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Linguocultural Portrait of a Migrant Student while Acquiring Russian as a Non-Native Language: Regional Aspect

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Abstract

The arrival of a large number of migrants to Stavropol region has led to the heterogeneity of training audience in regional schools. Inhomogeneity of a training audience requires adapting the existing methods of teaching Russian, developed for native speakers, taking into account the needs of a mixed audience. The paper focuses on adapting methods of teaching Russian considering peculiarities of the target audience. The empiric data is based on the results of the survey of Russian teachers, who work with migrant students at comprehensive schools in Stavropol region, and the results of Russian textbooks analysis.

Scientific data and materials have been obtained as a result of applying the following methods of investigation: general scientific methods (observation, analysis, synthesis, deduction, survey) and private linguistic methods (descriptive, comparative, componential analysis, quantitative).

We considered the existing model of teaching the Russian language based on the four factors: profiling psychological and pedagogical characteristics of a migrant student, structural and content-related organization of learning material layout, systematization of difficulties in mastering Russian encountered by migrant students and integration of features of the contingent studying Russian as a non-native language.

The aim of the present research is to reveal specific aspects of teaching the Russian language to migrant students in a multicultural environment of comprehensive schools in Stavropol region.

Keywords: migrant student, methods of teaching Russian as a foreign language, multicultural education, mixed training audience.

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Introduction

Intensive migration processes of the recent decades have led to sociolinguistic and sociocultural changes in student contingent in Russian schools. Teaching Russian to migrant children is of particular importance since Russian is the main mean of adaptation of foreigners in Russian society and a means of mastering school subjects.

In Russian schools, all tools, methods and programs of teaching Russian are designed for native speakers. Taking into account the multiculturalism and multilingualism of student contingent, there is a situation when the methods and techniques developed for Russian-speaking children are used in teaching Russian to migrant students.

Inhomogeneity of a training audience in Russian schools necessitates adapting the existing methods of teaching Russian, developed for native speakers, taking into account the needs of a mixed audience.

Purpose and objectives of the study

The purpose of the present research is to reveal specific aspects of teaching the Russian language to migrant students in the multicultural environment of Russian comprehensive schools.

Literature review

Our study is focused on migrant children, non-native speakers studying in a comprehensive school in Stavropol region, as well as difficulties encountered by foreign students in mastering Russian. According to the practice of international migration law, the term “migrant” is applied to persons and family members moving to another country or region to improve their material or social conditions and improve prospects for themselves or their family. It is noted that there is no universally accepted international definition (Perruchoud, 2005). According to the dictionary by Azimov and Schukin (2009), «non-native speaker is a speaker of a foreign language, who has respective world views». We use concepts “migrant children” and “foreign language student” as equivalents within the framework of the present research.

The methodology of teaching Russian as a non-native language seems to be the closest one to teaching Russian to migrant children at school. It originates from the methodology of teaching Russian as a foreign language and was initially applied at schools located in non-Russian speaking Soviet Republics. Balykhina (2007) mentions that among the basic principles of teaching Russian as a non-native language are communicativeness, functionality, concentric organization of the material, reliance on students’ native languages, minimization of educational material, complexity and differentiation. However, Al-Kaysi (2015) opposes the possibility of applying these principles at school. «Of course, many of these principles seem to be necessary when working with migrant students, but we should not forget that modern migrant students study in Russian comprehensive schools along with Russian students, for whom this technique cannot be fully applied as it is irrelevant for Russians» (pp.23).

The issues of adaptation of the methods of school education to the needs of -foreign students, as well as adaptation of migrant students themselves studied by the scientists of Herzen University. Usha (2013) writes: «... teaching Russian as a school subject includes an approach based on the passive form of grammar acquisition. Both languages of instruction and training tools focus on native Russian speakers» (p.30). Thus, non-Russian speakers, who do not have a good command of the language, find themselves excluded from the training process. This concerns not only Russian classes, as the Russian language is the most important medium of instruction at Russian schools.

