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# Awkward Writing as the Problem of Russian Learners of English

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## Abstract

The abstracted article highlights the research targeted at improving students' writing with a focus on its rhetorical aspect. With this aim in view, the author has studied students' compositions classifying the most typical errors under several headings. Part of the research concerning unclear and incoherent writing was featured in the author's previous articles published in recent years. The abstracted article focuses on the problem of ease and awkwardness. The research was based on the experiment that followed three stages. At the initial stage the author observed the students' writing and classified the rhetorical drawbacks into several categories. The next stage involved instructions on the qualities that, interacting with each other, constitute the notion of a good style. The final stage comprised the students' feedback, which was suggestive of their progress in written compositions. The author singles out typical errors, illustrates them with examples from the students' compositions, and tries to find out the causes of awkwardness in students' performance. As follows from the observations, the major reasons of awkward writing are mother tongue interference and students' carelessness. The first manifests itself in wordiness and word for word translation; the latter – in the overuse of repetition, undeliberate rhyme, and unintended alliteration. The students' feedback leads to certain improvement at the end of the experiment.

*Keywords:* lack of ease, rhetorical error, awkward writing, undeliberate rhyme, mother tongue interference.

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## **Introduction**

For many years, teaching writing to EFL students in Russian universities has been rather neglected. Writing has been viewed as an aid in teaching spoken English, and of all its possible aspects, due attention has been given only to spelling and to grammar. It also should be noted that the least regarded aspect of writing has been the aspect of rhetoric. The neglect of written English on the part of Russian language pedagogy became especially evident at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when graduates began to seek employment in Europe and the USA. Various proficiency tests revealed significant gaps in students' preparation. Although faring well in speaking, the students often failed the written tasks of the examinations.

Acting as a teacher of English in a Russian University I had ample opportunities to observe the EFL students' writing, and by now I have collected and classified samples that enable me to sum up the typical pitfalls of the Russian students in their attempts to write a composition that would meet the requirements of rhetoric.

## **Purpose and objectives of the study**

Purpose of the study is to empirically test the effectiveness of the developed pedagogical conditions for development of readiness of troubled adolescents for family life.

## **Background**

During its history the word "rhetoric" has acquired several meanings, and at least one of them does not seem fair for such a respected notion. The word is sometimes defined as 'speech or writing that sounds fine and important, but is really insincere or without meaning' (Longman Dictionary, p. 1153). This unflattering definition comes from the crisis that struck rhetoric in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and consigned it to oblivion for many decades.

The recovery of rhetoric was conditioned by the technical progress that activated the cognitive function of the language. The language had to serve the growing needs of the society in knowledge and in the development of science and technology. Rhetoric, which in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century began to get out of the crisis, had an excellent opportunity for its revival. It changed its guidelines, adapting them to the new demands of the society. The reorientation of rhetoric was carried out in two interrelated directions:

- the refusal to understand rhetoric as the art, available only to a narrow circle of the society;
- the shift from ornamental speech to its logical arrangement.

The new guidelines have received the most distinct forms in the rhetoric of the USA, which is quite natural, since the United States as the most advanced industrial power was the first to feel the need for new milestones. The refusal from rhetoric as necessarily ornamental art paved the way for the development of composition techniques.

However, situation with teaching English as a foreign language did not change until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Reid (2004) mentions that as late as in 1970<sup>th</sup> English L2 writing classes were mostly the classes of grammar with the focus on the classical rules.

The shift to new strategies meant a gradual transition from the focus on grammatical accuracy to teaching patterns common to English sentences, paragraphs and essays.

When applied practically new approaches confirmed the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Kay & Kempton (1984) about the relations between language and culture, as compositions of L2 students displayed national cultural conventions, foreign to English strategies of writing. This gave rise to a new branch of rhetoric that was initiated by Kaplan (1966) and was called contrastive rhetoric. Advocating the idea that any English writing should follow English traditions, contrastive rhetoric points to the ethnic habits of EFL students (Dudley-Evans, 1997; Henry, 1993; Flaitz et al., 2003) and treats them as negative influence on L2 writing. However, non-acceptance of national conventions does not concern all the cultural differences but only those, which are irritating for the bearers of English (Matalene, 1985; Spack, 1997; Zamel, 1997).

