

Conference Paper

Problems of Improving Spoken Language Skills in Teaching Russian as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

While teaching Russian as a foreign language to undergraduate and postgraduate students in India, we observed that the learners face difficulties in improving their spoken language skills needed at the specified level. There are many issues that is needed to be sorted out in order to improve spoken language skills. For spoken skills we need to use specific methods of teaching. Since the first thing that is taught to students, who are learning a language, are alphabets, the attention is turned towards improving their oral skills is through writing. Though, initially learners pick up to speak at the elementary level, the spoken language, in the intermediate and advanced levels of learning suffer due to various factors. One of the main factors is the lack of continuous exposure to the foreign language. *i/e/*, the learners do not use once they are out of the classroom. Outside the classroom, the learners use their mother tongue or other native language to speak that is a necessity in their outside life. As a result, their spoken skills of the foreign language suffer and do not improve. Measures need to be taken for improving spoken skills where the students are involved and activated to take part in discussions with the help of native speakers. Artificial foreign language surroundings need to be created to motivate learners to speak well a foreign language of their choice.

Keywords: spoken skills, teaching Russian as a foreign language, learning problems

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1. Introduction

The language came into existence through oral dictions. The oral speech is that which sounds to us with the help of vocal chords and peculiar to every individual. For some it is well developed, that one can produce any sound that is demanded by different languages. For others it is a herculean task not only some difficult sounds attributed to a language but also to produce the sound that exists in their language.

Oral communication skills are needed for many a profession, like teaching, public speaking, law, nursing, stage performers that involves articulation and speech and many more fields. These fields that demand oral skills involves interaction with fellow human beings. At times it is required at personal levels and other times to address to a bigger number of the gathering. We all know that even for entering into a profession

we have interviews where we have to fair well and impress with our oral skills. The business field that requires selling of your product needs these oral skills.

Learning only writing skills that is thought as the main requirement for learning a language by some is somewhat not true as mastery in language includes spoken, listening, reading, comprehension and thinking skills as well along with the written skills of a language.

This paper discusses about the problems faced by learners while acquiring oral skills. Oral skills are taught at higher levels, but lesser importance is given by the learners. The classroom learning begins by teaching alphabets in the order of vowels and consonants. This enables the learners practice both written as well as diction of oral form. The practice fortifies the memorization of signs along with the sound by learners and easier to recollect. For some reason as learners move up to a higher level of learning, with the complexity, the learning process of oral skills is slowing down. This is a major concern as mastery is needed in many a profession like legal or technology interpretations are concerned and two countries are involved for using a foreign language. We all know that slip of a tongue is quiet common, so interpreters have to be doubly careful and they have to be very careful and practice a lot. It involves an alert brain round the clock.

2. Background

Any learning involves brain and oral skills need a constant, alert and active brain. Motivation, emotion and attention are some of the needs for anyone to learn and retain and use effectively later as and when required. All these involve brain. Recently brain based learning is gaining importance.

The principles involved in it are listed out by Maryam Haghghi [1] as discussed by Jensen. Caine & Caine puts that brain reduces information into parts and perceives as a whole [2]. Jensen considers that every brain is unique and a parallel processor. The exhaustive brain based learning strategies developed by Jensen is tool based. He is of the opinion that natural spatial memory gets the facts and skills. Rote learning is followed by many. The search for meaning is inborn and based on patterning for which emotions are crucial. Focused attention, conscious and unconscious processing that engages entire physiology, occur during learning. Better learning is possible when challenged and a threat or stress on the other hand affects the learning [3].

The teaching model of Jensen is a three stage learning process, where 10% of the class time is given before so as to prepare the learners for creating an optimal environment. After teaching, 10% of the time is for passive processing for the learnt matter to settle, as rehearsing makes the learner to revise and use what was just taught. The remaining 80% the time that remains is used for engaging, framing, elaborating and connecting the learners to learning not just what is taught but to learn to widen this to other content, processes, and self. They are engaged by getting their emotions and attention drawn towards the subject taught during the class. The learners are framed to focus on learning to make it relevant, important, and compelling for acquiring

knowledge, skills, values, and experiences. The learning is elaborated and deepened through trial-and-error time, with feedback and active processing [4].

F. Duygu Bora considers the importance of emotions in learning from brain-based perspective. He agrees with Jensen who emphasizes that emotions optimize the learning experience, prepare the learner for novel learning experiences and can contribute to the awareness of learners about their needs, goals and other emotions. He believes that each learner has an individual way of learning. *"A low EQ level learner tends to avoid speaking and also He suggests the brain-based learning in classrooms and supports the idea of keeping the motivation level high by introducing real and related life situations"* [5].

In the light of EQ principles, it is presented in this study that if teachers plan their lessons considering Brain-based learning techniques, which view not only student's cognitive features, but also their feelings, interests, experiences and background knowledge as important, the students feel less anxious towards the class [6].

