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English as an additional language for Russian university students learning German as the first foreign language

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Abstract

The problem of language transfer and interference has been studied by H. Douglas Brown in *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*, L. V. Scherba in *Language System and Speech Activity*, B. Lekova in her articles and by many other scholars. But there is an obvious research gap in this area, because the teachers and scholars usually focus on the interference between the students' native language and a foreign one and forget about other languages students might know. The purpose of our research is to describe the experience of Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University professors who work with Russian-speaking students learning German as the first foreign language and English as an additional language. The authors outline the aspects of the Russian and the German languages that facilitate or complicate the process of teaching English. The significance of the research is that it helps the teacher to predict the difficulties and possible mistakes of the students and thus avoid them. The methodology of our research includes general scientific methods, namely analysis, synthesis, induction and deduction. We have studied the works of scholars and teachers' experience and structured the received information. Among the major findings we can indicate that the interference between two foreign languages is often stronger than the interference between the native language and a foreign one. Thus, our findings may be used in classes of English and help the students to use their previous linguistic experience to their advantage and to learn English quicker and more effectively.

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1. Introduction

Foreign language classes become more effective when the students' knowledge of other languages is taken into account. Students always know at least one language – their native one, and it may help the teacher to predict the difficulties and possible mistakes of the students and thus avoid them. But it is even more effective to compare the new foreign language with other foreign languages the students have learnt, because the interference between two foreign languages is often stronger than the interference between the native language and a foreign one. The present article describes the experience of Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University professors who work with Russian-speaking students familiar with German and learning English as an additional language. The authors outline the aspects of the Russian and the German languages that facilitate or complicate the process of teaching English as a second foreign language, thus helping the students to use their previous linguistic experience to their advantage and to learn English quicker and more effectively.

2. Linguistic interference and positive transfer

Our primary concern is the problem of interference between the students' native language and a foreign one or other languages students might know. We have already studied interference in our previous works, in particular, we have touched upon the problem of interference between Russian as the native language, English as the first foreign language and Spanish as the second foreign language (Kolabinova & Palutina, 2014).

We understand interference as “a negative transfer of language habits and skills from the mother tongue or from a foreign language to another foreign language” (Lekova, 2010). The teacher's task is to predict and avoid such transfer where possible. But there's another function of the teacher, which is no less important, and it involves helping the students to practice positive transfer of language habits and skills from a better known language to the new one. According to Douglas Brown, “positive transfer occurs when the prior knowledge benefits the learning task – that is, when a previous item is correctly applied to present subject matter” (Douglas Brown, 2007). So, the teacher should minimize the negative transfer and stimulate the positive one.

3. Aspects of language learning

We would like to compare some aspects of English, Russian and German grammar and vocabulary and show the importance of taking into account the languages the students already know in the process of teaching a new foreign language, as most of the possible students' mistakes are quite predictable in this case.

Being a Slavonic language Russian has little in common with English or German. Thus, if we teach Russian students, who only speak their mother tongue and no other languages, we have to introduce the Roman alphabet, new pronunciation skills, grammar and vocabulary. Some teachers practice the same approach, when teaching Russian students, who already speak a foreign language, but many aspects in this case become absolutely unnecessary, while special attention should be paid to different problems.

3.1. The alphabet

When learning their first European language Russian students come across the necessity to switch to the Roman alphabet from the Cyrillic one used in Russian. Every letter is new. But when learning their second or third European language, they only have to adapt new pronunciation skills, and even the pronunciation is very similar in many cases.

So, when teaching Russian students, who already speak German, we should remember that the Roman alphabet is familiar to them. Their only problem is that they tend to read English words like German ones. So, we only have to teach the English names of familiar letters and new rules of reading them. Besides, as oral spelling is often practised by the native-speakers of English, when they wish to clarify the spelling of a new word or a name, it is very important for students to learn the English names of letters well, and it can only be achieved, if oral spelling is practised in class.

3.2. Pronunciation skills

As we have already mentioned, Russian students, who study German as their first foreign language and English as their second foreign language tend to read English words as German ones. For example, they read 'steel' as [ʃti:l], not as [sti:l], 'step' as [ʃtɛp], not as [stɛp], 'set' as [zɛt], not as [sɛt], and 'send' as [zɛnt], not as [sɛnt], pronouncing the initial 's' according to German rules and the voiced sound 'd' as voiceless 't'.

The latter phenomenon should be mentioned separately, as voiced sounds in the word final position are pronounced as voiceless not only in German, but also in Russian, which produces double interference, so, the fact that such sounds should not be devoiced will be new to the students.

Thus, it is very important to attract the students' attention to the fact that 'dog' should not be pronounced as 'doc' or 'bag' should not be pronounced like 'back', because they are different words.

Although, this problem, if paid due attention, disappears very quickly, while the general tendency to read English words like German ones remains for much longer time, which proves that the language interference between the less known language and the unknown language prevails over the interference between the best known language and the unknown language.

3.3. Grammar

In grammar many aspects may become the object of negative or positive transfer of language habits and skills between the languages under analysis.

When teaching grammar, it is always very important to pay separate attention to the article. Due to the absence of articles in Russian, when learning their first foreign language, in which this part of speech is present, Russian students need much time to understand the nature and the functions of the article, which is quite natural, as they are used to a language that functions well without articles, and regard it as an unnecessary complication.

But when they already know the German language, the students can easily understand the importance of the article, and the teacher shouldn't spend much time explaining it. Vice versa, because of the grammatical gender, declension and number in German the system of articles in it is more complicated than in English, and the students usually like the fact that they only have to remember the definite article 'the' and the indefinite 'a'.

