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AREA OF COMFORT: RUSSIAN LANGUAGE TRAINING FOR VIETNAMESE STUDENTS AT TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY

Irina V. Salosina (a)*, Maria V. Netesova (a), Olga S. Lutoshkina (a),

Tran Dinh Tan Xu (a)

* Corresponding author

(a) Tomsk Polytechnic University, Lenina 30, Tomsk, 634050, Russia, salosinaiv@tpu.ru, 8 952 899 17 44

Abstract

The paper focuses on the psychological and pedagogical peculiarities of teaching Russian to students from Vietnam. The methodology approach taken in this study is motivated by ideas of active Learning articulated by Verbitcky and the Motivation theory developed by Maslow and Yakimanskaya. The methodological basis of the research is a student-centered learning approach. The author provides a theoretical framework based on the communicative competence concept elaborated by Viatutnev in area of theory and methods Russian as foreign language.

Our qualitative methodology included interviews with students, review of documents and analysis of educational results. The authors use Smekal and Kucher's Questionnaire to identify psychological characteristics of Vietnamese students and offer a solution to the problem of effective teaching with due consideration of the students' cultural features. The authors present the research findings on the personality orientation of Vietnamese students enrolled in National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University. In general, we systematize suggestions for Russian Language teachers who work with international students from Vietnam.

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Keywords: Internationalization of education; student-centered approach; ethno-cultural approach; personality orientation.

1. Introduction

The modern paradigm of higher education is characterized by openness and integration into the world educational space. Currently, one of the criteria for the competitiveness of the Russian higher education is the number of international students. Where anent, the internationalization of a higher education system is one of the leading trends of its development. The country's leading universities annually increase the



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volume of export of their educational services by expanding the geography of their users. In some cases, citizens' education in Russian universities is a part of the state policy of countries. The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is a great example of this tendency. The implementation of training programs for various sectors of the Vietnamese economy in the Russian higher educational institutions has been carried out since 2002. Students enrolled in this program take a competitive test in Vietnam and then receive substantial government support, such as scholarships for the studying period. National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University has been a member of this program since 2003, and there are 200 students from Vietnam currently enrolled.

The number of international students studying in Russian universities has increased. This fact requires methodological understanding of problems associated with international education as well as developing an ethnic and cultural approach to learning. This field is of current interest in scientific research.

However, most research is devoted to the problems of teaching the Russian language to students from China, the number of which is increasing year after year due to the nature of the geopolitical and economic situation. Some works describe the system of Russian language teaching in Chinese universities, (Liu, 2004; Salosina, & Ishutina, 2014; Li, 2015) and others. Some studies represent a comprehensive description of linguo-didactic models (Balykhina, 2009, 2010, 2013) and teaching methods (Zolotykh, 2012), etc. As part of the ethnocultural approach, TPU implemented several projects: "Portrait of the educational migrant", No. 10-01-64102, 2010-2011, "Chinese educational migrants in the Russian academic environment", No. 12-31-01298 / 12, 2012-2013. These projects were supported by the Russian Humanitarian Science Foundation and were aimed to investigate the particularities of the teaching process for students from China. Tis ideas developed by Kosheleva, & Samofalova, (2011).

The particular nature of teaching Russian to Vietnamese students does not receive due consideration in the scientific literature. There are some doctoral research works on the problems of teaching grammar in a technical college (Nguyen, 2003), the training of future philologists (Hoang, 2005), a series of works analyzes the difficulties of language interference (Sherina, & Nguyen, 2015).

International science takes an integrated approach to this problem. They study the problems of adaptation and socialization of Vietnamese students in the host society and in their motherlands (Anh, 2014), motivation to learn (Miller, & Div, 2012), the development of certain types of speech activity when teaching English to Vietnamese (Dan, 2008; Nguyen, 2008).

