

Language-Related Problems of International Students of Elabuga Institute of Kazan Federal University

Problemas relacionados con el lenguaje de estudiantes internacionales de la Universidad Federal de Kazán

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Contents

1. Introduction
 2. Methodology
 3. Results
 4. Discussions
 5. Conclusions
- Acknowledgements
References

ABSTRACT:

Nowadays the process of globalization is characterized by the tendencies of intercultural mixing and student exchange. The number of students coming from neighbouring countries to attend Russian universities is growing year by year. They subsequently face the problem of a language barrier in their new environments. The current study presents a research on language difficulties experienced by international students of Elabuga Institute of Kazan Federal University and their possible impact on their academic performance. The study aims at determining the most problematic areas of Russian language proficiency. The results of the paper show that the majority of students have to cope with the problem of language adaptation during their first year of study. The current study discusses the significant role of the University administration and teaching staff in elaboration of effective techniques of coping with language difficulties during their study.

Keywords: foreign students, intercultural education,

RESUMEN:

Hoy en día, el proceso de globalización se caracteriza por las tendencias de la mezcla intercultural y el intercambio de estudiantes. El número de estudiantes que vienen de países vecinos para asistir a las universidades rusas crece año tras año. Posteriormente enfrentan el problema de una barrera del idioma en sus nuevos entornos. El presente estudio presenta una investigación sobre las dificultades lingüísticas experimentadas por estudiantes internacionales del Instituto Elabuga de la Universidad Federal de Kazán y su posible impacto en su rendimiento académico. El estudio tiene como objetivo determinar las áreas más problemáticas del dominio del idioma ruso. Los resultados del artículo muestran que la mayoría de los estudiantes tiene que lidiar con el problema de la adaptación del lenguaje durante su primer año de estudio. El presente estudio discute el importante papel de la administración de la Universidad y el personal docente en la elaboración de técnicas efectivas para hacer frente a las dificultades del lenguaje durante su

1. Introduction

Increasing globalization is forcing a growing number of linguists and researchers to focus on issues of communication barriers in multicultural international environment. The fact that nowadays the Russian multicultural educational society is getting more ethnically diverse makes it necessary to study and analyze the impact of language barriers on academic experiences of cross-border students coming from Central Asia in search of better knowledge and higher education.

Research on the issues of interethnic education shows that upon arrival to a new country in the conditions of a new cultural environment with its own social norms, the majority of international students have to struggle with a plenty of challenging stressors: language barriers, adjustment problems (Poyrazli and Grahame, 2007), homesickness (Poyrazli and Lopez, 2007), loneliness (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert Nyland and Ramia, 2008), cultural differences (Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, and Utsey, 2005; Reynolds and Constantine, 2007), financial problems (Poyrazli et al., 2001, Yang and Clum, 1995), perceived discrimination (Beoku-Betts, 2004); Karuppan and Barari, 2011; Lee and Rice, 2007), poor social support (Pedersen, 1991) and so on.

Among the abovementioned stressors, language barriers appear to be one of the most challenging issues for international students (Mori, 2000). An insufficient command of the host language is a stressor for successful adjustment in a new culture (Poyrazli, Arbona, Bullington, and Pisecco, 2001; Yeh and Inose, 2003). Many researchers underline a close connection of language proficiency and the academic performance.

In a number of studies, international students identify language proficiency as the most problematic aspect of the academic learning (Lee, 1997; Lin & Yi, 1997; Nasrin, 2001). According to Sawir et al, difficulties are manifested in listening and oral communication, lack of knowledge of local contextual references, inadequate vocabulary, and the struggles to meet the requirements for academic writing (Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland, and Ramia, 2012).

The research that has been done on the issues of language barriers shows that the student's level of the host language proficiency affects academic performance, social interaction, and general adjustment to the host culture. In their academic life, international students face challenges such as language barriers, developing relationships with fellow students and professors. These challenges, in their turn, may cause anxiety, educational and sociocultural stress. For international students it can be problematic to share jokes in the language of the non-native society, make friends and develop a new social support system. Stoyhoff found that language proficiency is positively correlated with freshmen's academic performance (Stoyhoff, 1997).

In Australia, the UK and the USA the most frequently-cited language related learning problems are writing and then oral comprehension and communication (Robertson et al, 2000; Singh, 2005). He'llsten and Prescott note that language-related difficulties impose time pressures: study and assignment preparation takes a long time, lectures are recorded and replayed. Some students have problems with their accents and cultural differences (Singh, 2005).

Cross-border students who come to the Republic of Tatarstan, and generally to Russia to get higher education, must learn the Russian language for professional skills acquisition.

