

Improving Foreign Language Teaching for International Students

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Abstract

The processes of internationalization and globalization are ubiquitous. The growing number of international students in universities prompts the necessity of research into the best ways of teaching and learning the language of a host country. Language is a connecting link of prime importance in building up an efficient and suitable educational environment for an international student in a foreign country. This qualitative study sought to identify the most effective practices of teaching the host language as second language in leading universities of two countries: Germany and Russia. We interviewed ten teachers in each university regarding the specifics of organizing courses to teach the host country language as a second language. Our analysis revealed the difficulties teachers usually face in their work with international students, as well as effective methods and models of teaching international students. We interpret these findings using a framework for English Medium Instruction proposed by Dafouz and Smit (2012).

Keywords: teaching host language, learning host language, internationalization, methods of organization, multicultural education, international students.

Совершенствование преподавания иностранного языка иностранным студентам

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Аннотация

Процессы интернационализации и глобализации приводят в университетах к росту числа иностранных студентов. Язык для иностранного студента является условием первостепенной важности в создании комфортной образовательной среды. Это вызывает необходимость поиска наиболее эффективных методов преподавания и способов изучения студентами-иностранцами языка принимающей страны. Цель исследования – выявление наиболее эффективных методов преподавания языка пребывания как второго. Исследование проводилось в ведущих университетах двух стран: Германии и России. Было опрошено по 10 преподавателей в каждом университете на предмет специфики организации курсов преподавания языка принимающей страны как второго. Наш анализ выявил трудности, с которыми преподаватели сталкиваются при работе с иностранными студентами, а также эффективность методов и моделей обучения иностранных студентов. Мы интерпретируем эти выводы, используя структуру обучения английскому языку, предложенную Dafouz and Smit (2012).

Ключевые слова: системный подход к преподаванию, контентно-языковое интегрированное обучение, иностранные студенты

Introduction

The courses for learning local language provide fertile soil for deeper learning of the hosting country culture, and as a result, offer a safe space for intercultural communication in class. That is why the teachers' major initial purpose is cultural adaptation at large. The level of interconnected and combined knowledge of language and culture of the hosting country defines the quality of further education.

Presently, the internationalization of education is a distinctive trend in higher education. The process of internationalization influences political, economic, and ideological processes and culture (Maringe, 2010). The mobility of international students around the world is growing. Now the level of internationalization is one of the major indicators of a well-established, progressive and reputable university. In this article we describe internationalization as an educational process, while stressing the prime importance of good command of the hosting country's language in connecting the foreign student to the hosting country.

From the very beginning, poor command of language can be a major obstacle for international students' studies, and this is why it is very important to find some initial ways of creating a hospitable educational environment. In this paper we examine different ways suggested by teachers for implementing different kinds of cross-cultural communication models in the educational process with international students in academic classes. The research was conducted in the language preparatory departments of two German and Russian universities.

In general, students in Germany learn the German language during the full five years of their university studies. In Russia, particularly in the university where the research was carried out, students have only one year to learn the local language. The goal of our research study was to compare different systems of teaching the host country language as a second language in order to improve our practice.

According to Smit and Dafouz (2012), using another language as the medium of instruction can be analyzed through six basic components:

1. The role of English regarding another language. While Smit and Dafouz developed their framework in relationship to English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), the framework is also relevant for analyzing the teaching of other languages as well.

2. Academic disciplines. Teaching academic disciplines in the language of the host country is the main activity at the university; disciplinary practices of teaching and learning are relevant.

3. (Language) Management. This dimension covers language policy in the sense of 'direct efforts to manipulate the language situation' (Spolsky, 2004). Language policy determines the choice: which language will be used in a multilingual environment.

4. Agents. Teachers and administration of the university are faced with the need to manipulate the language situation. This is manifested in the need to search for new information. Each foreign student is a 'peoples diplomat' and represents his motherland in a foreign country, and later becomes an intermediary between his state and country of his study.

