

**A COMPARITIVE ANALYSIS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE
TEACHING IN MODERN EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT
IN BRITISH AND RUSSIAN UNIVERSITIES (THE CASE
OF DURHAM UNIVERSITY, UK,
AND TOMSK STATE UNIVERSITY, RUSSIA)**

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Summary. Foreign language teaching methods applied in the UK and Russia are reviewed, using as an example Durham University (UK) and Tomsk State University (Russia) in the conditions of the modern educational environment. The new educational environment is defined. The specificity of the language environment for teaching foreign languages is characterized. A comparative analysis of approaches and methods to foreign language teaching is conducted. Conclusions are made on the effectiveness of the approaches to organizing the modern educational process.

Key words: foreign language teaching; foreign language teaching methods; British HEI; Russian HEI; educational environment; language learning environment.

Introduction

For as long as there have been multiple languages in the world people have always been teaching them so that we might learn them and better communicate with one another. In the 21st century foreign language multicultural education is an important issue [1]. Our improved understanding of how humans acquire language has led to a greater range of approaches to language teaching and today universities are better equipped to teach languages than they were in previous decades. Nowadays teaching foreign languages embraces ideas which range from using conventional, but well-proven methods, to integrating innovative techniques and means of learning process organization, which appeared due to the emergence of new technologies and resources, mainly focused on worldwide communication, easy access to knowledge, a greater role of the learner in his / her progress and of the language in one's career development.

Language degrees continue to be offered by universities around the world with teaching often differing from country to country and Britain and Russia are no exception. Due to the breadth of the topic it is important that we focus on a specific comparison and for this the cases of Durham University (DU) and Tomsk State University (TSU) shall be used. We will look at the new learning environment which has both common and distinct features in these different sociocultural and educational contexts and define its basic components and qualities leading to a more effective process of teaching /

learning a foreign language to comply with the high requirements of our societies to a new generation of competent professionals capable of communicating with each other in the global multicultural world.

Method

The combination of research methods both theoretical and empirical focusing on gaining insight into the educational situations in the natural settings is used, such as historical analysis of evolution of foreign languages teaching approaches and methods, a review of current teaching practices, a comparison between particular language environments, generalization, and case-study as well as observation in the naturally occurring educational situations. The approaches and methods that each university employs in language teaching as well as practical aspects such as learners' needs, classroom hours, homework hours and its amount, and forms of work with course materials, and resource availability as principal components characterizing the particular language learning environment will be focused on. In addition to these things general information about language acquisition and various different techniques for language teaching need to be compared so that the specific focus on the universities will be relevant. It is also important to note that 'language teaching' refers specifically to second language teaching where students attempt to study and acquire a language different to that of their native language.

Defining Learning Environment

Conceptually speaking, the Learning Environment (LE) refers to the whole range of components and activities within which learning happens. The deep and broad discussions about the term imply that learning environment refers to the diverse physical locations, contexts, and *cultural* and human dimensions in which students learn. According to T. Warger, G. Dobbin, «The term learning environment encompasses learning resources and technology, means of teaching, modes of learning, and connections to societal and global contexts» [2]. We need to specify a LE that supports «optimal» conditions for effective learning and teaching a foreign language in the institution of higher education, taking into account particular physical, cultural and language contexts [3]. In this article a rich and effective LE for acquiring by the student the communicative competence in a foreign language is defined as a composite of conditions and circumstances of learning, such as a range of methods and approaches to teaching, a variety of in-class and self-study activities, pedagogically sound learning materials, efficient combination of learning modes, sufficient authentic input of the target language to tailor to the student specific needs, accommodate personalized learning,

maximize knowledge acquisition, skills and strategies development through the introduction and appropriate use of pedagogical and technological innovations relevant to the learning outcomes and the requirements of the modern society, that compliment each other and work as a whole.

Taking into account the complexity and largeness of the researched problem in this article we will focus only on defining some crucial factors and components of the LE that help a teacher to support an environment making the most of the learning opportunities available nowadays.

Language Teaching Methodology

Here the aim of our specific research interest is not to provide a comprehensive description of all the approaches and methods used in the teaching practice, but to focus on some trends common to British and Russian methodology schools that have had a decisive impact on the quality of teaching foreign languages. We look at language teaching philosophy which lies behind the methodology as a crucial backdrop against which language learning environment is created and affects its quality.

