

Research article

Issues of Teaching Linguistic Disciplines to Migrant Students at Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract. This paper is based on the authors' long-term observations of migrant students studying at universities in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Area — Yugra. The paper is devoted to the current issues that nearly every higher education institution in Russia is aware of. Most non-native-speaking students have a low level of Russian language knowledge, which poses challenges for mastering linguistic disciplines, on the one hand, and challenges for teaching, on the other hand. The paper examines the historical background of the modern ethnic situation in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Area — Yugra. Socio-economic conditions in the area attract immigrants not only from other regions of the Russian Federation but also from post-Soviet countries. The authors describe the social profile of a migrant student, and provide a review of unresolved issues in teaching the discipline of Russian Language and Speech Culture to students of non-philological majors, while paying special attention to the challenges in teaching the Russian Dialectology and Modern Russian Language Morphology disciplines to students majoring in philology. The pressing issues of teaching migrant students should not be ignored. The authors suggest ways to address these issues. One of these is based on stricter requirements for applicants applying for philological majors. The other one suggests simultaneous training and correction of missing Russian language skills.

Keywords: KhMAO-Yugra, migrant students, university, Russian language

1. Introduction

Modern globalization processes have led to an increase in forced migration around the world, as well as into the Russian Federation. The migrant inflow to Russia has both positive and negative sides. Migration is one of the means of population reproduction. Inviting migrants as a labor force amid its shortage definitely has a positive impact on the labor market performance. Adult migrants arrive in Russia with a degree most commonly earned in their home country, while children of migrants study in Russia. Educational organizations' staff of all levels face a set of problems related to the teaching of migrant schoolchildren. One of the major challenges is either no knowledge or low proficiency in

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Russian. Meanwhile, insufficient competence in the official language leads to challenges for socialization and communication in the Russian-speaking society, creates barriers for learning new trades that require perfect knowledge of the Russian language. At present, there is no unified approach to teaching Russian to migrants studying in a Russian-speaking educational environment. The first step towards this goal is to understand the issues associated with teaching migrants Russian and to analyze them.

The teaching of migrants is actively discussed in scientific literature. The works by foreign researchers consider the strategy for integrating migrant children into European schools and societies (Ngo and Schleifer) [1], multiculturalism in education (Modood and May) [2], the quality of training in multi-ethnic schools (Paton, Clark) [3, 4], inclusion in schools (Blanco and Takemoto) [5], etc. In Russian science, the current issues of teaching migrant children are analyzed (Zasyupkin *et al.*) [6], as well as methodological aspects of migrant children's guidance (Kuprina) [7], Sherstobitova [8], Kamalova [9], Zheleznyakova [10]). The issues of teaching linguistic disciplines are addressed in the works by Strelchuk [11], Filtsova [12], Grigoryan [19], Zhukova [20], Nazarova [15], Matveenko [9], etc.

2. Methods and Methodology

The research material was obtained through observations and interviews with informants from among the migrant university students in KhMAO-Yugra. The observations were made in the course of teaching Russian to students majoring in philological and non-philological fields. *Systematic observations of students majoring in non-philological studies were carried out within one semester, as per the duration of the "Russian Language and Speech Culture" discipline. A total of 14 observations were made. Each student pursuing a degree in philology was kept track of for 4 years, i.e. over the entire duration of studies at the bachelor's level. A total of 12 students were observed. Informal interviews were held individually. The duration of the interviews was 25–35 minutes. Over 50 interviews were held in total.* The analysis of the material was carried out using the methods of comparison, analysis, and synthesis.

The purpose of the study is to review the current issues of teaching migrant university students linguistic disciplines.

3. Results and Discussion

Siberia has always been attractive for migrants. Since its joining the Russian Empire, immigrants from the European part had provided an increase in its population for several

centuries. Foreigners often ventured to move to this severe region as well. As far back as in the mid-17th century, the population of Siberia, in addition to the indigenous one, represented a diverse, motley crowd consisting of Austrian and Livonian Germans, Swedes, Poles, Lithuanians, Latvians, Mordvins, Cheremis, Russians, and even French. This was especially prominent in Tobolsk [17].

