

Multilingual Awareness: Rethinking Linguistic Diversity in Schools in Russia

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Abstract. *The paper focuses on the notion of multilingual awareness in relation to the introduction of a second foreign language in schools' curricula in Russia. It first considers whether the expansion in this field matters and what are the reasons for such a move in language planning. It then examines the attitudes of both in-service teachers and students in teaching education programs of Bachelor and Master degree levels towards multilingualism and linguistic diversity. Most specifically, it looks into the level of teachers' and students' awareness of a multilingual component in language teaching and points to difficulties in maintaining a healthful balance between English and other foreign languages. Finally, it provides implications for the changes in teacher education to prepare a better qualified specialist capable of meeting the challenges of multilingual and multicultural settings.*

Key words – *multilingualism, linguistic diversity, awareness, schools in Russia*¹.

I. INTRODUCTION

Education as a universal human activity has been affected by globalization in recent years. Though it started to change slowly and somewhat reluctantly due to its historical adherence to national-scale demands, now we are witnessing a speeding up process of considering the goals of educations in the global context. The changes resulted in wide-ranging reforms of school education and teacher education programs as an attempt to help pre-service and in-service teachers to face the challenges of modern classrooms and schools.

One of the facets of globalization in education is the need to develop competences to go across cultural and linguistic boundaries. In 2002, the European Commission proposed an ambitious goal for all school-children in Europe: the European Union countries should provide opportunities for each citizen to become trilingual by learning three languages from an early age (the mother tongue or native language and two foreign languages). The changes are coming in Russia too: from recommendation to the introduction of a second foreign

language in compulsory education in all schools since 2019.

As any change in the traditional setting the introduction of an additional subject at school affects schoolchildren and their parents, teachers, the administrative staff and the higher educational establishments preparing future teachers. It is crucial to understand the implications of the change and become aware of the essential potential of the ability to speak and understand several foreign languages.

The article reviews ideas of linguistic diversity and discusses the multilingual awareness of future teachers as well as in-service teachers of foreign languages in Arkhangelsk in the light of the introduction of a second foreign language in schools curricula in Russia.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Language skills in a global era

Twenty-first century people live in a diverse, rapidly changing globalized world. According to A. Giddens, globalization can be described as “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa [4, p. 64]. Multiple skill sets have been put forth as essential for the realization of such social relations on a global scale. Language skills are also viewed as a medium that makes these relations possible.

We are now witnessing a shift in the understanding of language skills which results, on the one hand, in attributing to language good economic sense and, on the other hand, in seeing it as “a measurable skill, as opposed to a talent, or an inalienable characteristic of group members” [6, p. 474]. The consequence that flows from that is the commodification of language or treating it as an added value for the job market.

Along with the tendency to commodification, language skills are integrated into what is known as global competence. The nature of this phenomenon is explained by F. Reimers as “the knowledge and skills that help people understand the flat world in which they live, the skills to integrate across disciplinary domains to comprehend global affairs and events and to create possibilities to address them” [13]. In the light of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic interactions there is a need to

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develop new understandings of individual multilingual development and reconsider the approaches to achieving multilingual teaching goals through linguistic diversity in schools.

2.2 The spread of English

The perception of English as a prerequisite for entering the global market lies at the root of its choice as the most popular foreign language learnt at schools in Russia. It is followed by German and French which can be explained by a long term historical tradition.

Accepting the idea of necessity to learn English as a way of getting better career opportunities, some stakeholders in the educational sphere of Russia doubt whether the spread of English is an ultimately good thing. Their doubt goes in line with the concerns expressed by such researchers as R. Phillipson who has developed the concept of “linguistic imperialism” [12] to explain how economic and cultural factors are used to prime English over other languages.

The well-propagated idea of English as the international language of business in the context of the choice of a foreign language in schools in Russia puts other foreign languages at a distinct disadvantage. The statistics shows that the number of school-leavers taking Russian State Exam (EGE) in English is growing from year to year. According to M. Verbitskaja, K. Makhmurjan and S. Simkin [14, p. 3], the proportion of examinees in English in 2018 grew to 96,7 % while the share of those examined in other languages shrank to 2% in German and 1,1% in French.

At the same time it is getting more obvious in the English-speaking world, that “the ability to speak other languages non the less ensures the competitive edge” [3, p.164]. We can add here positive correlations that are often found in research on relations between plurilingual competences and earnings (for example, in Switzerland, where a German-French-English trilingual earns more on average than a German-English bilingual [5]).

