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A comparative analysis of foreign language teaching methods in modern British and Russian educational environment

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Abstract

The article contains a review of foreign language teaching methods used in the UK and in Russia. The authors describe and analyze the main characteristics of language environment specifics for teaching foreign languages. A comparative analysis of language teaching approaches and methods leads to the following conclusions. The fundamental language teaching system in British and Russian universities has much in common and only minor stylistic differences. There are new emerging trends towards more individualized and flexible forms of learning and a strategy of teaching catering to the learners' needs and interests result in improvements related to student progress and motivation. The language environment modeled by each institution comprises conventional and innovative pedagogical and technological base, stimulating both students and teachers to work hard in the educational process. Universities in both countries are equal in their ability to prepare well qualified linguists and professionals in different fields in the rapidly developing global multicultural world.

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Keywords

Foreign language, teaching methods, educational environment, comparative analysis.

Introduction

Nowadays, foreign language intercultural education assumes more and more importance [Kultanova, Ospanova, 2016; Busse, Krause, 2016]. Our improved understanding of the ways people acquire a new language has generated a wide range of approaches to language teaching, with schools and universities getting equipped better than ever to teach languages [Lekova, 2010; Ur, 2013]. The authors' teaching experience, extending back over 20 years, makes it possible to review these methods and to express the professional opinions, as well as make certain conclusions.

Learning environment and teaching methodology

The first and most important thing is the so-called Learning Environment (LE), which refers to a wide range of components and activities of learning. LE includes physical locations, contexts, cultural and human traditions that surround the process of learning. According to T. Warger and G. Dobbin, "The term *learning environment* encompasses learning resources and technology, means of teaching, modes of learning, and connections to societal and global contexts" [Warger, Dobbin, 2009, www]. So LE can be defined as a combination of conditions and circumstances of learning, such as methods and teaching approaches, a variety of classroom and home-study activities, training materials, sufficient authentic input in the target language, the knowledge acquisition, and innovations in teaching.

The next issue to consider is the language teaching methods and theories. This is where we can focus on some trends appropriate both for British and Russian methodology. Generally, the main challenge in teaching a foreign language is being able to adapt a language course to the educational environment so as students' language skills improve in a way that enhances their education level, language and personal development and matches their general area of expertise. At the same time, it is important that the context of foreign languages teaching includes related topics and issues, developing some specific skills, including critical thinking, communication, cognitive skills, self-reflection, individual and teamwork models of communication [Obdalova, 2007].

Universities from all over the world offer foreign languages at beginners' level that can become a part of academic degree. Many of the teaching methods used with students beginning to study a new foreign language focus on talking and listening because of the natural order of acquiring skills that occurs when learning a native language, i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

In the UK, universities typically have different departments for teaching different languages, since each language requires its own specific style of teaching [Glazunova, 2003]. At the same time, there are elements of teaching that are present in all departments. The academic staff of universities is made up of a large number of native speakers for nearly all the languages that are offered [Parish, 1987; Ortaçtepe, 2016]. This also allows for conversation classes to be conducted in a more natural way, where pronunciation can be corrected accurately. During the first year of study, a greater emphasis is placed on grammar teaching than in later years.

There are also elements of communicative language teaching at UK universities. Students have dedicated oral classes entirely focused on speaking the target language. Additionally, students are expected to produce presentations throughout the year in the target language on a wide variety of topics. Combined with grammar teaching, it is supposed to fix the problem of a communicative method, which does not provide learners with adequate linguistic competence. In addition to presentations, students are expected to produce other work, such as short essays and translations, grammar exercises, and other written work.

Russian universities also have different departments offering several foreign languages, the choice of which depends on the demand for the languages. All students of foreign languages departments study two languages and have a language-focused degree, while the other students study one foreign language as part of their obligatory program, but they can learn as many other foreign languages as they want taking extracurricular activities. Besides, students and teachers are usually offered additional foreign languages courses following their professional and particular interests.

Teaching at Russian universities offers a very interactive style, based on the Principles of Interactive Language Teaching written by Harvard professor Wilga Rivers in 1997 [Gural', Mitchell, 2008]. New approaches and methods are being introduced to create the environment with a stress-free interaction focused on the learner's involvement in thinking, speaking, and doing. The teachers use a number of teaching methods, including Communicative Language Teaching based on Wilga Rivers's third principle – that it is important to be able to use the language "normally" and communicate effectively in both written and oral formats. Students are also taught the structure of the language and study how it works in order to gain better knowledge of the language.

