

Native Language Interference in the Process of Teaching Russian as a Foreign Language

Katarina Jalova^{1,*}

¹ Department of Russian and East-European Studies, Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovak Republic

*Corresponding author. Email: katarina.jalova@uniba.sk

ABSTRACT

In this article, we deal with the problem of native language interference in the process of teaching Russian as a foreign language. In the theoretical part, we define the concept of the interlingual interference with an emphasis on various areas of language in which it occurs. In the analytical-interpretative part, we present the most common mistakes recorded in grammar lessons of students of Russian studies, other philological and non-philological disciplines at the grammar level caused by interference pressures based on our own teaching practice at Comenius University in Bratislava. Most often, it is a mistake of declension of nouns and adjectives, especially in the singular and plural of the genitive and dative case or the conjugation of verbs. At the same time, we bring proposals on how to eliminate these problems through a demonstration of grammar exercises applied in Russian grammar lessons.

Keywords: Foreign language didactics, Russian as a foreign language, Native language interference, Grammar of Russian language, Grammar exercises.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the world around us has become increasingly multicultural. People are in regular contact not only with other cultures, but also with languages, which is associated with the growing demand for knowledge of several foreign languages at the highest possible level according to the old Czech proverb "You live a new life for every language you speak. If you know only one language, you live only once" [1].

*This article has been prepared within the framework of the grant scheme UK/350/2021 Výskum gramatickej interferencie u študentov prvého ročníka ruských a východoeurópskych štúdií a prekladateľstva a tlmočníctva

Although English is already considered a modern *lingua franca*, there is no declining interest in other foreign languages among students. The Russian language has traditionally been at the forefront of Slovak students' interest (after the fall in the 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century), both in the position of the first and the second or next foreign language. Its popularity among

students is related to the linguistic proximity of the Slovak and Russian languages, which, however, also brings with certain problems in the teaching process. Native language interference is a natural phenomenon that we encounter at all stages of teaching Russian as a foreign language and at all language levels (phonetic, orthographic, lexical, and grammatical-syntactic).

This phenomenon is not new in the didactics of foreign languages and linguistics. The founder of comparative linguistics, W. von Humboldt, whose main thesis of his theoretical works was the argument that "different languages are not a different indication of one and the same thing, but different views of it" [2], has already spoken about a certain interaction of languages. In his view, every young child learning his mother tongue relies on vaguely felt analogies. The same analogies are a support for a person who learns a foreign language independently. It is important "to find the spirit of these analogies, and this in any language teaching is a critical point from which real language proficiency and real enjoyment of it begins"[2].

Humboldt's ideas significantly influenced the first important Russian linguistic theorist in psychological direction, A. A. Potebnja, who in his main scientific work *From Notes on Russian Grammar* (1874) brought an in-depth analysis of basic language units also with regard to their linguistic proximity to Slavic languages [3].

At the end of the 19th century (1881), one of the most important Russian linguists of the time, I. A. Baudouin de Courtenay, also spoke about the comparative grammar of Slavic languages [4].

In the middle of the 20th century, the American linguist U. Weinreich presented the problem of bilingualism in a book called *Languages in Contact* and introduced the concept of interference [5].

In the presented article, we focus on grammatical interference of Slovak first-year students of the *Russian and East-European Studies* program, the translation and interpreting program *Russian Language and Culture* and of students of the elective course called *Russian for Beginners* for students of various, also non-philological disciplines. We assume a high probability of interference pressures in grammatical phenomena, which have their analogy in the Russian language, but with different meanings as in Slovak language.

2. THE DEFINITION OF LANGUAGE INTERFERENCE

According to the definition of U. Weinreich, we consider language interference as "those instances of deviation from the norms of either language which occur in the speech of bilinguals as a result of their familiarity with more than one language, i.e. as a result of language contact" [5]. Russian linguists also offer their definitions. For example, L. Barannikova perceives language interference as "a change in the structure or elements of the structure of one language under the influence of another" [6]. V. Vinogradov defines language interference as "the interaction of language systems in conditions of bilingualism, which develops either in language contact or in the individual acquisition of a foreign language" [7]. This type of interaction is most frequent between mother tongue and first or second foreign language.

