

# Difficulties in Teaching Russian as a Foreign Language for Beginners in the Context of European Multilingualism

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**Abstract.** *The geographical location of Alsace (France) and its historical relationships define language situation in the region: most students speak French as well as German, and some of them know the Alsatian dialect. Besides, contemporary standards of education and professional activity require a certain level of English proficiency from students. As a result, teaching the Russian language at the Haute Alsace University is realized in the context of the regional, as well as individual multilingualism. The paper aims to highlight several difficulties (phonetic, lexical, and grammatical) which students face in the learning process and to suggest some ways to cope with these obstacles.*

**Keywords** – Russian as a foreign language, phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, methods of teaching\*.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Multilingualism is a new challenge of a contemporary society driven by the processes of globalization. According to K. Bezukladnikov et al. [1, p. 166], who analysed recent research papers dedicated to this problem, the main goal of the multilingual society is to elaborate sound language policy aimed at maintaining national language and culture as well as acquiring foreign languages indispensable for social adaptation in the globalized world. Moreover, languages are no longer considered to be segmented and autonomous entities but a part of plurilingual competences which are multiple, dynamic, integrated, contextualized, and individualized [5, p. 48]. So, in this context, multilingual education is regarded as a necessary right for all citizens.

Nowadays the attitude toward language learning has changed due to several factors [11]. Firstly, the European Union language policy ratified the formula Mother tongue +2 which means that besides the mother tongue an individual should acquire two more languages. Secondly, a great number of mobility programmes allow students, researchers and other individuals to study, carry out research and take part in different activities all over the world. Thirdly, the demographic situation conditioned the society to be linguistically heterogeneous. Finally, modern information and communication technologies make it possible to access the learning environment wherever or to communicate with anyone.

We should note that while studying a range of research papers we came across different terms, such as bilingualism, multilingualism, plurilingualism, etc. If the case of bilingualism seems to be evident, the situation with other terms is challenging because some authors distinguish those concepts, others use them interchangeably. Marshall and Moore [6] highlight the distinction between multilingualism and plurilingualism as between the notions of the social and the individual. The scientists assert that multilingualism is the study of societal contact, whereas plurilingualism is the study of individuals' repertoires and agency in several languages. E. Piccardo also sees the difference between multilingualism which is considered to be the addition of languages in societies and/or individuals and plurilingualism which includes the relationships between the languages and individual speaks, the underlying linguistic mechanisms and cultural connotations, the personal linguistic and cultural trajectory as well as the persons' attitude toward language diversity, stressing openness, curiosity, and flexibility [7]. Thus, plurilingualism is a more complicated phenomenon which fosters communicative competence embracing all knowledge, language experience, paralinguistic features, simplified codes, etc. to decode texts.

But we also should mention one more term "academic multilingualism" introduced by A. Prokhorova [8] for describing the learning environment. This means that the second or the third foreign language imposes on the well-formed verbal and cognitive activity of the mother tongue. In this case, any term or concept associates with the native and one more language phonic image but these associations are not equal if the individual's proficiency in these languages is different. So, we hypothesize that introducing academic multilingualism into the classroom we boost plurilingualism of the students, especially if the second or the third foreign language belongs to another language family.

Teaching the second or third foreign language is a complex and multifold process based on a comparative study of primary and secondary language systems. Comparative analysis implies a comparison of linguistic units of all levels – phonetic, lexical, grammatical, syntactic and stylistic.

The given article will focus on teaching Russian as a foreign language to students at one of the French universities, namely, the challenges that teachers and learners face within the learning process.

