

Difficulties in the teaching of Russian as a foreign language: the perspectives of an ethnically Tatar specialist in Russian philology and an American student

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Abstract: This article examines the experience of a United States citizen who studied on an individual basis under the guidance of three teachers, each of whom was responsible for a specific thematic or grammatical topic with the goal of improving speaking proficiency. Analyses of the difficulties in studying Russian are given from the point of view of both teacher and pupil. The relevance of the topic is evident, as the multilingual twenty-first century is characterized by the practical need for the development and improvement of both individual and collective methods of language teaching. This research may be used in the immediate practice of teaching Russian as a foreign language and may also broaden understanding in the sphere of multicultural communication.

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Introduction

“The problems of bilingualism and translation are such a pressing issue in our time, especially in the sphere of the multicultural community, that to have to prove and explain their importance is ‘almost shameful’”, the author of the monograph *Bilingualism and Translation* rightly highlights [1, p. 280]. Hundreds of dissertations, textbooks, and scientific articles have been dedicated to questions surrounding the study of Russian as a foreign language. (For example, we remember the textbook written especially for Americans by Alexander Lipson and Stephen J. Molinsky, written in the 1960s). It is therefore not simple to contribute something new to the field. But for us, “nontraditional” authors (one of us is a Doctor of Philological Sciences and a professor at a federal university, who has taught Russian her whole life as a native and non-native language in the bilingual republic of Tatarstan; the other is a Bachelor of Arts from the United States who had the desire to study the Russian language), we hope that we have something important to share. Since our analysis focuses on our work together and will include the points of view of both teacher and student, we have decided to employ the use of both the first and third persons.

Hope Johnson’s Russian proficiency is currently at the level of first and second year students of the Russian-Tatar Department of Philology; that is, she has the proficiency of a future teacher of Russian philology. When Johnson began lessons in October 2013, she had already reached an Advanced Low speaking proficiency according to the ACTFL scale and a ten out of twelve on a pre-study oral

proficiency interview given by ALTA Language Services. In three short months, she has made marked gains in the spheres of comprehension, mastery of grammatical concepts, and confidence in speaking. How did we achieve this? We had to combine various methods and devices, one of the most important being the individual nature of the approach. The student was taught by three teachers: a Doctor of Philological Sciences and two professors. Besides Russian, all three teachers are fluent in Tatar, and one is fluent in German. The lack of knowledge of English, although it is nothing about which to boast (we acknowledge our weakness in this area), however strange it might seem, did not obstruct our work in any way. Each teacher, who also at one time entered the world of Russian words through a different language (Tatar), excellently understood the student’s problems. Russian and English, which belong to different language families and groups, and whose speakers have differing cultural traditions and belief systems, differ drastically not only in their grammatical and phonetic systems, but in the nuances of perception of a piece of information based on the speaker’s innate system of linguistic consciousness.

Methodology

Our course, which was completed over a period of three months, consisted of one hundred hours. Lessons were three academic hours and were held three times a week from 11:00 am to 2:00 pm. The teaching of Russian was carried out in an individual format, which undoubtedly was one of the main keys to our success.

Our process of instruction was founded on three principles: communicative competency (to learn to

interact in Russian), systematicity (the study of Russian as an interconnected system of all linguistic units), and functionality (the ability to apply knowledge in practice). For the sake of fairness, it should be noted that Hope possessed a rather good base (threshold) level of proficiency in Russian, as she had participated in various short-term language programs. However, she had never been given a full and sequential picture of the phonetic and grammatical systems of the language. We hope that we were successful in improving the student's knowledge, ability and skills in conversational competency, Russian literature, and grammatical structures through a logical system, and to weave into our teaching a large amount of information relating to cultural linguistics. We were pleased that an American had the personal desire to strengthen her speaking competency; fortunately, in the States there is truly an interest in the Russian language. Concerning Americans' motivation to learn the language, "earlier, many spoke of an interest in Russian literature, but now other reasons are more frequently expressed, reasons 'more practical and personal'" [2].

