

"Now I Know Where to Start": Results of a Diagnostic Orientation Session for Academics

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Abstract

In this article, we will describe the design of a diagnostic orientation session offered to university academics by a faculty-based academic writing center. The session can serve as a model for identifying academics' needs in mastering English for Research Publication Purposes. We aim at sharing practical activities that successfully worked as a less traditional form of needs analysis. We will discuss the value of such a model to both participants, who get personalized feedback and recommendations for enhancing their academic growth, and instructors of the writing center, which provides support services to academics by designing tailored learning programs in English.

Keywords: Needs analysis model, writing center support services, academics' writing challenges, English for research publication purposes, pedagogical design

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Introduction

Globally, academics have been experiencing pressure to publish (Lillis & Curry, 2010; Sarewitz, 2016), which has led to a rapid development of English for Research Publication Purposes (ERPP) (Cargill & Burgess, 2008; Flowerdew, 2015). Recently, a considerable body of literature has grown around the theme of supporting researchers in their “writing journeys” (Gallagher, 2017, p. 24) and helping them communicate more effectively in an academic context (Eodice & Cramer, 2001; Cho, 2009; Chen, 2011; Geller & Eodice, 2013; Jamjoom, 2021). To make informed decisions about what kind of programs to offer academics, course designers have to carry out a thorough analysis of academics’ needs. While everyone agrees on the importance of needs analysis (Jordan, 1997; Klimova, 2015; Yuvayapan & Bilginer, 2020), there are different opinions as to what instrument can be the most effective within each educational context.

As the core of any educational program (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987), needs analysis is mainly carried out to determine the writing needs of a small number of undergraduate- and graduate-level students, using such instruments as self-reflection questionnaires (Yuvayapan & Bilginer, 2020), qualitative surveys (Lappalainen, 2016), target text analysis (Li, 2006), or interviews (Flowerdew,

1999; Denny et al., 2018). Studies focus on language needs (Zohoorian, 2015), the conceptions of academic writing (Ma, 2018), the needs of postgraduate students connected with writing in particular disciplines (Al-Khasawneh, 2010; Huang, 2010; Cai, 2017), and some specific issues, for example, the difficulties with writing a thesis (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006). We can also find a few studies that present an overview of academics' perceptions of their writing needs (Gea-Valor et al., 2014; Durmuşoğlu Köse et al., 2019; Frumina & West, 2012; Belyaeva, Kuznetsova, Nikiforova, & Suchkova, 2021), demonstrating the necessity for academics to improve their language proficiency in English.

Traditionally, teaching ERPP to academics and doctoral students is informed by the target-situation analysis rather than the learners' lacks, needs, and wants (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Existing research recognizes the approaches based on genre analysis with the focus on rhetorical moves, disciplinary conventions, and corpus analysis as successful (Swales, 1990; Cargill & O'Connor, 2006; Reid, 2010; Burgess & Cargill, 2013; Anthony, 2016; Englander & Corcoran, 2019). However, the generalizability of these approaches may seem problematic without considering academics' individual challenges. Flowerdew (1999) highlights that "attention needs to be focused on individual scholars because it is important to discover the perceptions, problems, and strategies used by NNS scholars in writing for publication in English" (p. 246). Here the question arises:

How can the learning / writing center make needs analysis informative not only to course designers but also beneficial for individual learners?

When conducting needs analyses, some course designers start with individuals, but they tend to focus on the data that are relevant to courses for a specific context (Zohoorian, 2015; Gea-Valor et al., 2014) or to general peculiarities of academics' development as effective communicators. In the latter case, researchers are mainly interested in tracking the individuals' development, documenting their journeys, analyzing factors enabling and hindering them, or paying special attention to the impact of explicit instruction (Li et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2014; Bazerman et al., 2012; Cameron et al., 2009). It seems that, to our knowledge, none of the studies presented a needs analysis model that would not only reveal learners' needs and characteristics, but also become an activity beneficial for the participants.

To fill this gap, the paper aims to generate fresh insight into learning about academics' needs in a less traditional form – we offer a series of engaging activities reflecting a new needs analysis model, which we have called the Diagnostic Advisory Orientation (DAO) model. It includes three major components based on the pedagogical objectives set: (1) **diagnostic** – to identify individual language needs; (2) **advisory** – to provide personalized recommendations for further development; (3) **orientation** – to raise

awareness of available professional development opportunities. These three components are intended to be beneficial for the session participants. The session results also empower the center, providing the following opportunities, or three Ps: to create a profile of the target audience (profiling component); to meet the clients' needs by offering customized learning programs (planning component); and to reach more clients (promotion component).

