

Difficulties in studying a foreign language in a technical college and some ways of removing them

Lyudmila Alexandrovna Kozubovskaja and Elena Leonovna Sentebova

Perm National Research Polytechnic University, Komsomolski pr., 29, Perm, 614000, Russian Federation.

Abstract. Unfortunately the lesser number of academic hours to study a foreign language is allocated nowadays in a technical college while the need in having a command of it is increasing. This fact makes learning a foreign language more complicated. Students come across different kinds of problems while learning a language. The article is an attempt to classify psychological problems and problems connected with a foreign language as a subject and to offer some methods and ways of removing these difficulties.

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Introduction

Unfortunately the lesser number of academic hours to study a foreign language is allocated nowadays in a technical college while the need in having a command of it is increasing. The purpose of this article is to identify and analyze the difficulties in learning a foreign language in a limited number of academic hours allocated for this discipline, and consider some techniques for removing these difficulties.

It is necessary to identify and analyze the difficulties encountered in the study of any foreign language. These are difficulties, related first of all to the specific qualities of a foreign language as a subject. A foreign language is different from other subjects. First, it is both “the purpose and means of education” [1]. Its learning does not give people direct knowledge of reality as opposed to mathematics, physics, chemistry or theoretical mechanics studied by first-year students in a technical college. Second, a foreign language is also characterized by “limitlessness” [2], i.e. its volume has no limits. This means that learning a language people are supposed to acquire the entire grammar and vocabulary throughout. Such “limitlessness” leads to serious psychological problems, such as stress, fear, lack of confidence in the students. Third, a foreign language is characterized by a number of features that are different from the features of the native language. As noted by L.S. Vygotskij in his book “Thinking and speech”, a foreign language differs in the direction of the way of its mastering, density of communication, the inclusion of language in subject-communicative human activities, the set of functions realized by it and correlation with the sensitive period of development of human speech, that is, the period of greatest sensitivity to mastering a language. “As you know, the child learns a foreign language at school in entirely different way than he

learns his native language. Almost none of the actual laws, so well studied in the development of the native language, will be repeated in a similar way when any schoolboy is mastering a foreign language. Piaget rightly says that adult language is not for the child what a foreign language under study is to us, i.e., a system of signs, corresponding item by item to the previously acquired concepts. Partly due to the presence of ready-made and developed meanings of words that are only translated into a foreign language, i.e., partly due to the fact of the relative maturity of the native language, and partly due to the fact that a foreign language, as shown by a special study is mastered with an entirely different system of internal and external conditions, it reveals in its mastering the features of the deepest differences with the course of mastering the native language.”[3]

A foreign language is mastered in a way of logics, awareness, conscious effort, and not unconsciousness, the way a child masters the native language. This way is particularly suitable for students of technical colleges since they are supposed to be logical and because they have a limited amount of classroom hours. “...Numerous aspects of first-language knowledge (i.e., the meanings of many concepts, the understanding of syntactic categories and functions, facility in using many structural patterns that are nearly identical in the two languages) are directly transferable to second-language learning and lastly, it is developmentally anachronistic and artificial for the older individual to learn a new set of second-language terms for familiar concepts by associating them directly with their referents (objects, pictures, situations)”. [4]

With the change in the direction of learning a new language the density of communication is changing as well. Thus, the density of the child's communication with the people around him is much higher than when learning a foreign language in the

classroom. And it is another difficulty in mastering a new language.

An essential feature of mastering a foreign language is its inclusion only into communicative, but not in the subject-communicative activities. This means that the words of a foreign language seem abstract for students and do not carry any emotional coloring, and it is difficult for the learners to remember them. The functions of a foreign language during its learning are reduced only to the satisfaction of learning and cognitive needs or the needs of expressing the students' thoughts with the help of a foreign language, that is, these functions are much narrower than the functions of the native language. A foreign language is mastered by the students not in the most sensitive period of their speech development, and it affects the entire learning process. The above mentioned difficulties deal with the specific features of a foreign language as a school subject.

Another category of difficulties in learning a foreign language is associated with psychological factors that may impede language learning. These factors are temperament of the language learners, their memory, attention, and the peculiarities of their perception. Psychological characteristics of students are a holistic system, where each link is the only one of its kind, and the process of learning is impossible without it.

Temperament plays a big role in language learning, as it is the type of higher nervous activity that affects the nature of emotional and cognitive processes. So, Vitt N.V. concludes that the knowledge about the psychological natural differences between students is required to make the process of learning a foreign language individual. Psychological individualization of learning a foreign language, in fact, is treated as a kind of ideal model of optimal conditions for learning a foreign language. [5]

Vitt N.V. gives particular attention to strength, balance and mobility of the nervous system of students and finds it necessary to consider the above factors when organizing activities, planning and distributing different assignments, switching from one type of work to another, in defining who should start to speak first and when selecting partners for discussions, dialogues. These students must be compatible in their psychological characteristics, speed of reaction, tempo of speech, personal style, and the ability to encourage the interlocutor to speak. [6]

Now let us consider some instructional techniques that can help both students and teachers remove the above mentioned difficulties in learning a foreign language.