For half a century contrastive rhetoric produced quite a number of researches, describing national conventions of L2 students from South Asia, Middle East or Europe. In its earlier works contrastive rhetoric explored general features of national cultures and placed them against the corresponding English ones. The researches revealed that linear and deductive English style is challenged by circular and inductive style of students from other parts of the world; that the straightforward way of expression is opposed by the metaphorical one; that the explicit type of coherence has the alternative to link ideas implicitly (Henry, 1993; Connor, 1996; Kirkpatrick, 1995; Hinds, 1990). Having identified national features contrastive rhetoric raised a question: to what extent all these features could be employed in L2 writing so that not to be an offence against English composition techniques?

The attempts to resolve this question revealed a wide diversity of viewpoints. Thus, Ghanbari (2014) treats English rhetorical conventions as an undoubted element in improving EFL learners' writing. Matsuda and Cox (2009) with reference to Severino (1993) describe three possible stances that a native English speaker can take when reading an ESL composition. The first one is non-acceptance of national conventions. Contrary to this opinion is the recognition of ESL students' right to express themselves in accordance with

their national identities. Other NES readers are willing to compromise: they want ESL writers to acquire a command of English patterns and not to lose their national ones.

Since recently the compromise alternative has become rather popular. Thus, Hackett-Jones (2016) brings up for discussion the problem of cultural interference in the classroom of students learning more than one L2. She advocates the idea that cultural conventions of several nations cannot exist in a student's mind separately. They rather influence each other and form different joint patterns. Similar ideas are set forth by Wilson and González Davies (2017). Lee and Jenks (2016) describe their experience of cross-cultural composition where ESL and NES students could benefit from each other. They support the idea that a composition can be open to different ways that people use language. Somewhat challenging is the assumption of Canagarajah (2006) who contests the monopoly of Standard English in composition and suggests that local "Englishes" should be given spaces in academic writing.

Meanwhile, a composition can never be performed to its best advantage until the writer is careful about language accuracy. This problem, both general and specific, concerns the philosophy of error. Its general character is determined by a wide range of questions, which are brought up for discussion. Issues under analysis include types of errors in L2 compositions, their frequency, and the degree of gravity for the NES readers (Vann, Meyer, & Lorenz, 1984; Runic & Runic, 2013; Ferris, 2014; Wu, 2014; Doolan, 2017), reasons of errors and their sources (Bartholomae, 1980; Myles, 2002), error correction and students' feedback (Harris & Silva, 1993; Bitchener et al., 2005; Ferris, 2014; Truscott, 2007; Chandler, 2003). The specificity of the problem is conditioned by limitations imposed on the analysis by the mother tongue of the students who learn English. Types of errors and all the particulars connected with them vary to a certain extent, depending on students' national language and their national culture.

Different as these researches might be in their aims, approaches and methods, all they treat a student's error as an offence against the system of grammar. However, grammar alone cannot ensure a logical and natural development from one idea to another. To maintain easy and coherent writing is no less important than to facilitate writing, accurate in grammar. In adherence to this perspective modern researches and case studies explore students' pitfalls in order to help ESL writers avoid rhetorical discord. These researches employ the participants from different national cultures: Chinese (Wang & Sui, 2006; You, 2004), Thai (Kaweera, 2013), French (Waguey & Hufana, 2013), Egyptian (Ahmed, 2010), as well as the participants learning English in mixed groups (Al Badi, 2015; Crossley et al., 2016). However, the findings demonstrate that the learners' deficiencies have more similarities rather than differences. They go against the logical arrangement of the thoughts, they loosen the links between the sentences, and they have a negative impact on the smoothness of an essay.