The common core of new challenges for TFL (Teaching a Foreign Language) at any modern university brought about by the quickening pace of globalization, informatization and the increasing prominence of languages for effective communication in the global arena is knowing how to model a language course into the educational environment so that students' skills in a foreign language grow in a way that enhances their education, language and personal development and matches their general field of expertise; how to design and apply teaching materials and tasks; what relevant resources to choose that improve the learners' ability to interact with people from other cultures in a foreign language. Nowadays for university students of all faculties it is very important that the content of teaching a FL includes related themes and problems, and is aimed at the development of not only different types of knowledge but also some specific target skills. They include study skills, critical thinking, communication skills, cognitive skills, self-reflection skills, and individual and team-work models of communication [4]. In fact the strategic goal of modern educational system is to nurture a competent professional who can effectively and independently work in any uncertain context in the global society. So today the competence-based approach [5] has been accepted according to which learning a foreign language is an essential element in the wide range of target competencies which should lead the learner towards the development of a communicative competence. It can be described as a framework including grammar / linguistic competence (knowledge of grammar rules, lexis and phonetics), pragmatic competence (the ability to use language appropriately in different social situations), strategic competence (knowledge of how to get out a message in a variety of

circumstances). Also of importance is social-cultural competence (knowledge of national culture and behaviour, national mindset and values etc.) [6]. The basis of it is linguistic competence, which has always been and still is the cementing foundation of the ability to use a foreign language in an appropriate way.

The field of second language acquisition is one that has received a great deal of study and according to Gass it is a relatively young field, having its systematic origins in the 1950s and 1960s [7]. It is the study of how we are able to learn languages and an understanding of it is important in order to know how to teach effectively. The methodology has come through the evolution of different approaches and methods towards communicative teaching, gradually shifting from focus on the language as a systematic code to language as a means of communication with the search for effective ways of instruction and consideration of the learner's personality [8–11]. An important concept that is seen as fundamental in second language acquisition is the fact that language learners create a language system that they use to structure the information that they are presented with and thus develop and internalize it [12]. The creation of language systems for learning by the learners also can help explain why sometimes there seems to be a regression or decrease in knowledge or in skill formation; this might be because a principle previously developed in the learner's own system has to be relearned with the introduction by the teacher of a grammar rule in the second language and a relevant language context. The phenomenon in the methodology of teaching foreign languages is known as 'de-automation of the skill'. It is the classical issue in skill and activity theory [13–15] postulating that under certain conditions such as lack of practice, fatigue, highly emotional state, high tempo of work etc. automated skills can fail, so that they have to be re-automated again [16]. Thus the system is developed and continued by the learner. The actualization can take place only when the learner involves his / her own knowledge and gets vast experience through practice. This therefore makes the actual acquisition of a second language driven by the learners themselves independent from the teacher. This fact is important to keep in mind when we look at some of the methods of language teaching as not all of them place the learner at the centre of the system despite the acquisition of a second language being determined by them.

With an increased understanding of how second languages are acquired, over the years there have been developments in the ways in which languages are taught. Healey wrote in the 1960s that there was a greater focus on the study of literature in the universities of Britain at that time. This was due partly to the fact that the courses in modern languages had been developed from the courses that had taught classical languages like Latin or Greek [17].

There was also once a smaller focus on speaking the second language and a greater emphasis on translation of literary texts between the native language and the target second language. Therefore in grammar translation method there is a greater emphasis on the reading of the written word and translating it into the students' native language. This is often because many consider a fundamental purpose of learning a foreign language is to be able to read literature in the target language [18]. That was a typical situation in methods of teaching at that time everywhere. In Russia consciousness-raising and comparative method as a modification of grammar-translation method was commonly used in teaching foreign languages (Scherva L.V., Rakhmanov I.V., Tsvetkova Z.M., Mirolubov A.A.) [19], which was based on structural linguistics, the cognitive approach and a teacher-centered model.

