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The system of foreign language teaching at the master`s level in Russia

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Abstract

Russian higher educational establishments are at the final stage of transition from the 5-year programs developed in the Soviet Union to the multi-level structure based on Bologna standards. The shift caused debate and misunderstanding which have not completely disappeared yet. This research aims to comprehensively analyze and describe the system of foreign language teaching at the second level of higher education. The selected representative sample constitutes universities for the humanities. Examining the problem the authors were guided by a set of methods, including the study of standard-setting and methodological documents, analysis of scientific works on foreign language teaching methodology at the theoretical level, and a comparative analysis of syllabi, textbooks and other teaching materials on English for Master`s programs, students` activities at the empirical level. The study reveals the parameters that need to be analyzed to characterize the system of foreign language teaching in the 2-nd cycle of higher education. It discloses the objectives of the Master`s Graduate Programs, the forms of teaching and learning (including autonomous, extracurricular work), content, methods of teaching, control and assessment, requirements for the admission, teacher training and the students' foreign language competences. In conclusion the authors prove that Russia drives the motivation for continuous improvement of foreign language teaching in Master`s programs, seeking of an optimal balance between its developed traditions and the principles of Bologna reforms.

Keywords: Foreign language teaching, Master`s Program, foreign language communicative competence.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Problem Statement

The current tendencies of Russian Higher Education (HE) including internationalization and regional integration trigger analysis of the existing system and the way it has been evolving. The range of pedagogical research confirms the concept that investigation of any practice, internal or external, is productive on the way of qualitative change of a HE system. Russian practice, as a part of international experience, influences the institutional strategy that is caused by both the search of new approaches and international obligations to follow practices of partners. Academic and professional community in this regard often addresses the problem of educational "transferring" of models from the context they were generated or formulated.

Given the participation of Russia in implementing the principles of Bologna reforms we concentrate our attention on the multi-level structure of HE, in particular Master's Graduate Programs and the corresponding system of foreign language teaching. The active Russia's integration into the European space with the transition from the 5-year educational programs developed in the Soviet Union to the Bachelor-Master model obviously caused debate in academic circles as Russian model differs in essential respects from other countries' traditions (fundamental nature of HE, unity of state standards, ethnocultural features, etc.) and this misunderstanding has not completely disappeared yet. At the same time Russia, being so inclined to the qualitative educational shift, has gained some experience in solving reform problems common between European partners and itself. Therefore, analyzing and discussing Russian experience can be useful in improving HE system as a whole as well as certain foreign language teaching approaches and styles.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

Foreign language teaching in the modern world is taking new twists. There is a growing interest in the principle of communication and a clear transformation of the purposes and content of education from teaching foreign language system to teaching foreign language speech. Accordingly, the purposes and aims of foreign language teaching, approaches and styles need to be revised at all levels of education, especially at university, as language is an integral part of graduate's future occupation, the most important means of knowledge transfer. This research aims to comprehensively analyze and describe the system of foreign language teaching at the second level of Russian HE.

We have analyzed findings of Russian researchers on the issues of Russian HE transformation and those concerning Master's programs and foreign language teaching (Gerasimova, 2010; Glebova & Yasnitskaya, 2015; Gurban & Tarasyev, 2016; Ismagilova & Polyakova, 2014; Kazakova, 2015; Kozachek, 2015; Mitchell & Mitchell, 2014; Sazonova, 2014; Voronov & Chasovskykh, 2015) as well as a variety of articles from other countries relating to communicative competence, competence-based and communicative approaches, the Bologna reforms (Cohen, 1990; Ek & Trim, 1998; Fleming, 2007, 2009; Keen, 1992; Komori-Glatza, 2015; Savignon, 1997; Trenholm, 2004). The analysis of related research clearly indicates gaps and limitations in current practice and knowledge.

Russian researchers identify professionally-oriented foreign language teaching, its methodological problems and perspectives, competence-based, innovative education, communicative competence, the implementation of Bologna reforms and transformation of Russian HE as a whole, without focusing on the issues of foreign language teaching at the Master's level. Whereas foreign publications cover a number of matters relating to definitions of "competence", competence-based approaches, communicative competence, its nature and components, teaching a foreign language for occupational purposes, designing university curricula and syllabi not considering features of Russian HE and Master's level in particular. Consequently, we turned to the study of specific aspects of a

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comprehensive, coherent foreign language teaching system at the Master's level in Russia, depicting the research methods and justifying the research design, employing both theoretical findings and empirical data.