5. Practice and Processes. This component is central in higher education and defines the ways of doing and thinking (Leung & Street, 2012). It is meant for discourses in the class for agents to develop disciplinary knowledge jointly. Practice and processes help thinking and self-realization of students, and ensure their level of mental health.

6. Internationalization and Globalization. This refers to measurement for internationalization and globalization that enables universities to respond to the challenges of the 21st century.

In our opinion, the framework developed by Smit and Dafouz (2012) helps to improve the teaching system and create conditions for the qualitative development of disciplines through a holistic approach.

Internationalization and preparatory language courses in higher education

Knight (2008) defines internationalization as 'the process of integrating an international intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education at the institutional and national levels' (p. 21). The knowledge of languages defines the scope of functional abilities. Language is a powerful tool of effective study. The academic disciplines cannot be learnt through poor language (Jenkins, 2014).

We focused on improving teaching a new language as a medium of instruction to international students. It is necessary clarify the role teachers in this process and how the teaching process is linked with whole system of education, using the six zones. The joint practice of studying a subject and a foreign language (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010; Dalton-Puffer, 2011) differs from the practice of teaching a foreign language on its own. In the practice of teaching foreign language, the focus is on achieving the level of knowledge of the target language. Dafouz and Smit (2012) offer educational practice in the form of classroom discourse. This is a platform for teaching and learning of teachers, where the teacher comes to the fore as a central agent in the implementation of educational approaches. Program documents in a foreign language can also act as a focus of study in the implementation of a program (Kehm & Teichler, 2013).

The practice of integrated language teaching has proven itself, and is being used as a research basis for applied linguistic interests in educational institutions that use a foreign or additional language to teach the content of curricula. Integrated language teaching means language integrated with subject content. It is important to take into account the cultural, linguistic context of student (Mauranen, 2012). What is the difference between the cultures of the host country and the student's homeland? Does the language, customs, traditions of the host country differ from the language, customs, traditions of the native country? Does the student find himself in similar or different conditions?

The practice of integrated language teaching is applied in regional and national contexts, as well as at all levels of education (Dafouz & Guerrini, 2009; Dalton-Puffer, Nikula & Smit, 2010; Ruiz de Zarobe, Sierra & Gallardo del Puerto, 2011).

By examining the same questions in two different cultural contexts (Russia and Germany), we tried to obtain the maximum information for the promotion of pedagogical activity of teachers in a multicultural context. Previous studies have shown the importance of the context of learning. Different results of training depend on voluntary participation in educational programs, and the existing beliefs of students (Dafouz, 2014).

Researchers have found a negative correlation between student performance and learning a second (foreign) language. In particular, this is due to a limited ability to ask questions in English. Reduction of the number of questions and answers narrows the interaction between the lecturer and the student (Airey & Linder, 2006).

At the lectures, students focus not on the lecture material, but on how trace out and translate incomprehensible words. After the lecture, additional time is needed for decoding of the content of the lecture. Before the start of the lecture, students have to read background material for understanding the lesson. According to the results of the study, the authors identified the following reasons that hinder the interaction of students and understanding the lecturer (Airey & Linder, 2006):

1. Understanding the subject matter correctly
2. Fear of revealing lack of understanding to the lecturer
3. Fear of speaking English

An important question for the administration of universities is this: Is it effective to arrange teaching in the host language for local students well in advance, before the students travel for studies? In our view, initial advance language preparation of students to travel to a new country, as well as the study of the educational material by students in the host language, makes work with foreign students easier and teaching more effective. There is a need to identify what makes learning a foreign language easier and what hinders the process.

Methodology

This qualitative study compares two universities of good ranking in Germany - Technische Dresden University, and in Russia - Kazan Federal University.

