LANGUAGE MEDIATION: THE PLACE OF ENGLISH IN TEACHING RUSSIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Communication in culture, society, economy and politics makes the study of Russian as a foreign language (RFL) to be necessary. In this perspective, the teaching of Russian as a foreign language nowadays is one of the most popular disciplines among foreign students coming to study in Russia. Any large university has it on the curriculum.

One of the most questionable dilemmas in teaching Russian as a foreign language is to use mediator language or not? This problem is considered to be not insufficiently studied in the pedagogical area, nevertheless such researchers as Vinogradov V.S., Alekseeva I.S., Jakobson R.O., Stathopoulou M. and others have made a great contribution to the study of this issue. The purpose of the research is to resolve this dilemma in order to remove the doubts and to help practicing teachers.

The majority of all incoming foreign students in Russia are from China, so it was decided to check the hypothesis that Russian is better learnt as a foreign without mediator language by Chinese students studying at the University in Kazan.

English was chosen as a "mediator" as it is the language of international communication all over the world. During 3 months 2 groups were taught, in one group English was used as "mediator", in other group Russian language was taught using the total immersion method.

The results of the test were processed by methods of mathematical statistics and it was definitely proved that the hypothesis advanced above was correct.

The results of the research can be used in determining the better way of teaching RFL or any foreign language in the situation when mother tongue of the teacher and the students are different, and teacher is a native speaker of the target language.

Keywords: Russian as a foreign language, mediator language, language mediation, teaching, Chinese students, immersion.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the recent years there has been a tendency to increase interest in studying the Russian language abroad, as well as the popularity of Russian higher education institutions as a place for getting higher education. In this regard, the methodology of teaching RFL is constantly being improved in the direction of the needs of a modern foreign student.

Many scientists have explored the role of a mediator language in teaching a foreign language. According to T. Kapitonova, "different methods of teaching foreign languages, including Russian as a foreign language, have different attitudes towards the usage of students' native language or the mediator language in the educational process. Some people are in favor of a complete rejection of them, for example, representatives of the audiovisual method or the full immersion method. Others support the direct comparison of the corresponding linguistic phenomena in the native and studied languages and the translation of training dialogues in the audio-lingual methodology "[1].

It was V. Kostomarov who introduced the concept of the "mediator language" for the first time in Russia. He wrote: "Traditionally, the mediator language is considered as an auxiliary learning technique and used to semantize the particular words and constructions that are difficult to explain by the means of the Russian language. And also it is used for checking the correctness of understanding the meanings of certain words and sentences, clarifying connotations of the studied linguistic units, for explaining grammatical material or the purposes and the content of the lesson, for creating situations that stimulate speech activity in Russian, and sometimes in order to control" [2].

M. Filtsova gives examples of a mediator language usage at the lessons of RFL: «Most often, the mediator language reinforcing translation in the teacher's speech. The purpose of the reinforcing

translation is to bring the meaning of the statement to the consciousness of students without paying attention to the lexical unit itself "[3].

In our study we stand on the position that the usage of a mediator language does not help to study the foreign language, because in this situation the interference phenomena are very strongly manifested. According to E. Haugen, the interference is "a case of deviation from the language norms, which arises in the speech of a bilingual speaker as a result of acquaintance with other languages". However, the scientist specifies, that interference is not always deviation from the language. That is why exactly determine interference, - he writes, - is possible only in case if we take as the original baseline such language condition, which came before bilingual establishment "[4].

Based on the above theoretical propositions, the following research hypothesis was put forward: the use of mediator language in the study of Russian as a foreign language negatively affects the formation of foreign students' Russian language proficiency.

2 METHODOLOGY

More than 80% of all foreign students in Russia are students from China [6]. Chinese students participated in the prolonged pedagogical experiment which was implemented to test the hypothesis. The experiment was conducted in a higher educational institution - the Kazan Conservatoire (Russia, Kazan). Chinese students come to study music at the Kazan Conservatoire; they are listening lectures on instrumental art, composing, conducting, music theory, etc. Teaching of Russian language as a subject is focused mainly on the professional sphere, so teaching materials are authentic and are taken from textbooks on music written in Russian by native speakers and for native speakers.

The pedagogical experiment took place in natural for the students learning conditions without disrupting the ordinary educational process. Students were surrounded by familiar people and did not know that they were the object of study. So this did not cause them stress and any kind of emotional pressure affecting cognitive abilities and, as a consequence, the normal course of the experiment. The active observation method, the testing method and methods of mathematical statistics were used during the pedagogical experiment.

The purpose of the experiment was to confirm empirically or disprove the hypothesis that the use of mediator language (in our case, English) in the study of Russian as a foreign language at RFL lessons by Chinese students negatively affects the formation of their Russian language proficiency.

In the beginning two groups of Chinese students were defined: the control group (CG) and the experimental group (EG). There were 12 students in CG and 13 in EG. In both groups, testing was conducted to determine the absence of differences in the level of Russian language proficiency on all types of speech activity (reading, speaking, writing and listening) (Table 2). The value of the statistical criterion χ^2 turned out to be less than the critical one (in our case (χ^2= 5,99, α = 0,05), which indicates the absence of statistically significant differences in the level of Russian language proficiency in CG and EG.