Let's start with the psychological characteristics of students and talk again about temperament and the way to deal with difficulties caused by it. It is known that the productivity of all human activities is connected with the peculiarities of the temperament. It is believed that melancholic and phlegmatic learners are experiencing the greatest difficulties in the study of foreign languages. Dr. Mohammad Ali Salmani Nodoushan from Iran made a research on temperament and its influence on language learning achievement. He writes: "Language learning is a complex process that is controlled or influenced by a host of linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Some of these factors are the main concern of psychologists rather than linguists. Ever since psychology began to develop in the 20th century, more and more individual characteristics were identified and defined. Eysenck's introduction of a way to measure temperament interested linguists, and some of them tried to investigate the influence of temperament on language learning. The present study, too, set out to investigate the probable effects of temperament on EFL speaking achievement. 139 Iranian intermediate-proficiency university students took the U-test, an IELTS-based structured interview, and the Eysenck Personality Test. They then took a speaking course. Another structured interview was conducted at the end of the course as the post-test. The results indicated that introverts were advantaged in speaking achievement. The sanguine participants in the study outperformed the choleric ones who in turn outperformed the melancholic participants. The weakest results belonged to the phlegmatic participant group" [7]. But our observation of the students with these temperaments has shown that it is not always so. Compensatory mechanisms allow melancholic and phlegmatic students to achieve not less, but sometimes greater success in learning the language, than students of other temperaments. Phlegmatic and melancholic learners reveal preference of stereotypical ways of action, i.e. they readily comply with even the monotone grammar exercises, tasks associated with multiple repetitions, which are so essential in the study of a language, which is annoying and tiring for sanguine and choleric students. And the slowness of their reactions is compensated with more thorough and meticulous execution of tasks. Melancholic and phlegmatic learners are characterized by a high level of aspiration to the level of actually performed tasks, their claim is more realistic than that of sanguine and choleric ones, who are characterized by an unrealistic level of claims. Thus, with the melancholic and phlegmatic students, you can achieve good results in language teaching, in case you take into account the characteristics of their temperament. They can

achieve even better results in some activities than sanguine and choleric learners, for example, in learning grammar, written translation and writing compositions.

The next mental feature that you should consider when learning a language is features of perception. Perception involves the allocation of the most significant traits from all the traits affecting a person and distraction from all nonessential ones. However, "many of the facts obtained in the theory on perception, suggest that one and the same object, presented to an observer causes a different cognitive effect as the object." [8]. The skills of perception can and should be developed in language learning. "Perception becomes more skillful with practice and experience, and perceptual learning can be thought of as the education of attention." [9]. This fact must be taken into account, in particular, when explaining grammar material. For example, in the course of translation of the English text it is necessary to find the predicate according to its formal characteristics and analyze it. However, this task is often too difficult for students because such characteristic features of perception as integrity and generality are not yet developed. Since English is characterized by the analytical forms of the predicate, students sometimes take each part of this predicate for a whole predicate, which leads to mistakes in translation. Even if the predicate is defined correctly, students cannot classify it, as they cannot perceive the entire paradigm in general. The solution is adequate training. Below are diagrams that may help the students to correctly perceive and understand different types of predicate. The teacher should choose the appropriate system of exercises aimed at the formation of the correct perception of a linguistic phenomenon. To avoid mistakes of perception, the teacher should give examples of similarities and differences of the predicates that only seem to be alike, offer the tasks to show the common signs of this or that grammar phenomena which help the students to classify the predicate in the right way.

Since in the process of learning a language the students require mainly voluntary memory, it needs to be developed. Development of voluntary logical memory requires not only the accumulation of a big volume of information, but also mastering a certain system of mental operations. To develop logical memory students should learn to classify, that is to be able to identify the nature of the relationship between objects and phenomena. The teacher should know that the new material is easier to remember, if the aim of the activity is clearly stated, if the material provokes an active mental work, if the material is organized logically. For example, words unrelated in meaning are remembered much worse than words

with logical semantic connection. Memorizing depends on the emotional coloring of the material, on its importance for the learner. Therefore, at foreign language lessons, it is important to choose the topics and texts of interest to the audience. "...contextualization and personalization of material, as well as choice, facilitate significant increases in motivation, engagement in learning, the amount of content learned in a given time period, perceived competence, and aspirations for future study. Brophy (2008) asserts that learners find curricula meaningful when the content is structured around big ideas and has genuine application to life outside of school. When material is relevant to students' current lives and interests, they see a good reason to engage with the material and so autonomously do so. Learning content without learning when, where, or why it might be useful is less constructive" [10].

