

Conference Paper

Preparing Multilingual Professionals: Deficiencies and Prospects of Foreign Language Education at Russian Universities

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Abstract

The trend of global mobility and super-diversity is reflected in the growing number of multilingual people. Research demonstrates that foreign language skills lead to a wage increase, and this is another important motivational factor in learning a foreign language. National and supranational language policies aim at developing citizens' multi-lingual skills, one of the most prominent examples being the European Union Multilingualism Policy. Although English as a means of international communication remains the main language to be studied in non-English speaking countries, some states have announced the development of languages other than English. In Russia, foreign language competence remains a mandatory part of higher education standards for all areas of training, and the quality of language education is important. This article presents the results of an online survey that show students' satisfaction with their foreign language skills acquired at Russian universities. The survey was conducted at four universities among students of non-linguistic curricula. As it turned out, more than a half of the respondents are only partially satisfied with their foreign language proficiency. As the main deficiencies, students mention an insufficient number of class hours, a lack of speaking practice, as well as obsolete programs and teaching styles. It follows then that students require more practical skills, including communication in everyday life situations, preferably with native speakers, as well as the modernization of programs and teaching methods. Many voiced a need to introduce edutainment activities into teaching.

Keywords: foreign language education, students' satisfaction with foreign language learning, modernization of foreign language education at universities.

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1. Introduction

Foreign language proficiency is required in the modern world. The global mobility of goods, labor, and finance presupposes the need for communication with others. Although the lingua franca of today is English, the loss of competencies in languages other than English can lead to economic disadvantages. This applies to both countries and individuals. Outward looking countries have created policies aimed at improving

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the citizens' foreign language skills. For example, back in the early 1990s, China initiated an intense English language learning in the framework of Deng Xiaoping Open Door Policy, and later, in accordance with the One Belt — One Road Initiative, introduced a multilingual approach. This has led to an increased interest in learning languages other than English [6]. English-speaking countries are concerned about the decrease of foreign language skills that could negatively affect their economic prospects [4]. In the 21st century, Russia has experienced a significant quantitative increase in the teaching of foreign languages in schools. At the same time, the language policy was aimed at multilingualism or, in the wording of the Ministry of Education, at “linguistic pluralism” as a result of “socio-political and socio-economic transformations”, including “growing openness of our society, its entry into the world community, development and strengthening of interstate political, economic and cultural ties, internationalization of all spheres of life in our country”, as well as “the fact that foreign languages are becoming really popular in modern society” [7]. Gradually, during the second decade of the 21st century, school standards with a mandatory second foreign language were introduced. At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, there were about 70% of schools with a foreign language as a subject; over 15 years this number grew to 99% [1]. As the data show, the number of English and Chinese learners has increased, and the interest in other foreign languages has declined.

The situation with teaching foreign languages at universities has not changed as much as at the secondary level. The main foreign language taught at Russian universities is English. The reason for young professionals to acquire foreign languages along with mobility opportunities is the correlation between foreign language competency and the salary level. Studies show that this correlation is characteristic of both the foreign and Russian labor markets [9]. Despite that incentive, the English knowledge, according to the EF English Proficiency Index, has remained low since 2011 [3]. Russia ranks 48th out of 100 countries and 28th among 33 European countries that participated in the EF Index. Next to Russia are Belarus and Ukraine. The proximity might be indicative of a common Soviet origin of modern language education in these countries. Although there is no special policy paper documenting the national approach to learning foreign languages, educational standards for higher education prescribe the ability to communicate in a foreign language in interpersonal and intercultural communication for all educational programs.

Thus, the quality of language teaching in Russia leaves much to be desired. The quality of education is a multifaceted concept. According to the researchers, quality is the compliance of the results with the set goals [10]. Defined in this way, quality is

the achievement of the expected outcomes. The UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment in the revised UK Quality Code for Higher Education defines high quality “as a quality which can consistently lead to credible and recognized positive outcomes for students” [13]. The current Russian standards for higher education prescribe the desired outcome in acquiring foreign language proficiency among the so-called “universal competencies”: the graduate should be able to demonstrate business communication skills in a foreign language or foreign languages [5]. This definition does not prescribe a measured unit, for example, the level of communication skills or the quality of communication. Thus, students’ satisfaction can act as a measure of the quality of education. In 2019, the authors of this article conducted a survey of students of higher educational institutions in Ekaterinburg. The respondents of the survey expressed their opinions on the quantity and quality of teaching, their foreign language proficiency and suggested some improvements in this area.

