Teaching Conversational Language Skills to Foreign Students: Blended Learning and Interactive Approaches

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ABSTRACT
The timeliness of the present study is a consequence of the changing status of the Russian language in the global communication landscape. The growing international significance of Russian requires the development of new language teaching methods. This article aims to demonstrate the effectiveness of employing a blended learning approach to teaching "Russian as a foreign language" with the use of authentic speaking situations, and to show the relevance of interactive education to the teaching of conversational language skills. The primary research method for this problem is a practical method of interactive learning that allows students to hold a constructive dialogue. The author proposes a new pedagogical genre, "convergent lecture," which takes a different approach to the instruction of foreign students. The article explains how students' experience of acting out potential social roles in the Russian as a foreign language classroom develops their ability to speak pragmatically in everyday, professional, and educational contexts. The findings of this article may be helpful for scholars who develop educational programs for foreign students, as well as instructors interested in helping their students develop more practical communication skills in a foreign environment.

Introduction

Improving the quality of college-level training for students is one of the key tasks facing today's education system. This challenge can be addressed with the help of information and communication technologies, material resources, and

the practical application of national and international theoretical knowledge. From the author's perspective, the optimal solution is a blended learning model which includes both traditional methods and e-learning technologies that provide lifelong learning opportunities regardless of one's circumstances (Teng, 2005). On the one hand, such an approach combines the strict formal methods of teaching, like classroom work and the study of language-a materials, with informal ones, like the discussion of language-related topics on forums, via email, and at e-conferences. On the other hand, it combines different methods of presenting the learning material — face-to-face, online learning and self-study — with knowledge management techniques (Kostina, 2010) "Both methods of education have advantages and disadvantages. …the greatest effect comes with the combination of traditional and distance education" (Polat, Buharkina & Moses, 2004).

The experience of both Russian and international instructors has shown that blended learning techniques facilitate a qualitative improvement in the learning process. The blended learning approach to language teaching is able to organize instructors' and students' time in the most productive way, increase the efficiency of learning lexis and grammar, enlarge the number of memorized lexical items for specific cases, as well as to make the language study process accessible and engaging. Because it comprises both "the advantages of the traditional academic learning process based on oral presentation of study material and face-to-face interaction between student and instructor, and innovative educational methods which use technologies that enhance student learning (tools allowing search, research, group, discussion, and interactive capabilities), i.e. classroom training and distance learning technologies." (Ruliene, 2016).

Various interactive instructional methods have been growing in popularity among teachers of Russian as a foreign language due to the emphasis placed in intensive courses — a common format for language classes — on developing conversational competency in the shortest possible time (Kitaygorodskaya, 2009). It should be noted that teaching any foreign language provides the opportunity to employ such interactive learning methods, since the chief goal is the development of communicative competency and preparedness for social interactions (Ya, 2007).

Interactive learning is based on dialogue and requires students' active cognitive engagement while completing creative, research, or problematic tasks. Training in speaking skills takes the form of both student-instructor interaction and peer interaction between students.

Materials and Methods

Research Methods

Our research relied on the following methods: theoretical (analysis of scholarly work in pedagogy, linguistics and area studies regarding methodological approaches to teaching Russian as a Foreign Language), empirical (modelling real-world communication scenarios), and practical (the development of conversational language skills for foreign students).

Experimental data for research

The experimental data for this study was collected at the Russian State Vocational Pedagogical University in Ekaterinburg. For the experiment we invited first-year foreign students who study Russian as a foreign language with the goal of using it practically in academic and professional activities, day-to-day life, and sociocultural communication.

Research Stages

The research was accomplished in three stages:

Stage 1 – Developing the most functional program for teaching Russian as a foreign language using innovative methods

Stage 2 – Correcting the program to more effectively integrate it into the educational process

Stage 3 – Formation of conversation skills and communicative competency for foreign students

Results

Program development

Educational programs in "Russian as a foreign language" or "Russian as a second language" are usually designed according to the classical model "theory – practice – control." Teachers mainly use the following methods: the presentation of the curriculum, assignments and exercises for reinforcement and training, tools to check whether students have mastered the material, and the analysis and correction of mistakes. The most obvious advantage of such scenarios using information and communication technologies in blended learning, besides the simplicity of implementation, is that it provides a high level of control over the educational process, as well as the ability to present the material systematically and complete a large number of speaking exercises within a given timeframe.

