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Teaching Disciplines “History of Russia” and “Country Studies” to Foreign Students: Problems and Solutions

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Abstract

The present paper is focused on the problem of teaching foreign students such disciplines as “Country studies” and “History of Russia”, which appear to be compulsory for the international students, getting higher education in Russia. Studying these disciplines, students meet some difficulties due to various reasons, beginning with poor knowledge of Russian language and ending with ethical problems. A lecturer needs to cross this socio-cultural and linguistic barrier and find solutions in order to give the full information in accordance with the educational working program. The research has an applied character. It is based on the sociological survey conducted among the foreign students of National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University. The aim of the paper is to demonstrate real difficulties of students and lecturers at studying and teaching disciplines “Country studies” and “History of Russia” and to offer solutions for overcoming these problems.

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1. Introduction

International education has become a problem of great importance for Russian Federation in recent times. Russian higher educational institutions have recognized the potential of capturing the core target audience, containing foreign students, and now they develop special educational programs and invite foreigners to get higher education in Russia. On the one hand, it is rather prestigious to teach this student-age population, it improves the reputation of Russian universities all over the world and gives extra bonuses to institutes. On the other hand, it is an extremely demanding challenge, because all the educational programs that are offered to students must correspond

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to international standards, have a high quality, and the teaching staff should be ready for teaching this group of students and specially trained for this purpose. International higher educational institutions have already accumulated rich experience and traditions in foreign students' teaching. They suggest special methods and strategies that facilitate the educational process for the lecturers working with this contingent, but mostly it is connected with a language component (University of Michigan, Columbia University, University of Southampton, etc.).

The focal point of the given paper is the difficulties that the lecturers meet while teaching such disciplines as "History of Russia" and "Country Studies" to foreign students. These problems have not been discussed so widely as the problems of language communication, but they stay topical for the Russian system of higher education, and some researchers (Greiben'kova, Erofeev, et al.) have contributed to the solution of these issues. The novelty of this investigation lies in its applied character. The method used in the investigation is a sociological survey, which has been conducted among the international students of National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University (TPU).

2. Challenges in teaching disciplines "History of Russia" and "Country Studies" to foreign students

The education plan or curriculum for international students studying in Russia includes several compulsory courses, among which the disciplines "History of Russia" and "Country Studies" can be found. Foreign students of National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University take the "Country Studies" course, included among their pre-university courses, and they study "History of Russia", when they are transferred to the first course of TPU. These two disciplines are combined into one object of our interest to the extent that the content-related basis of country studies is a short history of Russia and its main events, having influenced building a state and forming a nation.

In the given paper all the international students from far abroad are termed as "foreign students". In TPU as well as in the other Siberian universities these students represent mainly the countries of the Far East and South-East Asia (China, Vietnam, Mongolia), to a lesser extent – the countries of the Middle East (Syria, Egypt), and insignificantly – European countries.

In the context of the discussion, the specificity of the main group (Chinese and Vietnamese students) is the basic schooling, obtained in another cultural and historical paradigm and deprived of any eurocentrism. Russian and European history is presented here only as an element of minor importance (the similar situation is observed in Russian schools, where graduates have minimal knowledge of the history of Africa and Asia, except those events connected with Russian/USSR history, but they have certain apprehension about the medieval and modern history of England, France and Germany).

As to the students, having come from the countries of continental Africa or the Arab world, Europe takes a more significant place in their world-view. Mongolian students demonstrate the best educational background concerned with Russian history, as determined by the long-term close ties between the two countries. As researcher G.V. Grebenkova notes: «Many [foreign] students, due to the peculiarities of humanitarian training in their home countries, know even the history of their own countries badly, without speaking about the history and culture of Russia. Surveys show that 80% of foreigners have not studied Russian history and culture till arrival in TPU» (Greiben'kova, 2008) (*Hereinafter the translation is mine – E.V. Shvagrjukova*).

In the course of the investigation the method of a sociological survey is used. The survey aimed at revealing the difficulties in studying disciplines "History of Russia" and "Country Studies". The target group of the foreign students, including 20 persons, has been chosen. The group consists of the second-year TPU students, who have already passed the disciplines mentioned above. The methodology of the survey is as follows: the students have been offered a range of problems connected with the study of these two courses and three variants of answers ("Yes, I had", "No, I did not have", "I do not know"). The range of problems has been formulated according the analysis of classes and academic progress of these students while studying the disciplines. The results of the survey are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Difficulties in studying disciplines “History of Russia” and “Country studies”.