Since the late 19th century, the north of Western Siberia has become a place of exile for those repressed by the authorities. Deportations changed the ethnic composition of the population. In the late 1950s, over 120 thousand people lived in the Khanty-Mansi Area. The ethnic composition was dominated by Russians, with about 90 thousand people. Over 20 thousand people were the indigenous peoples: Khanty, Mansi, Komi, and Nenets [18]. Ukrainians, Belarusians, Latvians, Jewish, and other peoples also lived in the area.

The rapid growth of the oil and gas industry in the 1960s–1980s caused a rapid growth of the area population. During this period, it increased ninefold [19]. Specialists from Soviet Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, and Azerbaijan arrived in KhMAO-Yugra to develop oil and gas fields, thereby initiating the formation of ethnic Bashkir, Tatar, and Azerbaijani diasporas herein.

The motives for migration differed. According to the 1970 census, the main reason for relocation was the desire for improving financial conditions and making money (48.5%), family reasons — 22.3%, diversity in life and change of scene — 14.6%, improvement of housing conditions— 12.0%, emotive power — 7.7%, creative and interesting job — 5.4% [20].

In the early 1990s, there was a certain population outflow from Yugra, caused by the crisis in the oil and gas industry. However, as soon as 1995, there was an increasing migratory flow. The area population was actively growing due to the people arriving from low-income regions of the Russian Federation. The inflow from the former Soviet states of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, and Belarus increased. Many immigrants have taken root here. As of today, there are 124 ethnic groups living in Yugra.

The ethnic composition of university students in KhMAO-Yugra reflects the current ethnic situation in the area. It is highly unlikely that there is an ethnically homogeneous university class. Students from migrant families study in almost every major, including philology, which assumes a perfect proficiency in Russian.

Let us make up a social profile of a migrant student. Currently, students born in the late 1990s and early 2000s study at universities. Many of them moved with their parents to Russia in preschool or primary school age. Some of them were born in Yugra. Tolerant interethnic relations in Yugra allowed them to fit seamlessly into the Russian-speaking

society. Their successful social position is evidenced by the fact that almost every one of them considers Yugra to be their homeland. With that, together with their families they still have an opportunity to follow cultural traditions and to speak their native language staying far from their historical homeland.

Numerous studies show that the use of native language contributes to the preservation of ethnic self-identification while living in another ethnic community, has a positive effect on memory development, the ability to analyze linguistic facts. This is what one cannot agree more with. However, on the other hand, it poses challenges for studying. Compared to other disciplines, language studies are affected to a greater extent.

Students can be divided into two categories as per their level of Russian language proficiency. The students who have learned it since early childhood have the best skills. In their families, it is an everyday language of communication between older and younger generations. Attempting to facilitate the entry of children into the Russian-speaking community, parents consciously speak Russian as the majority language in family communication. At the same time, the ethnic language is limited: just for communication between spouses and relatives. Children in such families frequently know their ethnic language at the level of understanding. In this case, their native language has almost no impact on learning Russian at school. They successfully master their school curriculum, pass the unified state exam, and enter the university.

Another category is bilingual students. Their level of Russian language proficiency is significantly lower due to the fact that ethnic languages are their native languages. They consider the official language as a foreign language. In their families, the priority in communication is given to their ethnic language. Often parents deliberately prevent the Russian language from the family use in order to preserve the national cultural and linguistic traditions, the ethnic identity of children. Therefore, they are left to use Russian only in the place of study, as well as in leisure activities in a Russian-speaking environment, which definitely does not allow them to master it properly.

Since 2000, the discipline “Russian Language and Speech Culture” has been mandatory for students of all majors. The discipline contents are of a special linguoculturological nature [11], therefore, to master it, it is necessary to have the basic knowledge of the Russian language, Russian culture, speech and general etiquette, etc. The absence or low level of competence poses challenges for the successful studying of the discipline. Some sections and topics pose particular challenges.

