

# The practical importance of student conferences in a foreign language (from the experience of working with aerospace students)

## La importancia práctica de las conferencias de estudiantes en idioma extranjero (Experiencia proveniente de estudiantes aeroespaciales)

ABRAMOVA, Olga V. 1 & KOROTAEVA, Irina E. 2

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#### ABSTRACT:

The article provides an analysis of the practical aspects of extracurricular work with aerospace students in the preparation and conduct of scientific-practical conferences in foreign languages. The article describes the results of the study of the experience of organizing student conferences by departments of the Institute of Foreign Languages of the Moscow Aviation Institute (National Research University). The main communication problems identified during the analysis of the outcomes of the survey of teachers and students upon conference results have been discussed. Emphasis is placed on students' assessment of the role of such events for the preparation of highly qualified personnel who can successfully solve professional tasks in the aerospace field. The importance of student conferences for the modernization of the process of teaching and learning foreign languages at a technical university has been emphasized.

**Keywords:** Scientific-practical student conference, a foreign language for aerospace programmes of study, modernization of the process of teaching a foreign

#### RESUMEN:

El artículo proporciona un análisis de los aspectos prácticos del trabajo extracurricular con estudiantes aeroespaciales en la preparación y realización de conferencias científico-prácticas en idiomas extranjeros. El artículo describe los resultados del estudio de la experiencia de organizar conferencias de estudiantes por departamentos del Instituto de Lenguas Extranjeras del Instituto de Aviación de Moscú (Universidad Nacional de Investigación). Se han discutido los principales problemas de comunicación identificados durante el análisis de los resultados de la encuesta de docentes y estudiantes sobre los resultados de la conferencia. Se hace hincapié en la evaluación de los estudiantes del papel de tales eventos para la preparación de personal altamente calificado que pueda resolver con éxito las tareas profesionales en el campo aeroespacial. Se ha enfatizado la importancia de las conferencias de estudiantes para la modernización del proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras en una universidad técnica.

**Palabras clave:** Conferencia estudiantil científico-

# 1. Introduction

At present, serious changes take place in pedagogical science; they are related to the world economic, political and cultural events. Technical progress and rapid development of computer technology make major adjustments to the work of modern university teachers, open up new opportunities in improving the educational process.

Nonstandard forms of extracurricular work, one of which is the holding of scientific-practical student conferences, are becoming increasingly important in the organization of the educational process at the university. A presentation in a foreign language and publication of research results are an important condition for the professional development of a modern specialist (Kriger et al., 2015; Vecherina & Korotaeva, 2017, p. 3).

Scientific-practical conferences contribute to the formation in future professionals of the necessary professional-oriented communication skills and abilities related to the search, analysis, and presentation of information both in Russian and in a foreign language. Students speaking at the conference master the skills of reading, speaking, listening and writing in a foreign language.

The organization of a conference in foreign languages is highly relevant for technical universities. When preparing for entering a university, students do not pay enough attention to learning a foreign language; as a result, the level of their knowledge of a foreign language is not always satisfactory. Therefore, teachers of this discipline at the university face the task of not only implementing a compulsory programme but also developing an interest in learning a foreign language, creating an understanding of the need to speak it for successful professional performance of future specialists.

This article discusses the experience of the Moscow Aviation Institute (National Research University) (MAI). Much attention at the university is paid to the modernization of the processes of learning a foreign language by aerospace students. Not only engineering institutes/faculties of the university but also departments of the Institute of Foreign Languages (IFL MAI) are engaged in the training of highly qualified personnel in the aerospace field. Holding scientific-practical student conferences in foreign languages (English, German, French) is a long-standing tradition of the MAI (Kalliopin, 2017a, p. 7). Such conferences are necessary not only for students' professional development (Karlinskaya & Kovalenko, 2017), but they also contribute to the formation of foreign language competence (Ustinina, 2014). Knowledge of a foreign language and the ability to apply communication skills in one's future profession become essential for the demand for graduates of technical universities in the labor market (Kapustina, & Korotaeva, 2016, pp. 130-140).

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## 2. Literature review

The analysis of national and foreign literature has shown that many universities pay great attention to the role of scientific-practical student conferences in a foreign language when organizing the educational process.