In this article, we will describe the orientation diagnostic session *Finding Your Route to Research Writing*, which was facilitated at the Academic Writing Center (AWC) of HSE University from 2018 to 2022. Designing the session, we set the objectives to identify academics' level of proficiency, to learn about their language strengths and challenges, and to collect the topics they are interested in for further development of their academic skills. The session activities were designed to reveal directly and indirectly participants' academic skills, which served the objectives of the session.

The suggested pedagogical design for analyzing academics' needs has worked well as a diagnostic and planning tool for the AWC, enabling it to provide targeted support to academics in writing for publication. The data helped the Center to make informed decisions about creating courses and workshops to meet the needs of its clients. Additionally, each participant received individual feedback on their language strengths and weaknesses,

tips for improvement, and recommendations about which courses to choose.

The importance and originality of such a needs analysis model are that it explores less conventional activities for assessment in a stress-free atmosphere, which is conducive to academics' further development. This model may pertain to many other academic contexts as it places value not only on instructors designing courses or institutions organizing such courses, but also on individual participants, helping them to construct their routes to professional development.

The paper presents the information about the pedagogical design of the session, including materials description, preparation stages, and procedures; data collection and analysis; session results, including academics' levels of proficiency, and writing challenges voiced by academics themselves and observed by instructors; and participants' feedback and requests for the AWC.

Session Design

The diagnostic orientation session for academics *Finding Your Route to Research Writing* has been run at the AWC since 2018. The session aims to identify researchers' language level of speaking and writing in English, analyze their language needs, and identify challenges they face while writing for publication.

This face-to-face session lasts three academic hours (equal to two hours 15 minutes). The recommended group size is 8-10 people per

group. It is important to create a safe environment and stress-free atmosphere, involving academics in engaging activities and interaction and, at the same time, ensuring a standardized procedure and applying an internationally recognized scale of evaluation.

Activities

The session consists of three creative activities in English (see the instructions for the tasks in Appendix). The activities have been designed in such a way as to obtain as much information as possible about the primary clients of the center – researchers – while engaging them in individual and group tasks. This allows not only assessing researchers' levels of oral and written proficiency but also receiving information about their experience of learning English, successes and failures, writing challenges and learning demands.

The first framed speaking activity, "Shaking Hands," serves as a warm-up and helps to create a rapport. It involves note-taking and an oral presentation organized as a role-play. Participants sit in a circle and introduce their neighbor pretending to be them.

The second speaking activity, "My Metaphor of Learning English," involves drawing a metaphor capturing participants' perceptions of the language learning process, along with the roles of the teacher and the student. Metaphors have been chosen as they can serve "an important instrument of analysis" of experiences and can also help to define the way people act and plan their learning

strategies (Oxford et al., 1998, p. 45). Each participant in turn shows the drawing and describes it for 2-3 minutes. The other participants listen and take notes on the handout about the learning process, teacher and learner roles. After the presentation, participants are encouraged to ask questions and give comments.

The third activity, “My Writing Challenges,” is framed as a response email to a survey conducted by the AWC. It resembles one of the written tasks in the Business Language Testing Service exam (BULATS, 2017). Participants are supposed to cover three topics: their own experience of writing in English, primary difficulties, and writing needs. We agree that “it must be worth asking precisely what is difficult about writing and, especially, about writing in a second language” (Brookes & Grundy, 2009, p. 11).

As can be seen, the content of each activity has been designed with the purpose of analyzing academics’ difficulties and demands so that the center could cater to its clients’ needs better.

Preparation

The preparatory stage comprised several steps:

Step 1: Materials design. The whole set of materials comprises a PowerPoint presentation and handouts, detailed guidelines for instructors, the assessment scale, a template that facilitates giving individual feedback after the session, and instructions for the final instructor’s report that should be submitted to the center.

