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THE CHALLENGES FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION (APPROACH AND ANALYSE): THE EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL CONCERN

Abstract: in this paper the authors examine several intercultural factors that assist and hinder Russian/Tatar learners in acquiring communicative skills in English. A study was undertaken to explain the situation of ESL in Kazan (Russian Federation) and focused on the area of cross-cultural and intercultural factors that contribute to the proficiency of learning English. As we know, teaching English as a second language (ESL) all over Russia (case study Kazan National Research Technological University and Kazan State Power Engineering University, Kazan, Tatarstan) is mainly focused on the area of cultural, social and business factors that might contribute to the proficiency of learning English.

Keywords: teaching English as a second language, cross-cultural and intercultural factors, communication skills, approaches and conditions of learning English as a second language, educational conditions and approaches to teaching English as a second language, examination system, English Language Education

1. Statement of the problem

Over the last several years, the Russian ministry of science and education has revised the teaching curriculums, learning outcomes, professional training and re-training system in IT education in order to establish motivated professionals and English education as a way of raising individual standard in the international society. The goal of foreign language education is to deepen the understanding of language and culture and raise the encouraging mind-set towards communication. In order to produce Russian students who can express their opinion and introduce Russian and Tatar cultures to the international community, English education has to be changed from the traditional approach which emphasizes role memorization to the communication based approach.

English is the international throughout the world; most business and political meetings are carried out through English. Since the lack of confidence in communicating in English, Russians are sometimes not being able to express their opinions adequately when they go to another country or when they communicate with foreigners. In order to be recognized as one of the internationalized countries in the world, it is of great importance for each individual to express his/her idea and culture to people abroad. In Russian and Tatar traditional cultures, the identities of Russian citizens are based on the uniformity rather than differences. Researches sometimes characterize Russian and Tatar cultures as traditional, homogenous and group-oriented, which can be observed in the teaching techniques and school settings in all over Russia where teachers use traditional techniques (such as memorization, repetition, drills) as well as in English class, they focus on reading and translating rather than speaking and listening. According to LoCastro [1990] this approach “dehumanize” and “uncontextualizes”.

Russian government defines “internationalization” as the mission to be trustworthy in the international community; and as well as the goal of foreign language education is to deepen the understanding of language and culture, to raise the positive attitude towards communication; so in order “to produce” Russian /Tatar students who can express their opinions and introduce Russian/Tatar cultures to the international community, English education has to be changed from traditional approach which emphasizes memorization to the communication based approach. In this research paper, we look at Russian approached for teaching ESL and analyse the challenges for English language education in Kazan (Russian Federation); and we attempt to address some of the educational or cultural concerns that may obstruct the learning process of communication English in Kazan.

2. Purpose

Although change has been happening in the recent years, there are clearly some drawbacks in the language education (Language for Special Purpose) in the way of improving communicative skills which are not being addressed: like most students (of technical speciality) can read and write effectively but when it comes to communication they face difficulties in expressing themselves. Of course, there is a difference between Russian students and other students (Japanese, Vietnamese, Thai and etc) in their comfortable-ness in speaking English as a second language; which can be attributed to linguistic differences, however there are also seems to be foremost or essential social and cultural factors that may cause this difference.

In this article, an attempt is made (1) to identify the major cross-cultural and intercultural factors that play role in communication in English for Special Purposes; (2) to examine the approaches and conditions of learning English as a Second Language;

(3) to answer how Russian educational conditions (approaches) to teaching English might be improved in providing a more successful outcome in the way of communicative English; (4) to identify how awareness of cross-cultural and intercultural factors may increase the understanding of how more efficiently teach the communicative aspect of English.

In this article, we look at Russian approaches for teaching English to second learners and analyse the challenges for English language education in Russia (particularly Kazan National Research Technological University and Kazan State Power Engineering University, Kazan, Tatarstan). Through this process, we attempt to address some of the educational or cultural concern that may inhibit the learning process of communication English in Russia. The purpose is to study what kind of cross-cultural and intercultural factors support and obstruct Russian learners in acquiring communication skills (listening and speaking) in English. The study was undertaken to explain the history of the Russian approach to teaching English and will focus on the area of cross-cultural and intercultural factors that can possibly contribute to the proficiency of learning English.

3. Background

Compared to schooling years, the approach of English education since then (1998) has been more focused on communication; most schools and universities now have access to ALT's (Assistant Language Teacher) and such tools as language laboratories and the Internet. Through my schooling year and teaching experience in Russia, several problems had been found that may obstruct or affect Russian students in acquiring English communicative skills.