2.3 Linguistic diversity and multilingual awareness

Globalization, on the one hand, has challenged linguistic diversity and, on the other, has ceased to treat multilingualism as a marginal phenomenon. The acceptance of the idea that multilingualism should become the characteristic of the majority of people has never been either one-way or unproblematic in Russia. Until now some schoolchildren in Russia do not have a strong motivation to learn a foreign language. If we add here the pressure of taking the foreign language exam which is an announced plan for 2022 and the shortage of qualified in-service foreign language teachers on local levels, the prospect of learning an additional foreign language for many schoolchildren will look daunting.

Though managing several foreign languages remains a challenge, there are effective strategies of dealing with it. One of them consists in increasing multilingual awareness and focusing on benefits offered by the

transition to linguistic diversity in schools’ curricula. Schoolchildren, educators and stakeholders need to be aware of these benefits.

First of all, there is a need to consider the complex nature of contemporary multilingualism as having at least three spheres of relevant distinctions. According to L. Aronin and D. Singleton, multilingualism is no longer limited to (1) any particular territory, (2) any particular social layer or profession and (3) is well supported by new technologies such as the Internet [1]. The recent data of Internet users by languages provides convincing evidence of the value of multilingualism as it indicates that the English-speaking Internet users correspond only to 25, 2 % of all the Internet users in the world with the six official languages of the United Nations (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish) included in the top ten Internet languages table [7].

Secondly, we should keep our eyes open to the effect of multilingualism on cognition. The studies in this sphere have had a long tradition in educational contexts. According to G. Cenoz, “the results indicate that multilinguals of different ages develop resources that allow them to perform better on some metalinguistic tasks and can even slow down some aspects of the cognitive decline associated with ageing” [2, pp.7–8].

Finally, we need to understand a complex role that should be taken by teachers of foreign languages as “a better understanding of multilingual competencies and their effect on learning processes on the part of the teachers can lead to more efficient (language) teaching” [8, p. 173]. In order to make learners aware of potential multilingual advantage teachers themselves should possess multilingual awareness to promote linguistic diversity in schools’ curricula. Steps are to be taken at all stages of teacher education, from initial teacher training through the induction period to continuous professional development, to help teachers develop their skills and attitudes necessary to achieve multilingual teaching goals.

However, it is yet not clear whether the above-presented considerations are recognized as important by foreign language teachers currently working in schools in Russia and students preparing for this work. Thus, the exploration of their awareness can give us insight into whether the claims made above can work in practice.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The method adopted for this study was survey research while the questionnaire was the instrument used to collect data. This method was chosen to combine quantitative and qualitative perspectives to discuss the results of a questionnaire administered to Bachelor and Masters’ students and teachers of foreign languages from Arkhangelsk and the region.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Respondent Data

The choice of respondents is predetermined by the objectives of the research in question. The respondents are clearly divided into two distinctive groups, which underwent further categorization in due course. The first group is constituted by would-be teachers. These are bachelor and master degree students. As for the former subgroup, undergraduates represent all years of the academic program, starting from the first-year students up to the final fifth year of studying. We find it of paramount importance to observe the gradual, if any, change in multilingual awareness development. It being not the main objective, nonetheless findings may present some space for speculation and thus give a spur to a separate research beyond the scopes of the one in hand. Thus, the majority of students interviewed are the second-year students – 32%, 24,5% is the presence of the first-year students, 15% falls for the fourth year students, quit insignificant percentage is for the third and the fifth year – 7,5% and 9,4% correspondingly. Master degree students account for a slightly more than 11% (Fig. 1).

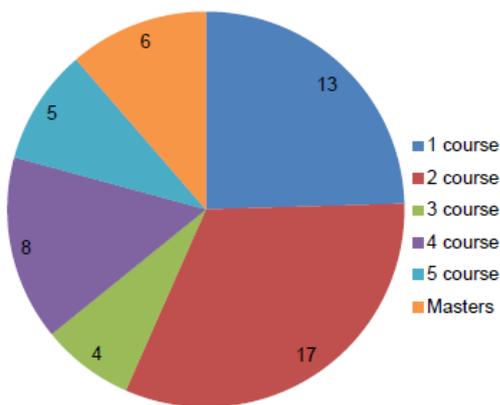


Fig. 1. Respondents subgroups of Group 1

For a profound understanding of the findings, it is worth mentioning that 55% out of those interviewed had done the course on multilingualism prior to the survey (Fig. 2).