Thus, the work on holding student conferences is conducted at the departments of foreign languages of the Faculty of Environmental Studies and the Agrarian-Technological Institute (ATI) of the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (Moscow) (Avdonina et al., 2017, p. 316-319). The authors note the role of conferences in the formation of students' skills of independent acquisition of knowledge in the chosen profession and skills of communication in a foreign language in the expert community. The authors distinguish the following types of conferences:

- thematic student conferences (Avdonina et al., 2016, pp. 281-291);
- scientific-practical conferences (Avdonina & Zhabo, 2011, pp. 130-141).

It has been suggested that student conferences are aimed at developing in young specialists the skills and abilities to search, select and analyze the information on specific topics in foreign and Russian languages, as well as to compress the text to prepare an oral public message and present it with multimedia support (Avdonina & Zhabo, 2011, p. 130).

This approach complements the view of some authors on a student conference in a foreign language as a model of oral scientific communication (Pavlovets et al., 2007, p. 2).

Furthermore, the creation and modeling of communication among future specialists in a foreign language, in combination with research work, is considered by a number of authors as one of the most important factors, the observance of which in the training of technical university students in a foreign language contributes to their readiness for a future foreign language professional activity (Anikeeva & Ovsyannikova, 2017, p. 4).

When holding student conferences at the MAI, special attention is paid to the creative abilities of students participating in scientific-practical student conferences (Abramova, 2015, pp. 122-125). The importance of the early inclusion of future engineers in research work in the main areas of technical departments can be noted. Working with literature in a foreign language and learning technical translation is an additional means of solving engineering problems (Vlasova, 2018). Annual scientific-practical conferences at the MAI bring together students of all levels of training: bachelor, specialist, master degree and postgraduate programmes. It should be noted that they are an important and necessary stage in the training of postgraduate students for a qualifying English exam for the Candidate's degree (Yanovskaya, 2017).

The MAI holds annual thematic events dedicated to the Day of Cosmonautics. Scientific-practical conferences unite the teaching staff of foreign languages departments of the MAI, students of the Institute of Foreign Languages and technical institutes/faculties of the MAI. In recent years, these conferences are held as the "Week of Science", which takes place on the eve of an institution-wide event (Kalliopin, 2017b, p. 6).

An important point is the publication of collections of conference materials in a foreign language, which contributes to the development of students' profession-oriented written communication skills (Anikeeva, 2017).

Foreign researchers also pay great attention to students' research work to be followed by conferences. Teaching students to perform this type of work has been identified as an important part of the curriculum that has the potential to create an educational community, in which both teachers and students generate new ideas through collaboration (Roberts et al., 2012).

Students' active participation in research creates the potential for the successful employment of students and their further career growth (Seymour et al., 2004).

Some authors are considering the possibility of studying the skills and aspirations of undergraduate students for a research career (Davidson & Lyons, 2018).

An important step towards improving students' professional level is the presentation of research results at scientific conferences (Hill & Walkington, 2016; Lund, 2013).

It is obvious that the study of the problem of organizing scientific-practical student conferences in a foreign language is especially relevant in the framework of Russian higher education institutions.

Based on the literature analysis, the following positive results achieved in the holding of student conferences in a foreign language can be noted:

## **2.1. Relationships with a teacher.**

According to most authors, the role of a teacher at all stages of preparing students for a conference is decisive. Thus, the teacher's participation in "coordination of all types of activities, in monitoring and controlling students' activities" is noted and this determines the success of a conference (Avdonina & Zhabo, June, 2009; 2011, p. 132). In the process of preparing for a conference, students discuss the presentation with foreign language teachers and their academic advisors/teachers in technical departments. Joint extracurricular

interaction between students and teachers in preparing a presentation gives students a useful experience, as they have the opportunity to devote more time to research work, discussing their questions with professionals. Such teamwork beyond the limited scope of classroom training is useful for a teacher too, since it allows him/her to observe to a greater extent the development of various competencies (linguistic, sociolinguistic, discursive, professional, etc.) and research skills in students.

The special importance of such work with students in the initial courses of study should be noted, since first-year students are not always well aware of their future specialty. In this case, the role of a teacher is especially important and consists in the development of a student's interest in the chosen profession.

The process of teaching foreign languages at the MAI is based on the following concept: teachers should support students' scientific initiative, pay close attention to students who can navigate in promising areas of science and offer relevant projects within their specialty while studying at the university (Kalliopin, 2017a, p. 13).