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## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Although the Russian language is not in the list of 24 official languages of the European Union, it is taught and learned in many European states, for example, Finland, France, Germany, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, etc. It is not within the scope of this article to investigate how Russian as a foreign language is taught in all European countries. We centre our attention on France due to three reasons. Firstly, the interaction between France and Russia has more than ten-century history undergoing different forms, such as cooperation, union, rupture, war, emigration, etc. [10]. Nonetheless, the general tendency can be characterised as mutual perception, influence, and understanding. For instance, Russian culture manifested in France in the sphere of theatre, music, ballet, cinema. Secondly, in France, approximately thirty thousand people in 80 out of 96 departments study Russian [4]. This language is considered to be a rare and difficult one like Chinese. Mostly people learn the Russian language in Paris, Nice, Cannes, Nancy, Besançon, and other tourist areas. Thirdly, Northern (Arctic) federal university named after Lomonosov (NArFU) has more than twenty-year cooperation with the Haute Alsace University (France). All these years teachers of NArFU teach Russian as a foreign language at the French university. We should note that this French region has a specific language context, namely, residents of Haute-Alsace speak French as well as German because of its geographical location on the border between France and Germany and the subsequent history. So, they have rather advanced communicative competence and experience in acquiring languages. Methods of teaching different languages have much in common though there are some peculiarities for teaching each language.

As E. Ivanova asserts [4], the first lesson is important not only for getting acquainted with the teacher and his/her methods of teaching but for refuting certain stereotypes. Students should know that it may be hotter in summer in Russia than on the Côte d'Azur; that in winter it can be warmer in Russia with lower temperatures than in Paris with its humidity and winds; that samovar is a symbol of traditional tea-time but not an object of everyday use, etc. It is necessary to emphasize that such Russian sounds as У [у], ШЧН [ш], ТS [ц], J [й] are considered to be the most difficult for pronunciation and two letters (hard sign and soft sign) provoke perplexity. Cases and declensions differ from the system of French a lot but some words have almost the same pronunciation, for example, аэропорт, biologie, chocolat, musique, passport, sport, taxi, théâtre, etc.

As we mentioned above, learning any foreign language relies on the system of the native language. For instance, Xu and Shuang actualize the theory of language transfer [13] that is when learners who do not know the rules of the target language use the sentence patterns and communication strategies of their native language to comprehend the information of the target language in the process of foreign language learning. The researchers state that we should take into account positive transfer (when the mother tongue is similar or consistent with the target language) and negative transfer (when the original language is quite different from

the foreign one). They add that a range of factors influences the language transfer (Fig.1), i.e. phonetic, lexical, grammatical and cultural [13].

Therefore, a comparative analysis of typological features of both languages (phonetic, lexical, and grammatical) implies a huge didactic potential. In our research – teaching Russian to French students – teachers have to appeal to comparison with French as well as German. Moreover, as English is obligatory for French students and they usually have a good command of it, we also use this language as a certain benchmark. Revealing similarities and differences allows us to impede interference of native and other foreign languages, to define and cope with challenges.

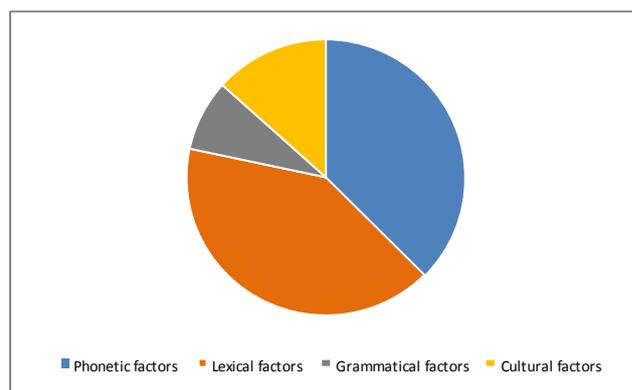


Figure 1. Influencing factors of language transfer in Russian teaching

## III. METHOD

The present research aims to highlight the particular difficulties of multilingual students while learning Russian as a foreign language. Mainly, we will denote peculiarities in acquiring phonetic, lexical and grammatical features for beginners.

To attain this goal we used several methods, namely, critical analysis of research literature, pedagogical observation in the process of teaching Russian as a foreign language, and interviews with university teachers engaged in teaching Russian as a foreign language.

Teaching foreign language in a multilingual classroom is analysed in a range of papers concerning first of all immigrant communities [2; 3; 9] or multilingual regions [12]. It seems fruitful to extend research and study of Alsace as a region that is multilingual due to its historical past and geographical position. Research data show that using students' native languages helps them acquire competencies in learning a foreign language [2, p. 237], translanguaging practices (translation, code-switching, cross-linguistic analysis) contribute in the overall school success of students [9].