Step 2: Training instructors. The training was focused on the procedure of delivering the session, instructors' behavior, and setting and applying the standard of assessment. For assessment of participants' performance, instructors were trained to use the BULATS global descriptors (BULATS, 2017), where each band corresponds to a certain level of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, 2001). They had to assess task achievement, text organization, and language variety. Instructors were encouraged to note not only typical language problems, but also strengths to avoid deficit model thinking (Smit, 2012).

Step 3: The first run of the session (2018) and observation of instructors at work. The observation stage was important to make sure that all participants had equal opportunities to perform and that the procedure was consistent across all the groups.

Step 4: Organization. Academics' participation was voluntary. The letter of intent stated that they would participate in some activities in English and get personalized feedback on their performance and recommendations for further development of their skills. The sessions were scheduled in parallel; participants were grouped randomly, neither age nor their research field was taken into consideration. The seating was arranged in a circle with the instructor as a group member.

After-Session Activities

As one of the objectives of the session was to provide each participant with personalized feedback about their level of English and readiness for academic communication, instructors had two weeks to write the feedback according to an agreed framework. The feedback consisted of comments about strong points and areas for improvement, recommendations, and suggestions for the AWC courses.

Instructors also provided a report to the center, which included the analysis of participants' language problems, and summary of their needs and requirements. Participants, in turn, were supposed to go through a two-stage project evaluation procedure: to comment on the materials and procedure (immediate participants' feedback) and to evaluate the session's usefulness (end-of-the-session feedback).

Data Collection and Analysis

Sources of Data Collection

To create a group profile (age, gender, and discipline areas), we used the information in the session online registration forms, which the participants filled out before the session, and participants' notes for Activity 1 "Shaking Hands," which were collected after the session. To learn about the level of proficiency, we used the instructors' reports that included marked levels of speaking and writing and the summary of typical problems in each group. We

also used participants' written papers (Activity 3) to collect requests for the Center and summarize voiced writing challenges. To get participants' feedback on the value of the session, we created two brief surveys (immediate and end-of-the-session feedback). The immediate paper survey was filled out by all participants, but the end-of-the-session online survey was filled out by only 46 % of participants.

The immediate feedback form consisted of two questions in which the participants had to evaluate from 1 to 10 (where 10 is the highest score) each of the three activities of the session and the instructor's performance.

The end-of-the-session delayed feedback included one evaluation and two open reflection questions. Participants were asked to assess the quality of individual language feedback they received from their instructors on a scale from 1 to 10. The second question required participants to reflect on the session and state whether and how it will affect their language development strategy. Finally, the participants had an opportunity to comment on the session and provide general feedback on how it was run.

Participants

Our research spanned the years 2018-2022 with a total of 329 participants. They are a diverse group of HSE University researchers, who differ both in previous language training background, particular language needs, and discipline areas, but all

of them are members of the high-potential research team of the university faculty, which is a selective talent pool program embracing new members every year. They are all encouraged to publish their research and are exposed to a variety of opportunities for professional development.

The sample included 48% males and 52% females of ages ranging from 20 to 49 (48% – aged 26–31, 34% – 20–25, 12% – 32–36, and 6% – 37–49 years old). A variety of research discipline areas was represented: 23% – social sciences, 22% – humanities, 21% – business, 15% – applied sciences, 12% – natural sciences, and 7% – mathematics.

Results of the Session

Results from the research represent 329 academics across five cohorts (2018-2022). As the purpose of the paper was to share a new model for needs analysis, we will focus only on those findings that can serve as success indicators for the model and can help the Center to make informed decisions about learning programs, i.e. academics' levels of proficiency, a brief overview of writing challenges, and a summary of requests to the Center. Finally, we will share participants' evaluation of the session.

Level of Language Proficiency

The majority of the participants demonstrated B2 level and above (see Table 1). While participants' speaking skills were also evaluated, for the purpose of the current study, the focus is on

writing skills only. The analysis of participants' performance shows that the majority of this high-potential group of the faculty are capable of producing an academic text (both oral and written). The results are consistent throughout the years.

Table 1
Level of Language Proficiency According to the CEFR (2018-2022)

Data	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
Speaking						
%	1%	7%	15%	43%	26%	8%
Number	2	23	50	141	86	27
Writing						
%	1%	7%	23%	41%	22%	6%
Number	5	24	75	133	71	21

These results give us a clear picture of what level the majority of our clients are. Although the B2+ level has been the most common, the Center needs to cater to the needs of learners with lower and higher levels. We can predict which of the existing courses will be in demand, and which we need to adjust to the required levels of proficiency.