In the EG the teacher used English along with the Russian language during RFL teaching, when she gave comments on tasks, explanations in the process of studying new material, students also used English as needed. Thus, during RFL learning in the EG group the English language was used as the mediator language, but English was not used as the mediator language in the CG.

A set of exercises for studying RFL has been developed for use in CG. Bilingual (Russian-English) tables were implemented while studying the use of Russian prepositions in a comparative aspect in situations of using the Second Case in Russian and English (Table 1) [7,8]. Online resource for studying the RFL was developed using the mediator language on the basis of the English-language Internet platform (https://stepik.org/course/5929/syllabus).

RU	EN
1. Значение перемещения в пространстве с использованием предлогов *из* и *с*: -Откуда вы приехали, Су Хан? -Я приехал <u>из Китая</u>. -Откуда он пришёл? -Он пришёл <u>с концерта</u>.	1. Movement of person and his place of origin (using the preposition *from*): -Where are you from, Su Huan? -I am <u>from China</u>. -Where had he come from? -He had come <u>from the concert</u>.
2. Значение отрицания обладания объектом: -У вас есть ручка? -Нет, у меня нет <u>ручки</u>.	2. Denial of having the object: -Do you have a pen? -No, I have <u>no pen</u>.
3. Значение принадлежности объекта (дом отца, фуга Баха) или сочетания с предлогом у: -У <u>Анны</u> есть книга? -Да, у <u>Анны</u> есть книга.	3. Affiliation or owning something (using the possessive case: father`s house, Bach`s fugue): -Does Anna have a book? -Yes, she has a book. (=<u>Anna`s</u> book)
4. Количественно-именные сочетания: Дайте, пожалуйста, бутылку <u>молока</u>.	4. Combination of quantity and belonging: Could you give me, please, the bottle <u>of milk</u>?

3   RESULTS

At the control stage of the pedagogical experiment in the CG and EG the level of Russian language proficiency of Chinese students was determined by testing in all kinds of speech activity. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *Russian Language Proficiency Test Results Before and After the Experiment.*

Language Skill	Level	Test Results Before the Experiment		Test Results After the Experiment	
		CG	EG	CG	EG
Reading	Low (0-60)	3	2	1	2
	Medium (61-80)	4	4	2	3
	High (81-100)	1	1	5	2
Writing	Low (0-60)	4	3	0	1
	Medium (61-80)	4	3	3	3
	High (81-100)	0	1	5	3
Listening	Low (0-60)	6	7	1	3
	Medium (61-80)	1	0	6	4
	High (81-100)	1	0	1	0
Speaking	Low (0-60)	7	5	1	3
	Medium (61-80)	1	2	5	4
	High (81-100)	0	0	2	0

The quantitative results of the tests in CG and EG enable us to use the methods of mathematical statistics to confirm or refute the statistical hypothesis put forward, that the use of mediator language

(in our case, English) in the study of Russian as a foreign language at RFL lessons by Chinese students negatively affects the formation of their Russian language proficiency.

To test the validity of the hypotheses put forward, the criterion of homogeneity χ^2 was used. The formula is the following:

$$\chi^2_{\text{эмп}} = N * M * \sum_{i=1}^{L=3} \frac{(\frac{n_i}{N} + \frac{m_i}{M})^2}{n_i + m_i}$$

where   N – is the number of students in the experimental group,
       M – is the number of students in the control group,
       n_i – the i-level test results in the control group,
       m_i – the i-level test results in the experimental group,
       i – the index of the level.

Table 3. *Values of Criteria χ^2 Before and After the Experiment*

Language Skill	Criteria χ^2 Before the Experiment	Criteria χ^2 After the Experiment
Reading	0,1232	1,7528
Writing	0,8288	1,4336
Listening	2,016	2,16
Speaking	0,5992	8,32

The comparison of the empirical values of the χ^2 criterion obtained after carrying out the experiment for all types of speech activity make it possible to draw the following conclusions. For three types of speech activity (reading, writing, listening), the empirical value of the statistical criterion is less than the critical value (χ^2 = 5.99, p = 0.05). Consequently, the hypothesis of the study was not confirmed for reading, writing and for listening. However, as can be seen from the Table 3, for speaking, the empirical value of the statistical criterion is much greater than the critical one, so in this case the hypothesis put forward is correct.

Only in one case we can confidently assert that the mediator language interferes with learning - when teaching speaking skills. This can be explained by the fact that for the formation of this type of speech activity, it is important to immerse in the speaking foreign language environment, but when using the mediator language this predictor is violated.

4   CONCLUSIONS

The following recommendations in the field of teaching RFL were developed on the basis of this study:

a) Full immersion in the language environment is most effective for the study of the Russian language by foreign students,

b) The use of the mediator language in learning affects the speed of understanding, but not the quality of learning;

c) In some cases, namely at beginning or when instructing, the use of the mediator language is permitted for scaffolding, but it is crucially important to develop speaking language skills in this case.

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