Nowadays, the effect of psychological characteristics of students from Vietnam on the process of teaching the Russian language in a technical college is not studied enough, hence the relevance of the research topic as well as its purpose: to identify the psychological and pedagogical aspects of teaching the Russian language to Vietnamese students. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to accomplish the following objectives:

- to determine the characteristics of the personality orientation of students;
- to identify the specifics of their mental representations of the teacher image;
- to develop proposals for the implementation of the ethno-cultural approach to teaching the Russian language to Vietnamese students.

2. Methodology and analysis

The methodological basis of the research is the ideas of humanistic psychology, Maslow (1954), the concept of hierarchy of needs of a person belonging to a group, respect and self-actualization. In Russia, these theses are developed in the framework of a student-centered approach to teaching. So, Yakimanskaya (1984,1989,1994) claims that organizing and planning the learning process requires, first of all, taking into account the *"identity, self-worth, and personal experience of each student"* (1994). It is essential to identify these criteria and match them with the content of education. Vyatyutnev (1984) was the first to tackle the task of implementing the principles of student-centered approaches in teaching Russian as a second language in higher education institutions.

Relying on modern educational concepts, we have substantiated the need for studying the personality orientation of students in the development of Russian language teaching technologies. The personality orientation reflects the peculiarities of the national character of students and defines the relationship of participants in the educational process. This is the novelty of the study.

The theoretical significance of the research: we prove that training international students in higher education institutions requires taking into account particularities of their previous educational systems, including the mental representation of the image of the teacher and the model of the educational process as well as national-cultural and individual personal characteristics of students. In this vein, the teacher of the Russian language plays a special role –that of a guide to the culture. The teacher is responsible for speech and behavioral survival algorithms of implementation in other socio-cultural and educational environment.

3. Research and results

The study was conducted at the Institute of International Education and Language Communication of National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University (IIELC NR TPU) in 2015. It involved Vietnamese students enrolled in the basic educational programs of TPU. Most of them are in their first or second year of study.

The experiment had three phases. At first, we analyzed the scores of international students in the Test of Russian as a Foreign Language (TORFL), level 1, for the period from 2010 to 2015. The students took the test at the Center for Testing of Foreign Nationals of the Department of Russian as a Foreign Language after mastering the elementary and basic level of the Russian language at the Preparatory Department.

Results of the analysis are presented in Table 1: the average scores (%) of the entire testing group in various sections of the course (A) and the average scores (%) of students from Vietnam (B).

Table 1. The scores of international students in the Test of Russian as a Foreign Language.

Sections	2010		2011		2012		2013		2014		2015	
	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
Vocabulary, grammar	78	89.2	72.4	82.8	74.28	83.5	75.8	85.7	72.4	76.1	67	69
Reading	89	92	88	90.9	82.88	88.33	83.4	90.2	68.2	71.6	66	66
Writing	81	86.6	73	73.8	67.1	71.6	69.1	77.4	73.3	81.95	71	75
Listening	88	91	77.9	80.92	78.9	91.7	77.09	88.9	74.57	74.35	63	70.5

comprehension												
Speaking	74	76.4	74.8	80.92	72.6	78.9	71.3	83.4	71	71	64	67
Total	82	87.2	77.3	82.46	74.5	83.4	75.9	85.7	72.5	75.4	67	70

We can see a downward trend in the overall average results in all the speaking activities as well as vocabulary and grammar.

According to both students and teachers, speaking is the most difficult exam. The lowest average score of the group is 64% (2015) and 67% (2015) for Vietnamese students; the highest is 74.8 (2011, group) and 83.4, (2013, Vietnamese students).

Starting 2014, there has been a sharp drop in the scores in reading, which has traditionally been easy to pass: maximum 89% (2010) and 92% (2010) for Vietnamese students; minimum 66% (2015) in both groups.

The results are presented in a more illustrative way in the following diagram containing the data of the average overall score in percent. If we compare two graphs, we can conclude that despite some regression in both the groups' scores, students from Vietnam consistently score better than the overall group.