Language pedagogy has come a long way since that time. Over time there has developed a greater emphasis, particularly when starting to learn a second language, on speaking it and being able to communicate effectively in the target language. Communication has become a key focus of language teaching in order to get students to be able to use their language skills effectively outside the classroom [18]. With this in mind there developed the Communicative Approach in the 1970s and this in turn became Communicative Language Teaching as it was applied in the classroom with the aim of giving students communicative competence [17]. Such is the case with the Audio-Lingual Method outlined by Larsen-Freeman in her book on language teaching. In this method the language is drilled, with the students learning through a great deal of teacher-led repetition, the aim of which is to get the students to use the target language automatically without stopping to think [17]. The main focus of this method is therefore being able to use the target language communicatively and uses techniques in the classroom such as memorising dialogues by repeating them and then manipulating the given phrases to answer quick fire questions from the teacher. Though it has been criticized for its mechanical nature of learning it still remains a method in-demand when there is a need to form language skills which are responsible for linguistic competence.

Communicative strategy is probably closest to what might be found in universities today given that the aims of this approach are to make the students effective speakers of the language in the 'real world'. However it is not without problems, according to Widdowson, since learners do not very readily infer knowledge of the language system from their communicative activities [20]. Today, learner-centered, project-based, problem-based and task-based approaches are widespread, emphasizing individual and research work, communication and practical uses of language. Therefore a combination of approaches and methods is necessary to ensure that students understand the language fully and are also able to use it properly outside the classroom, particularly on the world-wide scale. In this respect teaching a foreign

language through different discourses relevant to the learner's professional field allows for development of target competencies [21]. These various strategies should be kept in mind as we move to a discussion of our chosen universities.

A comparative analysis of the cases of Durham University and Tomsk State University

We will now briefly analyse the particular learning environments in Durham and Tomsk, paying attention to several major factors and components of LE, affecting the effectiveness of the teaching process, namely exposure to languages, modes of teaching, use of technology and facilities, methodology of teaching, human and cultural dimensions.

Many universities around the world, including DU and TSU, offer languages at beginner's level that can be incorporated into a degree. Many of the teaching methods used with students beginning to learn a new foreign language focus on speaking and listening because of the natural order of acquiring skills that occurs when learning a native language i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing.

The School of Modern Languages and Cultures at DU is made up of six different language departments offering courses in Arabic, French, German, Hispanic Studies, Italian and Russian [22]. Although each department is different, based on the fact that it offers a different language and different languages require slightly different styles of teaching, there are still elements of teaching and learning that are present across all departments and the same can be said for other universities too. For example, all students at DU studying for a degree in Modern Languages and Cultures are expected to choose six different modules each year. The general pattern is to study two foreign languages, therefore two of these will be a core language module and the remaining four can be made up of a variety of language-focused and culture-focused courses depending on the student's preference. Each module will have approximately two hours of lectures a week, giving an average of 12 contact hours a week but only four that are language-focused, by which is meant classes specifically geared towards the learning of the foreign language and not reading the country's literature or studying its history. The rest of the time during the week should be made up of independent study. It should be noted that to enhance self-study mode of learning The Study Skills booklet has been developed [23]. This booklet is available to students online. It recommends that each module requires 200 hours of study in total and that each module should have roughly seven hours per week spent on it. This time is usually divided into two hours of classroom time and five hours of reading and preparation of assignments.

The teaching staff at DU is made up of a large number of native speakers for nearly all the languages that are offered. It may be argued that

this allows for conversation classes to be conducted in a more natural way and pronunciation can be corrected accurately.

As for pedagogical tools, during the first year of study at DU there is a greater focus on grammar teaching than in later years. Students will have specific classes in which grammar is covered and the rules of the target language grammar will be stated and explained. This is to ensure that all students are at a similar level before progression to subsequent years. This is an example of the Grammar-Translation Method which can be seen continuing into the fourth year of study where students are often required to translate from the target language into their native language to understand passages.

We also see elements of Communicative Language Teaching at DU. Students have dedicated oral classes entirely focused on speaking the language. Additionally students will be expected to produce presentations throughout the year in the target language on a wide variety of topics. This, combined with specific grammar teaching, in theory fixes the problem of a communicative approach not giving learners adequate knowledge of the target language system. As well as the presentations students will be expected to produce other work, as homework, such as short essays and translations, grammar exercises and other written work. The style of teaching at DU, particularly in the language classes, is quite interactive given the expectation for students to use the target language in conversations. Other modules with a focus on literature and history will follow a weekly lecture and seminar format in which students are expected to take notes in the lecture and then prepare material to discuss for the seminar. These lectures and seminars are often carried out in the target language as well.