Usha (2013) offers an algorithm of methodological support design that includes textbook analysis, the theoretical conceptualization of textbook content from the perspective of Russian as a foreign language, methodological support, analysis of the relevance of the developed materials for Russian-speaking contingent.

Methodology

We applied an integrated technique that includes general scientific methods (observation, analysis, synthesis, deduction, inquiry) and private linguistic methods (descriptive, comparative, componential analysis, quantitative).

Based on general principles of pedagogics, we offer to consider the methodology of teaching Russian at school in terms of the following factors:

- profiling psychological and pedagogical characteristics of the personality of a migrant student as a reflection of cultural world-views;
- structural and content-related organization of learning material layout as a factor of optimizing its retention;
- systematization of difficulties in mastering a particular linguistic phenomenon as an intra- and interlanguage factor;
- integration of features of the contingent studying Russian as a non-native language into the situation of educational interaction between the two contingents.

The research involved three stages. The first one included a survey of Russian language teachers of comprehensive schools located in Stavropol region. Its aim was to collect data on characteristics of migrant students as a training audience as well as on problems of retention of particples. This stage includes linguistic and cultural profiling of the personality of a migrant child studying in a comprehensive school in Stavropol region. Its purpose is to determine the basic psychological and pedagogical characteristics of the personality of a migrant student through the compilation of a linguistic-cultural profile.

The second stage involved analysis of Russian language textbooks for compliance with the requirements applied to textbooks for a mixed audience.

The third stage included the development of guidelines for adapting the methodology of teaching participle to a multicultural audience based on the results of teacher survey and textbook analysis.

Results

The first stage of the research was dedicated to profiling the psychological and pedagogical characteristics of the personality of a migrant student as a reflection of his cultural world-views.

In order to collect data, we surveyed Russian teachers at comprehensive schools of Stavropol region using Google forms in November 2019. 50 teachers from 13 schools located in Georgievskiy, Sovetskiy, Neftekumskiy, Shpakovskiy districts and Stavropol participated in the survey.

First, it is necessary to determine which nationalities prevail in foreign student contingent. According to survey results, these are immigrants from Armenia (71.4%), Azerbaijan (36.7%), Uzbekistan (10.2%), Georgia (6.1%), Ukraine, Turkey, Kazakhstan (4,1% each). This corresponds to official statistics on Social and economic condition of Stavropol region (2018) for 2018. In addition to these migrant children, teachers mentioned Yezidis (8.2%), Gypsies (8.2%) and Turkmens (8.2%), who are Russian citizens but do not speak Russian as native speakers.

It is important to mention that native languages of the majority of migrant students belong to different language groups of Turkic, Indo-European and Kartvelian family, so it is rather difficult to reveal the relevant determinants regarding the methodology due to their wide scatter and teacher's ignorance of migrant students' native languages. Besides, many migrant students leave their countries of origin before they acquire the structure of their native language. Thus, it is impossible to rely on their knowledge of a native language while teaching Russian.

The most important feature of the pedagogical profile of a migrant student is the level of knowledge of Russian when enrolling in schools in Stavropol region. 44.9% of teachers told their students knew Russian at the Beginner level (A1), 24.5% of teachers chose Elementary (A2), 20.4% - Intermediate (B1). Thus, up to 90% of migrant children do not speak Russian at a level that meets the requirements of the educational standard for Russian as the state language when enrolling in Stavropol comprehensive schools. According to Russian teachers, 42.9% of students graduate from schools with Intermediate level of Russian language proficiency (B1), 26.2% - with Upper-Intermediate level (B2).

83.7% of teachers note that most of the migrant students encounter great difficulty in mastering written speech. The reason is the immersion of children in the language environment and age. Children make contact with their peers much easier than adults do and their sociability depends on individual characteristics rather than on knowledge of Russian.