	Difficulties	Students, %
1.	Problems with Russian language	100
2.	Problems in reading a map key	10
3.	Problems in understanding historical events	30
4.	Disagreement with a lecturer in the interpretation of historical events	0
5.	Disagreement with the other students in the interpretation of historical events	20
6.	I did not have any problems	0

As Table 1 shows, the most important peculiarity of teaching “History of Russia” and “Country Studies” to foreign students is non-acquaintance with or lack of knowledge of Russian language. All the questioned students (100%) have pointed to this problem. Without taking into account apparent difficulties, let us pay attention to the specificity of the analyzed disciplines, the study of which «...requires a rich vocabulary, adequate understanding of Russian historical terms and notions» (Geben’kova, 2008). First of all, the main problem is presented by abstract notions, which are extremely difficult to be explained with the help of simple words familiar to students. «This course study intends to provide special terminology acquisition, which provokes additional difficulties» (Erofeev, 2014). Illustrations do not help in this situation, because visualization of abstract complicated phenomena may lead to misconception. A well-known fact connected with the problem of listening comprehension is the aspect of terms within the Russian language; idiomatic expressions may be considered as a variety of this situation.

Secondly, the lecturer of “Country Studies” and “History of Russia” faces the following problem: international students have the lack of necessary historical and cultural information, which Russian students have *a priori*. Contrary to common misconceptions about the ignorance of modern youth, Russian first-year students have a rather broad overview of the main events and personalities of Russian history. The knowledge may be insufficient or distorted, but, nevertheless, the lecturer can omit many well-known facts and evident conclusions while telling about Peter the Great, A.V. Suvorov, E.I. Pugachev, V.I. Lenin, etc., whose images accompany Russians from their childhood as statues, monuments, toponymy, the other elements of culture and are well-known through books, films and school programs.

In accordingly, the students from the countries of South-East Asia do not understand the distinguishing features of many Russian and European historical phenomena (30% of students). The most attentive students are disconcerted by the importance of wars and the other events, in the course of which Russians had to take a stand for independence of the country, to the extent that a simple view of the map puts in doubt the possibility to conquer (concept “to win a victory over”) Russia for any European country. This question is withdrawn with the help of the example of Japanese occupations known by the students of South-East Asia.

As an example of problems in understanding the historical events, we can present the following illustration: the students from South-East Asia have difficulties in understanding the historic significance of German-Catholic aggression of the XIIIth century, because the difference between Orthodoxy and Catholicism is not comprehensible for them. Meanwhile, historical studies traditionally refer to this as the most important issue.

The third peculiarity of teaching the abovementioned disciplines to foreign students is the difference in the attitude to the historical events that are common for our country and the native countries of students. Usually it is difficult for young students to deduce the adopted social and cultural experience in the interpretation of the particular historical events. Therefore, traditional Russian historic study representations may be comprehended as offensive against national shrines and, in some cases, against national sovereignty. For example, Genghis Khan is appreciated by Mongols as a national hero. The time of Mongolian state rise, including the Rus’ conquest, is kind of a «Golden Age» in the history of that nation. Revaluation of socialism and the soviet period may be understood by students from the People’s Republic of China and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam as oblique criticism of their political regimes. Also, foreign students, having come from different countries, may disagree with each other in the assessment of historical events as the survey has shown (20%). Meanwhile, they respect the opinion of a lecturer and trust him, thus, the survey has shown a “0” result for option № 4 “Disagreement with a lecturer in the interpretation of historical events”.

As to the practical skills trained at studying these disciplines, the students (10%) have marked the problems with map key reading. In our opinion, this fact is determined by the specificity of visual cartographical memory (namely, the idea of the ground location of countries, cities, rivers, etc. on the map), which plays an important role here, because it makes it difficult to understand the range of questions related to domestic and foreign policy such as wars, trade relations and territorial expansion.

It is necessary to mention that all the students have problems with various aspects of studying “History of Russia” and “Country Studies”, because nobody has chosen option № 6 in the survey “I did not have any problems”.

3. Possible solutions

Evidently, the lecturer of the courses “History of Russia” and “Country Studies” faces many issues connected not only with the lack of knowledge in some disciplines, but also with the code of ethics. In order to overcome the abovementioned difficulties in teaching “History of Russia” and “Country Studies” to foreign students the following solutions are offered.

First, it is necessary to begin with the applied basics of history and to teach students the reading of a map key (or marginal notes). Active forms and methods of working with a descriptive text do not take much time during a class (approximately, 5-10 minutes), but the constantly trained skill will be improved. Visualization, in this case, will be really helpful.

Secondly, it is necessary to cooperate with the teacher of Russian language and ask him about help in explanation of complicated abstract notions in the course of language studies. This tandem system of teaching will give positive results very quickly. Consequently, both disciplines will benefit.

Thirdly, the lecturer of the disciplines “History of Russia” and “Country Studies” should use the opportunity to draw an analogy between the history of students’ native countries and Russian history, because it helps not only to understand one or another event better, but also to increase the interest of students in studies and in our country.

And last but not least, at teaching foreign students it is necessary to be politically correct and tolerant. The lecturer should be able to feel the mood of the audience and try not to injure the patriotic or religious feelings of students.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be noted that all these peculiarities require the constant monitoring of terminology, searching for optimal forms and strategies of information delivery. Otherwise, the implication of many important events in the history of Russia, having influenced on Russian mentality origin, will remain obscure or miscomprehended by foreign students. In time the lecturer must control the feed-back in all stages of the educational process carefully, using questionnaires, general questionings and the other methods of checking the knowledge obtained by foreign students.

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