2. Method

The study is based on parameters characterizing the system of foreign language teaching in Master's programs:

- The objectives of foreign language teaching.
- Requirements to teachers' qualification and students' language proficiency.
- Language teaching methods.
- Language education tools.
- Forms of education, control and assessment.

The selected representative sample constitutes universities for the humanities. The universities were chosen in accordance with QS World University Rankings: Far Eastern Federal University (FEFU), Kazan Federal University (KFU), Lomonosov Moscow State University (MSU), MGIMO-University (MGIMO), National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE), Novosibirsk State University (NSU), Saint Petersburg University (SPU), Tomsk State University (TSU).

Examining the problem, we were guided by a set of legal, content analysis, logical correlation and comparison methods. Standard-setting and methodological documents including legislative and regulatory documents, educational standards for HE (Federal'nyi zakon, Federalnye gosudarstvennye obrazovatelnye standarty) were analyzed, as well as syllabi and standards of separate universities (Magisterskie programmy, Obrazovatel'nye programmy, Obrazovatel'nye standarty, Programmy obuchenija, Programmy po discipline, Rabochie programmy (FEFU, HSE, KFU, MGIMO, MGU, NSU, SPU, TSU), Maket osnovnoj obrazovatelnoj programmy magistratury), textbooks and other teaching materials on English for Master's programs (available on the official websites of the relevant universities). At the theoretical level scientific publications on foreign language teaching methodology were studied. Special attention was paid to the communicative and competence-based approaches that led to the adjustment of teaching methods, the materials used, the content and assessment of learning (Bolonskij process; Ek, 1998; Fleming, 2007, 2009; Modern languages; Obscheevropejskie Competencii, 2005, Savignon, 1997; Tuning Educational Structures in Europe). The data collected at the empirical level include those obtained by direct observation of students' activities.

3. Findings

3.1. Foreign language competence as an object of research

The Bologna agreements stipulate two major objectives of foreign language teaching at university: development of foreign language communicative competence and students' personal development by means of a foreign language (Modern Languages). The concept "competence" implies knowledge and understanding of how to act and to live, it is interpreted as a combination of characteristics as referred to knowledge and its application, which determine the extent of its (**competence's**) application (Tuning).

Objectives of foreign language teaching determine university graduation requirements that include inter alia readiness for effective professional activity, professional skills, the ability to apply the knowledge and skills obtained. The results of training imply what students are expected to know, understand, and be able to show after graduation (Bolonskij process, 2009). Educational regulations of

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EC provide for a number of communicative competence components: linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic (Obscheevropejskie kompetencii, 2003, 2005). The findings of Russian researchers, as well as laws, rules and regulations governing HE in Russia either accept, develop those provided by the European Framework and/or introduce others.

Foreign language teaching at the Master's level aims at improving general, linguistic, communicative and professional competences acquired by students during their previous years of study (Federalnye gosudarstvennye obrazovatelnye standarty). The general competence constitutes empirical, academic and cross-cultural knowledge, practical skills and abilities, as well as personal factors. Particular attention is paid to the development of communicative competence and most higher education institutions (HEIs) focus on its linguistic, sociolinguistic, discursive, strategic, social and cultural components.

Linguistic component is characterized as knowledge and abilities to use the individual vocabulary, grammar and phonetic resources orally and in writing, receptively and productively in a language. It is the basis of practical language skills for all types of speech activity. Sociocultural one refers to the knowledge of national and cultural features of foreign countries, the rules of speech and non-speech behavior in typical situations and the ability to exercise them in accordance with that knowledge. This competence assumes mastering a certain amount of background knowledge, knowledge of non-equivalent vocabulary, realia of the relevant culture, as well as economic, social and political peculiarities of foreign countries, etc. Sociolinguistic subcompetence embraces the ability to use and transform language forms (grammar, vocabulary, phonetics) in the appropriate setting. It is determined by the level of language proficiency to express communicative intentions in a variety of situations, taking into account speech etiquette adopted in different countries. It also provides for politeness, dialects, accents markers, etc. (Obscheevropejskie Kompetencii, 2003).