Confirming these pitfalls in writing of Russian L2 students is the present research. But unlike the above mentioned works, the present article features failed attempts of students to construct a smooth sentence, rather than a smooth paragraph. The decision to take a sentence as the key notion of the research is conditioned by the 'simple-to-complex' principle of teaching.

### **Research and methods**

Starting from the premise that a good sentence should be clear for the reader, easy for the tongue, agreeable for the ear, and coherent in itself, I pursued a research with undergraduate students as the participants. The research was aimed at finding rhetorical drawbacks in students' writing, their classification, and, eventually, at the improvement of students' written performance. The details of the research, as well as its methods, were featured in my two previous articles (Terenin, 2013; 2015). For that reason I will drop the particulars of methods and will dwell only on the principal points.

The whole study followed three overlapping stages. At the initial stage I resorted to classification of rhetorical drawbacks, dividing them into samples that demonstrate lack of clarity, lack of unity, lack of ease, and lack of force. The next stage involved instructions on the qualities that, interacting with each other, constitute the notion of a good style. The final stage comprised the students' feedback, which was suggestive of their progress in written compositions.

I started the research in 2008 and all the three stages covered the whole of the academic year. As a matter of fact, I never stopped my observations. At the beginning of each year I resumed the research with a new group of students as the participants. The obtained data comprised the material for developing a training program on rhetoric of writing.

As is mentioned above, a good style is a combination of qualities that include clearness, unity, coherence, and ease. But as Barzun and Graff (2003) put it, 'neither style, nor any of its qualities can be aimed at separately. They are rather by-product of the writer's effort to make the words work' (p. 211). Meanwhile, it is important for writers to be able to recognize their errors in order to know where they are logical and where they are absurd; whether they are vague or plain; and what they should do in order to attain a better expression. Thus, recognition of rhetorical errors comes forward as one of the objectives in teaching a written course. The problems of clearness and unity were featured in my previous articles. This one pursues the subject of ease and awkwardness in students' writing.

## Results and discussion

The ability to write with ease attests to the writer's experience and the writer's sense of language. However, both of these qualities are exactly what the students lack. Under these circumstances the students formulate the ideas in their mother tongue and then resort to translation. All this creates conditions for language interference and eventually gives rise to awkward expression.

Translation from the mother tongue into the second language is a rather popular assignment in Russian language pedagogy. It is practiced at each stage of students' learning. And over the course of time the assignments become more and more complicated. At the final stage the students are required to translate coherent texts which belong to writers, far more experienced than the learners themselves. Their texts often have sentences with lots of expressive means, infrequent vocabulary, and complicated syntax. However, up to the end of their schooling many of the students cannot get rid of literal translation. The students resort to this method even if they face up a sentence structure marked by a relatively considerable length.

Example 1. From a student's translation:

*Some teachers think that the main thing for them in the process of education is to establish discipline and orderliness in the classroom, forgetting at that that the methods with the help of which they are established have no smaller and, perhaps, even greater importance than the discipline itself.*

The Russian original of the above utterance has no sins against ease. However, the student who made the translation turned out to be over-literal. Concentrating on syntax, he or she did not take into account the phonetic component of rhetoric. The sentence is objectionable both because of its clumsiness and because of its phonetic presentation. Thus, *think* and *thing*, similar in sounding, as well as two *thats*, coming one after the other make the utterance offensive to the reader's ear.

A long sentence is not a drawback in itself. But the ability to produce long sentences comes with experience. Against this background, Russian L2 pedagogy recommend that students should avoid long sentences in their compositions, and phrase the ideas in a more simple way. Guided by this advice, while correcting the above utterance, the students came to the following succession of sentences.