We taught the language using both well-known technology as well as unique personal methods. The combination of varying methods of teaching: role-playing games, pair work (sometimes the student became the teacher and explained accessibly simple material that she had just acquired), short presentations and mini-reports from the student, many forms of games, and of course, the use of new forms of digital teaching technology, programs with computer applications, experimental teaching platforms, online instruction and complete immersion through the memorization of poetry as well as consistent nightly homework assignments. In addition to in-class study, we interacted through the social network vk.ru and text messaging. The student also watched many Russian films, and we must note, "the recommended parameters of selection and work with material from films and the list of films that are recommended for analysis and interpretations" are debatable [3, p. 236].

It was unnecessary to begin our course of study through teaching the alphabet (this is the classic method of studying the language): the student could already read and write considerably well. Included in instruction were the following topics: phonetics, lexicon, grammar and the development of speech, the emphasis being on the improvement of speaking proficiency, including in this the understanding of grammatical concepts. We simultaneously introduced new Russian words to the student's vocabulary: these words were immediately used in phrases, sentences and set phrases. The student quickly grasped that in

Russian there many homonyms ([kosa: braid, scythe, kljuch: key, spring [source of water]). Using the Affective Method, we taught Russian not as a body of grammatical rules, but formed the perception of the language as a means of communicating in a concrete context. Each lesson (which was 180 minutes) consisted of the following points:

I. Recitation of poems from classic Russian literature (A.S. Pushkin, M. Lermontov, C. Yesenin, M. Tsvetaeva). Hope learned seven Russian poems by heart (whether or not each Russian student can do the same is disputable).

II. Work with pronunciation of sounds unique to the Russian phonetic system; first syllables, then words and phrases: (lju-lu, ljubov', ljubov' moja, zhi-zhit', byt' mozhet, pod moim oknom).

III. Work with proverbs and sayings; we will expound on this later in the article.

IV. Grammatical material: gender, difficult cases in defining gender, declension of names, forms of numbers, conjugation, parts of speech, etc.

V. Completing special exercises and tasks related to grammatical topics.

VI. Work on specialized topics with a simultaneous focus on the broadening of vocabulary. Each lesson had one theme and consisted of certain stages: the reading of a text, work with a dictionary, conversation about the text, a short retelling of the text's content, determining the type of speech showcased, and the text's genre. As the student came across new words, she wrote them down and many soon appeared in her active lexicon.

VII. The improvement of oral and written communication: timed readings of fragments of texts to judge speed, writing mini-dictations two paragraphs in length. Hope can now read 130 words aloud in one minute, which fully adheres to the general standard. Various forms of dictation were used: visual, memory-based, creative, and dictations based on fixed constructions.

After an hour and a half of study we always held a mini-lunch in a casual atmosphere, each time exchanging simple dishes, while the student characterized, described, and assessed Russian and Tatar cuisine. The transmission of not only linguistic information, but also cultural knowledge, was a prominent aspect of our program. For example, work toward the development of speech, in part enrichment of cultural knowledge, frequently in the form of learning traditional Russian proverbs, was carried out according to the following model: in three months we learned fifty proverbs of varying themes, such as language, words, Russian character, moral qualities, work, values, etc. We included culturally-based instruction in our lessons on the premise that immersion in the culture of a language aids students

in understanding the consciousness of native speakers, thus enabling them to use the language more effectively. A 2013 study of Malaysian students studying English supports this assertion. According to Rafieyan et al., “familiarity with and awareness of the cultural features of the target language community and the awareness of the differences between source language and target language cultural features really facilitates learners’ understanding of the target language” [4, p. 131].

As mentioned above, one of the main ways we approached cultural instruction was through systematically teaching the student culturally significant Russian proverbs. At each lesson we memorized about five proverbs, at first mechanically, with the goal of producing precise and correct pronunciation. The idea of these proverbs was explained, the frequency of usage and correct uses of constructions were noted, and English equivalents were discussed. Examples and situations were provided, and the student had to name the fitting proverb (for example, a person has not done anything yet, but boasts about the results: “cypljat po oseni schitajut” (chicks are counted in the autumn), “ne skazhi «gop!» poka ne pereprygnesh',” (don’t say “oh” before you have jumped). The teacher named half of the proverbs and the student named the other half. Topics were named (about language, about boasting, about work), and this elicited from the student’s linguistic consciousness a group of proverbs. The themes “Russian hospitality,” “Russia’s nature,” “the education system in the Russian Federation,” etc., on the one hand enriched the student’s vocabulary, and on the other hand, this material aided in learning, strengthening, and repeating the themes of lexicology, word formation, parts of speech and the syntactical structure of the language.