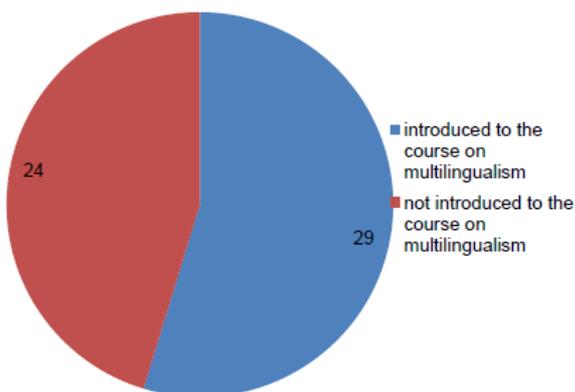


Fig. 2. Respondents who did / did not do the course on multilingualism

The second separate group of respondents comprises schoolteachers of modern languages. All of those surveyed teach the English language, yet approximately 10% are qualified as the teachers of German as their first foreign language. In-service respondents of this group are miscellaneous in age and work experience respectively. As the main target set before researchers was to spot the fact of multilingual awareness presence within the framework of the professional outlook of respondents, holistic approach to respondents' selection was taken. Equally, they present both ordinary schools and those specializing in modern languages.

4.2 Discussion

The study examined to what extent the complex phenomenon of multilingual awareness is present in the professional mindset of the educational market players and how it is grounded in social, cognitive and linguistic demands. The method involves a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis of the questionnaire results.

Thus, the first block of questions is seeking to figure out the way of understanding multilingual awareness phenomenon on a first approximation.

Have you ever heard about linguistic diversity and multilingualism? This is the question opening the first block.

Both group 1 and group 2 responded overridingly positively: only 2% and 5% respectively admitted to never hearing about it (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4).

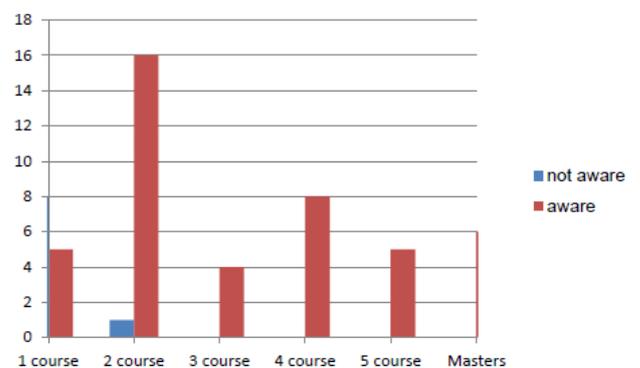


Fig. 3. Awareness of multilingualism in Respondent Group 1

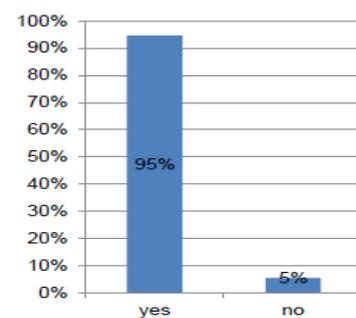


Fig. 4. Awareness of multilingualism in Respondent Group 2

The fact of almost total (with few exceptions) being aware of at least the phenomenon existence does not directly indicate precise understanding of the phenomenon's nature and facets. Suchlike inference draws on the following data: while answering the question on what multilingual diversity means for you, the majority of schoolteachers (49%) opted for the association of multilingualism with the number of foreign languages taught at school (Fig. 5). Interestingly enough, this tendency coincides with the preference of junior bachelor degree students – 60% of those chose the same answer (Fig. 6).