Discursive component is defined as the ability to use speech rules to create original statements, logical as far as their form and content are concerned, and interpretation of the meaning of statements produced by others, as well as the ability to use a specific strategy to create and interpret oral and written texts (Ek, 1998). Strategic one is the ability to select and use the most effective strategies to deal with different communicative tasks. It assumes mastering such general skills as making a plan of a certain task, its implementing at the level of statements, assessing the extent of communication goals, the ability and readiness to use effective general educational abilities, the ability to find ways of compensating for the lack of language skills and social experience (Ek, 1998).

3.2. Foreign language teaching at the second level of Russian HE

3.2.1. The objectives of foreign language teaching

Foreign language teaching at the second level of HE is professionally-oriented, it is aimed at integration of language and major subjects teaching to gain additional professional knowledge and develop qualities critical for a specific profession (M. Fleming, 2007, 2009). The main goals of foreign language teaching at this level include: 1) to further develop intercultural communicative skills; 2) to provide basic theoretical and methodological training needed for solving professional tasks in research, translation, and professional activities; 3) to teach students how to pass international professional exams; 4) to develop students' ability to act as subjects of the international educational field, to be engaged in active cross-cultural communication in professional and scientific fields to maintain and apply the multidisciplinary expertise; 5) to improve lexical and grammatical skills within oral and written scientific communication; 6) to improve oral speech (via listening and speaking), including oral public speech, reading original professional literature to gain knowledge on the latest scientific achievements, as well as the best domestic and foreign practices to be applied in their

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professional activities; 7) to develop skills of critical analysis of information (the press, scientific literature, official documents); 9) to improve translation skills; 9) to improve skills of summary and abstract writing; 11) to develop the ability of continuous self-education.

3.2.2. Requirements to teachers' qualification and students' language proficiency

The academic staff at the Master's level are linguists, teachers, philologists, translators generally speaking two or more foreign languages, mainly, European. They are graduates of pedagogical and linguistic HEIs or faculties of regional and capital universities: The Maurice Thorez Institute of Foreign Language, Moscow State Pedagogical University, philological faculty, faculty of foreign languages and regional studies of MSU, SPGU, etc. The employees can also be the graduates of non-linguistic faculties (MGIMO, MSU) speaking one, two or three foreign languages, after passing courses in pedagogies and psychology they run translation courses in special areas (economic, political, legal, etc.). Every 3-5 years the teachers improve their qualifications, they typically combine language practice and research via grant activity, conferences, publication of articles, etc. Unlike the staff of profile departments language teachers in non-linguistic universities generally are not engaged in delivering lectures, scientific advising. The teaching load in some universities (e.g., MGIMO) depends on academic position (starting from assistant, in some other universities- lecturer, then senior lecturer, associate professor and professor). The heads of courses on language teaching methodology supervise the preparation of curricula, schedules, tests, examination materials, attend classes, make reports, help the young faculty, etc. At least 75% of the educators are required to have Russian or foreign scientific degrees and academic titles, at the same time at least 15% of teachers should have academic degrees of doctor of science (including PhD confirmed by the procedures for recognition and equivalence) or Professor title.

The target group of Master's Programs are, first of all, bachelors of various faculties for the humanities. These Programs enroll applicants having sufficient language skills, assessed either with certificates of international examinations (level B2 +) or by means of entrance examinations. The examination requirements vary, assignments include essays, reading comprehension, lexical, grammatical, listening tests, translation of professional texts.

3.2.3. Language Teaching methods and approaches

At the master's level there are full-time, evening, part-time, distance courses. This review presents full-time Master's Graduate Programs, lasting for two years, as they allow to trace the diversity of teaching methods and forms at this level. Language teaching at the postgraduate level takes about 2-6 hours per week. The groups are small, no more than 10 people improve their linguistic skills. Students, depending on HEIs, learn from one to three foreign languages, the most prevalent are English, Spanish, German, and French. The Graduate programs focus mostly on the first and second languages. The first and second foreign language programs are similar in the form and content, with the exception of hours allocated. Hence, some aspects under study remain outside curriculum. The differences also concern control and assessment as far as the time needed to complete a task, and the volume of teaching material.

Workload embraces practical classes and self-preparatory work. The content of the discipline includes: topics, lexical and grammatical sections, the list of skills and abilities, a foreign language proficiency description, as well as the methodological recommendations for students' class work and self-preparation. Many regional HEIs are guided by methodological recommendations and practice of leading universities (Moscow State University, Moscow State Pedagogical University, The Maurice Thorez Institute of Foreign Language (Moscow), SPU (St. Petersburg), etc.).