At TSU, the Faculty of Foreign Languages (FFL) is made up of several different departments offering several foreign languages, these being: Chinese, English, French, German, Greek, Italian and Spanish [24], the choice of which depends on the demand for the language. It should be mentioned that the number of foreign languages taught at the university has grown in the last few years which manifests the ongoing process of adapting to the multicultural world and globalized economy [25, 26]. All foreign languages students study two languages and have a language-focused degree, non-language students study one foreign language as part of their obligatory program, but they can learn as many other foreign languages as they want by taking extra-curricular courses. The FFL offers all students of the university, as well as teachers, additional courses in foreign languages to match their professional fields and particular interests. For that purpose there is a special educational structure at the FFL, the Department of Continuing Education, which offers learners deeper language knowledge and experience in translation of texts dealing with the sphere of their professional communication. This department is in great demand with students of practically all faculties of the university. More than one hundred students are recruited annually to

get this additional qualification at the Faculty of Foreign Languages. This fact speaks for itself and demonstrates the great role of foreign languages as a means of access to the global world and better employment.

Teaching at Tomsk follows a very interactive style, based on the Principles of Interactive Language Teaching written by Harvard professor Wilga Rivers in 1997 [27]. New approaches and methods are being introduced to create an environment in which interaction is free of stress and focus is made on the learner's involvement in thinking, speaking and doing. A number of different teaching methods are also employed including Communicative Language Teaching based on Wilga Rivers' third principle that it is important to be able to use the language 'normally' and communicate effectively in both written and oral formats. Special pedagogic tools are trialed such as Storyline [28], project-based teaching, cognition-focused technologies [21]. Students are also taught the structure of the language and how it works in order to gain better knowledge of the language, this is an example of elements of the Grammar-Translation Method being used.

Making use of the time is also decisive for the choice of methodology. On average students of FFL at TSU have ten 45 minutes classes per week for language classes which in reality amounts to five double classes lasting 90 minutes each. Students at TSU are expected to complete work outside of lectures and are given homework assignments at the end of classes. These might be translation or grammar exercises, writing essays in the target language or preparing reading for the next class. Inside the classroom language development is encouraged through interactive, participatory activities such as discussions, presentations and small group work. Lessons are also conducted in the target language where possible and students are expected to participate. This makes the teaching style generally student centred yet also interactive, which is in keeping with the Principles of Interactive Language Teaching.

Apart from pedagogical techniques worth noting are the information technology and resources which are being integrated into the language environment. Together with conventional ways and means of teaching, new communication and information tools create an innovative environment allowing for more individualization of the learning process and the presence of native speaking communicators in the virtual mode. Due to this new ubiquitous technological environment it is possible to use relevant authentic materials, different types of input (aural, visual, combined, hypertext technology etc.) to make the learning-teaching process more effective [29]. In this respect at DU there are various facilities to help students complete their studies such as language labs and computer rooms that are available during and outside of class time. As for TSU there are also facilities available at the university to help students, including the first centre in Siberia for simultaneous interpreting, MOODLE-based courses [30, 31], computer classes, but in

general the learning environment lacks available technical recourses, which constrains incorporation of various technology options into learning and teaching process, as well as special laboratories for self-study to make learning supported at most.

The teaching staff at TSU are mostly native Russian speakers. A rich language environment is not possible without the participation of native speakers and language specialists. The language environment created for teaching foreign languages at TSU in this respect differs greatly from that of the DU or any European university, because not many native speakers come to work, study and live in Siberia, a cold and rather distant place from everywhere. The process of learning another language under the conditions when the natural environment of the target language and its cultural context are detached from the learner is rather specific and more difficult. That means that on the one hand the teaching bears a lot of responsibility for creating such a learning environment which will enable the learners of the target language to master it as an effective means of communication, on the other it is the learner's activity and involvement in the learning process. But it should be noted that in spite of the above mentioned objective obstacles the language environment at TSU includes native-speaking teachers who make a very important contribution to create a more authentic environment for both subjects of the educational process – the learner and the teacher [32]. At TSU it is understood that cultural penetration is important and that in order to fully understand a foreign language there must be an understanding of the culture behind it. Therefore communication with native speakers is important and is guaranteed to all students in the course of their education. So in LE for teaching foreign languages at TSU at present a more accent is being given to the development of the pedagogical framework to foster active learning and achieving the target competencies by the students through face-to-face communication, effective instruction, innovative pedagogical tools, development of teaching materials and activities, involvement of native speaking members of the staff. On the technical side, it is mostly the use of the Internet as a source of information and computer-mediated environment for organizing teaching grammar and carrying out testing of linguistic competence. Consequently, the need for designing and utilizing the advancements of technology is clearly realized. It is worth noting that according to the «road-map» leading TSU to join the list of top research innovative universities in the world, a lot of attention nowadays is being paid to the development of a learning environment based on conceptually grounded methodology, setting appropriate context for rich learning experiences, making use of various relevant resources both physical and virtual, widening students' learning space and creating additional opportunities for personal and professional development.