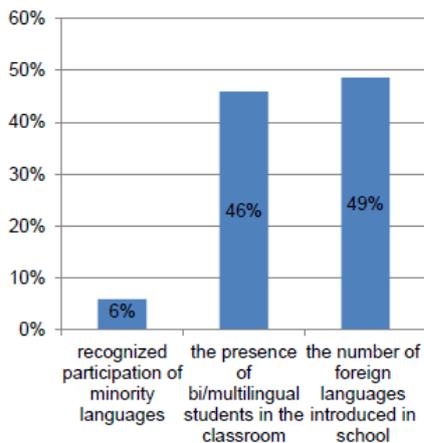


Fig. 5. Ways of understanding multilingualism in Respondent Group 2

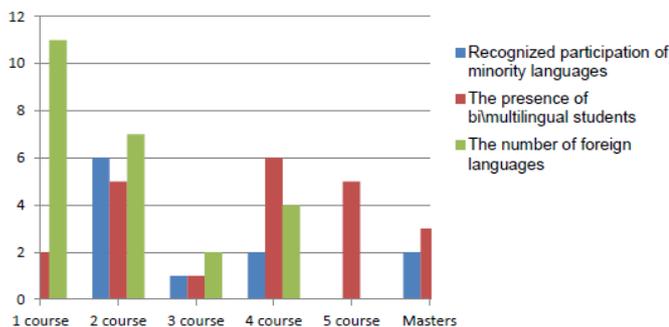


Fig. 6. Ways of understanding multilingualism in Respondents Group 1

Teachers seem to be more concerned with professional deflection of the multilingual awareness, pedagogical focus takes the main stance. As for the first- and second-year students, the mere closeness in time to school years and, consequently, still being the professional product of, in major cases, the same teachers surveyed, may be a reasonable explanation. In this respect, the evolution of the analyzed line demonstrates quite a drastic change of approaches. Thus, the second-year students demonstrate a more diverse perception of multilingualism already: the number of foreign languages still being the leader is closely followed by another option – recognised participation of minority languages, which in its turn is only slightly more preferred than ‘the presence of bi/multilingual students (Fig. 6)’.

This lack of unanimity may be explained by the wider exposure to both theoretical reflections on the issues overriding the educational setting in the number of newly appeared courses in the curriculum as well as accumulated empirical experience backed up by the developing critical thinking skills. This is very much the case, as the senior courses students and masters are ultimately inclined to diverge completely from the formal indication favoured by most teachers and first-years, preferring a closer to life feature – the presence of bi/multilingual students as the dominant aspect of multilingualism. The same aspect is second favourite among school teachers, accounting for 45%, whereas ‘recognised participation of minority languages’ is the least popular standing at the range of 6% only (Fig. 5).

Logically enough the refining of the multilingual awareness nature, which is the aim of the analysed block of questions, unfolds towards pointing particular forms of multilingualism from the personal experience of the respondent. Perceived value has significant influence on understanding of the previous two questions replies. Thus, very few students admitted to having ever being exposed to multilingualism (Fig. 7). Indeed, assuming that first- and second-year students take this phenomenon (in vast majority) as having several compulsory foreign languages at school, the result is not surprising. It was not until very recently that the second foreign language was obligatorily introduced to school curriculum. Yet, a small number, most probably of those who finished schools specializing in modern languages, gave a positive response. The number of suchlike demonstrates drastic fluctuation, though, remains more or less stable when it comes to average relation.

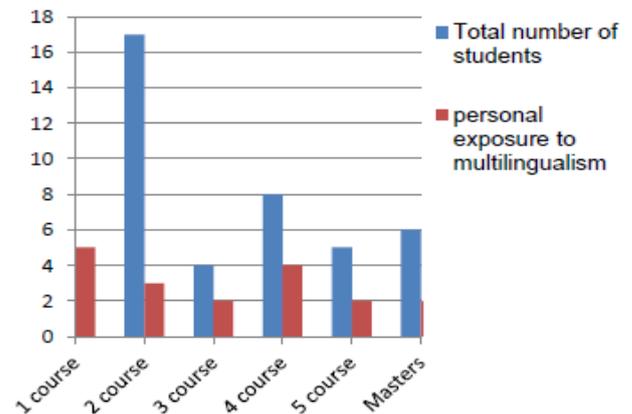


Fig. 7. Account on personal exposure to multilingualism in Respondent Group 1

Considering way greater professional and general life experience of the second group representatives, the percentage of those, responding positively and giving ‘yes’ – answer to the question on having being exposed to multilingualism, is quite substantial – 46% (Fig. 8). Again, in direct correspondence to the previous question – answers mostly encompassed the facts of two and more languages being taught at schools. Some of the answers depicted personal experience of having students for whom

the Russian language is the second one, while their mother tongue is a different language. The fact that 22% ignored the question and 32% responded negatively amounting to the majority of respondents in total is a bit disconcerting. The professional and qualified in-service teachers, who gave a positive answer to the first question about being aware of the multilingualism existence cannot specify the forms of the latter and are reluctant to share their experience. This negative feedback quite eloquently demonstrates very vague perception of multilingualism, which is not enough rooted in the professional background. It is possible to doubt at this stage already the mental readiness of the in-service teachers to embrace the new developments of the educational policy orientation on simultaneous two foreign languages teaching at school.

