

# A Comparative Study of Russian vs English in Teaching Language and Thinking Courses

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**Abstract.** *The Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Saint Petersburg State University provides its students a chance of taking Language and Thinking course first taught in Russian in the first semester and then in English in the third semester. In both cases Writing to Read interactive teaching techniques are used, which makes a comparative study of efficiency of teaching 21st Century Skills an easier task. The first semester classes are monolingual though multicultural with students from Russia as well as from CIS and former USSR republics. Students from Europe and the USF join Language and Thinking classes in the third semester, thus making them both multilingual and multicultural where EMI is the only possible means of instruction. Based on the aims of the research the analysis of students' interviews, achievement tests and reflective works was carried out. Another method used in the research was a survey of students who attended the courses by means of course-assessing questionnaires. The study shows that while Russian and EMI can be estimated as approximately equal in ensuring the objectives of both courses, it was the course taught in English that made the students be more language aware and more self-reflective towards their mother tongue as well as English.*

**Key words** – multilingual, multicultural, EMI, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills\*.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The paper provides a comparative study of Russian Vs English as medium of instruction for two similar courses at the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences (FLAS) of St. Petersburg State University. One is *Writing and Thinking intensive course (W&T)* that freshmen take in September and the other is *Language and Thinking (L&T)* that is offered to 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year students. Both courses are designed to be identical in terms of strategy, learning goals or teaching methods with the only difference in the language of instruction. While, the first semester classes with students from Russia and former USSR republics are taught in Russian and thus are monolingual and multicultural, whereas L&T course taught in English usually becomes both multilingual and multicultural due to participation of exchange students from European universities.

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The research was initiated by the Curriculum Development Committee of FLAS to learn whether L&T course taught in English as Medium of Instruction (EMI) covers no less content in comparison to a similar course taught in Russian. The research was to help the Committee find a solution to the dispute between those in favor of giving freshmen a choice of taking either Writing and Thinking course in Russian (W&T) or L&T in English. It means that the research was to give a definite answer about the impact of the language of instruction in terms of content and skills achievements. We were to find a solution on our own since the impact that such a phenomenon may have on the teaching and learning of subject matter content through English is still under researched [4].

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Three main methodological issues underly the research:

1. Principles of *Artes Liberales* Model of education;
2. Writing to Read interactive practices;
3. English as medium of instruction (EMI).

FLAS is the first institution in Russia to use the *Artes Liberales* educational model. It was established in close collaboration with Bard College, NY (USA) which remains its main partner. The model is gaining popularity in the modern world due to a significant competitive advantage it offers stimulating the development of a new set of skills required by the contemporary job market – the so-called 21<sup>st</sup> -century skills. According to P. Griffin they primarily consist of critical thinking, skills of collaborative work and effective communication, and creativity [1]. We can also add to this list the ability to work in a team, constant self-development, skills of processing big volumes of information and time-management, etc.

All the competencies mentioned are integrated into the definition of *Artes Liberales* educational model given by vice-president of Bard College J. Becker in which he states that the primary goals of this educational system are to develop critical thinking and communication skills of students, to foster their learner's skills, and to prepare them for effective functioning in the society. Among the distinctive features of *Artes Liberales* model he specifically highlights interdisciplinarity, flexibility of the curriculum, interactive teaching, free choice of courses given to students [3].

FLAS gives its students a unique opportunity to create their own study plan based on their interests and needs choosing from more than three hundred courses from various areas of knowledge [1]. Another important principle we follow is to give the students a chance to try a foreign academic environment by means of participating in various exchange programs with SPbU partner universities. FLAS alumni get a Bachelor of Arts and Humanitarian Sciences Degree from SPbU alongside with a BA degree from Bard College. Two degrees (Russian and foreign) give FLAS students a serious competitive advantage and excellent employment opportunities.