Concluding Remarks

When we compare the language environments of the two universities, DU and TSU, side by side we can see that there are many similarities in the approach of modelling. The two universities are both modern and leading higher educational establishments with a lot to offer students wishing to study foreign languages not just as a university subject but as a means to better functioning in the modern world.

The organisational structure of the universities' divisions responsible for teaching foreign languages is very similar and is based on a highly professional staff. Furthermore both universities recognize the importance of communication with native speakers and employ native speakers of the target languages in both places.

At both institutions the students study a number of foreign languages and also courses in culture, history, etc. There are certain superficial differences, for example with regards to teaching hours and also the style of degree that is offered by each institution. Nevertheless, there are a lot of similarities in the teaching methods used in both. For example elements of the Grammar-Translation Method such as learning grammar rules and working with the written language, reading and translating are still present in both TSU and DU. Both institutions combine the grammar translation method which is used to foster linguistic and sociocultural competences, appealing to this method at some stages of the teaching-learning process, with a communicative approach in order to teach students how to use the language practically and usefully. This is evidenced by the specific oral classes in DU and the interactive teaching style in TSU. Most widely used common pedagogical techniques are problem-solving, collaborative tasks, case-based study, discussions. The didactic approaches focused on the learner's active role, competent-based model, dialogue of cultures in the process of teaching foreign languages nowadays are dominating trends in the educational environments of both institutions.

Thus the fundamental language teaching in British and Russian universities has much in common and only minor stylistic differences. New emerging trends towards more individualized and flexible forms of learning, and a strategy of teaching catering to the learners' needs and interests result in improvements relating to student progress and motivation. The language environment modelled by each institution comprises conventional and innovative pedagogical and technological bases, stimulating their major actors – students and teachers – to work hard in the reciprocal educational process. The universities in both countries are equal in their ability to educate well-qualified linguists and professionals in different majors prepared to function in the global multicultural world.

In addition, the analysis has shown that we need more research on the design of a rich and effective environment for teaching foreign languages as

means of personal and professional development of students. Teachers have to design an environment which will be a specific mix of learning experiences, resources, media and technology to expand the learning time and to bring in the class distant speakers of different languages, to balance all the strengths and weaknesses of physical and virtual environments, to create reusable digital resources to lessen teacher's workload and investment, to find ways to carry out ongoing pedagogical and technical support in order to facilitate the achievement of the outcomes.

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СРАВНИТЕЛЬНЫЙ АНАЛИЗ ПРЕПОДАВАНИЯ ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКОВ В УСЛОВИЯХ СОВРЕМЕННОЙ ОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЬНОЙ СРЕДЫ В БРИТАНСКИХ И РОССИЙСКИХ ВУЗАХ (на примере Даремского университета, Великобритании, и Томского государственного университета, Россия)

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Ключевые слова: преподавание иностранных языков; методика обучения иностранному языку; британский вуз; российский вуз; образовательная среда; лингводидактическая среда.

Рассматриваются методики обучения иностранному языку в вузе, применяемые в Великобритании и России, на примере Даремского университета (Великобритания) и Томского государственного университета (Россия), в условиях новой образовательной среды. Дается определение современной образовательной среды. Описывается специфика лингводидактической среды при обучении иностранным языкам. Проводится сравнительный анализ подходов и методов к преподаванию иностранных языков. Делаются выводы о способах эффективной организации современного учебного процесса.