

Conditions for harmonious and comprehensive integration of foreign students in the Russian university (the case of the Ural State University of Economics)

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Abstract. One of the priority goals of Russian higher education development is its export, which is reflected in the federal programs and plans. The paper addresses the issues of language education of international students at the Ural State University of Economics (Yekaterinburg). A survey helped identify the needs of international students of the first year and reveal the main problems they face. Among the most serious difficulties are poor knowledge of Russian, bad communication with teachers and domestic students, and lack of support in the group. Some recommendations to foreign language teachers are offered that can help eliminate problems in the work with mixed-nationality groups and to motivate international students to study, which will decrease dropout and provide their harmonious integration in the university.

1 Introduction

Transformation of Russian education, initiated by the signing of Bologna declaration in 2003, has made studying in Russia attractive to foreign students. According to the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation, the number of foreign students in Russian has doubled within the last ten years and reached 309 thousand students in the end of 2019. Most of them come from the CIS countries, Asia, Middle East and Northern Africa. Promotion of the Russian higher education in the international market has been activated by the Federal project “Export of Education”. One of its goals is to increase the number of foreign students in Russian universities to 425 thousand people by 2024. This project outlines a complex plan to attract foreigners to study in Russia, which includes the following measures: international contests and Olympiads; introduction of summer and winter schools for prospective students; advertising in mass media; internship for foreign students in the large Russian companies; online exhibitions and presentations of Russian universities; online courses in Russian universities; special programs for prospective students (for instance, academic leadership), etc.

The Ural State University of Economics (*further referred to as USUE*), one of the largest universities in the Urals, is engaged in recruitment of foreign students. In 2019–2020 more than 1200 foreign students studied in the university, while in 2020–2021 their number increased to almost 1700. The growing number of foreigners in Russian education

gives rise to various problems, among which socio-cultural adaptation, communication between Russian and foreign students, foreign language teaching, early dropout.

This paper addresses the issues of language teaching to foreign students in multinational groups. It is assumed that knowledge of Russian and English may help foreign students of the first and second years of study to adapt to the realities of the country and thus to decrease dropout and promote harmonious development of students' personalities.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Research Methods

The research is based on the general scientific methods such as analysis, comparison, generalization, description and interpretation. Besides, a survey has been held to reveal the international students' needs in the field of foreign languages and to identify the main problems that they face at USUE. Other empirical methods relevant for the study are pedagogical observation, comparison of results and methodology design to teach the English language in mixed-nationality groups.

2.2 Literature review

The problems connected with international students and export of education attract much attention of scholars. Thus, within the last ten years the number of articles indexed in the Web of Science database covering different issues connected with international students has quadrupled.

Many papers analyze students' expectations from studying abroad. No doubt that defeated expectations may be the main cause of the dropout in the first semesters, for instance, "the behavioral expectations (implicit and explicit-based expectations) specify students' personal desire for monetary, work experience gains and industry reputation based benefits from internships rather than the program's accreditation, quality and academic standards" [1]. In this context it is important to analyze international students' satisfaction and dissatisfaction of the learning process which may give clues for the improvements from the point of view of teaching and management of learning. Thus, among the main dissatisfiers are assessment procedure that lacks transparency; poor state of facilities (computers, libraries, parking); ineffective support services; bad organizational structure and communication [2].

International student services deserve special attention, as properly-organized students' support in the first year in a foreign country may become crucial for the student to integrate in the host country. "International student support and integration services have been found to increase cultural knowledge, adjustment coping skills, health and safety, and student satisfaction" [3].

Adaptation of international students is a frequently discussed issue [4, 5]. "Our results reveal that feeling safe, participating in social activities, using counseling services, friendship with other students and communication with lecturers were important variables influencing international students' adaptation to their place of residence" [6].

Researchers are interested in the methods of shaping intercultural identity [7,8]. In this case the importance of mitigating language barriers and cultural adaptation are emphasized. For instance, when describing the situation in Chinese universities it is mentioned that: "Chinese higher schools should provide Chinese languages and cultural classes for international students to overcome language barriers and make efforts to increase opportunities for local students to expand cultural and educational exchanges between

different groups” [7]. In other words, academics should make their classes more inclusive for international students not feel isolated. “Development of cultural intelligence makes socio-cultural adaptation easier and promotes successful intercultural communication. It requires specially organized activities to develop intercultural competence” [4].