Specific methodological objectives determine the choice of innovative technologies intended to support the educational process. The newly developed educational method for foreign students, or more precisely, a new pedagogical genre – *"convergent lecture"* – consists of several constituent parts with different functions:

- Lecture/presentation: this form of instruction provides the student with foundational knowledge and is a mandatory tool for teaching Russian as a foreign language;

- Training: practice and reinforcement of the material using different types of exercises (see exercise types.) (Vereschagin & Kostomarov, 1990);

- Assessment: initial, thematic and final assessments that can take the form of a test, a text, etc.;

- Correction of mistakes: analysis, consultation, correction and updating of linguistic and area studies knowledge bases;

- Reference materials: it provides the student with additional information for further reading and assisting;

- Relevant literature, accumulation of thematic vocabularies/word lists.

Convergent lecturing (lessons) can include multiple educational forms and genres creating a new format of teaching: a lecture/presentation with the use of multimedia technologies, including both theoretical and practical

instructional course materials, is a planned communicative experience. This method fuses different learning activities in the context of verbal interaction. However, it is important to bear in mind that the slides should be clearly focused on helping foreign students internalize concepts when completing exercises that use the respective formal language structures. The exercises and texts on slides of a presentation or in hyperlinks can also be clearly focused on the development of communication skills through linguistic tasks.

The components "assessment" – "correction of mistakes" and "assessment" – "reference materials" are interlinked and should have a two-part structure or the correct version for the effective examination of a group and/or each student individually. A lecture/presentation and a lesson/presentation have an extensive hypertext system which can provide assistance in the process of self-learning. A set of linguistic program tools, consultations, processing of students' responses, additional exercises and variations for language and communication skill training are also available for distance education. It should be noted that we do not divide classes by types of speech activities because a convergent lecture is a comprehensive lesson. It is precisely the use of new computer technologies to synthesize video and audio in order to complement the work of the teacher that locates modern "Russian as a foreign (second) language" teaching within the theory of blended learning.

Updating the program for introduction into the classroom

Our proposed educational program for the "Russian as a foreign language" course corresponds to a new interactive paradigm that predominates in the modern educational system and presupposes active interaction of a student with a teacher and other students. Within these relationships the student is viewed as a subject capable of making his/her own decisions and acting independently. Two main types of language games are used to teach foreigners to communicate using dialogues: roleplay/imitation and modeling/manipulation. Language games of the first type simulate situations in everyday, socio-cultural, or professional spheres. The solution of the non-linguistic problem posed requires the use of language as a means of communication, which is very important for foreign students and foreign citizens working in Russia. The development of events in a given situation depends on the responses of the student, or more precisely, on their level of communicative competency and their ability to orient themselves not only in a situation caused by communication issues, but also in different kinds of language aids provided by materials in the reference/consultation function. "Be able to communicate in a foreign language in order to achieve interaction and mutual understanding through communication, storage and conversion of social information by verbal means" (Polat, Buharkina & Moses, 2004).

Interactive educational technologies relate to a personality-oriented approach, as it implies a collective, cooperative learning, self-study and equal relations between the teacher and the student as they are subjects of educational process (Shen, 2003). With the full participation with the instructor and their peers, students immerse themselves in the socio-cultural environment and learn firsthand the language, culture, and profession (acquiring professional skills and abilities).

Developing conversation skills of foreign students

According to modern methods of teaching "Russian as a foreign language," the object of research is "learning oral communication, or as they say, learning another language as an additional means of communication" (Kostomarov & Mitrofanov, 1988), and the speech activity is considered a way of implementing speech communication. That is, communication is recognized as an independent activity and is "a basis and a framework for the implementation" of the educational process (Shchukin, Kapitonov & Moskovkin, 2014). Of course, the main purpose of studying Russian as a foreign language is to gain practical speaking skills, which can be achieved with careful organization of educational process. Speaking is the primary form of verbal communication, and the communicative principle is recognized as foundational. Lessons for oral communication skill development are designed according to the following scheme:

- PowerPoint presentation with any prerequisite lexical content that will appear in the convergent lecture;

- Reading the dialogues and polylogues;

- Development of linguistic and speaking skills by completing grammatical exercises that will help facilitate speaking practice;

- Assign the task of producing monologues or dialogues.

At the elementary level, teaching "Russian as a foreign language" demands special attention to the practical application of noun and pronoun case forms, as well as verbal forms. Accordingly, the language material is introduced taking into account the communication needs of students while also corresponding to their level of familiarity with case and verb systems. The vocabulary and grammar used in communicative scenarios must correspond to the general instructional program in Russian language.