As for pedagogical observation, teachers of NArFU have been teaching Russian at the Haute Alsace University for 22 years. Here students learn Russian two academic hours a week for 24 weeks a year. They have face-to-face lessons complemented by home assignments. At the end of each semester, students are to write a test paper. There are groups for all levels according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (A1 through C2). Each group includes from 10 to 25 students.

We interviewed five teachers who have experience in teaching Russian as a foreign language from four to twenty years. They were asked about the easiest and the most difficult aspects to teach, about methods used for students of various levels of proficiency, about hints on how to cope with challenging topics and units.

Summing up the information we got we tried: a) to structure and highlight several difficulties which beginners face while studying Russian as a foreign language, and b) to suggest some means to overcome these difficulties.

#### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Comparative analysis of phonetic systems of Russian, French, German and English languages permit to reveal a substantial distinction between, first of all, Russian and the other three languages. Even though they belong to different language groups (Roman/Germanic languages), they have more in common than each of them compared to Russian. The main differences are of two types: in the list of phonemes and their usage.

French vocalism, as well as the German one contains more elements than the Russian one, including a number of front and labialized phonemes. The French language has nasal vowels while opposing vocals by quantity is a relevant characteristic in German. Pronouncing Russian vocal sounds A [a], E [e], O [o], U [y], I [ɪ] is usually not difficult for the French. At the same time, sound Y [ɨ] presents difficulties in its training. Even if the students percept the difference between I [ɪ] and Y [ɨ] when they are pronounced, articulation of Y [ɨ] (high position of the dorsum with no labialization) takes a lot of time and effort.

Some solutions are proposed to the students to overcome pronunciation problems. For example, if students keep rounding the lips when articulating Y [ɨ], it can be recommended to elongate lips. However, this method can be used only at the initial stage, since lips are neutral when this sound is pronounced by a native speaker. The French (and Germans) often replace Y [ɨ] with I [ɪ], which is familiar for them. When working on Y [ɨ], we can use specific articulation: the tongue moves back (which is not present in the articulation of the sound I [ɪ]). The tip of the tongue should no longer touch the lower teeth. Besides, it is advisable to pronounce Y [ɨ] together with velar consonants K [k] and G [ɣ], as their pronunciation contributes to pulling the tongue back.

Russian consonantism also contains a number of phonemes that are not proper to the other analysed languages or that are different. Such sounds as TS [ɕ], CH [ɟ] and SHCH [ʃʃ] do not exist in French and English. German does have TS [ɕ] and CH [ɟ], but Russian CH [ɟ] is much softer than the corresponding German phoneme, so students cannot just borrow the German sound as they pronounce it usually. Major difficulties arouse when hardness and softness of consonants become relevant for the word meaning because hard/soft distinction proper to most of the Russian consonants is not relevant for French, German or English languages.

Such sound as L [ɮ] can be explained in contrast to French and German L. When the Russian L [ɮ] is pronounced, the tip of the tongue rises no higher than the upper teeth socket and it joints the beginning of the alveoles. The back of the tongue rises to the soft palate and occupies the same position as for the vowels O [o] or U [y]. So, it is useful to train L [ɮ] together with these sounds.

The Russian R [p] is specific in comparison with corresponding French uvular, German velar and English apical sounds. It is an apical rolled sound, the tip of the tongue trills near the alveoles. Training Russian R [p] can be based on the corresponding French, German and English sounds by pronouncing it together with the Russian consonants ZH [ʒ] and Z [ʒ], which are also quite specific and need earlier training. The fact that most Alsace students know the phonetic structure of at least three European languages helps them understand that similar sounds represented by similar spelling can be pronounced differently in different languages.

Grammatical aspects of Russian language teaching arouse when explaining the case system, aspect, syntax structures, etc.

The case system is supposed to be the main difficulty when studying the Russian language. Though, if teaching is well-organized and with some effort from the student Russian cases can be studied with no major problems. Difficulties are rather concerned with syntax structures absent in European languages. Even the basic level phrases at the very beginning of the course contain these sorts of structures.