We are clearly aware that participants' levels of proficiency are approximated. Although not all instructors are certified examiners, they are all professional English teachers familiar with the CEFR descriptors and with a wide experience of assessing students' papers. The instructors have been carefully selected and trained in

applying the assessment scale. Each year they have to undergo rigorous retraining both in assessing writing and speaking skills under the supervision of a certified examiner. As it was not the task of the study to officially certify participants' levels of proficiency, we were quite content with the results that show the approximate level.

Writing Challenges

One of the purposes of Activity 3 (which was a response email to a survey) in the session is to find out about the difficulties that participants experience while writing in English. We have analyzed the writing challenges from two perspectives: those mentioned by participants themselves and those observed by instructors while checking participants' writing.

Participants' voices. Among the challenges voiced by the participants are English syntax and academic vocabulary, articles, punctuation, and differences in academic writing conventions in English and Russian. No matter what level of proficiency participants have, they admit that they mainly struggle with lower-order language problems: vocabulary, grammar, and punctuation. Naturally, B1 level and lower learners mention a lack of language and wish their texts to be more accurate. The higher-level learners strive for more variety and an increase in language complexity to "shine academically." B2 learners are concerned with register issues and would like to become more aware of formal versus informal

norms in writing. Interestingly, neither lower nor higher than B2 level learners do not see register as a problem. We can hypothesize that better awareness about register comes with more exposure to the language and experience. The issue of clarity also seems to be important as many of the participants would like to "write in a native-like manner" and avoid the "Russian way of writing." "Fear of not being understood" has been experienced by 50% of B1 level learners, and 15% and 13% of B2 and C1+ learners respectively.

Instructors' voices. Instructors, having recognized accuracy problems, a limited number of syntactic structures, and a low vocabulary variety, are more concerned with higher-order challenges. Instructors observe problems with audience awareness and genre features (in our case it was an email); text organization: paragraphing, developing an argument, coherence and cohesion; and typical features of Russian academic discourse: deviations from the topic, long sentences, wordiness, and excessive use of passive constructions.

Instructors see the need to provide focused training on certain aspects of academic communication: organization of ideas, stating an argument clearly, formal text characteristics, and genre analysis.

Participants' Requests

Part of the writing task was to write specific requests to the AWC. Some of the requests are common for all level participants, for example, offering proofreading services and providing

psychological support for boosting self-confidence. However, there are certain requests pertaining to a certain level. As for A1-B1 learners, they ask to organize General English courses to develop speaking and listening skills. For writing, they would like to master translating skills, especially concerning research terminology.

B2 level participants request training on developing argumentation and reasoning skills. They are likely to participate in joint research projects and voice their need for developing communication skills, e.g. an email course, small talk practice.

C1+ level participants are concerned with acquiring strategies that can lead them to being more autonomous in their writing: how to cope with the writer's block, how to paraphrase and summarize, and how to self-edit their texts. They are also interested in writing specific genres: a literature review, grant proposal, conference abstract, etc., and they would appreciate support in enhancing their fluency of expression both in written and oral forms.

The analysis of participants' requests provides a source of topics for targeted learning programs. Of course, providing vocabulary and grammar support is essential for English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners, but they also need strategies to enhance their self-confidence.

Participants' Feedback on the Session

We collected participants' feedback two times: right after the session we asked them to evaluate the activities themselves

(immediate feedback), and the second time after they received personalized recommendations (end-of-the-session feedback) to learn how useful the session was.

The participants evaluated the instructors' performance as 9.8 out of 10; the scores for the activities were very high, too: "Shaking Hands" – 8.6, "My Metaphor of Learning English" – 8.9, "My Writing Challenges" – 8.8. The participants praised the creativity of the tasks, interactivity, and involvement.

Answering the questions in the end-of-the-session survey, all participants appreciated a friendly stress-free atmosphere unlike the one in an official test setting. They pointed out that the session offered "enjoyable, fun" activities delivered in a "safe" and "relaxing" atmosphere, which proved particularly "important to those who still have a complicated relationship with the foreign language." The participants saw the session as a valuable opportunity to communicate with colleagues and self-assess their ability to get the message across: "good opportunity to think about your level and ways to improve it." Several participants noted that the opportunity to compare their level with that of their colleagues was valuable to them, as it enabled them to see what can be achieved.