Jensen tries to connect the brain based teaching to brain based content for learning where he models the curriculum with brain in mind by a simple figure. The curriculum of brain in mind is connected to information literacy, scientific inquiry, personal development, social fluency and artistic expression [7].

The second language as foreign language learning with academic achievement, IQ and emotional intelligence was studied by Pishghadam R., where it was found that *"academic achievement did not correlate much with IQ, but it was strongly associated with verbal intelligence which is a sub-section of IQ test."* Further studies demonstrated that the *"emotional intelligence helped in learning different skills and analyses of oral and written modes of language exhibited the effects of emotional and verbal intelligences. It also showed the amount of communication, the number of errors, and writing ability"* [8].

We know that people belong to different types and use language as their communication tool in different ways. With those interested in language communication, i.e. mastery of both written and oral skills, as per the study done by Pishghadam, the relation between the EQ variables and the language skills are highlighted. Through his data analysis results we come to know that successful language learners have high EQ level and the relation of total EQ to speaking of the language learners was not seen, but significant correlations of intra and interpersonal abilities (subscale of EQ) to speaking skills were found. Stress management and general mood abilities were seen related to speaking.

Howitz has studied anxiety of students in a foreign language classroom. He has formulated a questionnaire which is used extensively for studies on emotional intelligence and its relation to foreign languages world-wide. This questionnaire to measure anxiety on Howitz FLCAS scale has the following factors; communication apprehension, nervousness, confidence, lack of concentration and self consciousness. The oral skills, which are the focus of this study, develop by encountering these factors in the learning phase of the learners of Russian.

3. Findings and Discussion

In our earlier studies, we have focused data collection on anxiety level of learners of Russian in a beginner's classroom [9]. This enabled us to consider these emotional factors while creating course modules for beginners. However, the problems encountered by the intermediate and higher level learners were not studied. The fact that the intermediate and higher level learners are still weak in their oral skills, proves that we have to focus attention in this area. The earlier studies and its results give us a clue as to why oral skills in the higher learning levels tend to take a plunge. The discussions on problems encountered by learners of a foreign language at a higher level are discussed below.

4. Problems Encountered in Foreign Language Classrooms

The various problems that affect the learner's oral skills are discussed below.

The first and foremost is that not all the learners volunteer to speak and many are forced by the teacher. The initial level is very basic as to talk about your family, yourself, your school or university, library and so on. As the level grows, the learner acquires the minimum required amount of learner's vocabulary at each level. The problem that arises here is that the capacity to store this minimum vocabulary is not sufficient enough for each learner. Many of us encounter instances when it becomes difficult for us to remember a particular word at a particular moment of communication when it is needed the most to describe our view point on the topic discussed. This happens even in our mother tongue. More so this kind of a situation is very common in a foreign language learning class.

Moreover, from the third year onwards, literature and the science of language, its concepts and theories are explained in a more scientific language style that becomes difficult to the learner to understand in a short period of time. So the learners face time constraint and a difficult level due to scientific language style vocabulary. The conversion from the style that is read to a style expected to narrate orally becomes difficult for the learner.

Initially, a learner tries to read texts aloud in the classroom as well as at home. However, at later stages the learner stops giving attention to this exercise as they think it to be childish. At the beginning learners usually have the stress marks that are given in Russian textbooks which make it easy to read. Later it is avoided, that makes difficult to read, so the learners tend to ignore and do not bother to learn it. This attitude affects the learner's pronunciation and flow of speech, when reading or speaking aloud. This also leads to getting ridiculed by co-learners in the classroom.

The courses of Russian text analysis only include adaptations of literature works. Instead this should be dealt with in a varied manner, where adaptations of other text styles should be included. In doing so, the interest of a learner develops towards a particular style. Hence, a learner can chose a line of specialty which minimizes the trouble of choosing from the ocean vocabulary that one has to learn.

Another main problem seen in India, that needs to be addressed, is that science and technology or information technology; political or economic; or business and international trade specific learning of language which is not available now. Mostly it is literature or culture based.

There is one more problem. Once the students are out of the classroom, they revert back to their mother-tongue or to another local language. In a 24 hours' day a maximum of 6 hours are allotted for foreign language learning, and the next 10 hours (after excluding 8 hours for sleep) students speak either in their mother-tongue or in another local language. As a result of this they can't retain the new vocabulary learnt on that day, though the grammatical structure remains with them passively, but not in connection with the new vocabulary. This is seen when they speak. Mistakes are seen in verb conjugation or noun declensions. Hence, something needs to be done to make use of that ten hours, if not fully, but at least half of it.

The primary reason that is always show cast is that learners are made to hurry to learn everything in a short span of time. The area specific training of oral skills is missing in institutions that teach the language.