Statistically, 4900 international students studied in Technische Dresden University in 2017 (14.7% of the total number of students). Teachers work with international students only in German. German teachers note that the initial knowledge and understanding of language by students is rather good, but not good enough. Most students are from China but there are students from South America, Europe, India, China, Russia, Finland, the Baltic countries, France, Spain, Syria, India, Himalayas, Taiwan, Madagascar, Indonesia, Madagascar and Japan. There are no students from North America. By professional orientation, the first priority students choose is engineering sciences (29.0%); further choices include environmental ecology (26.8%); scientific directions (12.3%); humanities (12.3%); teacher training (10.5%); medicine (8.3%). German is studied during the entire period of university study. Language training in Germany is supported by the "European Union" foundation, and there is an opportunity for the best 25 students to get into the free-of-charge group.

4200 international students studied in Kazan Federal University in 2017 (11% of the total number of students). Among them there were 71% from Central Asia, 15% from East and South-East Asia, 6% from East and North Africa, 3% from Ecuador, 2% from Latin America, 3% were Europeans. As a first priority foreign students choose the Institute of Geology and Oil and Gas Technologies (27.7%); in second place, the Institute of fundamental Medicine and Biology (25.7%); the third was the Institute of Philology and Intercultural Communication (19.7%); and the fourth was the Institute of Economy and Finance (19.3%). Russian as a second language is studied only the first year, then the student studies it himself.

The data were collected by means of interviews undertaken directly in each university. We interviewed ten teachers in Kazan Federal University from the Preparatory Department (the department solves the problems of language preparation of international students, adaptation to educational process and with gradual preparation to the undergraduate program) and ten teachers in Technische Dresden University who teach German language as foreign for first year students. In contrast to Kazan Federal University, the Technische Dresden University does not have a Preparatory Department. Students in Germany study German simultaneously with disciplinary subjects for five years. Since many teachers of German know Russian and English well, the interview was conducted in both Russian and English. For Russian teachers, it was conducted in Russian.

The interview included 8 research questions that helped to identify strong points of the teaching process. We wanted to know what works well and what does not work in teaching foreign students, what are the difficulties faced by students and teachers in the university education, and what could be useful and helpful for both teachers and students.

Findings

Qualitative analysis of the data obtained through interviews helped to identify similarities and differences in teaching of the host language as the second language in the Russian and German universities. In what follows, we report our findings to each interview question.

What does and does not work well for international students in your class.

Russian teachers noted that visual perception helps at the initial stage, so they prepared good teaching aids in advance. The manual works effectively when every student has in hand an exercise notebook in Russian. It can be in the form of a workbook with presentations, pictures, role-play situations for example in a pharmacy or in a store (what you need to buy). Parallel corresponding situational discussions of the cases are held in groups of 15-17 people.

The German teachers believe that having a high level of self-supporting motivation works well. Students choose on their own whether to take part in proposed events or not, and can select interesting courses for themselves. German teachers said there were no classroom problems with foreign students since they take part in all class assignments. Groups are divided into subgroups of 5, in which interactive work is arranged, followed by a summary discussion in a bigger general group. According to German colleagues at large, this system works well, although there are certain small problems associated with quiet, modest, inactive students.

In our research we discovered some immediate contradictions. One of them is holding tests and interviews in English while all regular educational structures function in German. Most of the information on tables, books, websites, colloquium, scientific research discussions, and events is in German. Communication with staff during internship by e-mail or directly is also done in German.

Difficulties encountered when working with international students and how the teacher copes with them.

Both the Russian and the German teachers had a lot to say about students' difficulties. In Russia teachers complain about large classes. That is a big problem in work for study groups that should not have more than 8 people. It is also difficult to teach students when they arrive at different periods of time. Some join the group later and have to catch up, and the total group has to repeat everything again and again. Further, Russian students complain that some students take longer than others to learn the material, because students with different levels of training are put together into one group and often have to wait everyone to complete the assignment.