After receiving individual feedback, the participants found it useful and informative, as it included not only each participants' strengths and areas for improvement, but also resources and

suggestions for further development. In general, the session appeared to be “an incentive” for most of the participants. They found it motivating for several reasons:

- identifying specific areas for improvement (e.g. increasing vocabulary range, keeping syntax relatively simple, text organization, cohesion);
- providing actionable recommendations in the form of AWC courses and resources: “Now I am planning to sign up for *Fundamentals of Academic Writing*; I didn’t think the course was relevant to me”; “I had no strategy of improving English, now I know where to start.”
- finding out proficiency level: some participants had their level confirmed; others found the results unexpectedly higher, which built their confidence (“I wasn’t confident that I can write academic texts, but now I know that my level is sufficient”); still others felt that their level was lower than they had expected, so now they are willing to improve it (“Now that I know my level, I want to improve it”).

The feedback clearly indicated that the participants became more aware of the AWC services: “I will take advantage of the individual consultations”; “I’ll enroll in the courses of the AWC.”

Conclusions and Final Comments

The developed session *Finding Your Route to Research Writing* is a less traditional form of needs analysis, which is based on the DAO

model (**diagnostic, advisory, orientation**). The session was tested between 2018-2022 and proved to be very informative. It has achieved the triple objective: to learn more about the needs of the HSE University Academic Writing Center clients (diagnostic screening of their language and developmental needs), to provide recommendations to the clients for mastering skills (providing advice for improvement), and to show participants various opportunities the university provides (orienting them in the abundance of services).

The success of the suggested session can be explained by its client-friendly design, engaging activities relevant for academics, and an individual approach to helping participants develop their learning strategies. Although preparing and running the session is time consuming, the results are worth the effort, which has been confirmed both by the extent to which our goals were achieved and the participants' highly positive feedback.

For participants it was a "bright and interesting" event. Participants had enjoyable writing and speaking practice and, at the same time, they learned about their strengths and areas for improvement. They received individual feedback and recommendations for mastering academic writing and speaking skills. As a result, many of the participants started thinking about their own plans for development.

Working with academics, who are busy and pragmatic, we take needs analysis seriously. The AWC strives for offering client-oriented services (Suchkova, 2022). Organizing the session, we regularly receive valuable information for adjusting learning programs to participants' lacks, needs, and wants. This leads to successfully widening the range of services, choosing appropriate topics for workshops, and developing effective learning materials for our clients, as "the most effective materials are those which are based on thorough understanding of learners' needs, that is their language difficulties, their learning objectives, their style of learning, the stage of their conceptual development..." (Jolly & Bolitho, 2011, p. 128). Apart from a broader range of services and more targeted programs, the side effect of organizing the session for new groups of researchers has been increased visibility of the Center in the university, which resulted in a greater number of clients.

The session consistently worked well for our context, so we believe it to be a good practice that is worth sharing. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), a good practice is "a practice that has been proven to work well and produce good results, and is therefore recommended as a model. It is a successful experience, which has been tested and validated, in the broad sense, which has been repeated and deserves to be shared so that a greater number of people can adopt it" (2013,

p. 1). The diagnostic session *Finding Your Route to Research Writing* has potential for becoming such a model, as it can be adapted for a variety of contexts. Depending on the goals, the adaptations can include the following:

- Activities: questions in the activities can be adjusted to the target audience's expectations, background, and culture; reflection questions can be changed depending on the learning center goals; participants can be asked to answer different questions about the center.
- Feedback: participants' performance can be evaluated according to the criteria that would best meet the needs of the learning center; the recommendations can be aligned with the center goals.
- Organization: number of participants in groups can be made smaller; timing of adapted activities might need to be changed; the session can be run online or offline.

These adaptations will ensure that the session is fine tuned to the specific context and center requirements. Adapted sessions will produce results similar to ours as long as the new activities stay in line with the DAO model. They should retain an element of fun; include participants' reflection on their own needs, lacks and wants; and provide recommendations to the learning center. In turn, participants receive detailed individualized language and skills

feedback, which includes specific recommendations of the center resources.