All courses are student-centred and involve the use of state-of-the-art interactive teaching methods. Writing to Read interactive practices are the basics of both W&T and L&T courses. These practices have been studied, developed and implemented by the Bard College Institute for Writing and Thinking (IWT) and most of them originate from works by Peter Elbow, Professor Emeritus of English who was a Director of the Writing Program (University of Massachusetts, Amherst). He has written a series of books on writing, including *Writing Without Teachers* (1973), *Writing With Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process* (1981), *A Community of Writers* (1999) and others. All these books are not pure programs or guides for learning how to write, as it might be seen from the titles, they take the readers and learners to a fascinating journey where the destination is confidence and inspiration, power of voice and creativity and freedom in writing. The essence of Elbow's theory is a challenge against traditional and standardized writing methods – his approach is based on non-stop free writing which is followed much later by a complicated several steps editorial process. Taking risks of the journey through mistakes and uncertainty Elbow leads the writers to find a foundation of the creative writing and demonstrate both the production of writing itself and the art of revision of it [8; 9, 10].

Both W&T and L&T courses at the FLAS were designed to satisfy the need for proper skills to comfortably and effectively complete students' exchange programs with support and coordination with the Bard College IWT. The mission of the Institute proclaims bringing together "secondary and college teachers of all disciplines to explore teaching methodologies, learn from each other, and rethink how writing fosters and shapes thinking" [15]. The IWT provides the FLAS with constant methodological advice and support by leading workshops for the faculty and assisting in designing in-service teacher training programs. Through collaborative, hands-on, experiential workshops, teachers from across the curriculum consider what happens in the classroom when writing is a combination of two functions that add to each other. The first is simple recording of ideas and thoughts and the second is being a supportive instrument for teaching. "Novice and expert teachers alike have many resources to turn to when they want to improve their teaching." [16, p. 11]. IWT workshops and conferences are among the most effective resources. Four teachers of the FLAS have joined IWT Faculty community.

One of the instructional methods that might be called "A Novel Idea" is Interteaching originally proposed by Boyce and Hineline in 2002. The method described in detail in Richmond (2016) attempts to optimize the learning process changing the classroom environment. Students get a preparation guide to work with the assigned reading and start working outside class [16, p. 55–56].

We have changed the standard sequence of activities (Saville et al., 2011) [17, p. 153–166] so that the students have a guided discussion working in small groups of three or in pairs. They come back to class prepared to take part in a class discussion. After that they fill in a process or record sheet for the instructor to identify difficult topics the students need to review. The majority of time outside and inside class is spent engaged in discussion. Based on the feedback the teacher provides a brief lecture, typically at the start of the next session, that covers the specific topics identified by students as difficult

Language of instruction is what differs the two courses. For the students "to produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options their English language skills" should correspond to B2 level of Common European Framework [7] being the only prerequisite for the course. We claim that B2 level as a prerequisite is rather high for it is a level demanded from graduates of SPbU.

L&T course is based on the English as Medium of Instruction (EMI) approach that is gaining global popularity nowadays. EMI principle presupposes using English for teaching academic subjects in the countries where the mother tongue (or first language) of most citizens is not English [5; 12; 14]. The use of EMI approach fosters the process of internationalization of education developing student and faculty mobility (including participation in various exchange programs and involvement in international research teams), increasing employability chances of graduates, improving the rankings of universities in league tables of higher education institutes, etc. [6; 11] Making students more proficient in the language, EMI-based teaching can be also viewed as an integral part of modern English language instruction.

### III. METHOD

The research was carried out at FLAS (SPbU) for the period of 5 academic years (from 2013/2014 to 2018/19) when we were monitoring the course outcomes.

The participants of the survey were the FLAS students who enrolled for both W&T and L&T courses (in Russian and in English). This restriction to the selection of the participants is justified by the aims of the research – the students were supposed to compare the contents, teaching methods and atmosphere of the courses taught in Russian and in English, and to assess the skills they gained at both of them.

Questionnaires, interviews, students' achievement tests as well as their reflective papers were used to compare the results and learning outcomes that the two courses provide.