Student Analysis

When the course was nearing its completion, we asked Johnson to name the most difficult aspects of learning Russian, which according to the Foreign Service Institute, has “significant linguistic and/or cultural differences from English” [5, p. 361). We have supplied Hope’s answers to the question “What have been the most difficult areas for you in the study of the Russian language?” The student provided a specific classification of such difficulties. The first difficulties she mentioned were of grammatical character.

I. Endings.

A. Cases. English has a very weak case system, if any at all; therefore, it has been difficult for me to correctly supply case endings when speaking. Although it is not difficult to understand the theory of

the case system, while speaking it is difficult to both think about what I want to express as well as the correct ending to supply. The understanding of the case system does not translate easily into fluent speech.

B. Gender: Difficulties with gender multiply difficulties with the case system, because these systems are inextricably linked. Because of the existence of both case and gender, for example, an adjective can have twenty-four forms. My speech tends to slow down when I struggle to choose one correct variant out of twenty-four.

C. Verb conjugation: Again, it was not hard for me to understand the theory behind verb conjugation, but in rapid speech it is very difficult to supply the correct endings.

II. Pronunciation

A. The soft sounds [l’], [t’], [n’], [s’] and hard sounds such as [shh] and [zh] do not exist in English. When I first began to study Russian it was hard for me to even distinguish the difference between soft and hard sounds, since in English we only have the phonemes [l], [t], [n], and soft [zh].

B. Various combinations of consonants are difficult for a native English speaker to pronounce. Consonant clusters, such as [vzb], as well as alternating soft and hard vowels, such as in the word “ljubimyj” also proved difficult.

III. Verbal aspect. Although the English system of verbs is quite complicated, it is very different than the Russian system of verbal aspect. I understand the theory supporting the use of perfective and imperfective verbs, but I still often make mistakes when selecting aspect.

IV. Prepositions. Russian prepositions are hard to directly translate into English. For example, in English we have the general preposition “for,” but in Russian this can be expressed as “za,” “dlja,” and “na” depending on the context. The English preposition “to” can be expressed in Russian “k,” “v,” and “na.” Due to the lack of a direct translation it is hard for me to choose the correct preposition.

V. Politeness Strategies. Russians use more direct politeness strategies than English speakers, and this is often perceived by Americans as rudeness. In Russia it is not considered rude to use the imperative form of the verb without softeners. For example, it is not offensive on a bus to say “pozvol’te projti” (let me pass by). In English, speech this direct without a softening “please,” or “could you” sounds rude.

Instructor Analysis

These answers were one-hundred percent accurate, as the student’s primary difficulties sprang from the differences between the Russian and English phonetic inventories, as well as difficulties in the

morphological makeup of the Russian language. Rifkin explains that “Russian is classified by the United States Defense Language Institute as a ‘category 3 language’ in terms of the difficulties (e.g. heavily inflected morphology and complicated system of verbal aspect) that it poses to learners who are native speakers of English” [6, p. 13]. We explained to her verbal aspect does not exist in the Tatar language either, and that Tatar students also have great difficulties in correctly employing verbal aspect. For example, Tatar students today, like Hope, say “ja budu kupit’,” (I will + perfective infinitive “to buy,” and “ona chasto prochitala rasskazy Turgeneva” (she often +past perfective form of “to read” the stories of Turgenev).

We also used a specialized program for studying the grammatical rules of the Russian language, for example, devoting a lesson to the theme “Verbal Aspect.” In Russian textbooks, as is well-known, students are taught to define the aspect of the verb from the questions: “shto delat’?” (what + imperfective infinitive “to do” and “shto sdelat’?” (what + perfective infinitive “to do”). In contrast, textbooks for foreigners present the material from a different point of view. Students are given a detailed enumeration of the many rules pertaining to the perfective and imperfective verbal aspects: in which situations and before (or after) which words it is impossible to use a perfective verb, which form of the future tense is characteristic for description of a specific, concrete situation, etc. These rules were explained through examples of simple interactions in which these verbs are commonly used.