However, it is vital for Russian students to practice the use of articles in English, as this part of speech is absent in their mother tongue, and mistakes occur very often. Besides, the use of articles in English and in German is different, and the process of the positive transfer of language habits and skills from German into English cannot be realised in full.

Another important aspect that needs separate attention is grammatical gender.

The absence of grammatical gender and declension in the English language is something new for the Russian students.

Those of them, who only know English usually attribute the same gender to the English nouns as they have in their native language. That is, they say 'it', but they think of a train as 'he' and of the grass as 'she'. Occasional use of grammatical gender in English, like 'he' for death or 'she' for a ship puzzles them, because the word 'death' is feminine in Russian, and 'ship' is masculine. It seems natural to them. They are sure that the grammatical gender is the innate quality of the objects, even if you call all of them 'it'.

The students who speak Russian and German already know that the grammatical gender has nothing to do with the objects themselves, as the genders of Russian and German don't always coincide.

That is why the fact that inanimate objects in English have no gender at all is fully understood and appreciated by them and broadens their mind.

When learning English grammar, it is vital to learn the system of verb tenses.

At first Russian students who know German are very happy that there is no verb conjugation in English. They understand and accept it very quickly. The ending '-s' in the third person singular is not regarded as a problem by them, and they learn to use it correctly quicker than the Russian students, who don't speak German.

Regular and irregular verbs can become a problem for them, but again, the German language helps – the students, who have managed to learn it are so used to systematic training, that don't find it difficult to learn the list of regular and irregular verbs.

What is very difficult for all the Russian speaking students regardless of their knowledge of German is the system of verb tenses of the English language.

It is much more complicated than that of German or Russian. Thus, they need a lot of time to understand it. And the teacher can easily predict such a difficulty and plan the process of overcoming it in advance – more time should be devoted to it and more exercises should be done.

We usually present the system of English tenses in the form of the following table:

Table 1. The system of verb tenses in English

Tense	Simple	Continuous	Perfect	Perfect Continuous
Present	he works	he is working	he has worked	he has been working
Past	he worked	he was working	he had worked	he had been working
Future	he will work	he will be working	he will have worked	he will have been working
Future in the Past	he would work	he would be working	he would have worked	he would have been working

The examples given in Table 1 can be substituted by the structures like 'to be + verb + -ing' or extended by more examples using all the pronouns and both regular and irregular verbs.

Besides, we use a lot of games and quests that make the process of learning English more attractive and effective.

And, of course, the aspects of grammar mentioned are not all the aspects, in which the teacher should stimulate positive transfer of language habits and skills from Russian or from German into English. Every new grammatical material studied should be analysed by the teacher. If the knowledge of Russian and/or German may help the students, it should be recognised and stimulated. Sometimes a remark 'it's like in German' will be enough. If the knowledge of Russian and/or German may complicate the process of learning English, it should be noticed and prevented by the teacher.

3.4. Vocabulary

As both English and German are Germanic languages, many words have the same spelling and meaning in them. Such words are usually called cognates.

There are Russian-English cognates, too, of course, but not so many, because the two languages belong to different groups.

It is really effective to indicate the cognates in class. Students are always happy to see them. Cognates make the process of learning a new language much easier, they can guess the meaning of many words, and they need less time to learn them. In Table 2 we give several examples of English-German cognates.

Table 2. English-German cognates.

English word	German word
album	Album
alphabet	Alphabet
demonstration	Demonstration
ring	Ring
station	Station

But cognates can misguide the students sometimes. That is, when they are false cognates known as ‘false friends’. Such words have the same or nearly the same spelling, but mean absolutely different things. And though contextual guess should be encouraged, the teacher should always point out the possibility of coming across the false friends. In Table 3 you can see some example of false friends between English and German (Nicholls, 2003).

Table 3. False Friends Between English and German.

English word	German word
poison	Gift
child	Kind
insurance policy	Police
button or key	Taste
skirt	Rock

The existence of false friends should be indicated to the students as soon as possible, and the task of the teacher is to show the students possible ways to distinguish cognates from false friends.

First of all, the students should be encouraged to learn the list of most popular false friends between the languages they study.

Besides, the context may sometimes help. If a sentence sounds strange, it is always useful to check the meaning of all the unknown words in the phrase. Most likely there is a false friend between them.

Anyway, no matter how familiar the new word looks, it is always better to check its meaning, because even if it is not a false friend, it may have a little bit different meaning in the two languages, or its use may be restricted or extended in one of the languages, or it may have positive connotation in one of the languages and negative connotation in another one.

To avoid all these problems students should be encouraged to use monolingual dictionaries, which is more difficult than to use bilingual ones, but undoubtedly much more effective when learning a foreign language at the advanced level.

Thus, studying vocabulary is sometimes not so easy as it may seem, and the teacher should help the students to overcome the difficulties and to enjoy the easy aspects.

4. Conclusions

As a result of our research we can draw the following conclusions:

Language interference can complicate the process of learning a foreign language, but positive transfer facilitates it greatly. The teacher should encourage contextual guess and positive transfer of language habits and skills and prevent the interference.

Language interference between the less known language and the unknown language is stronger than the interference between the best known language and the unknown language.

In some cases the teacher may come across the problem of double interference, when a certain phenomenon is present in the two languages the student already know, but it is not present in the new language.

Comparing the structure of different languages the students develop analytical thinking and the process of learning every new foreign language becomes easier for them.

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