

**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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Abstract. 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.

Keywords: 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 been teaching them so that we might learn to 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. Those new techniques are focused on worldwide communication, easy access to knowledge, a greater role of the learner and of the language in one's career development.

Language degrees continue to be offered by universities around the world. They differ from country to country, with Britain and Russia no exception. This paper specifically compares two universities' teaching of second languages. The cases of Durham University (DU) and Tomsk State University (TSU) are offered as examples of the new learning environment. 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 globalized multicultural world.

Method

The combination of methods both theoretical and empirical focusing on gaining insight into the educational situations in the natural educational 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 theory about language acquisition and various techniques for language teaching are being compared so that the specific focus on the universities is relevant. It is also important to note that 'language teaching' refers specifically to foreign language teaching (FLT), where students attempt to study and acquire a language that is not native language and the language of the community.

Defining Learning Environment

Conceptually speaking, the Learning Environment (LE) refers to the whole range of components and activities within which learning occurs. 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 an LE that supports "optimal" conditions for effective learning and teaching a foreign language in an 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, including a range of methods and approaches to teaching, a variety of in-class and self-study activities, pedagogically sound learning materials, an efficient combination of learning modes, sufficient authentic input of

the target language tailored to the student's specific needs, personalized learning, maximized 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 complement each other and work as a whole.

We will focus on defining some crucial factors and components of the LE that help a teacher to support an environment that the most of the learning opportunities available based on the experiences of DU and TSU.

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 of EFL teaching that have had a decisive impact on the quality of teaching foreign languages. Language teaching philosophy is the crucial backdrop of the methodology upon which the language learning environment is created and affects its quality.

The common core of the 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 specialties it is very important that the content of TFL 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 lead the learner towards the development of an overall communicative competence. This integrative competence 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 mes-

sage 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, despite it being 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 fundamental concept 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 re-learned with the introduction by the teacher of a grammar rule in the second language and a relevant language context. This 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 (L.S. Vygotsky, A.N. Leontiev, W.J.M. Levelt) [13-15] postulating that under certain conditions such as lack of practice, fatigue, a highly emotional state, a high tempo of work, the 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 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 partly because the courses in modern languages had been developed from the courses that had taught classical languages like Latin or Greek [17].

There was also less 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 the grammar translation method

there is a greater emphasis on the reading of the written word and translating it into the students' native language. This approach is still in demand in some educational contexts 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 the comparative method as a modification of grammar-translation method was commonly used in teaching foreign languages (L.V. Scherva, I.V. Rakhmanov, Z.M. Tsvetkova, A.A. Mirolyubov) [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]. The Communicative Approach developed 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 [Ibid]. 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 rapid 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 context. 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 analyze 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, and 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 is made up of independent study. To enhance self-study mode of learning The Study Skills booklet has been developed [23], and 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 of nearly all the languages that are offered. 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 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 are 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 solves the problem of a communicative approach not giving learners adequate knowledge of the target language system. As well as the presentations students produce other work, such as homework, that includes short essays and translations, grammar exercises and other written tasks. The style of teaching at DU, particularly in the language classes, is quite interactive, with students expected to use the target language in conversations. Other modules on literature and history 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 5 different departments offering the English, French, German, Chinese, Greek, Italian and Spanish languages [24], the choice of which depends on high demand for the language as a means of communication for Russians abroad. It should be mentioned that the number of foreign languages taught at the university has grown in the last few years, which demonstrates 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 demonstrates the great role of foreign languages as a means of access to the global world and better employment for the TSU graduates.

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 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 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.

Information technology and resources are being integrated into the language environment. Together with conventional ways and means of teaching, new communication and information tools can create an environment that allows 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) 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 laboratories and computer rooms that are available during and outside of class time. At 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], and computer classes. But in general the learning environment lacks available technical resources, 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 teacher 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. In spite of the above mentioned objective obstacles the language environment at TSU includes native-speaking teachers who make a very important contribution to creating 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 emphasis 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, and 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, a 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 organizational 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 and history. There are certain superficial differences, for example with regards to teaching hours and also the type of degree that is offered by each institution. Nevertheless, there are many 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, 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. The most widely used common pedagogical techniques are problem-solving, collaborative tasks, case-based study, and discussions. The didactic approaches focus on the learner's active role, the competence-based model, and the dialogue of cultures in the process of teaching foreign languages nowadays are the dominant trends in the educational environments of both institutions.

Thus the FLT in British and Russian universities has much in common and only minor differences. 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 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, more research is needed on the design of a rich and effective environment for teaching foreign languages for the purposes 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 learning time and to bring in the class speakers of different languages, to balance all the strengths and weaknesses of the physical and virtual environments, to create reusable digital resources to lessen the

teacher's workload and personal costs, to find ways to carry out ongoing pedagogical and technical support in order to achieve of the outcomes.

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