Studying in a foreign language may become a challenge in case of poor knowledge of the language. There may be three major language-related issues: 1) listening and speaking in discussion groups, 2) writing in examinations and assignments, and 3) the negative impact of language proficiency on grades [10]. It means that even if the students know the language of instruction, their level is often insufficient to follow the high speed of speech in lectures and seminars, poor writing may also become an obstacle in getting good grades and thus make the international students feel uncomfortable.

So, this overview of the most recent publications allows to argue that the problems connected with education export require further study. In this paper we describe the experience of USUE in the work with international students, particular attention is paid to language teaching and to the students’ needs that can be satisfied in an English class.

At present there are three main types of programs at USUE suitable for foreigners:

- Preparatory programs that help international students enter Russian universities. Among the most popular are economics, medicine and biology, engineering, natural sciences and, of course languages, both Russian as a foreign language and English. These programs are suitable for a wide audience, not only those who are planning to study at USUE;

- Bachelor programs in a wide range of areas, including Management, Economics, Computer Science, Banking and Finance, Service and Hospitality and some others. At present the language of instruction in all these programs is Russian, which may create certain obstacles to foreign students, as they often admit that Russian is a difficult language;

- Master’s degree programs in the Russian language dominate now, but in 2021 “International business” and “Management in Tourism and Hospitality Industries” will be taught in English, which will increase the number of potential students.

In spite of attractiveness of USUE and the opportunities it provides, the dropout is rather high. To decrease it, it is important to combine work of different levels: administrative, organizational and academic.

3 Results and discussion

3.1 Survey: procedure and results

We held a survey among the first year Bachelor students of the Institute of Management and Information Technologies. It included 27 international students, which is 71% of the total number of foreign freshmen. The goal of this survey was to reveal the needs of students in the field of language education and based on the results to develop recommendations to English language teachers. Based on the students’ answers we can reconstruct the following portrait of a student: a citizen of one of the African, Asian or South American countries (Cameroon, Egypt, Libya, Benin, Syria, Uzbekistan, Colombia etc.); lives in Russia for a year or less; learns Russian for a year or less; can speak English. So, the majority of students come from non-Russian speaking countries.

The first part of the questionnaire included the questions connected with the general attitude to the studies and the role of the Russian language. The questions and answers are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Role of Russian and problems when studying abroad.

<i>1. Where did you learn Russian?</i>				
At USUE – 51,9%	At the Ural Federal University – 25,9%	With a tutor – 11,1%	At home – 11,1%	
<i>2. Do you know Russian well enough to understand lectures?</i>				
I understand the lectures partly – 55,5%		I can hardly understand anything, just some parts of lectures – 45,5%		
<i>3. What problems do you face when studying in the Russian university?</i>				
Communication with new people in Russian	Russian is a difficult language	Online learning	Communication with academics in Russian	Bad attitude from domestic students
<i>4. How can the university help you to solve the problems?</i>				
Additional Russian language courses during the 1 and 2 years – 51,8%	Some lectures in the major subjects could be held in English – 37%		Additional (extracurricular) classes in the core subjects – 11,2%	
<i>5. Would you recommend USUE to your friends and relatives?</i>				
Yes – 88,9%		No – 0%		I don't know yet – 11,1%

The survey revealed the most problematic areas, among which is poor knowledge of Russian that makes it difficult for the students to understand lectures. Besides they mentioned that online learning caused them even more difficulties, as they could not react fast to the teachers' questions and preferred to keep silent during the whole practical class. It was quite unexpected for us that the international students suffer from bad relations with their Russian-speaking group-mates and lack of support in class. However, almost all students in the survey would recommend USUE to their friends, which means they are quite satisfied with the university.

In the second part of the questionnaire we asked the international students about the role of foreign languages (Russian and English) in their current lives and in future. The answers are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Role of English at present and in the future.