Upgraded:

*Some teachers think that their main objective is to establish orderliness in the classroom. They forget that the methods of maintaining discipline are no less important than the discipline itself.*

Causes of language interference should be sought both in similar and in distinctive features between Russian and English. Similar features, taken as a basis for learning at the initial stages, promote the illusion that a communicated idea may be expressed in L2 by simple word for word translation. But over the course of time this habit acquires a destructive force, as it does not take into account the distinctive features of the two languages. These features in their turn are very numerous. They may be found in all the spheres of the languages beginning with their phonetics and ending with syntax. Leaving aside the particulars, I would highlight one of the distinctive features. As compared to English, Russian has a more conservative and expanded syntax. Consequently, an idea may be expressed in English by a smaller number of words than is needed in Russian. The resort to literary translation in such cases overloads the target utterance.

Example 2. From a student's composition:

*In spite of the fact that they were not rich they managed to collect the necessary sum of money in order to pay for the operation.*

The above sentence is built in accordance with the rules of English grammar; however it is not without shortcomings. The utterance is too wordy, and its faults result from the literary translation of the Russian sentence. To upgrade the utterance, the students were required to find a specifically English pattern, and after considering several ways to phrase the idea they came to the following decision.

Upgraded:

*Poor, though they were, they did collect money to pay for the operation.*

Language interference shows itself most vividly when the students attempt to translate sentences built after specifically Russian patterns. One of them is the pattern where the predicate is placed before the subject.

As early as at the initial stages of their schooling, the students learn one of the basic rules of English grammar, according to which the subject in the English sentence must be placed before the predicate. However, with the acquisition of more knowledge and experience (especially the experience of reading fiction), they become convinced that the above rule is not an absolute one. The students come to know that placing the predicate before the subject is not rare in the English language as well.

Example 3. From "Anthony in Blue Alsatia" by E. Fargeon:

*On a bench by the cottage **stood a pitcher** and a wooden bowl.*

Example 4. From “The Picture of Dorian Gray” by O. Wilde:

*At the end of the hall **hung** a tattered green **curtain** that swayed and shook in the gusty wind which had followed him in from the street.*

“Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English” refers to such sentences as locative ones and denotes them by the abbreviation AVS (Adverb – Verb – Subject). According to this grammar, the locative clauses focus on a particular place ‘where something is found or happens’ (Biber et al., 2000, p. 153, 954). Another detail of the AVS inversion is a relatively small number of verbs that may function as predicates. Finally, such structures mostly occur in fiction where lots of descriptions may be found.

All these details taken together define the main features of the English AVS inversion. However, in Russian the predicate may precede the subject in a wider range of discourse. The AVS word order may be used after any kind of adverb, with an indefinite number of verbs, in an unlimited frequency, and in any language register. The conceptual difference between such patterns in English and in Russian is determined by their stylistic status. In Russian they are neutral. The speaker uses them unintentionally without aiming at any stylistic effect. He or she chooses them because they come in handy. In English, on the contrary, such sentences belong to elevated language. They signal about the deliberate selection. They attract the reader’s attention and make him or her grasp the idea, which the writer wants to convey.

The authority of the written word, as well as the free use of the AVS word order in the Russian language encourages students to use this structure in their compositions. And moreover, the occurrence of such sentences in the printed matter is often used by students as a reason to defend their position in discussions with the teacher.

Example 5. From a student’s translation:

*At the area of the former transparent forest **were stretching** sullen hills of lumps of earth, branches and twigs, dead fragments of trunks.*

To find another way of phrasing the idea, the participants of the experiment got involved in a heated discussion. They offered several alternatives to the above utterance. The first and the most logical idea comprised placing the predicate immediately after the subject.

Alternative 1:

*At the area of the former transparent forest sullen hills of lumps of earth, branches and twigs, dead fragments of trunks **were stretching**.*



However, this utterance was rejected by the students themselves. They did it because of the expanded subject, which prolongs the readers' expectation for the predicate. Another alternative involved introduction of the modal phrase *one can see* as the subject and the predicate.

Alternative 2:

*At the area of the former transparent forest one can see sullen hills of lumps of earth, branches and twigs, dead fragments of trunks.*

This alternative was also rejected. It was mentioned during the discussion that the phrase *one can see* is the element of technical description, which does not suit the emotional coloring of the original. The Russian sentence expresses sadness for once a beautiful but no longer existing coniferous forest. Finally the students chose the alternative, which runs as follows.