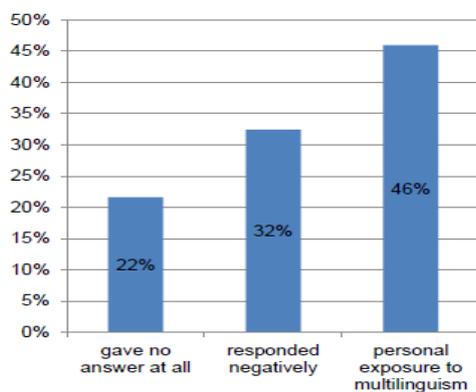


Fig. 8. Account on personal exposure to multilingualism in Respondent Group 2

Figuring out the extent to what professional society is ready for this is the purpose of the second block of questions to the analysis of which we have just arrived. Following the general logic of the questionnaire, the opening question challenges respondents no further of simple agreeing or disagreeing with the question – *Do you think that the introduction of a second foreign language in school will contribute to multilingual diversity in educational settings in our country?* In the first group almost 55% of respondents gave a positive answer, which reveals considerable doubts as 45% provided negative feedback (Fig. 9).

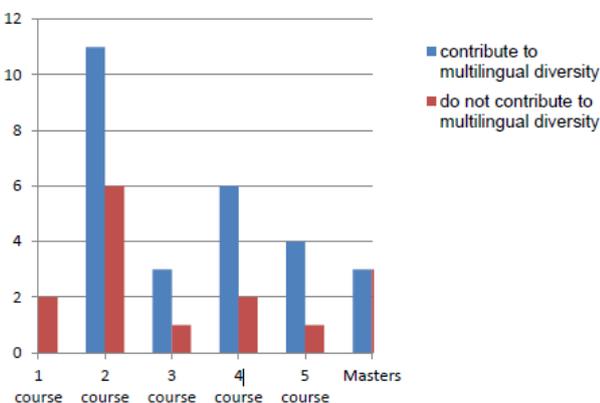


Fig. 9. Expectations on second foreign language introduction in Respondent Group 1

A similar pattern of relation was set by in-service teachers as well – 68% showed optimistic expectations with a bit over a third (which is a substantial proportion indeed) demonstrating negative attitude (Fig. 10).

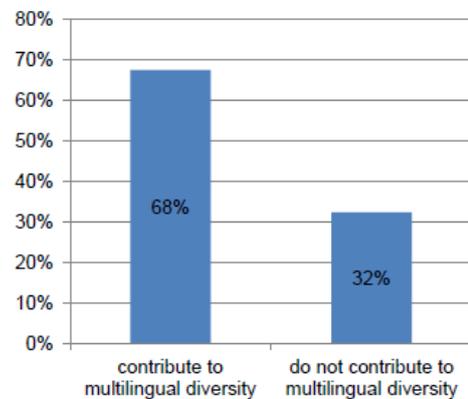


Fig. 10. Expectations on second foreign language introduction in Respondent Group 2

Nonetheless, both groups’ representatives generously shared their ideas on what can motivate the students at school to study diligently more than one foreign language. To make the choice easier, three general and frequently mentioned in connection with a foreign language acquisition reasons were offered: potential opportunities in labour market, expanding cultural horizons, enhancing general cognitive abilities (Fig. 11–12).

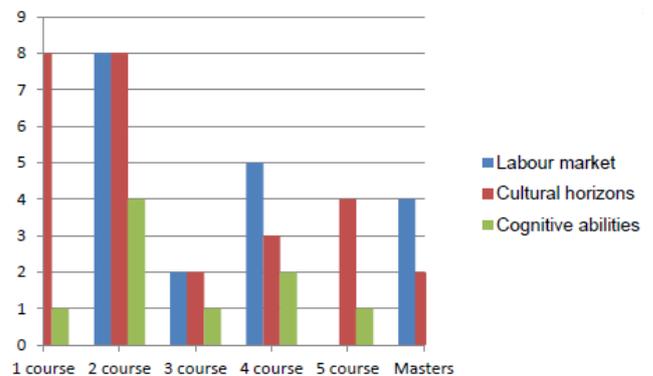


Fig. 11. Reasons for studying foreign languages (Respondent Group 1)

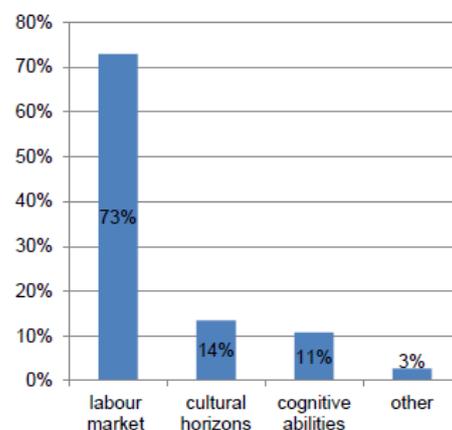


Fig. 12. Reasons for studying foreign languages (Respondent Group 2)