Not only students need to remember that there is no copulative verb in the present tense in such phrases as “Je suis étudiant”, “Ich bin Student”, “I am a student” – “YA student”. Les us quote some examples of phrases learned in the first lessons:

(French) *Je m'appelle Ivan.*

(German) *Ich heiÙe Ivan.*

(English) *My name is Ivan.*

(Russian) *Menya zovut Ivan.*

The Russian structure is specific compared to the French, German and English ones. The Russian phrase is an indefinite-personal structure meaning “They call/everybody calls me Ivan”. It is interesting to note that the structures in the other languages are also different with a reflexive verb in French, a personal verb in German and a classification model in English.

Another example is using possessive structures:

(French) *J'ai une soeur.*

(German) *Ich habe eine Schwester.*

(English) *I have a sister.*

(Russian) *U menya est' sestra.*

As these examples show, Russian uses an existential structure that can be approximately translated as “For me there is a sister” while the three other languages have possessive structures with the verb meaning “have”.

The question is whether it is relevant to explain syntax difficulties of the Russian language since the earliest stages. It may not be necessary at the very first lessons, but the principle of conscious learning reveals the importance of understanding formal and semantic characteristics of Russian grammar by French students. The experience of teaching the Russian language to French students reveals that possessive structures, thematic-rhematic articulation, and aspect of Russian verb cause most of the difficulties for French-speaking students.

Studying Russian vocabulary is easier because some words sound alike. At the very beginning of the course not only basic Russian words are used but also international ones such as “aeropot”, “zhurnalist”, “turist”, “telefon”, “passport”, etc. This method aims to help students adapt and familiarize themselves through common or similar lexemes. One of the tasks is to guess the meaning of words after reading them aloud. Such topics as "Airport" (“terminal”, “tablo”, “bagazh”, “kontrol”), “City” (“park”, “biblioteka”, “muzej”), “Professions” (“biznesmen”, “inzhenер”, “muzykant”) are concerned.

The fact that most Alsace students speak at least three languages (French, German and English) helps them recognize more words borrowed into Russian. Those can be not only international words, but also words that have similar equivalents in French (“avtobus”, “kilogramm”, “kredit”), in English (“ofis”, “printer”, “lift”, “biznesmen”) or in German (“buterbrod”, “ryukzak”, “apel’sin”).

Besides positive interference, which helps French students learn Russian vocabulary, negative interference is also present in the case of “faux amis” when words that sound alike have a difference in meaning. Thus, the Russian word “zhurnal” corresponds to French “revue”, “magazine” but not “journal”. The Russian “kompot” is a fruit beverage and has nothing to do with the French “compote”.

Though, speaking initially several languages is useful for students who are already familiarized with the notion of “faux amis”. They are supposed to have met similar examples when learning other languages (compare the English “conductor” that corresponds in French to “contrôleur” but not “conducteur” as it may seem; knowing about this difference can help remember the meaning of the Russian “konduktor”). Being familiar with the notion of “faux amis” contributes to understanding that similar words do not necessarily have the same meaning.

Multilingualism also prepares students for understanding that there are often no precise equivalents in different languages and the context should always be taken into consideration then translating or looking a word up in dictionaries. The multilingualism of the Haute Alsace University students helps them form linguistic sensitiveness and understanding that each language is a system that can have common and specific traits compared to other systems. A person speaking more than one language has cognitive advantages manifested in their multimodality and capacity to acquire new cognitive strategies.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

The fact that teachers of Russian speak several European languages permits to reveal similarities between different language structures and use them as landmarks in the academic course. This strategy can be more or less efficient depending on the language level. Knowing phonetic systems of several languages permits either to borrow a sound directly or to build phonetic oppositions based on different characteristics. Possessing the vocabulary of several languages makes it possible to understand a number of borrowed words. The main difficulties arose on the grammatical level not only because the Russian language is characterized by synthetic language structure while French, English, and German have analytical structure. The reason is that three latter languages have a number of distinctive features in their morphology and syntax.

Thus, the context of multilingualism specific to Alsace as a boundary territory contributes to the efficiency of Russian-language teaching at Haute Alsace University and helps overcome some difficulties in acquiring language structure.

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