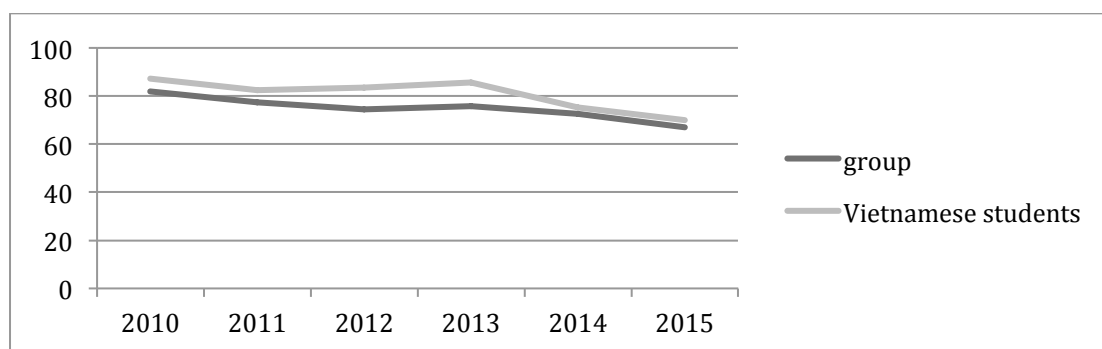


Fig. 1. Overall scores (mean in %).

The overall downward trend stems from many factors:

1. A greater number of international students come from South-East Asia. It takes them more time to master the program, since their native tongue has significant differences from the Russian language they are learning;
2. A greater share of students including those from Vietnam study on a contractual basis;
3. Succession of generations: current school graduates do not read much even in their native tongue, acquire most information on the Internet and use new-generation software that instantaneously translates large amounts of textual information.

Nonetheless, the trend of Vietnamese students getting better test scores is still consistent. In this connection, a teacher who works with groups including students from Vietnam has to take into account the high level of educational demands from this student category.

The second stage of the experimental activity involved determining the personality orientation of students from Vietnam. We used Smekal and Kucher's Questionnaire that singles out three groups of personality orientation: personal (to oneself), community (to cooperation), and practical (to a task). Thirty people answered questions by choosing two of the three options that best and worst describe their

opinion. Most intentions the respondents chose were related to personal and practical orientation. Let us comment on some results. We have arranged the answers into sense groups.

3.1. Concept of teacher and learning goals

A good teacher *understands the interests and problems of each student* (83.3%). I am at my best *if a teacher understands me* (40%). I do not like a teacher *who shows that they dislike some of the students* (40%). University *must develop individual abilities in a student* (50%). Thus, Vietnamese students need a friend-teacher who “sees and hears” each student and is open to communication. This teacher understands the educational needs of each member of student community and encourages their self-actualization. The teacher also keeps up with these needs.

3.2. Attitude to leadership

If I played football, I would most like to be *a famous player* (56.7%) and I would least like to be *the captain of the team* (50%). If I could choose, I would like to be a *chief* (46.7 %). I would like to be a *soloist*(43.3%). I would like to *win a contest* (56.7%), I would least like to *come up with an interesting contest* (66.7%). The results show that a part of the group strives for leadership, while the other part prefers to be reputable professionals.

3.3. Relationships with people

What I dislike most is *poor relationships in a group* (60%), what I dislike least is *teacher’s criticism* (50%). My best friends are those *with whom I have good relationships* (60%). I am happy when my friends are *always loyal and reliable* (46.7%) and the least frequently chosen option is when they are *intelligent and interesting people* (70%). Conflict-free relationships with people are an important factor determining success at work.

3.4. Attitude to work

I derive the greatest satisfaction *from realizing that I did a good job* (53.3%). I achieve the greatest success when I have an interesting job (53.3 %); least often, *my efforts are well rewarded* (56.7%). I like it when I get a *result at work* (63.3 %). It is most important for me to know *what I want to do* (56.7%) and least important is to know *how to organize people to achieve a goal* (60%). You must acts that you could *do a good job* (53.3%) and least, *so that other people are satisfied with you* (76.7%). The respondents value the subject and the outcome of their work more than external assessment.