There are cultural differences in everyday conduct patterns. For example, Colombian students are not always disciplined: they come late, they do not always listen attentively to teachers. Chinese students attend classes wearing casual sports outfits and in general disrespect the dress code. Students in dormitories have problems with their international roommates. There are everyday misunderstandings and problems of miscommunication. They wonder why psychologists do not help out in dormitories. These problems of everyday life interfere with the learning process. Psychological follow up is arranged. According to Smit and Dafouz (2012), it is necessary to shift the focus from the entire system onto teachers and their training. In our opinion, concentration on the teacher's actions really helps in practice, since it is difficult to work with the entire system at the same time.

In the Russian university, students sometimes complain that some classrooms are not sufficiently equipped with audio visual equipment for learning. Or students living in

distant dormitories are not happy that the road to school is long. At the Russian university, travel takes about one hour from the dorms where they live to the university because of traffic problems. Students prefer to live closer to the university just to save time.

Students are not happy spending a lot of time solving problems with visas and registration. These are issues directly related to the work of the Department of Foreign Affairs, which is a structural entity of the governance of Kazan Federal University dealing with development of foreign academic and educational relations. Sometimes students have to be at an examination at the same time as an appointment with the Department of Foreign Affairs to settle the extension of their study visa.

In Germany, the initial problem is that in the first semester students do not know much about the German education system and regulations. For example, that system is very different in China. And it is difficult to adapt quickly to accepted local academic rules. In Germany students have to act on their own. For example, the student needs to find by himself/herself the complicated schedule of classes in different buildings. The difficulty is that you need to know the requirements from the very beginning.

Special additional seminars and information events are organized by teachers, and guidance is personal. Teachers arrange special classes on how the university functions and the regulations. Students ask questions after classes face to face or by e-mail, such as: "I did not understand the task; I did not understand the task correctly, please, give me more information". Each group has its own platform. The "Opal" platform is very helpful; all important materials and information are placed there.

Although all students pass entrance examinations, still some students at first do not understand anything at all. Moreover, they have the psychological stress of being far away from their parents, or the stress of winter cold in case of those from warm climates. Students often catch cold because nobody takes close personal care of their health. Teachers say that this is the work of another separate department.

Plus, innumerable personal problems have to be solved on the spot, such as living facilities, legal problems, medical insurance, and travel logistics; all these have to be solved by students themselves. Teachers try to motivate them to self-support actions and focus on self-motivation, which is important.

Teachers' opinions about the difficulties that foreign students face in the process of learning.

In Russia, groups were reorganized into strong and weak based on the previous year. But that organization failed to eliminate immediately the problems of learning, for it was very difficult for weak groups to catch up with standard requirements of the program. Consequently, the experience was unsuccessful. There was success when groups were organized around areas of further professional specialization. During the year of this study, they decided to arrange groups on this basis, such as geology, physics, and chemistry.

In Germany the general independence of students is greater. There is no tight personal guidance. Attendance is free. That is why it is difficult for teachers to plan in advance how many students they will have; there could be 10 or 25. The teacher has one more plan, just in case only three students come. That creates difficulty in planning teaching. German teachers note that it is necessary to act efficiently in the classroom depending on the developing situation. Teachers use group work and the Opal system widely when working with a mix of international groups. For example, Chinese students are mixed with others especially looking for extra support from the German environment. Usually if students miss classes they are referred first to the Opal platform in order to catch up with learning materials and then are allowed to join the class.

Interviews with teachers in both Russia and Germany revealed difficulties in language misunderstanding when solving everyday life and organizational issues. The arising difficulties lead to dropout of foreign students from the educational process. The role of the teacher in the situation of language manipulations in subject teaching and in language teaching separately from the subject is to be studied in future studies.

How teachers solve the emerging difficulties when working with foreign students and who helps them in this.