Communicative competence is the ability to express one's intentions in the form of speech. To determine one's personal tactics and overall communication strategy, one must first of all possess certain socio-cultural and intercultural competencies, which are gradually formed in the process of practical and contextual knowledge acquisition. For this reason, when teaching Russian as a foreign language it is necessary to take into account the realistic communicative circumstances of the student in his/her educational and extracurricular environment.

In the early stages of adaptation to a new linguistic and cultural environment the main aim for the foreigner is to acquire the conversation skills required in socially significant, cultural, vocational and educational communication situations. That is why it is necessary to provide for any potential social roles played by foreign students on a daily basis as they have unique communication needs. The following model can be used to select the necessary means of communication: "social roles in everyday communication: a shopper, a passenger, a patient, a bank client, a customer in a café" (Evtyugina 2015). Then to provide for a "social role of the student in educational and professional communication" and a role "in the socio-cultural learning sphere: "visitors of theaters, museums, exhibitions, concerts, guided tours" (Evtyugina 2015). It is therefore necessary to use texts and situations that possess a fundamentally pragmatic value for the student in real interpersonal encounters,

reflecting a language-specific view of the world in order to cultivate appropriate communicative behavior.

It is especially important to take into account the social aspects in the early stages of teaching Russian as a foreign language to foreigners, because in many cases foreign students' social interaction with the new social environment preceded their speaking interaction, which is later followed by an organic fusion. If foreigners know ethical rules, social etiquette norms, and their rights and duties in Russian culture, it will help them adapt quickly to the new environment and become part of the new socio-cultural team.

It is important for the teacher to ascertain the student's speaking ability but it is not enough to determine how the speaker uses the tools and methods of communicative competence. It is necessary to determine if they are competent in the social techniques of communication, namely "choosing and implementing verbal behavior styles based on their personal ability to orient themselves in a certain situation while communicating, the ability to classify the situation according to topic, tasks, communication aims arising before the conversation" (Vyatyutnev, 1977).

Today, the communicative competencies in different types of speech activities have been identified. The communicative competencies of students not specializing in languages are such an important activity that speaking in the social and domestic environment and the socio-cultural environment are included as one element of the government proficiency tests.

According to many "Russian as a foreign language" experts, including M.N. Vyatyutnev (1977), V.G. Kostomarov & O.D. Mitrofanov (1988), A.N. Shchukin (2014), it is important to identify the components of the speaking behavior pattern:

- Personal characteristics of participants who participate in the dialogue;

- Topics, significant situations, and areas of learning;

- Intentions relevant to a given group of students;

- Language and speech resources;

- Skills and abilities necessary for speech activity/speaking.

Initially the most frequent, typical situations and spheres of communication were identified based on hypothetical modeling of students' speech activity. Then the researchers collected, systematized, and approved a curriculum for realistic spoken communication in selected situations in the study groups, and then integrated them into the educational process. With the help of observations, surveys, and questionnaires distributed to students and instructors, a list was developed of typical speaking situations in everyday, formal and cultural spheres. These situations are usually filled with authentic language content, where the standard language configuration, including any national/cultural component, is prominent. Usually when describing the situation, the content of the dialogue is preserved, and the language configuration takes the correct form.

When analyzing communication tactics in a particular situation aimed at achieving non-verbal results through speech, it should be taken into account that the "content and structure of situational speech can be predicted based on the defining factors of the situation: 1) the goal and the motive of action, 2)

temporal and local characteristics, and 3) participants of the speech act and their interaction" (Arutyunov, Muzrukov & Chebotarev, 1981).

Now the guidelines for describing real communication situations for teachers include a set script to be used as a model: the setting, the intentions of participants in the situation, and personal traits, since in real life students, acting in a variety of social roles, constantly meet communication partners and gradually construct a communicative model for their behavior. Their speech behavior derives a specific motivation from this model. Consider for example the following three tasks.

Task 1. Read the description of the situation. Start a dialogue.

You want to check out textbooks at the library. Ask the librarian what you need to do and what terms you need to observe in order to check out the books. Description of the situation: the student is talking to the librarian in his University about checking out the textbooks.

The script for the teacher:

The participants of the dialogue: a student and a librarian. The scene: Library of the Russian State Professional and Pedagogical University.

Dialogue model.

1. The student: - Hello.

The librarian: - Good afternoon.

2. The student: - I want to check out some textbooks. What should I do?

The librarian: - Do you have a library card?

The student: - Yes, I do.