The other reason is that the grammatical structure of the learner that is not fully developed. With doubts of its usage and a dearth in the vocabulary sometimes pose the problem to develop oral skills. The confidence level is not to the maximum for speaking. The right word doesn't strike at the right moment happens even with the native language. So much so it happens more with a foreign language. There is no alternative word, a synonym that occurs immediately to the learner, when one stumbles and can't just say differently to manage the situation. Though there are classes that teach the learners synonyms and antonyms, many do not remember them out of context. The practical grammar classes are monotonous and go to waste as they never try using them in real situations or even in essays which are supposed to be written using said patterns.

5. Conclusion & Sugestions

There are some lines of thought to overcome these problems faced during oral skills development in language classrooms.

1. One of our suppositions is that if intra and interpersonal abilities of a language learner can be improved by creating an environment for the learner that he could face in the event of real life situations, where he is forced to speak his opinion about the said theories and concepts that one learns during the higher courses, the inhibitions about oral communication in a learner might decrease. The aspect of empathy needs a serious look and this is one of the abilities correlated earlier in this paper as put by Pishghadam on intrapersonal and interpersonal abilities as compared to speaking skills.

2. The probability of having choice of specialized interpreters for particular needs with high accuracy increases when the training of oral skills is subject oriented.

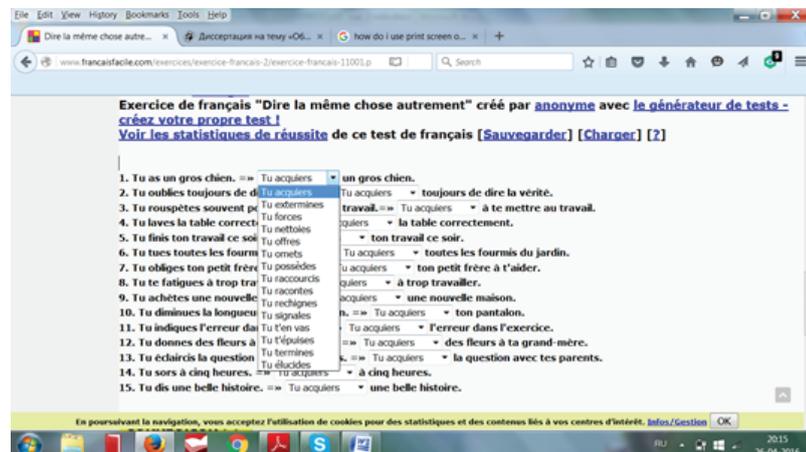
3. Brain based learning should be paid attention to focus on individual groups with problems faced in that area.

4. Job opportunities that demand in this era has to be the main focus in our universities. The teachers have to be chosen not only based on language literature and culture but also based on other fields of expertise. The already existing senior faculty can be supported with new faculties who can share the subject and also deal the need from a new angle of specialization.

5. The patterns should be made to practice in oral classes. This needs a closer look at the minimum intake of students in contrary to the large overflowing foreign language classrooms in Indian universities. This is the major problem that hinders to shape the learner to a better professional interpreter.

6. As we all know practice makes man perfect, for this purpose we should keep in mind the size of the language learning classroom. If the division of learner's interest is found early, the class can be divided and it is ideal for a classroom to have a healthy discussion on a topic and creative ideas born as a result which in turn helps a budding of a professional a teacher can be proud of. The need of the hour is the creation of artificial language surroundings, for the languages that are being learnt.

The French classes where "dire autrement!" i.e. to say differently comes handy in such situations. The five different ways to say the same idea gives the learner a practice that helps to recollect phrases in foreign language in a real situation. One material on internet that I stumbled upon has a drop down box with synonyms and one has to choose the right word [10].



The learning material in Russian of Volodina G. I., "A kak ob etom skazat'?: spetsificheskiye oboroty razgovornoj rechi [11]." is intended for learners knowing basic Russian and for those who want to master the language. This lends another helping hand to the learners who want to have a handy set of *dire autrement* phrases.

7. One of the most important factors of language learning process is motivation. In due course of learning, some learners are de-motivated due to many factors. Disinterest of learners to a few of the topics taught, or topics that have no career oriented value, or the worst hit problem that occurs during the interpretation course when their

native language or the language known by them does not figure as the source or target language.

8. Empathy plays a major role in classroom learning that can be imparted through training. The feeling of a learner has to be understood by the class as well as the teacher so as to boost the confidence level and morale of the student.

Our suggestion is to conduct a further study on the anxiety level of intermediate learners, where, the courses on oral skills are oriented towards the overcoming of anxiety hurdles. Our supposition is that, this study would reveal to us the factors that hinder the development of oral skills in the intermediate and higher levels and that if we make new modules for courses on oral skills based on the study's results, we will be able to counter these problems effectively. A methodology and an extensive course structure that can help to enhance oral skills have to be developed keeping the above mentioned problems in mind.

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