

Effective techniques to language training of foreign students in Russian universities

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Abstract

The strategic target of Kazan Federal University is enhancing its authority and gaining academic prestige in the area of research and development. For this reason, the objective of our research is to find out whether our techniques are effectively designed to meet the foreign students' professional language needs and how they impact their learning skills. Subsequently, these methods are being focused on developing their English communication skills in work-related situations. Firstly, we identified the strategy of formation the coherent speech at the level of topic-comment relationship. Secondly, we used the gambits as an essential instrument of speech culture. Comparative characteristics of the levels of English proficiency among foreign students of KFU and KNRTU-KAI illustrate the positive results of the experiment, which confirm the effectiveness and success of the proposed techniques. Thus, our methods of teaching English to foreign students make a certain contribution to the accelerated development of the necessary competencies.

Keywords: *Language personality; coherent speech; topic-comment relationship; gambits; language, education.*

1. Introduction

The creation of positive image of the Russian Federation and the Russian higher education as well as the enrollment of foreign citizens for gaining a Russian diploma are among the top priorities of Kazan Federal University (KFU). The integration of KFU into the global scientific and educational system and its self-presentation at the international level is provided by the implementation of the following mechanisms: the development of partnership and networking cooperation with leading universities, scientific centers and organizations of the world; the enrollment of foreign students and recruitment of foreign academic staff; the expansion of two-way academic mobility; the participation in international scientific projects; membership in international academic associations; organizing high-profile international events on the premises of KFU; targeted information campaign etc.

One of the top priorities of KFU is the development of educational services export which enables the university to consistently increase the number of foreign students, being among the leading Russian universities by the number of foreign learners. In 2019 there were 9 654 foreign students from 106 countries.

In the academic year of 2020-2021 the total enrollment of foreign students in KFU reached 13410 people. The majority of foreign first-year students are citizens of People's Republic of China. It is approximately 25% of the current total enrollment of foreign students. Apart from Chinese learners, there is a great deal of students from Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Egypt, and Latin-American countries. The university management set the goal to select the best applicants all over the world and to make their studies at KFU highly fascinating and comfortable. This intention is proved by the continual extension of a multi-cultural campus which is regarded to be one of the best in Russia. (Otchet. MD., 2019).

2. Material and Methods

2.1. Research questions

Our review of theoretical theses on this subject as well as our practical experience of intercultural communication at the lessons has enabled us to reveal the strategy of coherent speech development at the level of topic-comment relationship and determine how important it is to use gambits as an essential instrument in the context of oral communication culture.

2.2. Objective of the research

To identify how efficient methods of teaching a foreign language are within the framework of intercultural communication.

2.3. Research methods

The following methods were used in the research: analysis of literature review, methods of conversation and observation, questionnaire survey, methods of comparison and generalization.

Teaching the Russian and English languages for different specialties at our universities has changed the attitude of virtually all members of the institute staff towards a foreign language. For instance, many teachers of a foreign language found themselves to be unprepared to the new challenges. Thus, there emerged the necessity of review of their teaching methods which are to be based not only on their own cultural preferences but also on the culture of a language being taught. It has become obvious that it is impossible to teach a foreign language solely through providing authentic written and oral texts without their adequate interpretation. It is essential to keep in mind that only raising awareness of cross-cultural differences will enable teachers to identify their own and foreign perception of the learning material and determine why there is an occasional misinterpretation of language forms and language phenomena (Vereshchagin & Kostomarov, 1980; Gegel, 1990; Gerder, 1977; Gumboldt, 1985; Zakirova & Galeeva, 2018; Ter-Minasova, 2000; Furmanova, 1993).

In both universities KFU and KNRTU-KAI (Kazan National Research Technical University - KAI) the teaching of bachelor and master students is implemented in the Russian language. Whereas for studying for a Bachelor's degree it is sufficient to have B1 level of Russian, master's programs require B2 level. It is highly unlikely that all foreign students possess the above levels of a language competence and it is not uncommon that initial levels of their linguistic and speech competencies are inadequate to master the course of study. Moreover, foreign students need to be equipped with such a level of a foreign language knowledge which is sufficient for communication in an academic context. Implementation of these requirements regarding the language competence poses certain difficulties connected with the specifics of teaching in our universities: it is a limited number of in-class hours designated for studying a foreign language which results in the lack of adequate oral practice at the lessons. Then, there is a need to develop reading and listening skills up to a professionally sufficient level of a communicative competence. It is of importance to note that knowledge of a language and practical command of it require different psychological requisites and various neural mechanisms. Detailed consideration of development of oral activity is well-observed in the works of Gabdulkhakov (2010) in which he emphasizes that development of coherent speech is to be based on the mechanism of speech production. Contemporary pedagogical technology as a teaching model, in V.F.Gabdulkhakov's opinion, is to include the following technological scheme: creation of situations by collective action of the whole learners' group which require to use various speech units; collective rules deduction of speech units usage; selection, classification and activation of speech material which consists of speech units; creation of situations which require independent construction of coherent