Much depends on how the teacher focuses the attention of the students. To attract the attention of students it is necessary that the material should be new, interesting for this group, and meet the needs of learners and their emotional mood. Monotonous tasks reduce students' attention, especially of sanguine and choleric ones. Mental fatigue caused by the monotony can be reduced and the level of attention preserved through a series of techniques: switching, for example, from auditory information to visual, change of tempo and types of work. Interesting tasks, the possibility of a creative approach to solving them, making the material logical also help to retain attention. To activate all the above mental processes it is important to take into account the motivation of students. "Motivation is the psychological base of the whole process of teaching a foreign language. Motivation is considered as "internal energy" (micro strategy) of the student, which allows him to begin living activities in a situation in which he is normally slow and inactive" [11]. Development of motivation is promoted by student-centered approach to learning, creative approach to the presentation of the material. Motivation is determined by several factors - the organization of the educational process and subjective characteristics of students (age, gender, intellectual development, abilities, level of aspiration, self-esteem).

As it has been mentioned above, a specific feature of a foreign language as a school subject is that it is used only as a means for communication in different areas of knowledge. In a technical college it may be mathematics, physics, chemistry, engineering and others. These areas of study may be included in the academic content of language teaching. At the same time the language will increasingly act as a means of communication on the subject-matter already studied in the native language at such lessons

as maths, physics, chemistry and others. But sometimes some of the material could exceed the students' knowledge in his mother tongue, and then we can say that a foreign language is partially "subjectified", that is, its function is to give new knowledge in a particular branch of science. For example, at the Chemical Engineering Department students can study in English the work and construction of refinery plants and enterprises, and at the Aerospace Faculty they can study the trajectory of vehicles or components of ballistic missiles.

Another feature of a foreign language as a school subject is its "limitlessness". In this regard, it is necessary to limit the language learning material, as it is impossible to learn everything. According to P.D. Strevens, "limiting is a process whereby, knowing that you cannot teach "all the English language", we limit ourselves to some style and kind of the English language, and that it gets into our training material, i.e. inventory of linguistic units ..." [12]. Learning a foreign language in Technical schools should be conducted in close connection with the specifics of this school. This should be taken into account in the selection of lexical material. Unfortunately, in a limited number of classroom hours allocated to learning a foreign language, there is no opportunity to study specific professional terms. While learning grammar students may come across many difficulties. On the one hand, its volume must be large enough, because you cannot "throw away" this or that grammar material. On the other hand, the presentation of grammar should be logical and generalized and while presenting it a teacher should use various schemes and tables. This is particularly important for students of technical universities, who are supposed to be used to formulas, tables, and substitutions. When first-year students are asked about the difficulties they face in learning a language they say that it is grammar that is the most difficult and, accordingly, they do not want to study it. As Leonore Ganschow, Richard L. Sparks and James Javorsky write: "Our research suggests that poor attitude and lack of motivation are result of difficulties with language, rather than a cause of FL learning problems" [13]. Therefore, a teacher has to explain the most complex grammar phenomena in the simplest way possible, paying attention only to the main things. Verb forms and tenses are particularly difficult, in our view, for students, as they are radically different from those in the Russian language. The authors of this article use the following simplified diagram to explain different types of predicate.

Table 1. Different types of predicate: when and how to use

Subject	Question to the predicate	Predicate formulas
I, he, she, it, we, you, they	Who? What? What kind?	Be * + noun, adjective, numeral
	What can (may, must, should) the subject do?	Modal verb + infinitive
	What does the subject usually do?	V1
	What did the subject usually do?	V2
	What will the subject usually do?	Will + V1
	What is the subject doing at a definite moment?	Be * + V-ing
	What has the subject done by a definite moment?	Have * + V3
	What has the subject been doing for a long time?	Have * + been + V-ing
	What is done with the subject?	Be * + V3

Table 2. Interrogative sentences: how to construct them

Special questions			
Interrogative word	General questions		
	Auxiliary link-verb	verb or	Subject

Table 3. Question to the subject: how to construct it

Question to the subject	
Who (what)	predicate

If the predicate in the declarative sentence begins with the auxiliary verb, linking verb or modal verb, this verb in the general question should be put before the subject. If the predicate does not include these verbs, the question requires auxiliary verbs *do*, *does*, *did* for their formation. If it is a special question, it is formed in the same way, but it will start with a question word. The question to the subject is based on a simpler scheme.

Thus, the authors have attempted to systematize and analyze the main difficulties encountered by students of technical colleges in the study of a foreign language. The difficulties are caused by the peculiarities of a foreign language as a subject and psychological characteristics of students. Both factors should be taken into account while teaching and learning a foreign language. Some ideas, methods and techniques for removing these difficulties have been presented.

Corresponding Author:

Dr.Kozubovskaja, Perm National Research Polytechnic University, Komsomolski pr., 29, Perm, 614000, Russian Federation.

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