Alternative 3:

*The place once wooded by a transparent forest was hilling with grey, sullen lumps of earth, branches and twigs, fragments of dead trees.*

Example 6. From a student's translation:

*In the magnificent National Park **was carried out** a merciless, machine-operated **woodcutting**.*

Upgraded:

*The magnificent National Park was exposed to a merciless, machine-operated woodcutting.*

Example 7. From a student's composition:

*On the canvas **was pictured a lady** who was sitting in an armchair against a fireplace.*

Upgraded:

*The canvas depicted a lady who was sitting in an armchair against a fireplace.*

Another habit of Russian students' writing is placing the object at the beginning of a clause. Clauses of this type in Russian are very popular. But as distinct from Russian, the English language imposes certain limitations on the use of such patterns. Functions of fronted objects in the English language involve

cohesion with the preceding text: *Such an error I couldn't commit* or expressing contrast: *Winters I like, autumns I don't* (Biber et al, 2000, p. 909). Russian students, however, do not take into account the specific features of the English discourse. Steady skills of communication in the mother tongue influence the target language and result in the abundant use of the fronted objects in students' compositions.

Example 8. From a student's composition:

*His first poem he wrote at the age of five.*

Example 9. From a student's composition:

She has recently graduated from the university, and her **subject** she knew perfectly well.

Upgraded:

*He wrote his first poem at the age of five.*

*She has recently graduated from the university, and knew her subject perfectly well.*

An inexperienced writer cannot guard himself from misplacement of sentence parts, even if he or she strictly observes the basic rules of grammar. This is confirmed by the abundant use of sentences with inappropriate placing of relative clauses.

Example 10. From a student's composition:

*There are many professional **schools** in the USA separate from universities **which** provide preparation in one or more professional fields.*

Example 11. From a student's composition:

*They saw a **house** at the far end of the street **which** looked very beautiful.*

Each of the examples is an offence against clearness and ease, because the relative clauses are separated from the antecedent nouns (*schools* and *house*, correspondingly) by a prolonged context. The ambiguity is reinforced by the intruding nouns (*universities* and *streets*, correspondingly), which belong to the same class as the antecedents of *which*. Such sentences may also be regarded as the result of mother tongue interference. The matter is that Russian sentences of such kind do not lose clearness, as the relative pronoun and its antecedent agree in number, case and gender.

A different placement of sentence parts can relieve the utterances of ambiguity and clumsiness.

Upgraded:

*Apart from universities there are many professional schools in the USA which provide preparation in one or more professional fields.*

*At the far end of the street they saw a house which looked very beautiful.*

Language interference is a serious obstacle to the mastery of L2 skills, and it is impossible to overcome this obstacle outside a natural language environment. However, this is exactly what the student must seek, and the only recommendation here can be expressed by a commonplace idea about regular work on the language.

Meanwhile, interference is not the only cause of awkward writing. In many cases, clumsy style is due to students' negligence. One of the most common mistakes of this kind is overuse of repetition.

Repetition of words, phrases and sentences is rather common in writing, and in many cases this method is appropriate. It is often used as a means of emphasis and a means of cohesion between sentences or their parts. However, in the works of students and even of more experienced writers, there are many examples of lame repetition.

Example 12. From a student's composition:

*There were many villages round it, and after many years London and three hundred villages grew into a very large city. Some of the **names** of these villages may be found in the **names** of streets in modern London.*

The above sentence is a bright instance of a rhetorical error. One cannot say that *the names can be found in the names...* or *the work on something involves the work...*, etc. In addition, this statement demonstrates the lame repetition of the words *many* and *villages*. In search of better ways to express the idea the students produced the following statement.

Upgraded:

*It was surrounded by three hundred villages, and as the time passed London absorbed them growing into a very large city. Some of these villages gave names to streets of modern London.*

Errors of style in students' compositions comprise a wide variety of lame repetitions. One of the most frequent drawbacks is the flawed use of cognate words.