We collected more than 200 reflection letters and student evaluations of L&T in English and more than 500 evaluations of W&T in Russian. The difference in the data collected for the 2 courses is explained by the fact that L&T course in English appeared later than W&T in Russian.

At the end of each course the students were asked to complete a questionnaire that assesses both the course, the teacher, and the student's vision of personal achievements. The questionnaire consisted of six questions or rather sets of questions and was answered in the language the course was taught at (Russian or English).

The first set is aimed at getting student evaluations relating to how much students feel they got out of the course:

1. What are you most proud of about your own effort or accomplishment in the course? What are you not satisfied with, or what do you want to work on improving?

2. What has been your greatest challenge?

3. Tell about the effects of the course on your writing.

- Changes or lack of change in the quality of what you write

- Changes or lack of change in how you write

- Changes or lack of change in your attitudes and feelings about writing.

The next set is related to measures teaching effectiveness involving subjectivity. It can lead to different interpretations and need to be analyzed together with other measures of teaching effectiveness such as students learning:

4. What was the most and the least helpful in regards to:

- In-class activities

- Homework assignments

- Group work

- Comments on papers

- Readings

- Grading procedures/Criteria

- How the course is structured

- How the teacher(s) operates

5. What have you learned about yourself, about people, or about the learning process?

The last one is considered most helpful to solicit feedback from students to improve teaching:

6. Do you have any suggestions about how the course could be made more helpful?

Series of interviews with W&T and L&T courses students were carried out after the courses. By means of this survey method the students shared their impressions and assessment of both courses in a free form.

Reflection on the course is a very important part of ending the course which is to provide us with a specific picture painted by the students of what they have learned and noticed and of what our various teaching activities have made them think and feel. So, the reflection papers are the most valuable and credible data for evaluation of the goals achieved in comparison to what had been expected and planned.

There might be disagreement about the appropriate interpretation and use of reflection papers because some of them are written in the genre of an essay of some other creative piece of writing involving much imagery and

subjectivity, but we consider them to be well-validated measures of teaching effectiveness. We claim that student evaluation is a two-way street – the person giving feedback learns as much as the person getting it, since people do not commonly learn unless they are reflective and thoughtful about their experiences. Thus, the best way to increase learning in class is to reflect on what you have learned, how you have learned it and what it means. The same is true for college teachers. Reflection on students' feedback helps to foster student development.

As a team of instructors of the course we always try to build into our course some retrospective moments to help students pause and reflect on their learning. We believe that these moments help students get in the habit of being more reflective about their learning in all areas. As a result, we realize that our students' reflections on their learning are usually the most useful kind of feedback for us as teachers. As Ken Bain put it: "While methods vary, the best teachers often try to create what we have come to call a "natural critical learning environment". In that environment, people learn by confronting intriguing, beautiful, or important problems, authentic tasks that will challenge them to grapple with ideas, rethink their assumptions, and examine their models of reality" [2, p. 18].

Here are the prompts for responses we provide our students at the end of the course to then analyze the outcomes of the team of instructors' work [18, p. 88].

*Please, write about the process of your reading, thinking and writing. Here are some prompts for you to focus on:*

What are you most proud of about your own effort or accomplishment in the course?

What are you not satisfied with, or what do you want to work on improving?

What has been your greatest challenge? Why?

What have you learned about yourself, about people, or about the learning process?

Tell about the effects of the course on your writing.

Changes or lack of change in the quality of *what* you write

Changes or lack of change in *how* you write

Changes or lack of change in your attitudes and feelings about writing

Imagine this course as a journey: Where is it taking you?

Describe the climate and weather of the course. Has it remained the same or gone through cycles?

If you could start over again, what would you do differently? What have you learned about how to learn better?

Where are your thoughts now? Why?

The information we gathered from the abovementioned sources provided us enough data for the analysis and comparison of Writing and Thinking course taught in Russian (W&T) and L&T course taught in English.

#### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study shows that while Russian and EMI can be estimated as approximately equal in ensuring the objectives of both courses, it was the course taught in English that made

the students be more language aware and more self-reflective towards their mother tongue as well as English. Both students and professors were surprised to trace this unintended impact. Later we chose to use it extensively. The second impact the instructors were surprised with was creative thinking skills: the students observed that they don't have problems with devising new ways to carry out tasks.

Here are some examples of reflective essays and interviews that were provided by L&T students that show what students learn about the course and about themselves:

*'Why are you here today?'*-that was the topic of our first free writing. I remember I wrote that I wanted to find out how is that to study not only English in the sense of language but in English. After following the reverse order of the points that touched me the most, I can say that studying in English is surely miles away from my experience of studying in Russian. The difference is not only about the language itself but about the ways of thinking. It is easy to see even on the primitive example of how some phrases are constructed: for instance, a phrase 'by the skin of my teeth' is hard to imagine in Russian translation, we would never use such an idiom for expressing the same idea. The same situation happens on the other levels. As in one of the texts we had read it was said that each language has its own cultural experience behind it and it is almost impossible to express a foreign point of view by the language that has different history and is far away from that sphere. I think it is a wise point and it is fair enough when we take in consideration the distance between English and Russian.

The game ends here since the start point is reached. What am I going to take with me for the other courses? Looking at the plan of the gain again I would ask: what does every player take after the game is over? It is a feeling of joy and the process of the finished game. It is not different in my case: I'll take with me nice memories and the experience I got following the chosen way, all the questions, ideas, thoughts, new approaches to some problems mentioned above and of course some problems and struggles will also remain with me and I would not change anything even if it were possible.

We started the course with the why question and to me it seems logically to finish with it as well but in this case the question should be like 'why was all of that'? To find an answer I need to look back to all the points I found outstanding. What are they all about? I would summarize them with the title 'a shift in views and tastes'. That is how I personally answer to the final why question now: to change us, to show that the world is bigger than we think, to become closer with the general idea of who we and the others actually are, what makes us and hence the topic which is 'being a human' (Karina Kharebova, L&T 2015).

Karina's process writing states clearly that she has learned a lot and is satisfied with the course underlying the issue of language awareness. Margarita Kozyar has arrived at similar ideas in her interview:

*I like that now I think of a difference of languages more often: what "habits and customs" each of them has.*

*It is cool when you read the phrase in one language, then you think how to tell it in other languages, and you*

*enjoy the understanding of the difference of every language. And then you realize how the culture of this, or that country influenced on formation of language (and this phrase in particular) and on the contrary (Margarita Kozyar, L&T 2015).*

Mother tongue language awareness is what the student from the Netherlands was most surprised and satisfied.

*The list of things I'll take with me from this course goes on and on. There's only one more I'd like to point out. I've learnt how important native tongues are, besides English that is, I've learnt how beautiful Russian is, but also my own native tongue, Dutch. I used to dislike it, until I came here, and I took language and thinking. It is the only language I knew during an important part of my life, the language that taught me how to be human in our society, got me to understand jokes, expressions of love, grief and mischief. Obtaining a second, third, or God knows, fifteenth language is great, but an appreciation for your mother tongue plays an important part in understanding your own lingual development, and in being human.*

*Of course, there have been struggles, I believe with all the students that took the course. Some maybe more than others. I struggled with missing people I loved that are back in the Netherlands, at the same time I didn't know where to put the new place I fell in love with, during this semester. This contradiction in combination with sometimes personal writings made me overthink my emotions in various ways. It is, let's be honest, amazing but also hard to be away from home and to be confronted with and also submerged in a different way of doing life, a different way of tackling the challenge "being human" can be. Valuable life lessons never come without some sort of struggle. The idea of saying goodbye sooner than I wanted to the new friends I made was hard. This, in combination with wanting to see my family and friends in the Netherlands made me feel confused. It caused me to want to stay in bed and think for some days. I would struggle to get off my bed-island. Of course, the dark and gloomy sky didn't contribute to my motivation of getting out of bed. At the same time this didn't seem fair since many students are, distance wise, further away from home than I am right now. So, I put myself together and went back to class. Besides that, I struggled sometimes understanding the Russian, that sometime was spoken while working together with others. But I liked it, it taught me a lot, some struggles are not as bad as I often like to think.*

