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Curricular Impact of International Trends on the Russian Linguistic Education System

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ABSTRACT

In the context of globalization the promotion of the necessary international dimensions in higher education and research of innovative teaching methods and techniques become relevant. These innovations presuppose not only the reformation of the whole degree system but also the creation of a new curriculum, completely different from the existing one. The traditional teaching approach where the training of practice material is preceded by rule-presentation (explanation + mechanical form-oriented practice) doesn't meet the requirements of constantly developing rational language processing. Contemporary studies are considering the ways how to allow second language learners to be rational in the sense that their mental models of language functioning are the most optimal. This paper outlines current trends in the Russian educational system and cognitive perspectives on second language teaching.

KEYWORDS : Innovation, curriculum, globalization, the Bologna Declaration, communicative competence

Promotion of the necessary foreign dimensions in higher education, particularly with regards to curricular development, inter-institutional co-operation, mobility schemes and integrated programmes of study, training and research contributed to higher education institutions in Russia having a unique opportunity to shape their own future abroad and to play a crucial role in the development and implementation of the Bologna process.

This reform means that Universities and other institutions of higher education can choose to be actors, rather than objects, of this essential process of change.

They may in particular:

- profile their own curricula, in accordance with the emerging post-Bologna environment, in particular through the introduction of bachelor courses in systems where they have not traditionally existed, and through the creation of master courses meeting the needs of mobile postgraduate students from around the world;
- activate their networks in key areas such as joint curriculum development, joint ventures overseas or worldwide mobility schemes; contribute individually and collectively to the next steps in the process (The Bologna Declaration on the European space for higher education: an explanation).

We hereby undertake to consider these objectives within the frame of linguistic curricular reform in the Russian higher education system.

Reformation of the Degree System

It is known that adoption of a new degree system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate, has considerably shaken the foundations of the five-year well- established education framework in Russia. In the newly accepted system the access to the second cycle shall require successful completion of first cycle studies, lasting a minimum of four years. The degree awarded after the first cycle shall also be relevant to the European, American or Asian labour market as an appropriate level of qualification. The second cycle should lead to the master and/or doctorate degree as in many foreign countries.

So, the introduction of a new four-year education system in Russia instead of the old five-year one, which resulted for successful students in giving them a Degree in Interpreting or Teaching foreign languages, is a feature of globalization in the sphere of linguistic education. What do we have after the reform? The overwhelming majority of Russian high educational establishments nowadays suggest the foreign approach: a Bachelor in Linguistics (a four – year course) and Master in Linguistics (a two-year course). Only a few universities continue working with the old five-year programs along with the new ones, which arises much public controversy, since it's still remains unclear what the crucial difference between these two systems is. The old system is aimed at getting a degree or qualification of the so-called "Specialist" either in Translation or Language Teaching Methodology. The new Bachelor- Master degree - system presupposes a division into different profiles: Translation, Applied Linguistics, Methodology of Teaching Foreign Languages but the criteria for differentiating these two degrees (Bachelor and Specialist) or making them equal have still to be defined. The solution of the problem lies in the first place in entire harmonization of the Russian, European, American and Asian degree and curricular programs. At the present moment only diploma supplements with the indication of exact number of academic hours and the precise list of disciplines (subjects) can more or less contribute to figuring out the correspondence between the Russian and foreign degree systems.

Changes in the Curriculum Design. Shaping a Communicative Curriculum

It should be noted that the access to educational opportunities common in overseas countries has witnessed significant facilitation in Russia. The development of linguistic theory and the integration of Russia in the Bologna process resulted in the advent of new disciplines such as pragmatics, text linguistics, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics and cognitive linguistics as an elective discipline share the interest in language as use, focus on units larger than a sentence. Traditional areas of language studies, phonetics with phonology morphology and syntax have for a long time provided the standard theoretical framework for the study of language in Russia. The introduction of new disciplines was able to enrich the existing forms of language teaching, promote better understanding of language mechanisms and mastering of practical language skills.

From early 1990s there is an evident transition from the traditional approach to foreign language learning to an increased activity of learning and teaching cultural elements. Culture has become a significant element in foreign language curriculum including cultural awareness.

As an identification of learners' communicative needs provides a basis for a curriculum design, the newly documented linguistic curriculum in Russia aims to enable students (Jelica Tošić, 2007):

- To get a critical awareness of how meaning is organised and conveyed by the structures and vocabulary of the target language, and thus to contribute to their understanding of the workings of human language in general;
- To develop strategies for effective language learning;
- To have a broad acquaintance with the cultural, social and political complexion of countries in which the target language is a normal medium of communication and thus to help raise their awareness of cultural, social and political diversities.

These points have remarkable implications for the new curriculum design which implies the notion of the communicative competence being directly linked with the realization of students' professional needs, needs they are likely to be faced with once they start their careers or get involved in professional communication. Definition of appropriate communicative competence for learners requires an understanding

of the sociocultural contexts of language use and requires an understanding of sociocultural differences in styles of learning.

Communicative language teaching derives from a multidisciplinary perspective that includes, at the least, linguistics, psychology, philosophy, sociology, and educational research. The focus has been the elaboration and implementation of programs and methodologies that promote the development of language ability through learners' participation in communicative events and determines the kind of active, learner-centred curriculum, including the language forms and structures on the one hand and the tasks to be carried out on the other (Sandra J. Savignon, 2002).

So, a traditional task-based curriculum present the learner with the target language samples when the learner's attention is focused on task-completion. Language practice in a second or foreign language program focuses on forms of the language, including syntax, morphology and phonology. In contrast with language analysis, language experience is the use of language for real and immediate communicative goals.

The above-mentioned approaches to language teaching involve different instructional conditions in the classroom: 1) explicit (traditional rule explanation) and 2) implicit (remembering situations). The last one deals with a so-called rule-search condition, inductive rule-discovery tasks and practice activities based on both fluency and analysis tasks. Innovation approaches in mastering foreign languages are mainly based on meaning-centered and identifying rules tasks when a student is involved in cognitive process of analysing the communicative situations and formulating rules instead of mechanical memorazing them. Traditional instruction is directed solely at formal accuracy by means of traditional, controlled exercises where focus is on the formal elements of the language while innovation instruction is directed at establishing form-meaning mappings where attention is drawn to the linguistic apparatus needed to get the meaning across. It's crucially important to distinguish the context in which attention to form (for example grammatical) takes place (Ellis, 2006).

New linguistic curriculum teaching programs are those which take into account the cognitive aspects of language learning and seek to involve learners psychologically as well as intellectually. Regardless of the variety of communicative activities in the classroom, their purpose remains preparing learners to use the second language in the world beyond. The emphasis on communication has brought about vacuum in teaching formal language and left the second language teachers with a burden of challenging problems imposed by new international trends to solve by themselves. Finally it goes without saying that the above stated and other controversial and unresolved points deserve special attention.

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