In Russia, teachers solve their problems with assistance of other divisions, which help as much as possible. For example, the Department of Adaptation of Foreign Students in the Department of Foreign Affairs of the University helps with all everyday problems, especially during initial days of study and living. The university arranges regular courses of upgrading professional qualification of teachers working with international students.

In Germany, the upgrade of professional skills in language teaching is organized by the university. Teachers also have a special organization to support the European Union (official financial support for the language course) for a more successful learning, 'Academia Ausland.' According to German teachers specialized conferences are very helpful.

In our research we suppose communication system between students, teachers and administration helps to ensure a safe environment, and to resolve quickly domestic issues and visa issue.

Special preparation needed for foreign students.

In Russia, a training manual has been developed for teachers of foreign students. There is a well-structured study paper for regular retraining, and teachers attend advanced training and conferences. In Germany, teachers prefer to attend conferences, read articles, and have discussions with colleagues. German teachers consider that it is very effective to travel to other countries in order to feel themselves as foreigners, to become kind of 'foreign student' learning another culture and language.

Another form of special preparation is class design. The ideal model of class design differs in Russia and Germany. Russian teachers stress the importance of better equipped classrooms, especially interactive modern equipment. They believe that Russian as a second language should be offered during the whole period of studies in the university. That will empower students with ability to learn all special subjects better and be effective in solving their everyday life problems on their own, which should result in better adaptation. Currently, language is taught during the initial year and a half.

In Germany teachers require obligatory teaching of German for three years and further to learn deeply special professional subjects in order to increase professional and technical vocabulary. The gaps in knowledge are compensated by discussions in groups of students. Before that, a student should translate and audio-study professional text and discuss it with students.

If you could design or request preparation for working with international students, what would you ask for? What would be helpful to you?

Russian teachers stressed the importance of computer classes, spatial furniture and equipment for classrooms, teaching boards, air conditioners, shuttle buses, and extended time of training. Russian language classes are not enough for adaptation for further professional training.

German teachers focused on their obligations for the first three years to all students to learn German every week, including professional German and depending on the research

topic to accumulate professional vocabulary. If the student does not understand foreign words in the professional text which he works on in advance, after the lesson he can listen and discuss it with more advanced students and peers. There is strong recommendation that foreign students prepare in advance for upcoming classes.

Discussion

Comparative research by interviewing teachers about teaching in Russia and Germany revealed the importance of context and themes which are characteristic to teachers' approaches in different cultural contexts. Teichler (1996) adapted a questionnaire for an environment of cultural diversity. He found that research flows differently in different cultural contexts, and showed distinctive features and characteristics, and various connections to disciplines. The different roles were attributed to research in their activities.

The following difference in approaches to the practice of integrated language learning of the Russian and German universities was revealed. In Germany, this practice exists for all five years of study of foreign students. Subject training is done in German. In Russia, the integration of subject learning occurs at the second year of study, and not in all subjects. Despite the fact that the language in the study environment is Russian, some subjects are taught in English, not in Russian. In Germany language preparation is integrated into major subject of study itself. Students immediately get used to terminology and basic theoretical issues. The German system does not adapt itself to an individual student. All necessary information, textbooks, literature and recommended websites are in German. The accent is on professional development and professional vocabulary expansion. Teachers are more oriented to develop students' self-motivation. They also actively use a distance learning format. In Germany students solve the options and conditions for life during studies for themselves: either in a dormitory or private flat. In Russian teachers actively help international students to find best places for living. Though this paternal approach sometimes takes away self-decision making.

Comparative analysis revealed a certain collection of complexities met by teachers when working with foreign students. Correspondently, the practical methods of work at the initial stage of their education in the two universities were revealed. Highlights of our findings are:

1. The optimal efficiency of work is in small classrooms.
2. The teacher needs to have multi-level methods for working with different levels of student preparation.
3. It is important to arrange continuous training during the entire period of study.
4. The experience of German teachers shows that passing from self-support to independence is more efficient than the 'maternal style' of communication.
5. There is a necessity for preliminary preparation to give a quicker adaptation to the country, i.e. in removing unnecessary beliefs, overestimated expectations.
6. Of great importance is the availability of information in English (sites, timetables, methodological materials) that will help students in first stage to quickly enter into the educational process.