*In my notebook there are many constructions of language I quite like, however, I'm really proud of the poem of Lucebert I translated. I started to translate more poems from Dutch to English after that, I figured out I like to do it.*

*School of Poetry*

*I'm not a "sweet" poet*

*I'm the quick swindler*

*The love I see under the hate*

*and the following cackling deed*

*Lyrics are the mother politics*

*I'm just the announcer of the hussle*

*and my mystics are the hidden soil*

*of a lie with which the virtue sickens itself*

*I'm messaging that silk poets  
are dying timid and humane  
from now on the iron throat of  
the moving hangmen shall open musically  
Only I, who lives inside this bundle,  
like a rat in a trap, is craving to the sour system  
of revolution and calls, rhymers, scorn,  
scorn this way too beautiful school of poetry*  
(Julia ten Bos, an exchange student, L&T 2016).

Basing on the feedback we get from the students we constantly improve and update the programs of both W&T and L&T courses. When designing the courses described in this paper, we considered the following primary goals and objectives:

- to develop critical thinking skills;
- to develop critical reading skills and reflection;
- to develop logical reasoning skills;
- to develop creative thinking skills;
- to introduce students to the complexity of argument to be able to discuss a variety of topics;
- to develop abilities to define, classify, summarize; to analyze problems and create solutions; to present a position and supporting evidence;
- to master various aspects of critical reading skills;
- to master various aspects of critical and creative writing skills;
- to write different kinds of essays.

We believe that these skills that are considered central for the *Artes Liberales* model of education are essential for students for successful functioning in any academic environment, developing their communicative and academic writing skills [3]. It is essential for students to be able to view an issue from different angles, to create well-structured arguments and give evidence, to identify the arguments in a text and provide well-grounded judgement, avoid the subjectivity of opinion, understand and figure out logical mistakes and discrepancies. Work on the development of these skills can serve as an additional motivational factor for students to build a deeper connection with a piece of writing and to use reflection for better understanding of the text. Informal writing as a teaching practice is highly valued in this course. It can be practiced as a separate quite independent assignment as well as a preparatory task for a formal piece of writing.

“It is free writing which is unconstrained by the need to appear correctly and polished in public and which is not yet arranging and arguing but is still reflecting and questioning. Not only freewriting to become centered, present for the learning that is about to begin is used in the course. Focused freewriting that explores a term, problem, issue or question; metacognitive process writing to examine how and why you acted in a situation – done before or after reading an assignment, working on a problem, writing a paper, thinking about an issue, etc.” [3].

Most students' evaluations highlight the fact that both W&T and L&T (about 91% and 92% respectively) courses help to overcome the fear of writing tasks that they had before completing the courses. In section 4 of the

questionnaires the students were to choose the most effective in-class activities. The choice of more than 50 % of W&T students and about 75 % of L&T courses students was freewriting.

Both courses have a specific goal of encouraging team work (a joint process of inquiry and text exploration); promoting active listening; teaching through tasks, rather than just through data. The majority of students' evaluations (about 89 % for W&T and 91% for L&T) highly estimate this element of the courses.

Both W&T in Russian and L&T in English courses are designed to enhance students' such general learning skills central in the *Artes Liberales* model of education as questioning skill, ability to identify problems find solutions, using creativity and imagination, to think for oneself while working with others [3]. The texts we choose for the courses include pieces of poetry, extracts from fiction, newspaper articles, critical essays (e.g. from Graff, G., Birkenstein, K. “They say/I say”: the moves that matter in academic Writing”), academic papers, advertisements, etc. We also discuss television programs and pieces of art. The central notion of the L&T course is *Being human*, while the notion of the W& T is somewhat narrower or precise – *A Person in a big city*.

