Methods of overcoming the language interference in the speech of Russian-speaking immigrants in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to analyze the Russian-Czech interference in the speech of bilingual students, as well as to develop methods for overcoming this interference and approbation of these methods in practice. Corrective strategies for dealing with interference in studying foreign languages with the aim of improving the quality of language knowledge are presented in the article. The functional approach to Russian grammar teaching, in particular, is gaining in importance. The implementation of the functional approach is closely linked to the training of intra-level and inter-level relationships between different language units. A good effect is achieved by the teaching of morphology on a syntactic, i.e. text basis.

Keywords: Language interference, bilingualism, error, syntax, poetic text, communicative competence;

1. Introduction

In the last two decades the Czech Republic has become an attractive country for immigrants from the Russian Federation, Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries. According to the data of the Czech State Statistical Committee, in the Czech Republic there are approximately 30 thousand Russians, 120 thousand Ukrainians, citizens of the Republic of Belarus, Moldavia, Kazakhstan and other nationalities. Many of the Russian-speaking young people study in Czech universities, including such majors as “Russian Philology”, “Russian Language in Business Communication”, “Russian Language in Tourism” etc.

Teaching of the Russian language to Russian-speaking students in the Czech Republic is of a specific nature. The level and idiomatic quality of their native speech is affected by the natural interference between the Russian language and the Czech language. Many children of immigrants have attended elementary and secondary school in the Czech Republic, and therefore they have a very limited knowledge of Russian grammar. Among those Russians, who constantly live in a foreign language environment, the spheres of their native language usage are on the decline, and thus their native language tends to become stylistically shallow and limited to domestic-like and interfamilial modes of communication. The stylistic lack of depth of their native language among the Russian-speaking citizens in the Czech Republic is caused by the limited scope of their bilingualism.

It is known that approximately 70% of the world population can speak, to some extent, two or more languages. Weinreich (1953) defines bilingualism as the practice of alternately using two languages. Studying of the Russian language by the Russian-speaking students in the Czech Republic is influenced by Russian-Czech bilingualism. The variety of Russian-Czech bilinguals is rather extensive and comprises both ideal bilinguals at one end of the scale and individuals who are taking their first steps in mastering a foreign language at the other end of the scale. The core
elements of ideal bilingualism are primarily education and social mobility, with these two elements being jointly applicable in most cases. Each bilingual is unique, first of all, in terms of overcoming language interference. The term “language interference” was introduced by representatives of the Prague Linguistic School (Weinreich, 1953; Haugen, 1957) who used it to define deviations from the norm of contacting languages within the context of bilingualism.

2. The Aim of the Study

The environment of immigrants is fertile ground for the emergence of contacts between languages, since communication involves the alternate usage of two languages: the native language (Russian) and the language of the country of residence (Czech). In the context of Russian-Czech bilingualism, the interference unfolds in two directions. On the one hand, there is a transfer of phenomena from the Russian language to the Czech language, and, on the other hand, there is a transfer of phenomena from the Czech language to the native Russian language due to insufficient differentiation between these phenomena. When teaching the native (Russian) language to bilingual students, the overcoming of the second type of interference is more frequent.

The purpose of this research was to analyze the Russian-Czech interference in the speech of bilingual students, as well as to develop methods for overcoming this interference and approbation of these methods in practice. For this purpose, twenty-eight assignments and one hundred forty in-class practice tasks were collected and analyzed for errors caused by the Russian-Czech language interference. A total of 47 Russian-speaking university students in Usti nad Labem (Czech Republic) participated in this study.

3. Statement of the problem

U. Weinreich in “Languages in Contact” (1953) pinpoints phonetic, grammatical and lexical interference among bilinguals. Among Russian-speaking students in the Czech Republic there are almost no cases of the Czech-Russian phonetic interference. The Czech-Russian lexical interference repeatedly occurs in the speech of Russian-speaking students. The emergence of lexical interference is triggered by proximity of two Slavic languages and presence of interlingual homonyms.