The first group being miscellaneous composed of different years' students produced variants drastically distinct depending on the course and thus requiring separate analysis. First-year students in almost absolute unanimity (88% of those who answered the question) choose cultural horizon expansion with a small number of those opting for cognitive abilities improvement. Total exclusion of a foreign language command as a competitive advantage in the labour market should not come as a surprise, considering the age of respondents and their being detached from professional reality keeping in mind their being at the very beginning of professional training. The pattern changes dramatically for second-year students, though. Here the labour market opportunity rivals on equal footing with still significantly present cultural horizon expansion, and cognitive abilities motive demonstrates growth as well. Yet, first group representative do not provide continuity in the above-mentioned patterns and with trend being the same for the third-year undergraduates, and well-expected over-balance towards labour market for fourth-year students, final year respondents (fifth-year students) exclude labour market opportunity spur. Regardless of this break of the trend, master degree students again demonstrate their enthusiasm about labour market opportunities factor, which is twice as more opted for than cultural horizon expansion motive. We will mention in passing that cognitive abilities enhancement factor being present, at least to some extent throughout the whole subgroups of Group 1, is not chosen at all. In all probability, the reason behind is pragmatic consideration as all of the master degree students surveyed are those who, in the first place had consciously speculated applying for the program and thus are keen on accomplishing the course for enhancing their career prospects mostly (Fig.11).

Second group respondents showed similar patterns: 73 % of teachers are in favour of labour market opportunities factor, which is far greater percentage than the second popular 'cultural horizon expansion' – 14%, followed by the third least popular 'cognitive abilities enhancement'–11% (Fig.12).

Similarity of both groups' choices is easily explained by prevailing common-sense reasoning and getting immediate down-to-earth application of a foreign language acquisition. From this perspective, cognitive abilities enhancement, being not immediately beneficial, lags behind in both groups preferences. Yet, in the second group answers this motive is outstripped by the second popular option with a slender majority only. Being in a teaching trade makes some in-service respondents understand all the benefits and profound potential of language learning for refining and improving general cognitive abilities of students. This is very much the case indeed, and the fact that few respondents see second foreign language introduction as the powerful instrument of sharpening analytical, generalizing and deductive skills, makes it clear that this advantage of the second foreign language introduction is not enough emphasized

by the experts behind the novelty and should be taken to notice.

Following the set pattern in questions lay-out, the third question in the reviewed block gives respondents an opportunity to reason critically on their own and put forward the factors curbing efficiency of language teaching and learning at school. Notwithstanding the open question unlimited opportunities, both groups seem to have pinned down the same difficulties and moreover, verbalized ideas in a very similar way (Fig. 13–14). This shows that the foreign language teaching/learning at school issue has long been on public discussion agenda and both laypeople and in-service communities are aware of 'something being totally wrong' with the way languages are taught at school and are mentally prepared for changes. Even so, in case with the in-service teachers' group, respondents demonstrate their apprehension of the risks and new challenges it may entail. Equally they do understand that they will have to find new methods and technologies to meet the challenges, and this will mean leaving the comfort zone. Thus, among the difficulties the extra ones are enumerated calling for the alleviation from outside but not resorting to inner resources and critically reviewing one's own approaches to teaching with the aim of necessary changes to live up to new demanding requirements of the profession. The following obstacles were singled out by the respondents: time pressure, lack of qualified teachers, putting a strain on students.

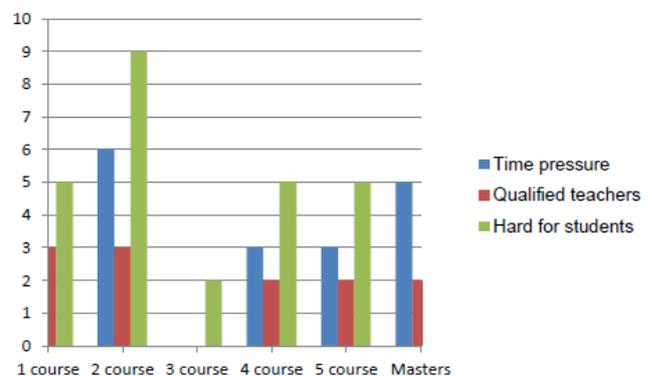


Fig. 13. Hindrances for a foreign language acquisition (Respondent Group 1)

These three most favourite hindrances are given by both groups' respondents. We will dwell on these difficulties first before moving on to some more particular offered by the second group respondents only, being in trade and having faced with a wealth of difficulties on a regular basis, teachers, quite understandably, are more specific and verbose in answering the question. So, 'hard for students' difficulty is predominant one: 46% of teachers and 49% of all students surveyed refer to this issue (Fig. 13–14). Hardly will anyone doubt the necessity to exert one's intellectual efforts while acquiring a new language, and students of the first group relying on their immediate and relevant experience of intensive acquisition process and teachers of the second group having to ensure this knowledge acquisition quite expectedly give this as the main difficulty. The question

arises – why then so few of respondents see the potential of language teaching/learning for general cognitive abilities enhancement, which, in connection with the specific knowledge giving, is an essential aim of general school education?