Thus, for a great number of students enrolled in Elabuga Institute of Kazan Federal University Russian is not their mother tongue, and the literature confirms that the main source of difficulty for them is associated with language skills.

Elabuga Institute of Kazan Federal University is located in a provincial town in the Republic of Tatarstan, which is multicultural in its nature being populated by ethnic Tatars and ethnic Russians, with significant numbers of Chuvash, Mari, Udmurt, as well as Bashkir, Mordvin, Ukrainian minorities with the sprinkling of other nationalities. In recent years, Elabuga Institute has admitted approximately 400 students from the countries of Central Asia, namely from Turkmenistan, Tadzhikistan, Uzbekistan, Kirgizia.

The aims of the study

The current study presents a research on language difficulties experienced by international students of Elabuga Institute of Kazan Federal University and their possible impact on their academic performance. The study aims at defining the most problematic areas of Russian language proficiency. The paper discusses the significant role of the University administration and teaching staff in elaboration of effective techniques of coping with language difficulties during their study. The paper emphasizes the positive effect of social work carried out in the Institute.

2. Methodology

To achieve the aims of the study the authors sought to obtain data by employing questionnaires and interviews in order to identify the main language problems among culturally different students enrolled in Elabuga Institute. Beside them, the study used literature analysis, direct and indirect observations.

2.1. Participants

The primary focus of the research was on the group of international students whose residence time was less than one year. The participants were 98 students representing a wide range of nationalities: the Turkmens, the Tadzhiks, the Uzbeks, the Kyrgyzs. The age of the respondents ranged from 18 to 25. 100 % of these students had lived in Elabuga for less than one year.

2.2. Measure

The study used Personal Data Sheet (covering citizenship, age, marital status, duration of residence in Russia) and a questionnaire developed by the authors. The questionnaire consisted of two blocks: academic adjustment and language adaptation. The task of each units is to identify the problems encountered by foreign students of Elabuga Institute of Kazan Federal University to get higher education, as well as the features in the course of their adaptation.

3. Results

The analysis of the responses given by first year students-inophones has shown that they experience certain difficulties in their academic study due to serious language difficulties. The autors came to this conclusion after analyzing the responses to the survey question "Rate your level of knowledge of the Russian language". The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Russian Proficiency

The Level of Proficiency	Number of Students
I hardly understand Russian or I do not understand it at all	52

I understand Russian and can read in it with the dictionary	38
I understand and can speak Russian	10

Thus, 52 of the respondents arrived in Russia without any knowledge of Russian. 38 of students noted that by the beginning of their academic year they were able to read in Russian with the dictionary, but were not capable of oral communication. The rest 10 of international students of Elabuga Institute of Kazan Federal University had basic speaking skills.

The second question "Why do you think you cannot speak Russian?" was aimed at identifying the causes of poor knowledge of the Russian language.

4. Discussions

The results of the analysis of the responses have revealed several reasons. Firstly, the Turkmen language belongs to the Turkic group of languages. It is an agglutinative language. There is no grammatical category of gender and irregular verbs. Therefore, the study of inflected Russian language is particularly difficult: "I find it hard to determine the gender of a noun" (1st year student, profile "Mathematics and Physics"); "When in the courses, we were explained which nouns were animate and which were inanimate, I could not understand why the cat was an animate noun. Indeed, in the Turkmen language only people are animate" (1st year student, profile "Russian language and literature, English language"). Secondly, in some of the countries of Central Asia the Russian language is taught as a foreign one, together with English, French, Japanese, etc., but the amount of academic hours is not sufficient. The level of Russian proficiency of these students (especially of those from rural areas) is very low. This can also be explained by the fact that many of them did not plan coming to Russia: the priority was to get higher education anywhere abroad, but not in their own countries.

Another reason for the emergence of the language barrier is the lack of desire of Russian-speaking students to come into contact with the international ones: "When we came to study in Elabuga, Russian students did not want either to speak to us or to get acquainted with us. Sometimes they talked with senior Turkmen students" (1st year student "Mathematics and Physics").

Overcoming the language barrier is one of the ways of academic adaptation of foreign students in the didactic environment of the Institute. To determine the difficulties associated with the educational process, respondents were offered the options to continue the phrase: "It is hard for me to study in this Institute because...". The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Difficulties experienced by international students in educational process

It is hard for me to study in this Institute because...	Number of Reports
I know the Russian language badly	61
I do not understand the lecturer	43
It is difficult for me to prepare for practical classes	74
It is difficult for me to prepare for exams and pass them	73
It is difficult for me to do homework	47
It is difficult for me to read large volume works of Russian literature	27

Teachers do not carry out individual work with me	39
I have complicated relationships with my fellow students	-

As it can be seen from the results of the survey, preparation for classes is the most challenging area, mentioned by 74 respondents. This area was followed by preparation for exams and passing them (73). 43 participants noted difficulties in preparing their home tasks.