The greatest challenge in the teaching of the Russian language to Russian-speaking students is posed by the Czech-Russian grammatical interference. According to Weinreich (1953), the grammatical interference is possible when the rules of placement, concord, choice or mandatory change of grammatical units, incorporated into the system of S language, are applicable to approximately the same chains of elements of C language which results in violations of C language norms. Common mistakes in the speech of Russian-speaking students, which are caused by the influence of the second (Czech) language, are as follows: 1) incorrect syntactic compatibility of the verb with the noun by means of subordinate relation (verbal inflection): кружится мне голова (točí se mi hlava); работать на переводе (pracovat na překladu); 2) incorrect compatibility of numerals with nouns and noun dependent adjectives (два новые телефоны) due to the influence of forms of the Czech language (dva nové telefony); 3) incorrect usage of prepositions; 4) mistakes in phrase composition (Спроси у него, если он пойдет в кино, instead of Спроси у него, пойдет ли он в кино).

Professors of the Russian language encounter the challenge of overcoming all kinds of manifestations of the Czech-Russian interference in the speech of Russian-speaking students.

4. Methods

In order to overcome the language interference we need students to learn all language phenomena in the context of their functioning and usage in speech. The functional approach to teaching Russian grammar ensures more efficient learning of various grammar elements and provides a better understanding of the language system. Furthermore, students should not learn isolated phenomena, but rather a complex of units, pertaining to all language levels, along with their interrelationships in order to better express their ideas in different communicative situations.
and spheres of social activity. The functional approach requires a meticulous selection and organization of language material, as well as understanding of the role, purpose and usage of various language units in speech.

The system learning of lexis, morphology and syntax comprises the development of intra-level and inter-level language relations as well as the studying and correlation of units from various language levels. The analysis of students’ written works has indicated that learning of morphology on a syntactic, i.e. text basis, is rather efficient. As such, the learning of separate morphological categories is ensured, due to examples of their implementation in a text. It is at the syntactic level that all functions of language units are realized. The communicative approach to the teaching of syntax can provide students with a new level of communication: from the intuitive usage of the language to a conscious and skillful usage of sentences with varied structure and semantics for various communicative purposes. The teaching is aimed not only at sentence building, but also at text creations wherein sentences perform different functions. Students should learn to decipher simple and complex sentences and their types, as well as to use different syntactic constructions in spontaneous speech.

In order to overcome Czech-Russian interference, we have developed special complexes of grammar exercises which help students activate their knowledge of grammar in different communicative situations. It is especially challenging to overcome interference at the syntactic level and particularly in the prepositional case of verbal inflection. For this purpose we offer a complex of exercises with the constructions of “verb + (preposition) + noun” where students need to correctly define a preposition and put the verb into a correct case. Constructions with verbal inflection are used in texts of different functional styles and in different communicative situations. Positive results are provided by Czech-Russian and Russian-Czech translations of syntactic constructions which pose problems to students.

Good knowledge of the language presupposes not only a high level of communicative competence, but also a command of speech culture and ability to participate in a dialogue of cultures. It is advisable to include in the teaching of the Russian language such language materials as literary and poetic texts. A poetic text can and should be actively used when teaching syntax of the Russian language due to the following reasons: 1) a simple sentence in a poetic text is represented by a solid number of laconic and multifunctional structural variants; 2) a poetic text, as a rule, requires not only slow but also repeated readings which results in a meticulous analysis of various levels of its language organization; 3) a poetic text is easy to remember due to its rhythmic organization, thereby enriching students’ speech with perfect speech samples.

Students easily learn similarities and discrepancies in the structure of a simple sentence in the Russian and Czech languages by means of such learning activities as translation of original poetic texts from the Russian language into the Czech language, comparison of student translations with professional ones, as well as reverse translation from the Czech language into the Russian language with subsequent comparison with the author’s original text. Such usage of poetic texts is important not only for teaching the Russian language, but also for the students’ linguistic and cultural development. A poetic text, being a speech product, expresses specific peculiarities of Russian speech, demonstrates the language’s image potential and contains cultural value by representing the spiritual heritage of Russian people.

5. Conclusion

The implementation of functional and systemic approaches in the teaching of lexis, morphology and syntax facilitates the overcoming of Russian-Czech interference and the efficient development of students’ communicative competence. Due to a complex of specific exercises, the number of mistakes caused by Czech-Russian interference decreased in Russian-speaking students’ written works by 25 – 30 %. The students’ communicative competence improved, namely the command of the Russian language norms, the creation of texts for different communicative situations, the evaluation of literary pieces from a foreign verbal culture and the evaluation of one’s own communicative competence, i.e. the ability to notice and correct one’s own mistakes.
References