1. Most of the classrooms are made up of more than forty students and a single teacher gives all students the same instructions. Without saying, it is rather difficult for the teacher to pay individual attention to each student and give opportunities for them to interact with each other and so they become reluctant to communicate in English in such a large sized classroom; and the method that English teachers used was grammar-based instructions; the methodology didn't provide the opportunity to communicate in English. After becoming a teacher, we had to teach twenty or more students at the same time; whenever we tried to have students speak in English by letting them pair up, to do skits and presentations, students would become tired of attempting to speak in English and began chatting in Russian /Tatar during the interaction.

2. The students are forced to memorize English grammatical structure, words, and phrases; teachers use traditional methods and therefore students became eager to memorize as much as possible in order to pass the examination. Because the examination at present is the assessment of memorization, the English language

education is emphasized be reading and translation skills and not so much on communication skills. Consequently, students acquire English as knowledge based and not as a tool for communication.

3. Some teaching credential can be earned by taking a few required courses in university; as a result even Russian teachers who teach communication English sometimes have lack of training in communicating in English. Many English teachers major in English literature and Education in their undergraduate or post-graduate levels; in addition to it, the period of practical training less than two months, which is not enough to acquire teaching skills in a broaden sense. After becoming certified teachers, they not only become busy with teaching English, but also become involved in classroom management or club activities.

4. Most Russian Teachers of English, especially the older generation, are good at teaching grammar, but not communication since they were trained in oral skills and do not know how to teach communication in English. Those teachers tend to depend on ALTs for the preparation of lectures/lessons and are not able to communicate with ALTs and use them effectively in class.

4. Limitations of the research

The research has been limited with regard to the individual characteristics of the respondents; since data was collected within a relatively short period of time, there was no definite method in the procedure to measure how these descriptions may have recently changed or may be expected to have changed in the near future. As has been mentioned before, the purpose of this research was to examine communicative skills of Russian (Tatar) learners of English.

5. Approach (methodology)

This study used a qualitative research method of inquiry, including review of literature and interviews. The interview and survey was conducted with Russian students from Kazan National Research Technological University and Kazan State Power Engineering University to establish their perception of learning English in Russia. This study considered students' perceptions towards oral communication, and Russian Teachers of English and Assistant Language Teachers' perception toward English instruction. The data was gathered through the interviews with six Russian Teachers of English whose academic levels vary (so it is necessary to consider the conceptual differences by academic level) and four Assistant Language Teachers and a survey of forty students in Universities. This study took place in Kazan National Research Technological University and Kazan State Power Engineering University.

6. Literature review

We will review and analyse the supporting literature concerning the cross-cultural and intercultural factors on second language acquisition; however there has been a significant amount of research done on second language acquisition and language interference in Russia. But in this research paper the resources will discuss cross-cultural and intercultural factors which affect and may cause difficulty for Russian / Tatar learners to acquire the communicative skills, such as internalization, training limitation, traditional approach (instructions) and students' perceptions in general, and toward the English as the whole.

7. Internalization

Russia is in the process of its internalization through English education. Ministry of Education and Science states that it is important to promote individuality of each student in order to contribute to the future international society in the moral education policies. Several researches emphasize Russia's internalization through their articles. However, Russia's internalization in the future, Russians have to not only learn about other countries, but also convey Russian way of thinking and Russian culture to the rest of the world by using a tool "English". Most researches discuss Russia's internalization through English education, which has become an important concept in the process of re-establishing Russians identity, providing the view of self (Russia) and the other (the rest of the world).

7.1. Russian teachers' lack of training

Teachers' lack of training is considered to the difficulties students in the acquisition of communicative English. Most teachers majored in literature; however, the percentage of teachers who majored in linguistics is only 10% and the percentage of TESL/TEFL major is only 9%. It is reported that those who majored in TESL/TEFL at the undergraduate level felt more prepared for the many challenges since those who majored in literature were not required to take additional courses in second language acquisition theory, ESL methodology, and techniques, or testing.

Scholefield (1997) criticizes the system of obtaining teachers' licence and the system of appointments. TEFL training for teachers is limited to the undergraduate degree and teaching practice. Besides taking some requirement in college, students are required only four weeks teaching practice, and in teaching practice, teachers are trained to follow the supervisors who usually practice traditional techniques (Scholefield, 1997). Also appointments are based on examination results that consist of written test of educational subjects, professional and teaching subjects, and interviews so that teachers' communication skills are not really evaluated in the examination (Scholefield, 1997).

It has been over several years that ELT Russia was established. In the early years, many Russians English

teachers found difficulties in communicating in English with a foreigner, although there is still a great deal of debate if ELT program has improved the quality of communicative language teaching in Russia, it had an impact on English ability of Russian English Teachers and their confidence of working with native speakers of English.