At the third stage, a student arranged a questionnaire without any help from the teacher. This approach makes it possible, on the one hand, to analyze answers and on the other hand, the questions, since they are what matters to students. The topic of the questionnaire was Difficulties in Learning Russian. Fifty students from Vietnam took part in the survey. The analysis shows the top answers in order of importance, difficulty, etc. Questions are grouped by meaning.

3.5. Content of curriculum

68% of the respondents ranked Speaking first as the most important aspect of the Russian language. Listening comprehension is the most difficult aspect (46%). When answering the question “What do you find difficult about learning Russian grammar?” most students ranked difficult grammatical rules first:

42%. 48% of the respondents admitted the existence of the psychological barrier and placed the option “When you talk, you are afraid of making grammatical mistakes” second.

The statement *It is not interesting for you to learn Russian because...* was not applicable for 49% of the respondents. 40% chose the answer “You cannot express your opinion on this problem”, 38% ticked “In our class, we study topics that are not related to other subjects” and 16%, “You do not need it for your future work”.

Thus, although learning Russian is obviously topical, especially in terms of verbal skills (speaking and listening), there are problems of psychological nature (many questions start with “you are embarrassed to...” for areas on) as well as a problem of choosing adequate teaching methods. This, however, is already a question of correlation between the content of curriculum and organization of teaching process.

3.6. Organization of teaching process

When it comes to the conditions of successfully learning the Russian language, international groups are the top choice; then goes acquiring knowledge before coming to Russia; thirdly, it is regular communication with Russian students; and finally, living with Russian students in a dormitory.

Problems that affect successful learning of the Russian language most are climatic conditions of Siberia (40%) and least, other subjects that do not leave enough time to learn Russian (52%).

The most difficult thing during the Russian language classes is to understand what the teacher says- 46% (listening comprehension problem); then goes asking friends for help and then, finally, working with one's friends in small groups. The easiest thing to do is to ask the teacher for help.

You do not like it when: the teacher talks to other students a lot (66%). You have to work with your friend who is bad at Russian (52%).

It often happens that I know the answer to a question but do not answer it because: I am afraid of making a mistake (58%); I am afraid that they will not understand me (22%); my friends do not like it when I get high grades (14%).

Thus, Vietnamese students are highly tolerant towards other members of the group, so interactive teaching methods may become the optimal form of the teaching process organization. However, the problem of the psychological barrier to communication in class (I am afraid or embarrassed to put it wrong) may form a misconception on students' passiveness or lack of knowledge. In this case, the task of the teacher is to create the educational environment that is as safe as possible, when it is important to say, whereas the degree of correctness is a cause for organizing a discussion.

Students had an opportunity to express their opinion in an open-ended question: *describe your problems in learning Russian that were not included in the questionnaire*. Interestingly, the respondents did not only repeat the options grammar, lack of time, too many students in the group, etc., but they also gave answers like “my own laziness”. This suggests a certain level of self-reflection and evaluation of learning goals and outcomes.

4. Conclusion

Thus, the external research findings (the analysis of the test results on the Russian language, the Smekal and Kucher's questionnaire) as well as the internal ones (the questionnaire drawn up by the student) have led to the following conclusions:

1. Most Vietnamese students are oriented towards completing a task and have an expressed desire to be a leader.
2. The task of a Russian language teacher is to create the "safe learning environment" as a basis to develop each student's abilities, including the elimination of psychological barriers through the development of subject-subject relations among the participants of the educational process.
3. The preparatory stage of work with the group includes a comprehensive diagnosis of the students' level of the foreign (Russian) language skills and educational needs to adjust the content and to choose the optimal training technology.
4. Interactive teaching methods are most effective (contests, competitions, discussions, brainstorming, role-playing and simulation games, etc.) in the process of teaching the Russian language to students from Vietnam. These methods promote self-actualization of the student personality.

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