The influence of the mother tongue on the acquisition of a new foreign language is manifested at all language levels:

- On the *phonetic level*, it manifests itself when "a bilingual identifies a phoneme of

the secondary system with one in the primary system and, in reproducing it, subjects it to the phonetic rules of the primary language" [5]. In practice, we encounter, for example, the fact that Slovak students pronounce soft Russian consonants hard according to the pattern of the Slovak language, and also with the incorrect placement of the moving Russian accent, caused by the permanent position of the Slovak accent on the first syllable of the word. In the current pandemic situation, one of the reasons for phonetic interference may be the fact, that during the short period of attendance education, both teachers and students had to be in masks, which could cause some communication noise, after the transition to distance education, low-quality internet connection may be behind the potential problems;

- Interference at the *orthographic level* is in many cases caused by the exchange of Russian and Slovak letters, especially in the initial stage of learning, or by the application of specific Slovak orthographic rules in the Russian language;
- The linguistic proximity of the Slovak and Russian languages is significantly manifested at the *lexical level*, where interference arises from the use of equally sounding Slovak words in the Russian language, in which, however, they have different meanings [8], so called *faux amis* of the translator;
- *Grammatical interference* is related to the transfer of Slovak grammar rules into the Russian language, which also results in negative changes at the syntactic level, e.g. when the verb is used incorrectly.

While in the initial stage of learning a foreign language, inter-lingual interference prevails (between the mother tongue and the foreign language, or the mother tongue, the first foreign language and another foreign language), after at least a partial increase in the level of knowledge of a foreign language could appeared an intra-language interference, in which students incorrectly apply older knowledge to a newly taught phenomena.

3. THE PROBLEM OF GRAMMAR INTERFERENCE AMONG SLOVAK STUDENTS

3.1 *Students of Russian Studies*

Groups of first-year Russian studies students at Comenius University in Bratislava are often very diverse. The Department of Russian and East-European Studies provides for applicants for bachelor's degree two study programs – *Russian and East-European Studies* and the translation and interpreting direction of *Russian Language and Culture* in combination with another language, according to which the composition of students in individual groups unfolds. In the case of the *Russian and East-European Studies* program, prior knowledge of the Russian language is not expected; students have an increased subsidy for hours of practical language courses and exercises in the Russian language aimed at increasing their language competence. Nevertheless, in the group of 10 – 15 students (the number of admitted students vary each academic year) there are on average 3 – 4 students with previous knowledge of Russian language, either from high school or primary school on average at the level A2 – B1, 2 – 3 students studied at a bilingual Russian high school and their knowledge of the Russian language corresponds to the B2 – C1 level, more and more often Russian language native speakers come to Comenius University, especially from Ukraine and Russia, less from Belarus.

A very similar situation can be observed in the group of future translators and interpreters, where students with previous knowledge of the Russian language at the B1 – C1 level (bilingual high school graduates and graduates from the Russian language) predominate, while the number of Russian language native speakers compared to *Russian and East-European Studies* program is at about the same level (on average 3 – 4 students), although recently we have seen an increased interest in both programs of native speakers from Ukraine and Russia.

The degree of interference also corresponds to the diverse composition of students. While inter-language interference between Russian and mother tongue, or the first or second foreign language (most often English or German) predominates among beginner students, we also encounter intra-language interference between students with advanced levels.

During the lessons of *Russian Grammar Exercises* for first-year students, we identify significant grammatical-syntactic interference in the teaching of inflection of flexible word classes, conjugation of verbs and lexical connection of verbs with a suitable case or preposition. The use of Russian simple verbs of movement in a direct and figurative sense also seems problematic. In this context, we can talk about the overlap and correlation of different types of interference, when, as in the language itself, one level affects another. Failure of master the phonetic rules of the language or communication noise results in errors in orthography, lexical and, last but not least, in the grammatical and syntactic part of the language.

As mentioned above, Slovak students tend to transfer the rules of Slovak spelling to Russian, which causes frequent errors in the form of misuse *и* or *ы* after consonants (especially after hard consonants *к, з, х*), which is especially pronounced when creating the plural of nouns *textbook, physicist, tax, nut, Czech: учебники, физики, налоги, орехи, чехи* instead of the right forms *учебники, физики, налоги, орехи, чехи*. Grammatical interference is also characterized by the transmission of Slovak declension rules, which students try to apply mainly in declension in comparison with Slovak of the same or similar sounding Russian words with the same gender, e.g. *учитель, конь, лес, улица, месяц* vs Slovak *učiteľ, kôň, les, ulica, mesiac* (in English *teacher, horse, forest, street, month*), the interference is even more pronounced in the case of words with a different gender in Slovak and Russian, e.g. *цель* (feminine g.), *уровень* (masculine g.), *степень* (feminine g.), *путь* (masculine g.) vs Slovak *cieľ* (masculine g.), *úroveň* (feminine g.), *stupeň* (masculine g.), *pút* (feminine g.) (in English *goal, level, degree, way*). In these cases, students tend to use Slovak declension suffixes especially in the genitive and dative case of the singular and plural, and the grammatical interference strongly correlates with orthographic interference:

- In the genitive case of the singular and plural in words ending in a soft consonant -*ль, -нь, -ть*, the most common mistake is to use a vowel after a soft sign, e.g. *учителья, конья, целью, уровнью, степеня, путья*, resp. *учителей, коньов, цельюв, путьов*, while in words with a different gender the use of the Slovak gender suffix is also obvious (compare forms of Slovak nouns *učiteľа, коња, cieľu, úrovne, stupňa, púte* in

singular and *učitel'ov, koní, ciel'ov, púťi* in plural);

- In the dative case of the singular and plural we also encounter the problem of correct orthography of nouns with a soft ending, to which is added the incorrect form of the noun after the preposition, e.g. in phrase *экзамен по истории* (in English *history exam*) we recorded form of the noun *по историе*.

In addition to inter-lingual interference, intra-lingual interference at the phonetic level also occurs during inflection, which affects the grammatical level. The shapes of the singular genitive in selected mostly one- to two-syllable nouns graphically correspond to the shapes of these nouns in the plural nominative, the only difference is the location of the accent (compare *без до́ма – все дома́, без то́ма – все тома́, без окна́ – все о́кна, без пятна́ – все пятна, без сосны́ – все со́сны, без игры́ – все и́гры*). The correct determination of the accent is the biggest problem for students, also given that in the Slovak language the accent is constant and is on the first syllable of the word.

In process of declension Russian adjectives in the genitive and dative case of the singular, we recorded the use of a soft declension suffix for an adjective with a hard ending, especially in adjectives as *великий, маленький, русский, детский, технический* (in English *great, small, Russian, children's, technical*), when students suffer the suffix *-ий* to use a soft declension prefix in the genitive case of the singular *великего, маленькего, русскего, детского, технического* (whereas these "neoplasms" correspond to the Slovak way of creating the genitive of the singular of adjectives: *vel'kého, maličkého, ruského, detského, technického*), and in the dative case of the singular – *великему, маленькему, русскему, детскему, техническему* (which again corresponds to the Slovak form of the dative case of the singular of adjectives – *vel'kému, maličkému, ruskému, detskému, technickému*). Similar problems did not arise in the plural of individual cases.

Besides the grammar native language interference in the declension of nouns and adjectives, the interference in the verb tenses is also significant for Slovak students, especially in the first person of the singular and plural and in the third person of the singular and plural. The most fundamental difference between the conjugation of verbs in Slovak and Russian is the form of the first person singular. For Slovak, the suffix *-m* is typical,

on the other hand, this suffix occurs in the first person of the singular in Russian only in the verbs *есть (я ем)* (in English *to eat*) and *дать (я дам)* (in English *to give*) and the verbs derived from them *поесть, отъесть, отъестся, подать, отдать, отдаться, передать, передаться*. It is here that we encounter the tendency of students to use the Slovak ending in the Russian verb, e.g. *я читаю, я говорю, я пишем, я смотрю* etc., which corresponds to Slovak forms *čítam (I am reading), hovorím (I am speaking), píšem (I am writing), pozerám (I am watching)*. On the contrary, Russian suffix *-м* (in form *-ем/-ём* or *-им*) occurs in the first person of the plural – *мы читаем (We are reading), мы говорим (We are speaking), мы пишем (We are writing), мы смотрим (We are watching)*. In connection with the conjugation of Russian verbs in the first person of the plural, we recorded the use of the Slovak suffix *-те* – *мы читаем, мы говорим, мы пишем, мы смотрим* etc., which again corresponds with Slovak forms *čítame, hovoríme, píšeme, pozeráme*.

In process of the conjugation of verbs in the third person of the singular and plural, the subconscious addition of a soft sign to the end of the verb (probably under the influence of a similar pronunciation with the infinitive of the verb) seems problematic, e.g. *он говорит / они говорят, он смотрит / они смотрят, он учит / они учат* etc. In this case, grammatical interference overlaps with phonetic and orthographic interference, we can also talk about intra-language interference.

3.2 Students of Non-philological Programs

The Department of Russian and East-European Studies offers an optional course *Russian for Beginners* at the interfaculty level and its continuation *Russian for intermediate students*. Students will gain a basic knowledge of the Russian language (Russian alphabet, basic courtesy phrases and communication skills), those interested in the course usually come without prior knowledge of the Russian language. From a group of about 10 – 15 members, there are usually 2 – 3 students with previous knowledge of the Russian language from high school or primary school, a small part of the students (on average 3 – 4 students) are students of philological programs of translation and interpreting. The composition of students is therefore very similar to groups of Russian studies students in terms of language level. Unlike the

Russian studies students, these students are at a disadvantage in terms of the hourly Russian language allowance, which is at the level of one lesson.