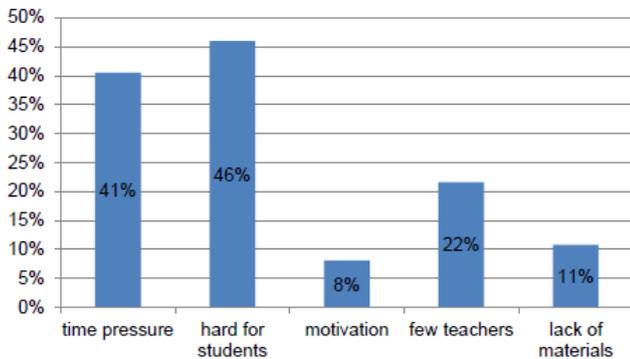


Fig. 14 Hindrances for a foreign language acquisition (Respondent Group 2)

It does give food for thought to those involved in educational reforms implementation in terms of shifting priorities in these reforms targets and long-term outcomes.

Second popular difficulty again reveals the unique solidarity of both groups reviewed – time pressure. 41% of teachers refer to this as a great problem and 32% of students (Fig. 13–14). While offering this very issue, teachers showed a special displeasure with the deficient number of hours, allocated by program designers for foreign languages at school. Three classes for the first foreign language and one class a week for the second can hardly be enough, especially when no revision of the current approaches to teaching is taken.

Lack of qualified teachers being the third popular issue was mentioned by 22 % of teachers and 22% of students (Fig. 13–14). The role of teachers in providing language education success is obviously underestimated even by those who are in the trade already and by the would-be teachers. In all probability, it is the mirroring of general negligence to proper teacher training necessity and low status of the profession. And again isn't it a signal for changing the priorities as definitely in school language education teacher's expert knowledge and skills are main factors of efficiency?

Turning to a closer examination of the first group opinions the following attitudes are demonstrated: 'hard for students' and 'lack of qualified teachers' prevail among the freshers; 'hard for students' keeps being predominant for second-year students, but 'time pressure' comes into play, overtaking the 'lack of qualified teachers' difficulty; similar pattern remains for the fourth- and fifth-year students, while the third year mostly ignored the question; master degree students favoured the 'time pressure' and do not mention 'hard for students'. The latter pattern may easily be explained by subjective reasoning – being experienced students, they have come up with the learning strategies making it easier for them to acquire new knowledge, at the same time not being

experienced teachers they cannot yet show empathy for their would-be pupils' difficulties.

The respondents of the second group put forward two more obstacles on the way to proper foreign language acquisition – lack of materials – accounting for 11 % and lack of motivation standing at 8 % mark correspondingly (Fig. 14). As for the former of the above-mentioned factors – it used to be a relevant problem indeed. Yet, with time and thanks to the advances of the technologies and the abundance of affordable applications it is more a case of a teacher's own motivation to conquer new media for the academic process. This is probably why none of the students has pointed to a similar difficulty. Being more at ease with numerous ways of language acquisition media, would-be teachers are potentially more flexible when it comes to information and materials provision. Considerable changes in the curriculum of current teacher training programs is another reason for not seeing the problem of the lack of the materials – separate courses on materials development and design have been introduced recently.

On the other hand, motivation being an inner problem is tough to tackle. It does require close attention.

This part of the questionnaire provides both researchers and those responsible for education process to run smoothly with data worth of the detailed analysis, as it partly reveals the urgent necessity to allocate more resources for in-service teachers' keeping updated on the massive developments in the multifaceted field of teaching. In the long-term it will result in multilingual awareness raise as well.

The third and the final block of questions emphasizes the idea of English as a global language. The first question about whether or not English is chosen in most cases as the first foreign language leaves no variants among respondents. Both groups are wholeheartedly in unison while responding positively. Being a country constituting The Expanding Circle, speculating in terms of the World Englishes paradigm approach developed by B. Kachru [9, 10, 11], Russia has to secure access to the international scientific and economic grounds by strengthening the main global language of today position in the educational setting. Both in-service teachers and their future colleagues are clearly conscious of the enormously dynamic ongoing expansion of the language in question. For this reason, business and academic opportunities are by far the most popular option while answering the second question of the analyzed block – what are the reasons for choosing English as the first foreign language. 92% of teachers and 66 % of students choose this factor (Fig. 15-16).