## **2.2. Organizational ability**

Extracurricular activities are an important component of the educational process in terms of the possibility for a student to develop an organizational ability. It is very useful for students to participate in research projects already in their first or second year of study. In the process of preparing a speech for a student conference, students develop their time management skills. The task of a foreign language teacher, who directs the process of a student's preparation for a conference, is not only in helping with the translation of foreign texts and the formulation of one's thoughts in a foreign language. A teacher should teach students the phased organization of scientific work (Bankozhitenko et al., 2017, p. 2).

## **2.3. Research skills**

When organizing the process of teaching a foreign language, teachers rely on the assumption that science and practice are always connected. Thus, it is advisable to get acquainted with theoretical issues and research methods before entering the practical field. Research complexity may first make students feel unsure of their abilities, but here the role of teachers (both foreign language teachers and teachers of specialized departments), who help students find answers to their questions, is important. Conducting research for a project helps a student to understand the essence of research work, gain experience in searching and analyzing key information, find its practical application. Practice shows that many senior students even had no experience in conducting research. Speech at the conference with the subsequent publication of works in collections of the IFL MAI (Kalliopin, 2017b, p. 13; 2017a, pp. 7-8) allows students not only to express their ideas but also to get acquainted with the research of their fellow students.

## **2.4. Socio-cultural and social competencies**

It is important for a modern student to get involved as early as possible in the work related to communication and interaction with various partners. It is necessary to take into account the speech and behavioral patterns adopted in the relevant culture, as well as the various features of the conference audience. Participation in a conference creates a positive experience in the development of these competencies, helping to formulate one's thoughts in a language understandable for listeners and to learn the skills of feedback with the audience (Kuznetsov, 2014).

Furthermore, the participation of students of nonlinguistic universities in scientific-practical conferences in a foreign language contributes to the free use of the target language in the working environment, increasing the mobility of a future graduate, implementing a principle of equal employment opportunities and subsequent advanced training. Today, the ability to communicate in a foreign language is considered as the most important professional quality of a modern specialist.

### **3. Methods**

The study was carried out based on the results of the annual student scientific-practical conference "Innovative Technologies of the 21st Century". In order to assess the results achieved during a conference and find out possible ways to improve the process of its preparation, at the Aerospace Foreign Language Department at the IFL MAI, a survey was conducted in the following groups of respondents:

- 1) teachers at the department, preparing students for conferences every year (38 people);
- 2) students (bachelors/specialists) of technical specialties of the university (level of complete higher education, including the stage of professionalization in teaching foreign languages), participating in the conference (70 people);
- 3) masters and graduate students (stage of teaching a foreign language: scientific and communicative pragmatization), participating in the conference (70 people);

To assess the opinions of teachers, the method of in-person interviews was used. The following goals were set:

- 1) To assess the impact of the conference on the process of formation of professionally-oriented intercultural communicative competence;
- 2) To evaluate the quality of speeches depending on the level of training (linguistic and professional aspects);
- 3) To estimate the optimal period for students to start participating in conferences;
- 4) To identify key communication problems faced by teachers in preparing students for a conference.

To evaluate the opinions of bachelor/specialist/master students, as well as graduate students, an online survey was conducted containing open-ended questions. The following goals were set:

- 1) To investigate and evaluate the attitude of students to conferences in a foreign language depending on the level of training (assessment of the relevance of participation in conferences for a modern student/young scientist; assessment of the optimal period to start participating in conferences);
  - 2) To identify key communication problems faced by students participating in a foreign language conference.
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## **4. Results and discussion**

### **4.1. The results of the survey of teachers**

Teachers of the IFL MAI were asked to assess the role of a scientific-practical student conference, taking into account the practical contribution to achieving the main objectives of the foreign language proficiency course at a technical university at all levels of training (bachelor, specialist, master, postgraduate programmes).

95% of the teachers, participating in the survey, noted that among students annually participating in conferences the level of language proficiency is constantly growing. They also noted that students need to start research work as early as possible and learn to present their ideas in a foreign language at student conferences. 5% of the respondents noted a slight decrease in the quality of speeches by masters and graduate students, attributing this to the fact that some of them, previously successfully participating at conferences, began to work actively in their specialty, which does not allow them to devote enough time to a foreign language.