2. Methodology and Methods

There is lack of single methodological approach to research on satisfaction with the quality of education. As many authors mention, the quality of higher education is a highly controversial and relative concept [12]. The methodology that was used to conduct this study is based on questionnaires administered via Survey Monkey among 622 students at four universities in Yekaterinburg. In the EF index, which measured the proficiency in six cities of Russia, Yekaterinburg ranks after capitals such as Moscow and St. Petersburg. Thus, the results of the research on teaching a foreign language in Yekaterinburg can be representative of Russia. As elsewhere, in Russia there is also a knowledge gap between urban centers and rural areas. Nevertheless, the analysis can serve for an average Russian city in which higher educational institutions are located. The universities that participated in this research included the Ural Federal University, a comprehensive university with a wide range of study programs, the Ural Law University, the Ural State University of Economics and the Ural State Pedagogical University. The study involved only students of non-linguistic programs. Curricula covered STEM, the humanities, social sciences, law, and pedagogy. Most students (90%) belonged to the first and second years. The choice was guided by the fact that, as a rule, a foreign language is taught during the first 3–4 semesters.

Questions were grouped by topics of teaching, assessment, general skills and learning experiences. In particular, questions focused on obtaining general and specific data on language education, including students’ goals for learning a foreign language,

assessment of their knowledge, experience of language learning at the secondary and tertiary education levels, their opinions about the place of language learning at the university, self-education, and other aspects. Answer options were given, and for some questions, only one answer was possible, and for some, several. Some questions had an open answer option.

In developing the questionnaires, we have analyzed approaches to measuring satisfaction with tertiary education in Russian universities in general and, in particular, the quality of foreign language learning and learning outcomes. A general study of the determinants of satisfaction with higher education was conducted at the Russian Pedagogical University named after Herzen in 2018 [11]. This study argues that the key determinant of the quality of university education for students is the competence of teachers, material and technical environment of the university takes the second place, and the third is applicability of knowledge. As measures necessary to improve the quality of education, students suggest involving more practitioners and more competent teachers in the educational process.

Studies of satisfaction with language education were conducted at Kuban State University [2], Moscow State Linguistic University [8] and other higher education institutions in Russia. A study on the development of tools that measure satisfaction with the quality of education claims that the results of such studies are answers to the questions posed [10]. This can be a common denominator for surveys. To try to overcome this shortcoming, we will focus on the analysis of open questions. It is widely known that questionnaires may lack credibility, as respondents are not motivated to provide reliable answers. On the other hand, those who are dissatisfied with something more often express their complaints in polls than those who are satisfied. Thus, in our survey there are two major blocks with open questions: one concerns the factors of dissatisfaction, and the other includes possible suggestions for improvement.

3. Findings and Discussion

73% of students began to learn foreign languages from 6–8 years old, the vast majority (47%) — from the first school grade. 64% of respondents studied foreign languages along with school lessons: 27.2% — in language centers, 21.7% — with private teachers. 76% of respondents practice self-study everyday up to 2–3 times a week. 64.6% are able to self-assess themselves. 60% say that they study outside the university in order to gain additional knowledge. Most respondents describe their current proficiency in a foreign language as ‘average’. In addition, they chose answers that indicated some

kind of limitation on their ability to communicate. 62% indicated that they could cope with everyday communication, but have difficulty talking on professional topics. 25% respondents can read and translate with a dictionary, but cannot communicate freely. Most of them said that lack of time (42%) and poor school preparation (39.5%) were the main obstacles to learning languages at a higher level at the university. Nevertheless, the majority of respondents (58%) believe that their proficiency depends on their efforts, and only 23% indicated the interdependence of achievements and a skillful teacher.