It is also important to note that a significant number of migrant children speak their native language with family members. Most commonly (especially when it comes to the families of labour migrants) only fathers speak Russian. They are first to arrive in Russia to assess possibilities to move here and initiate moving. However, it is traditionally a mother, who raises children. Mothers either begin to learn the language only after moving or do

not learn it at all if a father is responsible for all the contacts with the Russian-speaking environment. Some teachers noted a complete lack of interest and awareness of the importance of learning Russian for children from their families. Fortunately, this situation is rare for schools in Stavropol region.

In terms of the complexity of mastering themes of Russian, spelling (73.5%) comes first, followed by phonetics (44.9%), syntax and punctuation (42.9% each), lexicology and phraseology (36.7% each), word formation (32.7%), stylistics (20.4%), morphemic (18.4%).

Personality traits of a migrant student directly affect the effectiveness of the learning process. 75.5% of Russian teachers say that migrant children have difficulty in mastering other subjects due to insufficient knowledge of Russian. At the same time, students with a level of Russian language proficiency above Intermediate do not experience difficulties in other lessons. 63.3% of teachers mentioned shyness of foreign children as an additional obstacle in the learning process; 49% of teachers noted the need of such students for additional attention, 32.7% said they were closed, 6.1% mentioned aggression caused by a lack of understanding and lack of knowledge of Russian. One teacher faced total indifference of a student and his family towards school education.

According to teachers, migrant students do not fear to communicate with classmates, but they try to avoid oral replies and encounter difficulties with other subjects. 53.1% of teachers said their foreign students face problems in communicating with classmates caused by the language barrier, 73.5% of teachers said their foreign students fear to speak in class. There is a correlation between the absence of a language barrier in foreign children while communicating with peers and more advanced conversational skills. This fact may be explained by the age characteristics of the studied audience.

Most of the teachers (67.3%) consider additional classes as a way of assistance to foreign students. 42.9% of teachers noted the importance of involving children in extracurricular activities as a mean of adaptation and mastering Russian; 40.8% stated the need to apply special textbooks developed for foreign children.

Thus, it is possible to compile a profile of a migrant student studying in a secondary school in the Stavropol region based on data obtained during the survey of Russian teachers. Most of the students are citizens of the Republic of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Uzbekistan; they entered schools with a level of knowledge of Russian in the range from Beginner (A1) to Intermediate (B1). The greatest number of migrant students are currently in the 4th, 5th, 6th, and 8th years.

Migrant students find it much more difficult to learn written language; the most problematic aspect is spelling. When working with a foreign child, a teacher should take into account shyness caused by the low level of knowledge of Russian and his fear of oral replies. Migrant students often require an individual approach, additional time during the lesson and after it.

The second part of the survey involved teachers of the Russian language as the state language. All survey participants unanimously agreed that mastering participles for foreign students is more difficult. The greatest difficulties for foreign- students are caused by features of a verb. (69%). It should be noted that this topic is

difficult for Russian-speaking students as well. 34.5% of teachers mentioned the features of adjective and the need to agree participles with a defined word as the main difficulty. 17.2% of teachers noted the difficulty in making short forms of participles. Among the other problems, the teachers mentioned identifying participles in the text, distinguishing adjectives and participles, mistakes in using the suffixes of participles and spelling of the suffixes of participles.

45.5% of teachers think that the additional classes for foreign students may benefit to mastering Russian by migrant students; 18.2% of teachers supported applying individual approach to teaching migrant children, 9.1% mentioned the importance of applying special textbooks of Russian as a foreign language. Other answers included: “explanation of the wording of rubrics”, “additional forms of control,” “gamified form of learning”, “transforming the participle into various forms of the verb, and vice versa.”

The second stage of the research included analysis of the structural and content-related organization of learning material layout as a factor of optimizing its retention and systematization of difficulties in mastering a particular linguistic phenomenon as an intra- and interlanguage factor. Training material on the subject of Participles was selected for analysis.