Summarizing the results of the teacher survey allows us to conclude that a conference is useful at all levels and stages of education. It contributes to the achievement of the ultimate goal of the foreign language course – the formation of professionally-oriented intercultural communicative competence:

1) In the first years, students get acquainted with their future specialty and, mainly, analyze the work that is being done in the field of aerospace. The teachers evaluate the quality of presentations as follows:

A. Relevance – high (about 90% in all courses, which is explained by the participation of teachers in the selection of topics and discussion of the list of used literature);

B. Scientific novelty and practical significance: the 1st-2nd years – under 5%; the 3rd year – under 10% (high rates are observed among students who have already begun to engage in scientific work);

2) Master and graduate students have the opportunity to participate in a conference already with results of their own research; therefore, the relevance, scientific novelty and practical significance of their speeches are high – about 90% for each indicator.

3) Among students participating in the conference for the first time, the level of language proficiency and professional characteristics of the speech (relevance, scientific significance, etc.) are lower than among those who speak at conferences annually.

The analysis of the obtained information allowed emphasizing the following main positive results achieved during the preparation and holding of the conference:

1) the creation of a base for dealing successfully with challenges within a competency-based approach in the context of the mobility of future specialists and the internationalization of educational systems;

2) the creation of conditions for the formation of an intercultural professional-oriented communicative competence – the most important component of the professional competence of future specialists;

3) emphasis on the formation of linguistic competence (phonological, grammatical, lexical, stylistic aspects);

4) the development of profession-oriented communication skills (reading, speaking, listening, writing);

5) the implementation of the principle of transfer of skills in Russian speech experience in a situation, the intended solutions of such problems in a foreign language professional context;

6) the implementation of various strategies for mastering a foreign language communicative competence:

strategies of various types of reading (search, revision and skim reading, reading for detail);

oral communication strategies (monologue, dialogue);

universal understanding strategies when listening.

the acquisition of experience in solving important professional issues (including in a foreign language);

the acquisition of professional communication skills and experience of public speaking;

the immersion in a professional environment;

the development of interest in the chosen profession;

the development of motivation to learn a foreign language;

the development of leadership skills;

the development of the ability to work in a team.

Teachers also noted a number of problems and issues to be paid attention to when organizing conferences.

The first problem concerns the material provided. A teacher must inform a student in advance that the speaker bears personal responsibility for the accuracy and quality of the material provided, for its compliance with scientific standards. At first, a student chooses the topic on his/her own, selects literature from reliable published sources, using the strategies of search/revision and skim reading. Then a student begins to work jointly with a teacher who helps to organize work, gives advice on using the strategy of reading for detail, helps to

construct the speech correctly. If a student presents the results of his/her own research, a teacher should help the student with a high-quality translation of his/her ideas into a foreign language. Besides, the teacher must possess sufficient knowledge in the field of the student's research. In this case, this is about the use of an interdisciplinary approach, so a foreign language teacher should try to study the problem and, if necessary, contact experts of the relevant technical departments.

The second problem concerns the student's ability to hold a discussion. Since the audience may have questions after the speech, a student should be able to clearly answer them in a foreign language. Sometimes a student is well prepared for the monologue, but the dialogue causes him/her difficulty. During the work with a student, a teacher should think over possible questions as fully as possible and discuss the answers in advance taking into account the lexical, grammatical and phonetic aspects of a foreign language.

Teachers note that most students feel confident before the audience, speak a professional foreign language at a good level, are well-versed in their scientific problem, freely use technical means, do not lose contact with the audience, clearly and competently answer the questions asked by listeners, thereby demonstrating full and deep mastering of the material (Abramova & Vlasova, 2017). For many students, participation in the conference becomes a tradition until the graduation from the university even after the end of the compulsory foreign language course.

