Besides, many participants stressed the importance of the list of clichés used in academic correspondence: *“The class was really helpful. The teacher showed and explained some important structures of academic correspondence. The useful phrases given by the teacher were extremely good for beginners like me on this level of studying”*.

Moreover, the class helped the students to understand the differences of academic emails from business and informal emails: *“Now I understand the differences between formal and informal styles of written communication in English”*; *“There are differences from business emails. Now I understand them better”*. The learners also realized that the rules of writing academic emails in English were not the same as those in their own language: *“The explanations about the manner of communication in the English-speaking environment, somewhat different from the Russian-speaking one, were very useful – about mutual gratitude, the order of*

constructing emails, and much more”; “Before this class I used a more ‘Russian’ style of academic writing and sometimes I had problems because of misunderstanding. Now it is easier to communicate with foreign colleagues”.

From some responses it can be concluded that when writing academic emails in English non-native speakers have to rely on their intuition, background knowledge and their experience of writing academic emails in their native language because explicit instruction of this means of communication is very seldom included in the curriculum of teaching English as a second language: *“Now I have a clear understanding of the academic email structure. Before the class it was mostly intuitive and based on English academic emails I had seen before”; “After the class, the structure became clear, first of all, after fixing it with a little practice”; “Before this class I have never had any experience in writing an email for academic purpose in English. So, I can say with confidence that I have got a lot of useful information and practical skills”.*

To illustrate the individual progress in academic email writing, we will provide three emails written by one of the students in Table 5.

Table 5
Email Examples

Email 1	Email 2	Email 3
Hello, Professor Kevin LeRoy! We are happy to invite you to the online workshop, that will take place at National Research Nuclear University MEPhI at 12-15 May, 2021. More details in the attachment file. You can join us as listener or speaker. Anyway, we will be glad to see you. Have a nice day, Organizing Committee	Dear Professor Chapman, My sincere apologies for a belated reply. I am really sorry but I have others plans for those days. My colleague Dr. Petrov will be able to read my paper at the conference. Could you tell me is it possible to have my report published in absentia? Thank you in advance. Kind regards, Alexei Orlov	Dear Organizing Committee, Thank you very much for your kind invitation to the 4th international conference on New Technologies of Interdisciplinary Research (NTIR 2021). I am very honored and delighted to accept it. I’m attaching an abstract of my paper which is entitled “The mechanism for determining a consensus algorithm of a distributed ledger technology”. I would prefer a session called

Email 1	Email 2	Email 3
		“Data storage and processing”, but my article also deals with cryptography and information security. Looking forward to your reply. Thank you in advance. Kind regards, [Name]

It is obvious that the student was familiar with the general structure of an email, however the tone in Email 1 was inappropriate: Alex¹ mistakenly used “Hello” and the exclamatory mark and the first name after the title in the salutation (“*Hello, Professor Kevin LeRoy!*”), and the colloquial phrase “*Have a nice day*” as a closing statement. In contrast, despite a couple of slight grammar mistakes, the tone of the second and third emails was greatly improved. Thus, in Email 3, the student’s response contained an appropriate salutation (“*Dear Organizing Committee*”), a polite opening remark (“*Thank you for your kind invitation...*”), the details about the paper, a reference to the attached abstract, polite final remarks (“*Looking forward to your reply*” and “*Thank you in advance*”), an ending statement (“*Kind regards*”) and a signature. Due to the explicit instruction, the student was able to improve his skills of formal writing. After the class Alex commented on his progress: “*On your examples, some situations during correspondence became clearer, and I also expanded my thesaurus on this topic*”.

The qualitative analysis of emails generated by the participants and the comparison of the differences between the scores obtained for the three writing tasks revealed that on average the students’ writing improved to a considerable extent with regard to all the four criteria: task fulfillment, organization, mechanics and tone. As a result, the students in the experimental group became more able to arrange their emails, control the degree of formality in response to the given task and make the appropriate linguistic choices. This allows us to conclude that academic mail writing instruction based on genre learning proved successful, for the significant enhancement from roughly 70% to 94% was obtained within a relatively short period of time.

5. Discussion

The present study was devoted to analyzing the effectiveness of the genre-based approach in teaching academic email writing in tertiary education. To the best of our knowledge, no previous studies have considered teaching academic email writing to PhD students from the point of view of genre learning. The results of the pre-test in our investigation are in good agreement with those obtained by Economidou-Kogetsidis (2015, 2018) in her two studies of academic emails sent to faculty members by L2 students in Greece. Her findings showed that the students' emails contained a variety of pragmatic errors connected with the structure and tone of academic emails composed by the L2 learners. The qualitative analysis of PhD students' emails showed similar errors in using salutations, greetings, polite opening and closing remarks, as well as inconsistency with the style of formal writing.

The results of the post-test and delayed post-test in our study agree well with the findings described by Yasuda (2011), although due to the lack of a comparison group the researcher found it difficult to relate the significant progress in the students' email writing to genre-based learning. Yet, the results of the survey revealed that the L2 students had positive attitudes towards the implementation of genre analysis in L2 classes (Yasuda, 2011). Likewise, the PhD students participating in our study showed an overall positive perception of the genre and considerable improvement in academic email writing. We relate the L2 students' progress to the application of explicit instruction based on genre analysis, which was evidenced by the recruitment of a control group. Besides, the effectiveness of genre-based learning was demonstrated within a very short period of time, which is a serious advantage, considering time constraints at a technical university like MEPhI.

Furthermore, the previous studies concentrated on teaching general email writing skills to sophomore students majoring in biology-related fields (Yasuda, 2011) or teaching formal email writing skills to students mainly specializing in Humanities (Carstens, 2009), whereas our research sample comprised students mostly majoring in Physical sciences. In addition, the majority of researchers have worked with groups of students having the same level of English from Intermediate (Hartle, 2017) to Upper-Intermediate (Blinova, 2021), whereas the participants of our experimental

and control groups had a different level of English proficiency, from Beginner to Advanced. Despite the differences, the results of our experiment and survey show that a vast majority of the participants benefited from the intervention regardless of the area they major in or the initial level of their language proficiency.

6. Conclusion

Academic emails are different from other types of emails in English as well as from academic emails in other languages. Therefore, the mistakes made when writing an academic email in English can lead to hindering and even breaking communication in the scientific sphere. Writing an academic email is an essential skill that will enable postgraduate students to succeed in academic and professional settings.

Genre-based learning is shown to be an effective way of improving L2 learners' awareness of formal email writing. The results of the experiment conducted in this study revealed significant improvement in the participants' academic email writing over a relatively short period of time. Such progress was possible due to the carefully designed instruction explaining the conventions of the genre of academic email. The results of the survey revealed that most of the students changed their way of thinking about writing emails for academic purposes in English and became aware of the norms of formal email writing. Based on these results, we can assume that it is essential to include academic email writing in the curriculum of teaching English as a second language.

The study has some limitations. It was limited to tertiary education and to specific situations in email writing related to the academic sphere, as it is particularly relevant for our university and especially the education of PhD students in technical fields. Moreover, the study was limited to a relatively short period of time, providing evidence of how L2 students became aware of the genre and its conventions within one intervention session of 90 minutes. Future studies should concentrate on how much development can be observed in L2 students' genre knowledge on a more continuous basis and how this knowledge can be applied in related genres. This would give a clearer understanding of how genre-based learning can be helpful in teaching novice academic writers who have little experience with different academic genres in L2.

Notes

¹ The name is a

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