In the initial stages of teaching, we encounter mainly interference at the orthographic level. It is a confusion of the same-looking Russian letters for Slovak ones, while their meaning is different (compare Russian letters *B, E, H, P, C, V* and Slovak *B, C, E, H, P, Y*), or a replacement of Russian similar-sounding vowels *e* and *э*, e.g. in words like *есть* and *этаж* to *эсть* and *етаж*. By frequently practicing reading short and simple texts (e.g. fairy tales), these errors can be eliminated very quickly and effectively. However, this also requires the student to work outside the classroom, without which a positive result is not possible.

Due to the limited number of teaching hours in the subject *Russian for Beginners*, we focus mainly on the gradual development of communication skills, the expansion of vocabulary in a new foreign language and socio-cultural competence, which "will create a positive image of Russia and the Russian people" [9] and motivates students to visit Russia, whether as part of a tourist trip or as an exchange student at one of the Russian universities.

The development of communication skills also includes the clarification of basic grammatical phenomena in Russian (e.g. the creation of simple negatives, the creation of possessive relations, simple declension of nouns and adjectives, and the conjugation of basic verbs). The grammar composition of Russian language lessons for non-Russian studies students is thus roughly equal to the composition of the course *Russian Grammar Exercises*, of course, in a simplified, and mainly abbreviated form. Examples of grammatical interference, which basically copy the most common mistakes of Russian studies students, also correspond to this fact.

4. EXERCISES FOR GRAMMATICAL INTERFERENCE ELIMINATION

We also try to adapt the choice of tasks to the diverse audience of students to practice and eliminate the most common interference pressures. On the Slovak market, however, we feel a shortage of Russian language exercise books designed for Slovak students. Due to the linguistic, cultural and historical proximity of Slovakia and the Czech Republic, we receive Czech language textbooks and exercise books, which, however, do not always

meet the requirements and needs of Slovak students (e.g. some grammatical phenomena are identical in Czech and Russian, but different compared to Slovak language). It is for this reason that we are forced to create our own teaching materials, which are directly derived from the composition of the group of students and their level of knowledge of the Russian language. In the process of teaching the basics of Russian grammar, we use the same teaching materials for Russian studies students as well as for students of *Russian for Beginners*, when we select suitable tasks for a more thorough practice of individual grammatical phenomena.

Exercises are designed according to the gradual increase of difficulty, where the introductory exercises (maximum 2 – 3) consist of, for example, determining the gender or declension of free-standing nouns (the choice of words corresponds to words with potential interference pressure, or with exceptions in declension suffixes) and pronouns, followed by connecting nouns with adjectives into simple phrases, up to the creation of simple sentences. Problematic phenomena are repeated in several exercises and lessons, e.g. words with gender differences between Slovak and Russian taken over in the first lesson appear in each subsequent lesson for each declension case.

The individual exercises are enriched with a very important socio-cultural component (e.g. names of important Russian personalities of culture, literature or politics, geographical peculiarities), thanks to which students will expand their knowledge to other areas. The socio-cultural component is also a major component of anecdotes or humorous stories, where students practice their grammar skills in a funny way.

5. CONCLUSION

The problem of inter-language and intra-language interference is among the students of the Russian language, whether under the terms of Russian studies or not, also significant in the process of teaching Russian grammar. In many cases, phonetic or orthographic interference is added to grammatical interference, especially in the early stages of teaching, when students often do not yet fully master the new graphics system.

We encounter grammatical interference when declining nouns and adjectives, especially in the genitive and dative of the singular and plural or verb tenses. In most of the above examples, we talk about inter-language interference under the

influence of grammar rules of students' mother tongue, but there were also several cases of intra-language interference at the level of phonetics or orthography, which ultimately affected the grammar level.

During the *Russian Grammar Exercises* and *Russian for Beginners* classes, we noticed virtually identical errors in both groups of students, resulting from approximately the same language level before the start of Russian language studying. However, the students of Russian studies are in a better position with an increased hourly allowance of language exercises in the Russian language. In the case of non-Russian studies students, the intensity of interference pressures depends on the amount of grammatical material, which is much smaller compared to Russian students.

Individual problematic aspects of Russian grammar can be at least partially eliminated by appropriate selection and conception of exercises that should meet the needs of students. In the work book we are preparing, we therefore try to combine tasks graded according to their difficulty with interesting grammatical facts and humorous stories or anecdotes, thanks to which students can better remember new grammatical phenomena.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Jalova, K. – formulation of scientific hypotheses, analysis and interpretation of the interference problems among Slovak students, suggestion of the solution of these problems.

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