## **4.2. The results of the survey of participants in the conference**

The analysis of the information obtained as a result of the survey shows that the opinions of the bachelor/specialist/master/graduate students regarding the conference, in general, coincide. In our opinion, this can be explained by the fact that students participating in a conference are fully aware of the correct choice of their future specialty, the need to get involved in research work as early as possible and the importance of achieving a high level of foreign language proficiency for their successful professional activity. The main positive results of speaking at a conference, according to the participants, are:

- 1) the improvement of the level of knowledge of a foreign language (students noted a significant vocabulary expansion);
- 2) the acquisition of experience in the use of professional English (students noted a significant expansion of terminological vocabulary, the development of the ability to better perceive and memorize texts in English);
- 3) the immersion in the research topic (technical focus);
- 4) the possibility of the disclosure of creative potential;
- 5) increased motivation, self-esteem and personal growth (student feedback: "When you finish your speech and hear a burst of applause, a sense of victory flares up inside you – a victory over yourself, over the fears you faced"; "Don't give up and always go to the desired result, even when it seems impossible");
- 6) the increased level of knowledge, the opportunity to listen to other participants;
- 7) the development of public speaking skills;
- 8) expansion of the circle of acquaintances.

The questions for students to answer were divided into four question pools:

- 1) the assessment of the material presented at the conference;
- 2) the assessment of the process of working with a teacher;
- 3) the assessment of the level of organization of the conference;
- 4) the assessment of the difficulties arising in the process of preparing for and holding of the conference.

The results obtained are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

Estimated parameter	Characteristics in students' opinion
<b>Question pool 1. The assessment of the material presented at the conference</b>	
1.1 The quality of information obtained during the conference	<p>A bilateral aspect of the importance of the reports presented has been noted (technical and linguocultural components):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- scientificity of reports (for 3rd-years, master and graduate students);</li> <li>- a large number of foreign language terms in reports;</li> <li>- useful information contained in reports (professional and cultural information);</li> <li>- high technical level of presentations.</li> </ul>
1.2 A variety of speech topics	<p>A variety of report materials has been noted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- a variety of topics related both to the history of aviation and astronautics and to modern scientific discoveries in the field of science and technology;</li> <li>- topics from various fields of science and technology, which is related to the participation in the conference of students of all technical institutes/faculties of the MAI.</li> </ul>
1.3 Relevance and novelty of speech topics	<p>Bachelor/specialist students: The relevance and novelty of the information received have been noted.</p> <p>The importance of obtaining information in a foreign language has been noted.</p> <p>Master/graduate students: the novelty of the information received was noted only in the speeches by 3rd-year bachelor/specialist/master/graduate students.</p>
<b>Question pool 2. The assessment of the process of working with a teacher</b>	
The quality of a teacher's work in preparing participants to speak at the conference	<p>The important role of teachers in preparing for the conference has been noted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- increasing the motivation of students in learning a foreign language;</li> <li>- increasing interest in the university and future profession;</li> <li>- providing an opportunity for each participant to get the necessary experience of public speaking in a foreign language.</li> </ul>
<b>Question pool 3. The assessment of the organization level.</b>	
3.1 Organization level	<p>The following has been noted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- a high organization level that allows students not only to make a presentation but also to take part in discussions (ask questions and express one's own opinion) on the topics of other speakers.</li> <li>- interest of visiting teachers in all speech topics and their participation in discussions.</li> <li>- the importance of discussing professional information in a foreign language.</li> </ul>
3.2 Inclusion of entertainment pauses during the conference	<p>The positive impact of entertainment pauses included in the conference has been noted (songs and verses in foreign languages):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- creation of a friendly atmosphere;</li> </ul>



- the ability to relieve stress due to speaking before the large audience;
- immersion in the language atmosphere.

**Question pool 4. The assessment of difficulties arising in the process of preparing for and holding of the conference.**

1.1 Phonetic aspects: mistakes in the pronunciation of English sounds and violation of intonation rules.

The following has been noted:

- phonetic difficulties faced by students in speech preparation;
- difficulties of perceiving the speech of speakers who make phonetic errors (incorrectly pronounced sounds, wrong stress, intonation rules are not observed).

1.2. Difficulty of remembering the large volume of text in a foreign language.

The following has been noted:

- small vocabulary and a large number of new words in the text (including terms).

1.3. The need for cooperation of foreign language teachers and special departments (indicated only by master/graduate students)

The necessity of organizing joint work with teachers of a foreign language and special departments to discuss the language and professional aspects of the speech has been noted, which requires significant additional time in the preparation of a presentation.

The participants in the conference expressed a similar opinion regarding the optimal period for starting participation in conferences in a foreign language, indicating that such work should begin as early as possible. However, master and graduate students believe that this work should be started already in the 1st year (97% of the respondents) so that the development of public speaking skills occurs more evenly. Bachelor/specialist students consider it optimal to start preparing speeches in a foreign language in the 2nd year (89% of the respondents) since in the 1st year, they have to adapt to student life and spend a lot of time preparing for classroom studies.