This session has thrown up many questions in need of further investigation. A further study could assess the long-term effects of the session by tracking, for example, researchers who followed the recommendations and enrolled in the AWC courses. Deeper analysis of speaking performance would be a fruitful area for further work. A natural progression of this work is to analyze the metaphors shared by the participants and learn whether the attitude towards English (positive or negative) has any influence on the actual performance of the individual. A greater focus on written papers could produce interesting findings that account more for particular language issues academics of different levels of proficiency struggle with. It would add a greater degree of accuracy to the brief overview presented in this article.

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Appendix

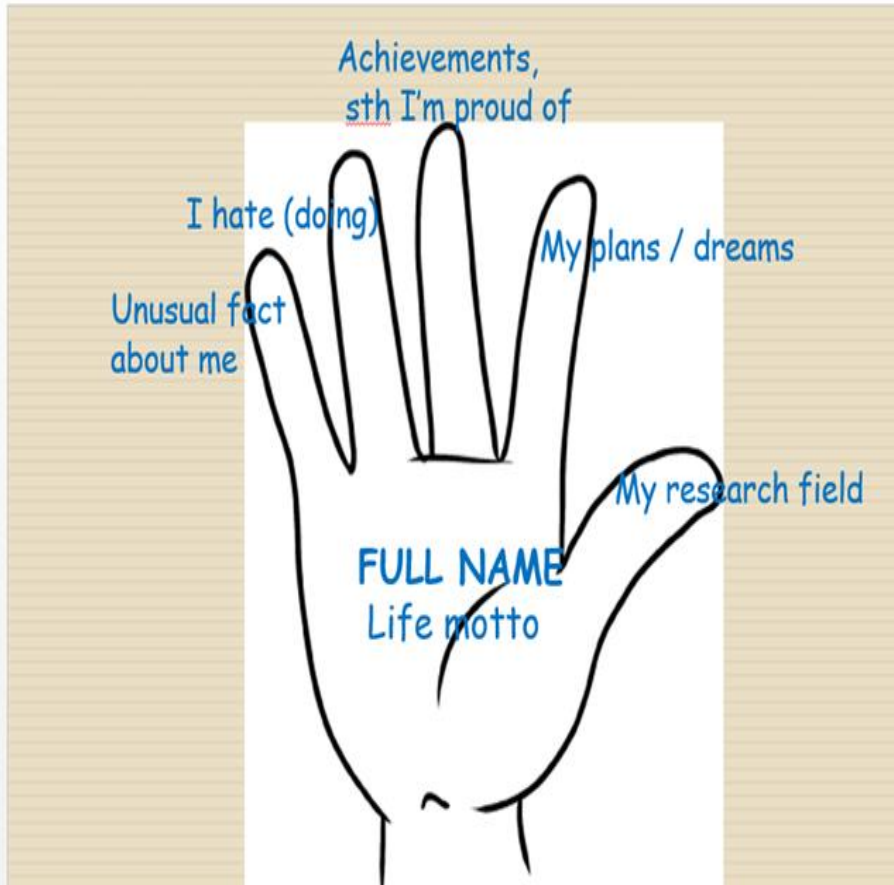
Diagnostic Session Tasks and Instructions

Activity 1. Shaking hands

Make an outline of your hand. Make notes: full name, life motto, plans, research field, achievements, something you hate doing, an unusual fact about yourself.

Exchange the papers and study the notes. Pretend that you are the person.

Introduce yourself. Feel free to add more information.



Activity 2. My metaphor of learning English

- Think of a metaphor of your experience of learning English.
- What can you compare the process with? What are the roles of teachers and the learner? (5-7 minutes)
- Draw the picture of your metaphor. (5 minutes)
- Present it to the group (2-3 minutes). Be ready to answer questions if there any (5 minutes).
- While listening to others, take notes: process, learner's roles, teacher's roles. Use the handout.

Activity 3. Writing challenges

To: HSE University researchers
From: Sophia Voronina, AWC manager
Subject: Survey about writing needs

...We are conducting a survey about the challenges you face when writing in English. I would be grateful if you could write back to me. This information is necessary to better cater for your needs. Thank you ...

You received a request from the manager of the Academic writing center. Please respond to it, writing an email of **150-180** words. You have **20** minutes. Write about

- your experience of writing in English
- the primary difficulties you face
- specific topics you would like to have training on at the Center