The results presented in Table 2 show that low language proficiency provokes language difficulties in their academic work and adjustment.

With the aim of smoothing the process of coping with language barriers, there are organized courses of Russian in Elabuga Institute where they study the language for several months to reach the intermediate level. At these classes, students systemize their knowledge of the Russian language, complement it, broaden their vocabularies, and gain important information about the culture, traditions, customs, of not only Russian, but also Tatar people, as children learn in a multicultural environment. Thus they are prepared to communicate with the native Russian-speakers.

Nevertheless, these courses prove to be not sufficient for comprehension of the material given at the lessons: "I attended the courses of the Russian language where I received a lot of useful information. It is still hard for me to understand the lecture material, I cannot follow professors. Therefore, I fail to prepare for practical classes at home" (1st year student, profile "Mathematics and Physics"). Insufficient proficiency of the Russian language affects the quality of practical lessons: "I am in my first year. We learn very complicated topics on the contemporary Russian literary language. At lectures I do not understand what the teacher says. He uses a lot of unfamiliar terms. I do not know what they mean. It is very difficult to remember them. And at practical lessons, as I cannot answer, I'm ashamed, uncomfortable" (1st year student, profile "Russian language and literature, foreign language"); "It is very difficult to learn. When the teacher asks me at the practical lesson, I do not have enough time to answer, because I have to think too long: first, I mentally make a response in the Turkmen language, and then translate it into Russian" (1st year students, profile "Physical culture"). "At the classes of Russian literature we ask the teacher many questions, but still do not understand many things. We try to make the plan of the material. And when preparing for practical classes, we learn the material by heart. It is very hard for me" (1st year student, profile "Russian language and literature, foreign language"). For many Turkmen students it is very difficult to do their homework for the reason of lack of vocabulary and poor understanding of the theoretical materials.

5. Conclusions

The research shows that international students of Elabuga Institute of Kazan Federal University are a vulnerable group experiencing serious language-related problems in their academic work.

To tackle these problems, the administration of Elabuga Institute of Kazan Federal University has tailored up the following measures. Firstly, the number of hours for learning the language in the framework of courses of Russian is being increased. Three teachers are involved in the work with foreign students, so that it could help them to be more relaxed and overcome shyness. It is very important that the students feel relaxed at the lesson. It is the desire and willingness of students to participate in intercultural communication in the target language, not just knowledge and mastery of the language and speech material that determine the effectiveness of the language adaptation and the process of learning Russian as a foreign language. This is possible if one of the forms of educational activity is not only listening, speaking, reading and writing in a foreign language, but also lively, active communication with the teacher and with each other. Secondly, at the department of Russian language for international students there are organized consultations assisting students in different issues on certain disciplines. Thirdly, they are engaged in different social events and projects in the Institute and in the city. For

example, they are often invited to take part in the meetings organized by Silver Age Library which is a cultural centre of Elabuga city and the "residence" of creative intelligent people. International students of Elabuga Institute participate in various sports competitions (darts, "Koresh" national wrestling, volleyball and football matches, etc.). There they mix with local students – native speakers of Russian and act as a single team. At such events there are implemented the following educational objectives: 1) forming respect and interest to the culture and the people of the host country among foreign students, 2) forming communication culture, and 3) maintaining interest in teaching and cognitive activity. Fourthly, international students are eager to share their rooms with Russian-speaking ones in order to have an opportunity to speak Russian in household. At the end of the first term international students together with others have rest in Elabuga Institute's "Burevestnik" holiday camp which is located in a picturesque site on the territory of "Nijnyaya Kama" national park. Communication with Russian-speaking students gives international students of Kazan Federal University the opportunity to deepen and expand their skills in practical use of the language in different situations and spheres of activity.

The authors' suggestion is organizing a serious system of language support services including encouraging international students' participation in University events enabling them to better adapt to the language and culture of host country, private tutorials, interactive forms of group and pair work, mixing of local and international students in joint projects, providing the theoretical materials for lectures and so on.

The authors find it necessary to carry out a similar survey of these students in some intervals (in a year, in three years) and compare the results that will make it possible to see the dynamics of language proficiency and academic adaptation. It is worth mentioning that at a certain time international students will be facing certain challenges, that is why effective techniques of coping with language-related difficulties elaborated by the University administration and teaching staff are of great significance for international students.

In addition, there is a need of further research on international students' integration into the educational process in Kazan Federal University as intercultural mixing and student exchange is a relatively new phenomenon for the Republic of Tatarstan.

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[Índice]

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