Analysis of differences in the results of the survey of bachelor/specialist students and master/graduate students shows the following:

- 1) master and graduate students pay more attention to the scientificity of speeches and the presence in them of information new for them, which they can use in their research;
- 2) master and graduate students note the need for cooperation of foreign language teachers and special departments to organize a more fruitful student work in preparation for conferences.

Analyzing the survey results, special attention should be paid to the problems arising in the process of preparing for and holding of the conference. It should be noted that in the process of making reports, teachers pay great attention to correct pronunciation, explaining to students the peculiarities of the phonetic structure of the English language and helping to organize the speech process based on the mastered phonetic and intonation patterns. This approach contributes to the formation in students of technical specialties the phonological competence, which is part of the linguistic competence serving to perform communication tasks. As far as the lexical aspect of these problems is concerned, the participation in the conference allows students to expand their common and terminological vocabulary.

Thus, conferences are highly relevant for the successful process of teaching a foreign language at a technical university, as students can prove themselves, overcome their fear of public speaking, learn something new and share what they know and what they are interested in. Holding such events contributes to the intensification of training in general, increases its efficiency and effectiveness. One of the main learning objectives is achieved – mastering the educational material at the required level and developing practical knowledge skills.

All the surveyed students expressed a desire to participate in the conference next year, which indicated the success of the event and the achievement of the objective of increasing students' motivation.

Based on the study conducted, the authors propose a model of organizing a scientific-practical student conference in a foreign language, which consists in the close collaboration of foreign language teachers and specialists of technical departments.

### **4.3. The work of a foreign language teacher**

1. A teacher's work in study groups and the definition of conference participants (teacher's assessment of students' skills and abilities in a foreign language; qualification testing; taking into account a student's interest in the chosen specialty; a student's understanding of the need for knowledge of a foreign language; taking into account a student's interest in the event).
2. Providing a student with all the information about preparing for the conference (working with national and foreign literature; possible ways of information search; possibilities of the base of the MAI Scientific-Technical Library; explaining the basic strategies of reading in a foreign language; a research plan).
3. Assistance to a student in preparing an oral presentation (monologue):
  - lexical, grammatical, phonetic, and stylistic aspects (assistance in the implementation of high-quality translation; analysis of terms and discussion of their translation; grammar analysis, which causes difficulties for a student; explanation of phonetic features of a foreign language, explanation of stylistic features of public speaking);
  - a technical aspect (organization of slides).
4. Assistance to a student in preparing for discussion (thinking about possible questions from the audience; discussing the answers to them).

### **4.4. The work of a teacher of the specialized department (professional aspects)**

1. Assistance to a student in preparing for the presentation of a report on the study results (determination of the relevance of the selected literature; analysis of the relevance and novelty of the chosen topic);
  2. Assistance to teachers of foreign language departments (explanation of professional aspects of the topic chosen by a student; explanation of terminology).
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## **5. Conclusion**

Summarizing the above, it can be concluded that scientific-practical student conferences are highly relevant and contribute to achieving not only the ultimate objective of a foreign language proficiency course, which is to form an intercultural communicative profession-oriented competence, but also contribute to the development of a whole set of professional competencies of future specialists. Holding of such events contributes to the intensification of training in general, increases its efficiency and effectiveness. The study confirmed the great interest of aerospace students in conferences in a foreign language despite the fact that the preparation for entering a technical university and the curriculum did not imply the in-depth study of a foreign language. Students readily consider the need to improve their level of proficiency in a foreign language and make it a tradition to participate in annual conferences. Scientific-practical conferences in a foreign language are a necessary component of professional training of students of technical universities. They unite the teaching staff and student groups of the university, which contributes to its more fruitful work.

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1. Aerospace Foreign Language Department I-11, Institute of Foreign Languages, Moscow Aviation Institute (National Research University), Moscow, Russia

2. Aerospace Foreign Language Department I-11, Institute of Foreign Languages, Moscow Aviation Institute (National Research University), Moscow, Russia

Email contact: [sciencedept@mail.ru](mailto:sciencedept@mail.ru)

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