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The Master's programs provide professionally-oriented foreign language education. The distribution and variety of aspects taught depends on the number of total hours. Professionally-oriented education includes language for specific purposes and translation. The language education relies on competence-based, communicative, cognitive activity and student-oriented approaches. Teaching is based on various methods: grammar-translation, communicative, cognitive, non-translation, problem-search, gaming, case-method. All kinds of language speech activity (listening, reading, speaking, writing, translating) are involved.

The leading teaching principle is revision and development of grammatical, lexical and stylistic phenomena within future profession. *Vocabulary* focuses on situational and communicative conditionality of the words and set phrases use, expressive-modals' shades of meaning, direct and indirect meaning of lexical units, synonymy, general scientific and special vocabulary. *Grammar* section involves more detailed studying of grammatical structures within oral and written scientific, professional communication.

Reading is aimed at improving skills of different types (scanning, skimming, close reading, etc.) based on publicistic, scientific, professionally-oriented texts, developing the ability to analyze texts according to particular parameters, reading with elements of structural, informational, comparative analyses. *Writing* consists of drafting and editing professionally-relevant documents (reports, presentations, summaries). Writing based on reading and listening mainly involves drafting annotations and abstracts. It also includes writing comparison of authors' viewpoints on an issue and essays.

Translation (written and oral) involves translating professionally-oriented texts, interpreting negotiations, formal and informal meetings, situations and documents related to professional activities. *Speaking* concerns a formal presentation, the ability to explain (a problem) and describe (a situation) and all other types related to translation and interpretation. *Interaction* includes participating in official meetings; organizing conferences, symposia, roundtables; conducting interviews, negotiations and meetings as chairperson; participating in seminars, trainings and their organization; participating in discussions and informal meetings using modern means of communication. *Listening* is tailored to comprehend presentations, talks, oral reports, lectures and other original materials within professional activities, as well as understanding explanations, descriptions, instructions and following them.

3.2.4. Language education tools

Textbooks, manuals, online resources, reference books, specialized dictionaries, methodical literature account for the variety of teaching means employed. In general, all textbooks are presented by Russian and foreign publishers. English is the dominant foreign language taught in Master's programs, consequently the teaching materials are provided with reference to English. The most popular British publishing houses are: Longman Pearson, Cambridge, Oxford, Macmillan. Their textbooks are designed to prepare for international certificates, as well as for teaching languages for specific purposes (ESP) (English for economists, lawyers, etc.). Another group of textbooks is of Russian publishing houses specializing in educational literature, or issued by Publishing Houses of the corresponding universities. Products of joint projects of foreign publishing houses and Russian authors are also available. Most of these textbooks are complementary. They primarily include a bilingual glossary, readers, additional self-learning materials, exercises, tests.

Below we provide the content analysis of British and Russian textbooks, as well as factors causing the necessity of compiling separate tutorials and training material to foreign textbooks. One of the major factors is the drawbacks of foreign textbooks (as perceived in Russian universities). In this article we make references to British publishers. Assignments found in foreign textbooks mainly

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include: T-F statements, open clozes, gap filling, sentence completion, text comprehension questions, mind-mapping, writing essays, summaries, case studies.

The target audience of these textbooks is wide. As a rule, they are sold in all countries where English is taught as a foreign language and not only in universities. In this regard, country-specific training in high school is not taken into account. For instance, there are no lexical equivalents in the native language, assignments on translation. As a result translating skills are not developed, including: determination of full or partial matches, differences in lexical units' meaning, relations of lexical non-equivalents, similarities and differences in the formal means of theme and rheme expression in native and foreign languages, methods of compression and decompression of the statement content; interpreting the meaning of words order and incorrect position of main parts of the statement; evaluation of theme- rheme chains significance in organizing inter-phrase unities; identifying different types of predication and cross-language, interlingual comparison; division and unification of sentences, using grammatical replacements, mastering transcription and transliteration, calquing of morphologically complex words, paraphrases, clichés and others. In addition to the above-stated the shortcomings are as follows:

- The age of students isn't considered. In Russia people enter the university rather early, the average age is 17-18 years old;
- Some books, especially on business English, are based on the communicative approach, that is typical for the intensive language courses rather than fundamental university education;
- Previously formed competences of students aren't considered, there is no link between school and university, a variety of high school courses, etc. ;
- Most textbooks have the same structure;
- Many textbooks that "take root" in educational process are no longer republished. However, nowadays the universities need to update textbooks at least every 5 years;
- About 30% of the tasks are easy, especially the grammar sections, which demotivates students;
- The number of class hours for learning a foreign language per semester is not taken into account. As a result some units are not studied or should be passed more superficially.