Besides ELT Russia, there is FULLBRIGHT – six months program for teachers to study overseas (mostly USA). Since then, opportunities for study overseas for teachers have been increasing. However, the program pays little attention to educational research of schooling and instructions. Also there are several organizations among English teachers, for example, the National Association of Teachers of English in Russia (NATE Russia), in order to make changes in English education in Russia.

7.2. Traditional instruction

As mentioned before, because of the traditional teaching methods that have been used in Russia, students are not able to acquire communicative skills in English. Teaching methods in Russians language classes put emphasis on traditional techniques such as memorization, repetition, and drill rather than creativity and innovation. Because of the goal of studying English is to pass entrance exams, English teaching has traditionally emphasized methodology and materials. The class is overcrowded with many students and Russian students are accustomed to a role learning style, which focuses on memorization and test taking. English education in Russia "dehumanize" and "decontextualizes" English language by preoccupying students with reading and translation, which resulted to the lack of "critical thinking" and "problem solving".

Scholefield (1997) explains the history of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) toward oral approach since 1950's in Russia. Despite the existence of different Committees for English language, which stressed two areas of English education, teacher education and the production of teaching for the oral approach. However, many teachers found it difficult to accept oral approach since they were not used to it and it was difficult to see how this approach would benefit students with regard to their examinations. In the mid 1960's audio-lingual movement began, which moves away from the grammar-traditional method and let students acquire the ability to produce all of the sound system with basic grammar within a limited vocabulary. However, most teachers used combination of grammar-translation and some oral practices. Reasons for the reluctance of transition among teachers were oral practice was confined to "parrot reading" of textbook and most educational establishments were not suited for audio-lingual approach since teaching hours are short and auditorium is overcrowded. Teachers with low English proficiency were the one to blame as

they could not serve as models for students and prefer the traditional style because they are accustomed to it.

There were several teachers who discuss the reasons for teachers' preference of traditional teaching methods: (1) for continuing to use grammar-translation include the teachers' low proficiency in English and their explanation that "it is convenient to carry out lessons in Russian"; (2) feel powerless to alter these factors and continue to work within a system they may theoretically indefensible but which they assume "will remain for a while".

7.3. Students' perspectives toward English instructions

It is important to be aware what kind of instructions students prefer and how they want to study English. Several researchers have analysed students' perspectives toward English instructions: questionnaires asked about their preferred teaching methods, traditional methods, natural approach, TPR (total physical response), PBL (problem based learning), CLT (communicative language teaching), the Silent way, CLL (communicative language learning), grammar – translation method, audio-lingual method, direct method, and error correction.

The result showed that most students' preferred new methods to traditional approaches, however, to some extent, students wanted traditional methods because of their educational background. As far as the error correction is concerned, most students considered error correction as a positive approach to improve their language skills and they did not feel embarrassed.

With regard to error correction and rote memorization, traditional approaches should be used; but the teacher should try to use tactful techniques to reduce students; anxiety, such as group work or teamwork, cooperative work. Class techniques should use Natural Approach, which has an emphasis on listening and speaking. The use of TPR should as well be used; teachers need to allow ample time to lower anxiety levels and help to create the classroom atmosphere in which students feel comfortable about speaking up.

All is all students want to be able to listen and understand everyday English and agree with the idea that

skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are equally important. A significant percentage of students disagree with the idea that being able to read in English in enough and focusing on only reading is the way of English learning. Regarding fear of learning English, a large number of students agree with the idea that studying English cause fear and unpleasant feelings. Analysing the result, most students consider English communicative skills, such as, listening and speaking are as important as reading and writing, and want to acquire those skills.

As far as the skills that students expect from the role of the Russian teachers of English and the Native Speakers of English, students perceive the native speakers of English as listening/speaking oriented (students expect those teachers to help with pronunciation), and Russian teachers of English as reading/writing oriented (with grammar and guide how to study English). Students perceive the Native Speakers of English as useful in the classroom and find team-teaching more fascinating.

We do believe that two-way interaction among the three parties (students, the Native Speakers of English, the Russian teachers of English) is necessary to improve the speaking as well as communicative skills. It is concluded that team-teaching should move towards the process of team learning, in which the three parties have opportunities to exchange the ideas and convey a sense of their individual cultural values. It has been shown that English education is changing from traditional to communicative to assist with internalization. However, there are still many cultural and social factors that hold back this transition in Russian university settings.

8. Conclusions

Russia is in the process of its internalization and English language education has a key for Russia's internationalization as it was mentioned before, therefore we believe the examination system for universities and English curriculum, which puts emphasis not on creativity or coherence but on examination are the two main factors that obstruct Russians acquire communicative English.

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