There were also obstacles of extralinguistic character. For example, it was difficult for an American to understand the logic of proverbs such as “Pravda horosho, a schast’e luchshe” (truth is good, but happiness is better.) Alexander Solzhenitsyn commented on Russians’ love of proverbs about truth [7, 2002], and expressed that “they give steady and sometimes striking expression to the not inconsiderable harsh national experience” [8], an experience that is difficult for a foreigner to fully understand. Discussions related to the historical and cultural significance of each proverb resulted. For example, from the proverb “poka grom ne grjanet, muzhik ne perekrestitsja,” (until thunder is heard, a man doesn’t cross himself), a discussion was sparked about the culturally differing mindsets of Americans and Russians, commenting that whereas Americans view planning ahead as of utmost importance, Russians are more comfortable with living one day at a time. Understanding texts about the system of education in the Russian Federation, jobs, and so on was a complex endeavor, because in the economically developed States, the relationship to

profession and receiving higher education are built on completely different foundations.

Our student was sometimes shocked by the divergence in literary and conversational variants of the language. For example, during our study of the exceptions in the formation of plural nouns (brat-bratja, suk-suchja), before being told the correct forms, Hope produced forms which resembled street jargon. And finally, exceptions to almost every rule (in spelling, declension, verb conjugation, etc.), the lack of logic of null forms; for example, verbs with a defective paradigm, also strongly complicated our work.

We only spoke with the student in Russian; the constant use of the target language aids instruction. We only had to use her native language in extreme situations when something needed to be explained. All the stages of listening were carried out in accordance with the current specifications defined by our Moscow colleagues. “As is well known, the International Center for Russian as a Foreign Language (RSL) was created with the aim of promoting the Russian language throughout the world.” [9]. The illustrious Moscow State University continues to develop technology and methodology in this sphere.

Hope was also given the assignment of watching Russian television and films, listening to music, in short, to be “surrounded” by Russian speech. The immersion in the atmosphere of the target language, the study of traditions and culture of native speakers further supplemented her lessons. Another significant help was that the student was invited to the homes of Russian families and colleagues. We must note that traditional Russian and Tatar hospitality, containing an abundance and variety of food on the table, was not easy for an American, but she nobly passed this “culturological exam.”

Without a doubt, the student’s integrative motivation to learn the language, that is, a desire to use the language in order to interact with those in the culture, played a significant role in her success [10]. Although integrative motivation is not necessary to learn a language, the psychological effects of desire to integrate with the second language culture can aid a student greatly in achieving mastery of the language [10]. Gardner characterizes the motivated student as one who “is goal directed, expends effort, is persistent, is attentive, has desires (wants), exhibits positive affect, is aroused, has expectancies, demonstrates self-confidence (self-efficacy), and has reasons (motives)” [10, p. 15]. Hope exhibited the qualities of Gardner’s motivated student; her openness, commitment, good memory, and very conscientious attitude toward her assignments,

multiplied by the intensive one-on-one nature of the language training program, helped the pupil greatly.

Results

At the end of our program, teacher and student, professor and Bachelor of Arts, started to interact on the same level: the student could change the direction of the lesson, ask to go back to a certain topic, supply a commentary on a given subject, and make adjustments to separate phrases and speech constructions. In one word, Hope Johnson became a true bilingual; that is, we were able to achieve a relatively fluent mastery of two languages and alternating use of them in dependence on the conditions of speech interaction. The student stopped translating between her native language and Russian, and it is no longer difficult for her to think in the needed language at a given moment. Of course, she has a long way to go before she achieves an ideal level of Russian, but the question must be raised, who in Russia today can boast of a flawless mastery of the Russian literary language?

In any case, we can confidently assert that in the bilingual and multilingual community of the twenty-first century, and specifically in connection to the intensifying momentum of the opening of borders and mobilization of culture and ethnicity, it is possible for an already advanced student to achieve fluent bilingualism even with domination of the native language (English) in a relatively short time: 100-120 hours of one-on-one lessons built on complex methodology rich with modern elements. "The human factor" is often alluded to in Russian publications in a negative tone, but in our case there is a difference: the professionalism and talents of the teacher were multiplied by the strong motivation of the student. Fortunately, "the lack of interest that is a powerful factor in language acquisition, which is also known as language shock (the state of deep lack of confidence in one's abilities to speak or understand a different language," [11, p. 79] played no role in our lessons, and this gave us the ability to prepare the student for the C1 certification level examination.

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