Thus, when studying the normative aspect of speech culture, the influence of ethnic language does not allow bilingual students to completely master the orthoepic norms

of the Russian language. The students' vocabulary is insufficient, and, therefore, challenges emerge when studying the communicative and ethical aspects of speech culture. In this regard, one must admit the fact that the competencies being implemented when studying the course are not formed sufficiently in this category of students. This means that after graduating from the university, graduates will not be able to communicate comprehensively in the Russian-speaking community, whether it is professional or common communication.

A particular issue is teaching migrant students philology. Challenges during the teaching process emerge not only for bilingual students of non-Slavic ethnicity but also for people from Ukraine and Belarus. It would seem that it should be much easier to study for native speakers of languages cognate to Russian, but in fact, the expectations are not met. This category of students also has a limited vocabulary, which is complicated by poor knowledge of Russian history and culture, literature, and other linguistic and cultural knowledge.

Compensation for insufficiently formed competencies in the Russian language calls teachers for paying closer attention to migrant students. In the course of training, it is necessary to apply a variety of methods and techniques aimed at adapting didactic material for bilingual students. Individual guidance, explanations, mistakes analysis, and other methods are fruitful when this kind of work is systematic.

Mastering the "Russian Phonetics" discipline motivates international students for self-control, focused, conscious pronunciation of the Russian language sounds. Studying the "Lexicology" discipline expands the vocabulary. Parallel studying of literary studies courses enhances language skills.

Challenges emerge when studying the "Russian Dialectology" discipline. Understanding the facts of dialectal speech is possible only if the student is familiar with all forms of Russian, is fluent in its literary language, and perceives the Russian language as a system. Bilingual students have great difficulty distinguishing Russian dialect speech phenomena. The help comes from the methods of comparison and juxtaposition of facts between Russian and the students' native languages, the search for linguistic universals in cognate and non-cognate Russian languages, etc.

Mastering the morphology of the Russian language requires a thorough knowledge of its grammar and vocabulary. It is difficult for students to understand the grammatical category concept, which is important for forming an image of language patterns, as well as for vocabulary classification.

Poor knowledge of the semantics of words, especially those that are on the periphery of the Russian literary language, as well as words related to non-literary forms, leads

to challenges for determining their lexical-grammatical and partial attribution. When studying the verb and its forms, it is especially challenging to master such categories as transitivity/intransitivity, voice, and the formation of participles and adverbs is not easy, too. The successful understanding of the theory does not entail success in the practical field, since the insufficiently high level of proficiency in the Russian language does not allow students to understand the word in its entire multidimensional aspects.

The scope of this paper does not make it possible to comprehensively describe the issues of teaching linguistic disciplines to migrant students. Note only that the gaps in the knowledge of the basic courses inevitably lead to difficulties in mastering other disciplines.

4. Conclusions

The reality is that Russia will continue to face similar issues as long as the country is attractive to foreigners. One can solve the issue with one of the two options. In the authors' opinion, the first and the easiest one to implement is to accept the most skilled applicants for the philological major. In this case, universities need to introduce independent entrance tests in Russian. This will help to screen out applicants with insufficient proficiency in Russian. This method might not seem tolerant enough. However, one must keep in mind that some graduates from among the migrants will become school teachers, and the schoolchildren they will teach will become students someday. Therefore, it is necessary to take effective measures to train highly qualified staff. The first step to success is recruiting qualified applicants.

The second option is the most time-consuming, since it involves both compensating for the lack of competencies in Russian and teaching. It implies developing new approaches to teaching Russian in a multi-ethnic community, adapting educational and methodological guides to disciplines and didactic materials. It is also necessary to introduce the optional "Russian studies" discipline. It is necessary to introduce in the academic load ongoing individual counseling on disciplines.

The proposed methods, of course, are not the only true ones. The main thing to understand is that ignoring the issues associated with the education of migrants now may turn into more significant problems in the future.

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