In addition to the pedagogical techniques, it is worth noting the information technologies and resources integrated into the language environment. Combined with conventional ways and means of teaching, new communication and information tools create an innovative environment, allowing for the individualization of the learning process and the presence of native speaking communicators in virtual mode.

New technological environment makes it possible to use relevant authentic materials and different forms of input (aural, visual, combined, hypertext technology, etc.) to make the learning process more effective [Obdalova, 2010]. In this respect, UK schools offer various facilities to help students, such as language labs and computer rooms that are available during and outside of class time. Russian schools also offer facilities to help students, including centers for simultaneous interpreting, computer classes, but in general the learning environment lacks technical recourses, which limits the ability to incorporate various technology options into learning and teaching processes.

The teaching staff at Russian universities mostly consists of native Russian speakers. But a rich language environment cannot be possible without the participation of native speakers and

language specialists. The language environment created for foreign languages teaching in Russia differs greatly from that in the UK or any European university, because not so many native speakers come to work, study, and live in Russia, especially in such remote areas as Siberia or the Far East. The process of learning another language without the full cultural context is rather specific and difficult. It is well understood that cultural penetration is important and that in order to understand a foreign language there must be an understanding of the culture lying behind it. Therefore, communication with native speakers is important and it is guaranteed to all students in the course of their education. So in the learning environment for teaching foreign languages in Russian universities, more stress is placed on the pedagogical framework development, to stimulate active learning through face-to-face communication, effective instruction, innovative pedagogical tools, development of teaching materials and activities, and involvement of native speaking members in the staff. On the technical side, it is mostly the use of the Internet as a source of information and computer-mediated environment for teaching grammar and carrying out testing of linguistic competence.

When we compare the language environments of universities in the UK and in Russia, we can see that there are many similarities. The organizational structure of universities' divisions responsible for teaching foreign languages is very similar and is based on highly professional staff. Furthermore, both sides recognize the importance of communication with native speakers and employ native speakers of the target language.

There are a lot of similarities in the teaching methods as well – for example, learning grammar rules and working with the written language, reading and translating. Both parties combine the grammar translation method with a communicative approach, in order to teach students how to use the language practically and usefully. Most widely used pedagogical techniques are problem-solving, collaborative tasks, case-based studies, and discussions. The approaches focused on the learner's active role, competent-based model, dialogue of cultures in the process of teaching foreign languages nowadays are dominating trends in the educational environments of both countries.

Conclusion

Therefore, the fundamental language teaching system in British and Russian universities has much in common and only minor differences. There are common new trends towards more individualized and flexible forms of learning and a strategy of teaching catering to the learners' needs and interests, that leads to the improvement of student progress and motivation. The language environment modeled by each institution comprises conventional and innovative pedagogical and technological base, stimulating both students and teachers to work hard in the educational process. Universities in both countries are practically equal in their ability to prepare well-qualified linguists and professionals of different fields in the rapidly developing global multicultural world.

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Сравнительный анализ методов обучения иностранному языку в современном британском и российском образовании

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Аннотация

Статья предлагает обзор методов преподавания иностранных языков, используемых как в Великобритании, так и в России. Авторы описывают и анализируют основные характеристики специфики использования языковой среды для обучения иностранным языкам. Предпринятый сравнительный анализ подходов и методов обучения языку помог прийти к следующим заключениям. Система языкового образования в британских и российских университетах имеет много общего и содержит незначительные различия. Прослеживаются новые тенденции, направленные на поиск более индивидуализированных и гибких форм обучения; стратегии преподавания, ориентированного на потребности и интересы учащихся, приводят к более быстрому прогрессу и росту мотивации. Языковая среда каждого учреждения включает в себя традиционные и новаторские педагогические и технологические средства, способствующие мотивации студентов и преподавателей в едином учебном процессе. Университеты в обеих странах равны в своей способности подготовить высококвалифицированных лингвистов и специалистов в различных областях в быстроразвивающемся, глобальном, мультикультурном мире.

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Ключевые слова

Иностранный язык, методы обучения, образовательная среда, сравнительный анализ.