According to the survey results, the most popular Russian textbooks are the one by Trostentsova et al. (2019), textbook by Pimenova et al. (2019) and the one by Rybchenkova et al. (2019). Since these textbooks are used in teaching Russian to a mixed audience, we analyzed the form of presentation and organization of the training material in terms of teaching foreign students.

If we turn to the methodology of teaching Russian as a foreign language, and this is a base of the methodology of teaching Russian as a non-native language, participles are studied at the first certification level, which in the European system corresponds to the Intermediate level of language proficiency (B1). To study at this level, the volume of student’s vocabulary should be 1300 words. A student should be able to read simple short texts, initiate a conversation in typical situations, understand basic information from dialogues and monologues on familiar matters or of personal interest and everyday topics, write short letters.

If a student’s level of language proficiency does not meet the requirements listed above, he either will encounter additional difficulties in mastering participles or will not understand teacher’s explanations. Such students need additional individual classes, as the gap in the level of Russian proficiency is too big.

Thus, in our study, we focus on students with Elementary, Intermediate and Upper-Intermediate levels of Russian proficiency. Students, whose level of Russian proficiency is C1 and C2, should not encounter any additional difficulties in mastering participles compared to Russian-speaking students.

First, when analyzing the training material, we drew attention to the vocabulary of both the wording of rubrics and in the texts of exercises. School textbooks contain a large number of rare vocabulary (archaisms, neologisms, historicisms, dialectisms), which is difficult for understanding not only to foreign students but to Russian-speaking students as well.

Reading Russian classical literature is undoubtedly important for foreign students, especially if the texts correspond to the level of students' Russian proficiency. However, colloquial speech is much more important when it comes to migrants. Textbooks of Russian as a foreign language content such texts, as well as fragments of literary works adapted to the student's level.

The training material on participles is presented in the same order in the textbooks. First, goes a table with all forms of participles, then students learn to identify them in the texts, determine the features of adjective and verb, learn about punctuation. The following paragraphs introduce the rules by each form of participles and rules on spelling. There are up to ten exercises for practising each participle form. This is not enough for students with Intermediate level of Russian proficiency. In addition, the textbooks do not contain information on exceptions and other aspects that are obvious to a native speaker, but not clear to a foreign student.

The textbook by Pimenova et al. (2019) presents the material in the most illustrative manner. It contains exercises on the pronunciation of complex participles, which is especially important for foreign students. This textbook contains the fewest rare words compared to the other textbooks. The unit on participles starts with identifying all forms of participles in a text, describing pictures using participles and analysis of participle suffixes. Such exercises that include all participle forms at ones are designed for native speakers.

Russian textbooks analysis revealed lack of clarity in training material layout, the need to supplement the theoretical part with rules of formation and use of participles, which is important in terms of Russian as a non-native language. In addition, the pronunciation of suffixes of some participles is complicated as there is a concentration of whistling, hissing, soft consonants and vowel gradation. At the same time, foreign students need more words from exercises and rubrics to be explained. The teachers also mentioned the need for an example as it is much easier for migrant children to follow some model.

Based on the survey results and structural and content-related organization of learning material layout in school Russian textbooks we classified the difficulties in mastering a particular linguistic phenomenon through the example of participles.

Participles is one of the most complicated topics in the Russian language. It brings together topics learnt during the whole course of Russian. Thus, it is very important to a teacher to make sure that students remember learnt grammar material on gender, number, case, verb conjugation, kind and tense, agreement of attributes with a determined word, complex sentences. Quite often migrant students do not know or do not remember topics that were learnt some time ago, especially at the beginning of their studies in Russia. Shyness prevents them from asking for help until a teacher notices the gap himself and helps a student to overcome it. In addition, many grammatical features of Russian participle do not coincide with those in students' native languages. All this causes additional difficulties.

Thus, among the main difficulties encountered by foreign students when learning Russian using school textbooks are:

- lack of clarity in training material layout;
- misunderstanding the wording of rubrics;

- misunderstanding rare vocabulary used in school textbooks;
- arrangement of exercises based on the passive approach to grammar learning;
- incompleteness of grammar material;
- little number of training exercises when it comes to the needs of migrant students;
- lack of phonetic exercises.