<i>1. Do you speak English with Russian teachers and students?</i>		
Yes, I often speak English at university – 51,9%	No, I do not speak English with teachers – 37%	I rarely use English in academic communication – 11,1%
<i>2. Do you have any difficulties in learning English?</i>		
No – 88,8%		Yes – 11,2%
<i>3. What foreign language is more important for you today?</i>		
Russian – 88,8%		English – 11,2%
<i>4. What foreign language is more important for your future profession?</i>		
English – 59,2%	Russian – 33,3%	Both – 7,5%

So, it is clear from the students' responses that English as a foreign language is an advantage of the program as the language is relevant for the future; the students do not have serious problems in learning this language, as they learnt English at school; half of the international students speak English with teachers and group mates if the knowledge of Russian is not sufficient to say what they want. However their current need in the knowledge of Russian is very strong and it should be satisfied. It is possible to do it during English language classes. In the next paragraph there are several recommendations to teachers that may help promote Russian language skills of international students and motivate them to successful study at the university.

3.2 Discussion

Since 2020 all international students in Bachelor programs of Management and Information Technologies have to learn English as a foreign language instead of Russian as it used to be. In general such transformation of the programs is quite rational, as many leaning materials are in English and the knowledge of this language gives students an opportunity to continue their education in different countries, to work in international companies and to be able to communicate with business partners from all over the world

So, among the main problems that such students face are problems with Russian language acquisition, troubles in communication with group mates, mixed-nationality and mixed-ability groups, inability to understand the content of lectures and to discuss the material in practical classes (due to poor knowledge of Russian), sociocultural differences, etc. These problems can be solved (if not completely, but at least some solutions might be found) during the English language classes due to the following: it is possible to develop intercultural competence that may bridge the gap between domestic and international students; communicative approach in teaching may help students get rid of the fear to speak in a foreign language (though it will be primarily English, experience shows that when international students realize that their Russian-speaking group-mates make mistakes speaking a foreign language, they stop being afraid of making mistakes in Russian). It is of great importance to develop an individual approach to teaching English in such mixed-nationality groups. Based on the experience of work in groups with domestic and international students, we can provide the following recommendations to English language teachers:

1) Russian should not be excluded from English classes. It is advisable to use translation exercises (primarily from English into Russian); glossary revision by translating the words (find Russian-English correlations, give the English equivalents to the Russian words); some rules might be explained in Russian (e.g. simple grammar rules, which international students often know, could be reviewed with the help of Russian); use of English-Russian projects (in this case international students may work in tandem with domestic students). These and some other exercises combining English and Russian have been used in teaching international students and we received a positive feedback from the group;

2) Individual exercises for international students, both in class and as the home-task (e.g. English-Russian glossary for the text or the topic, monologues on the topics relevant to them – speak about your life in Russia or describe the positive and the negative experiences of living abroad, etc.);

3) Extracurricular work with international students (individual consultations, preparation to scientific conferences and contests in English, assistance in writing papers in English). In this case communication between the student and the academic may be in Russian;

4) Tandem work for a longer period might be of use, as domestic students often have a lot of problems in learning English and their foreign group-mates can help them eliminate the problems, and thus relations within the group will become friendlier, and foreign students will stop feeling alien.

These recommendations do not contradict communicative-cognitive approach (or integrated form-focused and communicative instruction), they are student-centered and apart from hard skills they develop such soft skills as responsibility, teamwork, assistance, independence and others.

4 Conclusion

Attractiveness and popularity of Russian education abroad depends on various factors, among which are curricula, rating and the image of the university, and personal attitude of

students to the opportunities the higher school might provide them with. When asking foreign students about the reasons that influenced their choice of university, many of them mentioned advice from friends and relatives who studied in this university and had a positive experience. We believe that to be able to create such a positive feedback from the graduates, all the university staff should combine efforts. Although the workload is often shifted to the international department of the university, we should not underestimate the role of academics. It is with them international students communicate on a daily basis, and thus teachers may contribute to the students' success or failure. Being a teacher of English, I could witness the problems international students confront and I realized that some of them might be solved in an English class with the help of an individual approach to the mixed-nationality groups.

However this study has certain limitations. Firstly, the number of students in the survey does not allow to generalize the conclusions and refer them to all international students; secondly, only the international students from USUE took part in the survey, so the recommendations to work with them have the local nature, while further study might expand them; finally although the results do not represent all universities in Russia, the findings are important for teachers and administration of different higher schools, as the problems mentioned by international students are quite common.

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