Respondents were asked about their satisfaction with learning foreign languages at their universities on a scale: 1 — completely satisfied, 2 — partially satisfied, and 3 — dissatisfied. Of 622, 5% did not answer, 5% were dissatisfied, 33% said they were completely satisfied, and 57% indicated their partial satisfaction. Students were offered nine options for possible dissatisfaction if they chose an answer other than “completely satisfied”. Of these nine, the majority of students (37%) indicated a lack of classes, 12% mentioned that they were not taught to communicate in everyday life situations, and 12% indicated that they did not study a foreign language in the professional sphere. 12% of students gave answers to an open question about obstacles to their better learning of foreign languages. On average, they indicated a lack of teaching hours, unsatisfactory teaching materials and teaching methods. Many students require more speaking practice, preferably with native speakers. Quite a few students complain that they do not fit into the group because their language level is different. Some say that the textbook is too easy or too difficult for them. A large number of respondents are not satisfied with the teacher: “the teacher is not interested in us”, “the teacher is busy with herself \himself”, “the unprofessional teacher”, “the teacher has a low level of language”, “we just sit in the classroom”, “they do not teach at all”, “the teacher is boring and does not give knowledge”. Some students complain that the lessons are “boring”, “monotonous”, “useless exercises”, “not motivating”. The texts are “old-fashioned”, “obsolete”, “originally from the 90s”, “textbooks without relevant topics at all”, “the textbooks are from the USSR”. Some students say that there is no modern equipment for study, there is no language laboratory and no e-learning.

Natural science students are upset because they hardly develop their language skills for specific purposes. The vast majority of students who took part in the survey never use literature in foreign languages available in university libraries. 73% consider themselves unprepared to participate in conferences in foreign languages, and 79.4% say that there is no preparation for participation in a conference or presentation during their studies. 39% indicated that professors do not recommend literature in foreign languages for their project or research work, 31% say that they receive this recommendation from

time to time, and only 17.8% chose the option “constantly recommended”. Virtually all the respondents insist on following the students’ individual requirements, on making learning more individualized and tailored to personal needs.

Among recommendations for improvement, suggestions are those relating to increasing class hours, as well as introducing more speaking practice. However, many students want to intensify learning, introduce games and edutainment activities to make lessons more engaging, make more changes to the plan so that the lessons are less monotonous, and modernize the program and teaching materials. Although students are only partially satisfied with their foreign language learning experience at the university, the vast majority of respondents (92%) retain a desire to learn foreign languages after graduation.

The survey participants are committed to learning foreign languages. In particular, 60% say they want to be able to communicate with foreigners in their professional life, 53% are eager to read about their future work, and 44% are considering working abroad. The survey results show that students are not entirely satisfied with their experience in foreign languages learning at universities. This experience is transferred from schools, and although they are used to learning languages on their own, their results still do not satisfy them and remain, as a rule, at the level of A2–B1, according to the Common European Framework of Reference. Students believe that academic hours are not enough for a successful study of a foreign language at a university. The organization of the educational process leaves room for improvement, since students are not always streamed into groups according to their respective levels. Teaching materials and equipment should be modernized, and the curriculum should become more diverse to meet the various individual needs of students.

The survey has indicated that according to the students’ university experience, foreign language learning is rarely associated with any other activity in a foreign language. There is a lack of systemic referral to materials in a foreign language coming from research advisers, and therefore there are no other motives or reasons for studying foreign languages, other than the requirements of a foreign language teacher. Thus, this analysis shows that universities predominantly remain a monolingual learning environment, providing students with rare incentives to use foreign languages while studying. Thus, in order to acquire foreign language skills, students turn to institutions of informal education. Students are used to studying languages, and this is normal practice for most of them from a young age. The majority pursue the aim of becoming multilingual outside formal institutions such as schools and universities.

4. Conclusions

Young professionals express their wish to acquire foreign languages and make use of them in their jobs throughout their lifetime. They are experienced in learning a foreign language from an early age, and look forward to continuing their studies after their graduation from a higher education institution.

This study has shown that there is a certain rupture between the students' needs to participate in the multilingual labor market, their expectations from the university foreign language education and the foreign language offer of universities. Universities can only partially satisfy students' expectations for acquiring foreign language proficiency. Apparently, the system of quality assurance, which could redress some of the imbalances in the field of language teaching at universities, should be improved.

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