Summarizing the difficulties that exist in both universities, first of all multi-level classes are taken into account. Language mixed classes provide an opportunity for active involvement in the development of the language of the host country. The results of the research show that teachers have to work in a multi-level class, taking into account different cultural contexts. Distant electronic educational resources give extra students access to missed materials and enable students to return to misunderstood subjects.

Secondly, both in Russia and in Germany there are unstable sizes of study groups, which creates certain difficulties for teachers in preparing and conducting classes. And

third, in both countries, teachers have to work simultaneously with different number of students and level of training.

In this study, we found the framework by Smit and Dafouz (2012) to be very useful because it widens the scope of what one considers when planning the teaching of a host language to foreign students. We conducted a comparative analysis of the difficulties of Russian and German teachers when working with foreign students at the initial stage of their education in universities.

The first zone concerns English, and it was not relevant to our study.

The second zone of their framework focuses on teaching the host language within the academic disciplines. As a result of the study, we found a difference in language learning approaches: discipline-integrated language training in Germany and separate study of language and discipline in Russia.

The third zone of Smit and Dafouz's framework is language management. This is more difficult than the other five components in both Russia and in Germany.

In Russia and Germany, language policy initially involves learning in the language of the host country. This helps students to quickly penetrate the language environment and learn the subject in the language of the host. In Germany, the language policy builds up the process of learning through the subject area; in Russia, first the language is taught, and then the subject is learned in the language of the host.

The fourth zone is Agents, which is important in the implementation of educational practices. Educational practice takes place in the form of a classroom discourse and is a platform for both teaching and teacher training. The teacher comes to the fore in the form of a central agent. Program documents in a foreign language can also act as a focus of study during the implementation of a particular curriculum. In Germany, the development of the education system for international students focuses on teachers as agents. In Russia, the emphasis is shifted either on the psychologist or the administrators or to external structures such as visa departments for instance. There is no fixed position on this issue.

Conclusion

The framework developed by Smit and Dafouz (2012) has helped to frame our comparative analysis between the universities of two countries. Based on the six main zones we have managed to set up a maximum ideal model of teaching foreign language. The framework helps us to see the broad picture of helping foreign students learn the host country's language well enough to advance in the university and professional level learning in that language. The systemic care of language training at the university provides the necessary level of academic integrity, and improves studies in academic disciplines, and interaction with the administrative staff of the university, with departments, and with native local students. High-quality language training facilitates effective mastery of academic disciplines, enabling students to learn terminology. Quality language training helps students to manage the language situation independently in order to find optimal solutions to difficulties. Language training makes possible involvement in university social and academic life, and participation in conferences and cultural events. Active involvement in the processes of scientific thinking helps students to immerse into development of disciplinary knowledge.

Summarizing the conducted comparative research aimed at improving the teaching of a foreign language for students, we have eight recommendations for teachers:

1. Explain to students this is the second language of teaching.
2. Form groups of no more than 8 people. When the number of students goes up the group should be divided into subgroups.

3. Prepare auxiliary material in the form of visual slides and presentations, online platforms
4. Understand that unresolved every day domestic and organizational issues have a negative impact on the educational process.
5. Adhere to a single politics in choosing of language and material auxiliary to the lesson.
6. Teaching of second language through teaching of subject will help accelerate the preparation of a foreign student for bachelor's and master's programs.
7. Consider carefully the student's background, the cultural difference between the country of arrival and homeland.
8. It is important for the teacher to understand the mutual influence of the six zones in the learning process. Adhere to a systematic approach in teaching.

Limitation

This study has its limitations, since it based only in two universities. This, of course, is not enough to make exhaustive conclusions.

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