utterances. Unfortunately, the present technology is incompatible with the still common methodology which represents a system of instructions for teachers and regards students as the passive object for influence. (Davydov & Suprunova, 2003). Our research review on formation of the linguistic personality in the multicultural environment enabled us to determine the strategy of development of coherent speech in the framework of integrated study of different languages. In the current context of teaching practice, we assume it appropriate to teach students how to make sentences on the basis of topic-comment relationship technique which leads to accelerated formation of coherent speech in future. According to the concept of inter-sentence cohesion (ISC) developed in text linguistics, the main indicator of cohesion is semantic coherence which is based on general structural mechanisms – repetition and linking. ISC can be expressed as a connection among sentences, a complex group of sentences, passages, chunks, chapters and other parts of a text (Loseva, 1980; Sayakhova, 1995). Recognition of the importance of coherent speech formation at the level of topic-comment relationship has enabled to confirm our assumption about the necessity of special study of the word order in a whole text. To confirm our assumptions, we will illustrate them with the following examples (Table 1):

Table 1. The strategy of coherent speech development at the level of topic-comment relationship

Strategy	Examples
Linear saying sequence	In summer our students worked in Turkey. There are a lot of popular hotels in this country. Marti Mira is one of the best among them.
Saying with a regular (cross cutting) theme	My brother is a student of tourism faculty. He likes travelling very much. Recently he's been to Moscow.
Statement due to the parallel connection of derivative topics	In the morning I signed up for tour. Before lunch I had spa treatments. In the evening I went to the gym.

2.3.1 Topic-comment relationship

The results of the research suggested that mistakes in the structure of actual division of the sentence are mainly caused with lack of knowledge of the topic-comment relationship and inability to use the word order as a means of organizing a text. According to the results of the conducted research, errors in the structure of topic-comment relationship (the structure of actual division) tend to be caused by inability of students to make the three main types of it. According to the rules of making these types of sentences, the topic in a sentence is to be placed at the beginning of a sentence and it cannot be moved within a sentence. The comment part is placed at the end of a sentence and has the highest degree of actualization which cannot be moved within a sentence or text. The third type of sentences has the topic at the beginning

of a sentence and it cannot be moved to the end of a sentence. The comment cannot be moved to the beginning of a sentence. The topic and comment are to be placed properly in all sentences. According to our observations, each group of foreign students has a tendency to make a considerable number of mistakes connected with the topic-comment relationship. Moreover, in the course of study there is a continuous growth of the mistakes which is directly correlated with a growing length of an utterance. It all confirms the fact that it is necessary to specifically study the word order within a whole text but not within a single sentence.

2.3.2 Gambits.

The second issue to be examined in a more detail is the use of gambits at the lessons. To facilitate our communication in a foreign language and to give our speech a natural sound it is crucial to utilize as many spoken words and phrases as possible – the so-called gambits. A gambit is a word or phrase which helps us to express what we are trying to say. On the one hand, the gambit has a very little meaning – it does not express an opinion, it may only introduce the opinion. On the other hand, if we never use gambits in our conversation, other people will think we are very direct, abrupt, and even rude. If you want to express a deeply-held belief, people will understand you better if you start: I personally feel that... - and if you think your view is surprising, people will react better if you introduce it with: Not everyone will agree with me, but I think... Thus, gambits will make your English sound more natural, more confident and will make you easier to talk to. Above all, you will not be misunderstood (Keller & Warner, 2002).

We suggest some techniques of working with gambits: in each of the activities in pairs or small groups there is a list of gambits in front of students. Before they start their conversation, make sure they can say them. Try to use them in your conversations. If you find them difficult, have the conversation again and try to use them. It will help you if, after your conversation, you try to write it down and include the gambits. Then read aloud what you have written. Do not try to memorize the gambits. You will remember them better if you try to involve yourself in the activities in an active way. Above all, try to use them whenever you have an English conversation outside the classroom (Martinez, 2002; Hill, 1980). If someone asks you a question, you answer it if you can. But conversation does not consist of questions and answers. We hardly ever ask direct questions. We make observations and pass comments. We expect other people to respond to us. How they respond tells us how to develop what we say. This means that successful conversations depend partly on how we respond to what other people say. For example, if you disagree very strongly with what someone says, you could say: You must be joking! and the other person knows that you are surprised – this will make the person think more carefully before continuing. The adaptation process will go on quicker if gambits are used at any opportunity in extra-curricular activities (Keller & Warner, 2002).