The question arises then – why is it so that everyone understands potential benefits of English language in particular acquisition, yet a lot of teachers witness lack of motivation among their students? We dare to respond, in connection with these Englishes emergence, in the following way: in-service teacher do understand the global significance of English, yet they probably lack

awareness of the pedagogical implications of recently emerged English as a Lingua Franca (which is a separate but contributing to the integrity component of the multilingual awareness facet) in addition to well-rooted in the pedagogical ground English as a Foreign Language and English as a Second language.

This is supposed to be the necessary aspect of professional expertise these days for objective reasons. So, it is very much the case that this deficiency of adequate evaluation of the imminent and inevitable embracing of the ELF to the education landscape with ensuing implementation of EFL-related learning activities is actually taking its toll on the quality of language teaching in Russian schools.

Very insignificant percentage is demonstrated in relation to “the personal interest” as the main reason for English learning. Only 3 % of teachers and 11% of students opt for this motive (Fig. 15–16).

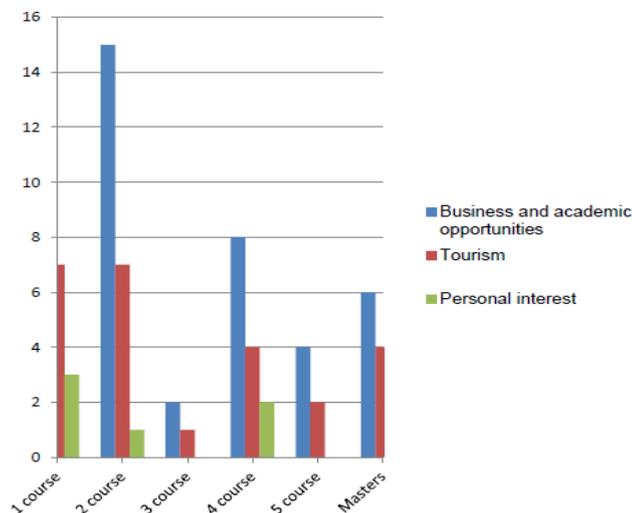


Fig. 15. Reasons for choosing English as the first foreign language (Respondent Group 1)

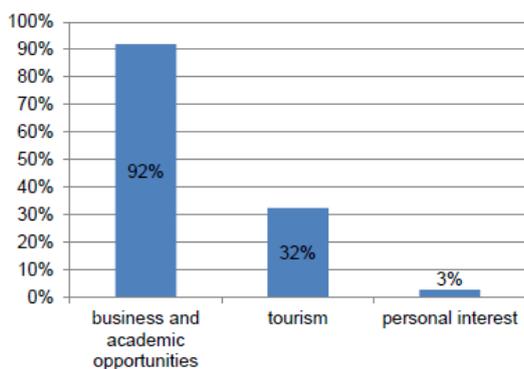


Fig. 16. Reasons for choosing English as the first foreign language (Respondent Group 2)

This situation only underlines what have been speculated upon above – a proper command of the English language is a necessity rather than a case of choice, which in a way demonstrates readiness of the

community for introduction of compulsory state exam in English no later than in two years time.

In this light, the feedback to the final question – whether one sees the competitors to English does not seem to contradict line of reasoning. Although the insignificant majority attempt to put forward possible rivals of the English, neither respondents of the first group nor the teacher come to the agreement on the most tangible and realistic lingual rival of the English language. It is more like toying up with the idea rather than being serious on the assumption of a possible threat to the dominance of English worldwide. Among those “possible rivals” are some European languages, Chinese and languages of neighbouring to the region Scandinavian countries and Finland, so it is more the case of local geopolitical significance rather than a global one. On the other hand, with due nurturing of the idea of a second foreign language introduction benefits it may facilitate its introduction. Thus, there is a clear benefit of reflexing on the point even for mere stipulation reason for a start.

V. CONCLUSION

The areas of inquiry discussed earlier all demonstrate the potential for further research. The ongoing global-local tension in the necessity to strengthen and maintain linguistic diversity at the level of school education seems set to continue. The spread of English and its status of the global language will continue to predetermine its favourable position among other foreign languages. To conclude, we hope that we have been able to contribute incentives to further discussion of multilingual awareness as an element of a change and reforming of school education in Russia.

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