The target of both W&T and L&T courses as stated in their Syllabi is to develop the following abilities:

- “active listening” ability, questioning techniques; problem-solving;
- giving definitions, summarizing, classifying;
- identifying and analyzing problems;
- deconstruction of complex patterns;
- the ability to generate evaluation criteria;
- the ability to establish inferences;
- the ability of communal learning thinking for oneself while working with others.

The only difference is that these skills are being trained either in Russian, or in English language which is a second and sometimes the third for all the participant of the course both students and instructors. No matter what the language of instruction is it is variety of writing assignments that students highly appreciate in both courses.

#### ***Samples of writing assignments that were appreciated in L&T students' feedback:***

1. Write an essay on *Am I Human?* Remember to use some language, examples, ideas from the two readings of the week. Write about 500 words.
2. Write your reflection paper on the process of Writing to Read in the Zones. Consider the following questions: *What was it like to work with the text in this way? What (new) thoughts do you have about the ideas? What ideas about the text have been challenged or reinforced because of your writing and thinking? What interpretations/ meanings are now clear to you? What questions are uppermost in your mind? What was it like to hear the text read in this way? What do you now understand about the text that you didn't after reading it once in silence?*

3. Three letters: Einstein to Freud: Freud to Einstein; Dr. M. Luther King Jr. to 8 Fellow Clergymen.

### Essay in Miniature (© Bard IWT)

This is an approximately 80-90-minute assignment. Find a quiet, solitary place to work. Compose a draft of an essay (a form of questioning, exploring, elaborating, musing, puzzling, conjecturing by means of the act of writing) using your previous work.

Do the following in the order that makes the most sense to you:

1. Look over the points you want to expand or pursue.
2. Choose several of these passages from your writing to question: Why does this matter? Does this relate to anything else in the letters? What questions does this address? What question does this raise?
3. Identify a question (or set of questions) from whatever provokes you in these letters.
4. Identify portions of the actual letters that help you think about these questions. (Note other potential sources that might contribute to your thinking).
5. Elements and Constraints: Draft an essay in miniature Begin with a question. Use material from at least three letters. Include at least two direct quotations. End with a new question.
6. Take this as a serious opportunity to articulate yourself, your vision and your thoughts.
7. Enjoy!

Similar assignments are used within W&T course. We think this fact to be crucial to consider student evaluation valid. To understand how much students get out of the two courses in terms of learning we used one standardized student evaluation in both cases since reliability is essential for good measurement. Student evaluations consisted of measures of overall course quality, overall teacher quality, and subjective perception of learning. All measures shared significant correlation with the results of skills test students took by the end of the courses, and with the feedback we obtained from students' reflective papers (Correlation Coefficient is 0.52 and 0.46 respectively). We might say that the validity of the results was double checked since the measurements we compared resulted from the surveys we were taking for five years. And what seems to be no less important is that three professors instructed both courses in Russian and in English thus reducing the number of unconvinced critics who consider comparing teaching-related competences to be too complex when the competences trained by means of two different languages. Collecting and soliciting student opinions helped us improve our teaching anyway.

### V. CONCLUSIONS

The systematic and intentional assessment of student learning is considered to be crucial for a high-quality education. An evidence-based approach to teaching means that teachers learn from assessment outcomes and other teaching-related outcomes. Student evaluation is always a challenge for both sides involved in the process. Both students and instructors learn being reflective and

responsible sharing their experience. Thus, the best way to increase learning in class is to reflect on what you have learned, how you have learned it and what it means. The same is true for college teachers. Reflection on students' feedback helps to foster student development.

The analysis of questionnaires, interviews, students' achievement tests as well as their reflective papers shows that while Russian and EMI can be estimated as approximately equal in ensuring the objectives of both courses, it was the course taught in English that made the students be more language aware and more self-reflective towards their mother tongue as well as English. This unintended impact at first surprised both students and professors, then we chose to use it extensively. The second impact the instructors were surprised with was creative thinking skills: the students observed that they don't have problems with devising new ways to carry out tasks. Students were sure that "thinking" in English helped them "think outside the box" and thus to develop their creative thinking skills.

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