3. The Librarian: - What is your major?

The student: - Sociology (psychology).

4. The Librarian: - Are you a first-year student?

The student: Yes, I am.

5. The Librarian: - What books do you need?

The student: - I need: "Russian History," "Russian Language," and "Psychology".

6. The Librarian: - Please fill out a request form.

Task 2. Read the description of the situation. Start a dialogue in a polite way using proper terms of etiquette.

You want to go to the circus, but you do not know where it is located. Ask the passer-by on the street where the circus is and how to get there.

Script for the teacher:

The dialogue: a student and a passerby. The scene: the streets of Yekaterinburg.

Dialogue model:

1. The student: - Excuse me, could you please help me?

The passer-by: - Yes, sure.

2. The student: - Tell me, please, where is the circus?

The passer-by: - In the city center, near the metro station "Geologicheskaya", just past the intersection of Kuibyshev and 8th of March streets.

3. The student: - Is it near the shopping center "Greenwich"?

The passer-by: - Yes, it's next to the shopping center "Greenwich".

4. The passer-by: - Do you know where that is [located]?

Student: - I think so.

5. Student: How do I get there?

The passer-by: You can take the metro to "Geologicheskaya" station or trams number 5, 14 or 15 to the stop "Circus".

6. Student: Thank you.

The passer-by: You're welcome.

Task 3. Read the description of the situation. You go to see the dean about moving to a different department. Speak with the dean about changing your specialization.

Dialogue participants: student and dean. The scene: a university dean's office in Yekaterinburg.

Dialogue model.

1. Student: Hello!

Dean: Good morning!

2. Student: I want to study in a different department. Could you tell me how to resolve that issue?

3. Dean: Have a seat, please. What is your last name?

Student: Orlov, Andrei.

4. Dean: State the department and year in which you are studying?

Student: I am currently in my first year in the engineering department.

5. Dean: And what department do you want to switch to?

Student: I want to switch to the electrical power department so I can become an electrical engineer.

6. Dean: You need to submit an application to the university provost.

Student: Thank you.

Dean: You're welcome.

It should be noted that in many respects the selection and classification of communication situations coincide with the cultural topics encountered by students in their daily routine and in the educational and professional spheres of their lives. The methodological approach of all introductory textbooks for foreigners includes such traditional topics as "Family," "Shop," "Cafeteria," "Pharmacy," "Theater," "City," "University," "Library," "Dean's Office," "Bank," and others. The selection of such topics is determined by the real-life needs of foreign students. All topics are determined in accordance with the appropriate areas of oral communication.

The material presented in textbooks should be adjusted according to the communication skills needed by students to successfully manage the real-life situations they encounter, or special training and study guides for additional

work in the classroom or self-study should be developed. Such study materials should be guided by a methodology both conscious and practical, which presupposes students' awareness of their own linguistic resources and the speaking applications of those resources, as well as communicative, depending as previously mentioned, on a choice of intentions, topics, and communicative situations reflecting the practical need of foreigners to adapt more quickly to Russian society. It will contribute to a faster communicative transition from the accumulated factual, background, and related knowledge to successful behavior in real-world communication.

It is advisable to present teaching materials in the form of scenarios prescribing both verbal and nonverbal behavior, because for a foreigner it is important to know not only what to say, but also how to behave. Therefore, each speech situation is accompanied by commentary on normal behaviors, "where the linguistic details are closely related to the behavioral information, and which constitute a unifying description of the speaking and behavioral norms called for by a certain speech situation" (Vereschagin & Kostomarov, 1990). This is how communicative competence is developed.

To ensure its practical relevance, information presented in the scenarios for teaching communication should be up-to-date, including accurate facts about the city, province, and region.

Discussion

Contemporary language teaching methods aim to unite traditional training tools with new learning methods, so a considerable effort is made to integrate the information technologies and communication methods (Bespalko, 1989; Shukin, 2014).

Traditional instructional methods, forms and tools do not meet the realities of the modern education process and cannot provide students with the skills necessary to assimilate the growing body of existing knowledge. Computer technologies make the language learning process more effective. The future of language education is tied to the increased role played by multimedia technology. New federal standards of education in Russia define the new form of curriculum delivery and a new role for students in the knowledge acquisition process, so many instructors are gradually introducing blended learning techniques (Ruliene, 2016) but there are very few substantial works analyzing the blended learning approach for courses of Russian as a foreign language.

The current state of foreign language instruction, including "Russian as a foreign language" or "Russian as a second language", is characterized by introducing new instructional methods and learning forms that are based on the use of electronic resources to process and transmit information.