Example 13. From a student's composition:

*After the war Germany was **separated** into two **separate** states.*

Upgraded:

*After the war Germany was divided into two separate states.*

Example 14. From a student's composition:

*After the **performance** had been **performed** the audience burst into applause.*

Upgraded:

*When the performance was over, the audience burst into applause.*

Another problem of flawed repetition is excessive use of the same grammatical structures. Thus, repetition of the infinitive and the ing-forms in the following sentences is an offence to the ear.

Example 15. From a student's composition:

*He wanted **to ask** Ann **to help** him **to do** his homework.*

Upgraded:

*He wanted Ann to help him with the homework.*

Example 16. From a student's composition:

*She was **sitting** in the armchair **staring** at the **flickering** light of the candle.*

Upgraded:

*She sat in the armchair with her eyes fixed on the flickering light of the candle.*

Very often awkward language is due to the excessive use of the same preposition, notably the preposition *of*. To a certain extent this is also a case of Russian interference, since the English *of*-phrases convey the

same meanings, as the Russian genitives. The succession of several genitives, as may happen in a Russian sentence, is a temptation for students to resort to of-phrases in translation.

Example 17. From a student's composition:

*One of the classrooms was turned into the exhibition of the works of art of students.*

Upgraded:

*One of the classrooms was chosen to exhibit students' works of art.*

Another reason for the loss of ease is undeliberate rhyme. In general, the use of rhyme is strictly regulated. Apart from poetry it can be found in proverbs and sayings, advertising, folk tales and pastiches. This is the list of genres in which rhyme is stylistically justified. In other cases, it is always disagreeable.

Example 18. From a student's composition:

*He learnt from the **nurse** that his father was **worse**.*

Upgraded:

*The nurse said to him that his father got worse that day.*

Somewhat similar non-rhetorical effect may be observed in sentences with undeliberate alliteration. It should be noted that genuine alliteration performs its functions within the same genres as rhyme. Its occurrence in the students' compositions is often inappropriate. Example 19. From a student's composition:

*On their way to the mountains Mary and **John joined** a group of tourists.*

Upgraded:

*On their way to the mountains John and Mary met a group of tourists and joined them.*

Example 20. From a student's composition:

*He couldn't **believe** that his **beloved** went through all this.*

Upgraded:

*He couldn't believe that his dearest one passed through all this.*

It should further be noted that, the English favor alliteration more than the Russians do, and the spheres of its use in English are wider. In addition to the above listed types of discourse one can see alliterated consonants in titles: *The Last Leaf*, *Pride and Prejudice*, in slogans: *live with lightening*, *bed and breakfast*, and in set expressions: *now or never*, *forgive and forget*, *still as a stone*. But one way or another, alliteration can emphasize the utterance only when it is used skilfully and deliberately. Casual alliteration always jars on one's ear.

### **Conclusion**

Awkward expression is a rather serious drawback that downgrades the quality of writing. The major causes of awkward writing are students' carelessness and mother tongue interference. The students' feedback confirms that rhetorical errors rising from the first cause can be easily avoided. If the teacher succeeds in establishing the right atmosphere in the classroom, the students readily respond by recognizing the rhetorical errors and by correcting them. As for the errors emerging due to language interference, they are more problematic. Insufficient knowledge does not allow students to find a better way of phrasing ideas. It is only natural that students resort to word for word translation, often with non-rhetorical results. The current situation may be getting worse, as the teachers themselves are not free from the influence of Russian structures. They seldom master their English in Great Britain or the USA, and their background consists of communication experience within Russia.

The attempted measures to improve the situation may be formulated as in the following list:

- development of closer cooperation with NES teachers;
- encouraging students' participation in academic exchange programs;
- developing courses of written English;
- upgrading modern curricula with the view of increasing sessions in written English;
- upgrading and updating teaching materials with a focus on authenticity.

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