Thus, it can be argued that conversation gambits efficiently encourage students to communicate freely in English and promote active cross-cultural exchange.

3. Study and Results

The results were obtained in the following way. We made up two tables 2 and 3. Each table is divided into four sections. We tested 70 foreign students from two universities: KNRTU-KAI and KFU. The examined category of students is placed in section 1. The other three sections were designed to distribute the levels of competence of students in oral English speech (high, intermediate and low). Table 2 shows the results in oral speech of KNRTU-KAI and KFU students before the experiment (in %). Table 3 shows the results in oral speech of KNRTU-KAI and KFU students after the experiment (in %), respectively. The diagnostics of foreign students' mastery in oral English speech has been performed with the aim of identifying the level of realization of coherent speech development at the level of topic-comment relationship with the use of gambits in 2019-2020. The sample constituted 30 KNRTU-KAI and 40 KFU foreign students. Three levels of students' mastery have been determined: the first level (High) – faultless construction of sentences in oral speech; the second level (Intermediate) – one mistake in the construction of sentences in oral speech; the third level (Low) – two or more mistakes in the construction of sentences in oral speech. For the purpose of diagnostics, utterances made by the students in the process of 5–7-minute spontaneous communication have been employed. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Diagnostic results in oral speech of KNRTU-KAI and KFU students before the experiment (in %).

Examined category	High level	Intermediate level	Low level
KNRTU-KAI students	12	47	41
KFU students	34	37	29

As we can see, neither KNRTU-KAI, nor KFU students show high indicators in the level of ownership of a good command of English. Both of them have an average level. This suggests that their speech is not always a role model. Then a two-month training workshop was held. The results of it we can notice in Table 3.

Table 3. Diagnostic results in oral speech of KNRTU-KAI and KFU students after the experiment (in %).

Examined category	High level	Intermediate level	Low level
KNRTU-KAI students	64	28	8
KFU students	75	23	2

They show that after the experiment, the average and high levels of mastery of oral English have changed significantly: high from 12% (KNRTU-KAI) and 34% (KFU) increased to 64% (KNRTU-KAI) and 75% (KFU). At the same time, the average level of mastery of oral speech, has significantly decreased: from 47% (KNRTU-KAI) and 37% (KFU) to 28% (KNRTU-KAI) and 23% (KFU). The results suggest that adding our techniques in a course of study where they are not currently used will have a positive impact on student perceptions of the instructor. We found that although most students (KNRTU-KAI) had low level (41%) before the experiment, they could achieve good results: intermediate level (28%) and high level (64%) respectively.

Statistical analysis of criteria for assessing the progress of foreign students defines the purpose of the presented tables: firstly, a comparative statistical assessment of the indicators of improving academic performance before and after the experiment. Secondly, identification of the factor of increasing productivity at the initial stage of training. Thus, the positive results of the experiment suggest that the proposed techniques of coherent speech formation at the level of topic-comment relationship as well as the active use of gambits have proved successful. And the results of Table 3 help to realize that the increasing productivity at the initial stage of training highly depends on foreign students' readiness to study at the university. However, we can notice a gap between KFU (29%) and almost 41% of KNRTU-KAI students at the low level. We could be wrong, but we think the quality of teaching and the prestige of the university will determine the level of education and preparation for passing the entrance exams of applicants.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This manuscript is motivated by a series of experiments on the interaction between peers in a group. As a result of the experiment, we have come to the conclusion that for accelerated development of coherent speech both in English and Russian in the integrated study of different languages to be needed for successful study of the chosen specialties it is crucial to do the following: firstly, it is necessary to identify the strategy of coherent speech formation at the level of topic-comment relationship. Secondly, we should encourage students to use gambits as an essential instrument of speech culture. Although the proposed techniques for coherent speech formation at the topic-comment relationship and active use of gambits in speech cannot be regarded as single and universal, the positive results of the experiment indicate that opportunities for successful acquisition of the English language by foreign students are promising.

Thus, we conclude that the occurrence of the positive results is justified on the basis of existing experimental and theoretical results. Moreover, a survey examining students' attitude to the authors' solutions has shown a positive impact on student perception of the teachers

and their techniques. Therefore, these findings could play a beneficial role in the development of the foreign students' professional language skills. We argue that the above-mentioned techniques are quite relevant for teaching staff of universities in connection with a mass influx of foreign students wishing to receive a higher education in Russia.

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