Joint teaching of two contingents: Russian-speaking one and non-Russian speaking, requires application of the individual approach. Methods of teaching certain class will greatly depend on students' psychological and pedagogical features: nationalities of migrant students, their level of Russian proficiency, and level of sociability.

In general, teaching migrant children as a part of a heterogeneous audience requires the involvement of some elements of the methodology of teaching Russian as a non-native language. In terms of teaching aids, maximum clarity is required when presenting educational material. At the level of teaching methods, it is recommended to apply a system of additional individual homework, containing exercises on both new and already completed, but not understood, topics.

When developing an individual task for migrant students, it is especially important to follow the principles of teaching Russian as a non-native language: principles of the active approach to grammar learning (Shcherba, 1974), the arrangement of grammar exercises taking into account the stages of grammatical skills development (Passov & Kuzovleva, 2010), use of adapted texts considering the level of Russian proficiency and the personal interests of students. A teacher should carefully prepare each lesson, which includes analysis of textbook vocabulary and planning the ways of its explanation.

Discussions

Social and cultural changes of the Russian society inevitably influence a contingent of school students. Students in Russian schools have always been of various nationalities, however, some important features of a migrant student's profile have changed and this requires adaptation of the methods of teaching Russian.

Based on the survey results, we compiled the profile of a migrant student. The level of Russian proficiency of migrant children is much lower than the level of the Russian-speaking contingent. Moreover, Beginner and Elementary levels of Russian proficiency (69,4% of foreign students) do not allow students to understand teacher's explanations and topics that are traditionally difficult such as participles.

In addition, when working with migrant children, a teacher should remember such important psychological characteristics of migrant children as shyness, fear of an oral reply in the class. Neglecting these psychological features imposed by a lack of understanding of Russian, stress of moving to a new country and change of the familiar environment, can result in protest behaviour, aggression and loss of motivation.

We have analyzed the material of school Russian textbooks and taking into account the features of a migrant student profile, we note inefficiency of teaching Russian to a heterogeneous audience, namely, a foreign-language contingent, using only school textbooks.

The modern educational paradigm involves the individual approach to education. In case of teaching migrant students in the Russian-speaking environment, an additional difficulty is the need to combine the interests of a Russian-speaking audience with the needs of migrant students. We offer to enhance individualization by individual homework for foreign students designed taking into account students' level of Russian proficiency and gaps in their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. The material should be compiled on the basis of principles of teaching Russian as a non-native language such as communicativeness, functionality, concentric organization of educational material, complexity and differentiation. The principles of reliance on students' native languages and minimizing educational material cannot be implemented even at the level of individual homework.

We offer to use more texts about culture, nature, etc. interesting for both Russian-speaking and foreign-language students during classwork. Since schools textbooks contain a lot of rare words (archaisms, neologisms, historicisms, dialectisms), we advise solving this problem by teacher's explanations. This method is described by Usha and Nikulina (2015). They offer a teacher to comment difficult words during a lesson and reformulate wording of rubrics and exercises: «.. such comments are built into a lesson and represent an explanation of the material from the perspective of active grammar» (p. 33). Russian-language students can be involved in explanations of words that are difficult to migrant students. Some rare words from literary passages may be difficult to Russian-speaking students as well.

Conclusion

The principle of reliance on the features of a target audience when developing teaching methods is the basic one in pedagogics. Thus, the change of school student contingent should influence the existing methodology of teaching Russian. We have considered the existing model of teaching the Russian language based on the four factors: profiling psychological and pedagogical characteristics of a migrant student, structural and content-related organization of learning material layout, systematization of difficulties in mastering Russian encountered by migrant students and integration of features of the contingent studying Russian as a non-native language. In our opinion, the developed guidelines should promote more efficient teaching Russian to a mixed audience that will meet the needs of both contingents.

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