Interactivity is the core resource that increases students' ability to influence the learning process and curriculum content. Computer technologies optimize the labor of instructor and student. Computers are regarded as a tool which increases the effectiveness of interaction of all participants of the educational process because it minimizes less productive kinds of work.

Instructors can use a database of linguistic and methodological data that allows him/her to improve the quality of curriculum preparation and

presentation. Students can use various specialized systems: reference materials targeted to specific student populations (foreign students, migrants, foreign secondary school students) electronic dictionaries that help develop curriculum-related vocabulary, mobile apps, etc.

From the author's perspective, the blended learning approach to Russian as a foreign language is the optimal form of language learning in institutions of higher education. The nature of foreign students' engagement with information has changed. Today the majority of foreign students exist in the multi-code communication space because they use visual, verbal, and auditory modes of social interaction. The display or convergent text is the main unit of communication (Kostomarov, 2010). According to V.G. Kostomarov, polydisplay or convergent text "involves verbal (spoken and written) and non-verbal units of meaning, a regular alternation between items of different potential (informational and expressive), syntax consisting of self-contained parts and a division into convenient clips (comparable to montage sequences in movies), firm constructiveness, so-called anomie (when multiple meanings of the word are limited by the accompanying visual image)" (Kostomarov, 2010). Based on the ideas of V.G. Kostomarov (2010), the author suggests that a convergent ("polydisplay") lecture, which consists of polydisplay or convergent text units, is the most effective for modern education. This brings to the fore student-instructor interaction and peer-to-peer interaction, is the most effective for the contemporary educational process.

In the opinion of the author, this learning process is effective because students are constantly engaged academically in class and use their time as efficiently as possible. Convergent lecture (class) includes different types of assignments: texts for reading and analysis, case studies modeling specific speaking situations, video for illustration and analysis, practical exercises requiring a specific script, as well as questions and tests at various levels of difficulty to assess and improve students' knowledge of each topic, which allows students to alternate between different types of work and stimulates active cognitive engagement.

Foreign students beginning to study Russian will need to comprehend 100-120 different model situations in order to communicate. Selection of the cases depends on the learner's personal priorities. Full-time students, for instance, will be given cases connected with college life and the professional domain they are studying. The instructor should select the situations necessary for achieving the anticipated learning results.

As experience has shown, foreign students participate in role plays with the understanding that their ability to speak in these pragmatic situations will help them in their day-to-day life. Role play in the classroom helps students overcome phycological and linguistic barriers. It also "provides participants with the opportunity to participate in the communicative process and to establish active contacts; allows them to learn what exactly their communication partners see and hear and how they interpret their words… [role plays] become a mirror that reflects the students through someone's else's eyes" (Abolina & Akimova, 2012).

A project/module-based approach to education helps realize the potential of the *convergent lecture* format in the communicative training of foreign students.

This integrative course of lectures and practices allows for a deeper and fuller presentation of the curriculum, reinforcement of knowledge, and working through of necessary topics.

This method provides a convenient way to hone definitions and concepts and improve practical conversation skills, increasing the level of mastery of cultural and speaking norms and rules—in short, to establish working control over the skills and learned competencies. The multi-component thematic organization of theoretical material, the possibility to break up texts into shorter clips or, on the contrary, to unite and integrate theoretical information with practical exercises from related disciplines – all this can significantly change one's approach to structuring and conducting a class. This provides an opportunity to compress content, distributing the bulk of semantic and pragmatic information across different semantic systems.

Conclusion

In sum, a blended learning approach to Russian as a Foreign language that incorporates interactive methods produces very good results in the area of speaking skills development.

In 2015, in the experimental group of students trained with convergent lectures approach we had the following improved achievements:

— Out of forty-eight students nineteen received a grade of A, twenty-four - B, and five - C

— Students learned actively through interaction and natural communication initiated by the instructor

— They developed their communication skills and the ability to work in a creative group, which fosters tolerance of different nationalities

— Role playing provided them with the flexibility needed to change social roles depending on the situation, which leads to more efficient assimilation of course material

— Class practice in interpersonal communication with peer-students developed their speaking activity skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing

— communication and information technology stimulated independent speaking and self-learning

— Trusting and creative environment for interaction both in class and out of class encouraged students to learn intensively.

Recommendations

The findings of this article may be helpful for scholars who develop educational programs for foreign students, as well as instructors interested in helping their students develop more practical communication skills in a foreign environment.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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