As for the accompanying textbooks and tutorials, they are basically text-centered. Texts are accompanied by pretext, text, post-text tasks and they are more complicated than those in British publications. The tasks are focused on studying and consolidating terminology, overcoming the language difficulties specific to professional texts, making emphasis on key information, determining meanings of words in context, detailed perception of information, commenting on texts, etc. Comprehension questions are more detailed and subtle, mainly, open. The active vocabulary of the unit is paid special attention to. The lexical sections focus on the use of unit active vocabulary. Their characteristics are as follows: more attention is paid to synonymy, collocation, paraphrasing, text compression, translation. The skills at the level of words, phrases, sentences, text are mastered. Textbooks often contain excerpts from the corresponding syllabi, assessment paper samples. Tasks for speaking and writing are given at the end of each unit. Approximately 2-3 units are covered a month depending on the number of hours and the level of students' language proficiency. A range of modules is identified for specific purposes and translation, they are aimed at improving understanding and mastering various kinds of language speech in communicative areas (educational, professional, social).

3.2.5. Forms of education, control and assessment

Students work in pairs, groups, individually, engage in interactive forms (dialogues, polylogues, discussions, round tables). In Master's Programs there is a special focus on autonomous work (with approximately 72 hours allocated for it) in the form of independent work with audio, video content, preparation of translations, presentations, essays, discussions, role plays, project work, self-testing, homework (exercises), search and review of the literature on particular issues; revising for tests, exams, self-study of current theoretical material. Different means of self-control are employed, such as algorithms, assessment criteria.

Assessment takes forms of interim (quizzes, lexical and grammatical, reading, listening comprehension tests) and final control. The typical final control tasks are as follows: translating and/or interpreting professionally-oriented texts, authentic documents, or fragments thereof, including translation with elements of summarizing; summarizing texts; drafting documents, including translation of the proposed clichés; making annotations of articles, related to the professional profile; rendering a text orally; discussing the ideas presented in a text, professional issues; making a report and presentation on the research, interpreting professional terms resorting to comparative analysis, if required. The total score is reflected in ratings, usually there are three or more ratings per semester with credits and examinations taken twice a year.

The system of assessment is based on the recommendations of Modern Languages Department of the Council of Europe, approved by Educational-Methodological Association for Education in linguistics, Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation. Match point and percentage systems vary within 5-10 points.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Knowledge of a foreign language, according to the Third Generation Federal State Educational Standards, is now recognized as a part of the general competence of the graduate in various areas. English in Russia has no official status and is considered a foreign language that is typically used for international communication. The influence of European integration tendencies and transition to the multi-level structure based on Bologna standards have led to the revision of academic paradigms, fostering changes in teaching foreign languages, restructuring curricula and programs in light of the competence approach.

On the basis of the foregoing, we can conclude that adopting the modern approaches and styles of the Bologna reforms Russia opts to preserve its national and cultural identity. Traditions of language education developed in the Soviet Union (such as perfectionism, powerful theoretical base, training on a single textbook, focus on teaching reading and grammar, etc.) are being enriched with new principles and approaches. The outcome of training is measured in terms of foreign language communicative competence and its components: linguistic, socio-cultural, sociolinguistic, discursive, strategic. It assumes mastering general skills in language forms (grammatical structures, vocabulary, phonetics) as well as background knowledge of economic, social and political features of foreign countries. Language teaching methods can be used to stimulate communication situations in the language environment. Language education means help to present and organize new material and to create an outer support of speech acts.

Offering the internal practical approaches to the foreign language teaching at the Master's level in Russia we recommend colleagues to expand the scope of comparative research, analyze and identify constructive ideas and strategies on HE development of other countries, and hope that our practice will allow experts to see new opportunities of choosing more effective organizational models and promote new ideas for the development of their educational programs.

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