



## English language teacher development in a Russian university: Context, problems and implications



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### H I G H L I G H T S

- English language teaching is a challenge for higher education in Russia.
- In-service teacher training is a valuable tool for professional development.
- Student evaluation of teaching (SET) is useful to measure the results of teacher training programmes.
- The system of teacher training should be correlated in Russia as a response to internationalisation of higher education.

### A R T I C L E I N F O

#### Article history:

Received 31 May 2016

Received in revised form

2 December 2016

Accepted 26 January 2017

Available online 2 February 2017

#### Keywords:

Student evaluation of teaching (SET)

Teacher development programme

English language teaching

English as a foreign language (EFL)

Higher education

### A B S T R A C T

The evaluation of teacher professional development efficiency has always been an issue that has attracted attention of professionals in education. This paper reports on the results of a two-year English language teacher professional development programme following a Needs Analysis study conducted by Cambridge ESOL in 2012. Longitudinal research shows that in Russia English language teaching has several problems which exist throughout decades. This article focuses on some of them: class interaction mode; the use of native (Russian) language in class; error correction strategies employed by teachers. A new approach to evaluation was employed by asking students and teachers the same questions from different perspectives on areas identified during the needs analysis study. The results varied in significance, though some positive changes have been noticed in class interaction mode, little has changed in the error correction strategies, the use of Russian in the classroom seems to be quite reasonable and does not interfere with learning. Overall, the study may be useful for general audience, especially for the post-Soviet countries as it provides evidence of change management and their impact on ELT. The findings presented in this paper seek to contribute to the formulation or adjustment of policies related to educational reforms, such as curriculum reform and teacher professional development in non-English-speaking countries.

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## 1. Introduction

Internationalisation has been a priority for universities around the world over recent decades and one of the most significant drivers of change that modern universities are facing [1–4]. Key analyses of internationalisation in higher education discuss

different features [5–8]. Academic internationalisation involves aspects such as student mobility – participation in international exchange programmes; study opportunities for foreign students – provision of courses in English specifically designed for and delivered to international students; academic mobility – staff giving lectures and speaking at conferences abroad; publication of research papers in international journals; applying for, qualifying for and obtaining grants; and organising international conferences [9].

This implies that there should be no language barrier restricting international academic activity and the global *lingua franca* of the

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academic world is English (see Ref. [10]). Teaching English to all students is therefore essential for any university which aims to internationalise. Student mobility, conference participation and international recognition of research are all integrally connected with English language proficiency.

Success in developing academic internationalisation depends on close cooperation between the participants: managers and teaching staff and must be managed within the resources available to the university [11]. The global indicators associated with internationalisation mentioned in the Universities' Road maps (strategic university development plans, designed by Russian universities for their own context) aimed at enhancing university competitiveness on the world educational market include: the percentage of academics with sufficient command of English, which will allow the academics to lecture and to write articles in English; the ratio of published articles (recorded on the Web of Science and Scopus) to academic staff; the percentage of articles published in cooperation with foreign authors; and the percentage of foreign students enrolled in the university.

Most Russian federal universities have been given a clear mandate to position themselves within 100 of the Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings (QS WUR) by 2020, which presents a considerable challenge. QS WUR is a global research and rating of world universities based on the study by a British Consulting company Quacquarelli Symonds [12]. Russian universities had to think about their students' English language proficiency not only in terms of complying with Federal State Educational Standards [13], but also with the international expectations of the English language proficiency of different universities abroad. Having analysed the language requirements of the first 100 QS universities, it would be correct to say that the lowest IELTS score is from 6.0 to 6.5. IELTS is a high-stakes English test for study, migration and work, where the scoring system ranges from 1 to 9, the latter being the highest score meaning a fully operation command of the language [14]. This suggests that Russian universities offering courses for international students should set similar expectations.

There have been little or no studies investigating the status of English language proficiency among bachelor degree students in relation to international standards such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) [15] in the Russian higher education context. This fact leaves us unable to relate the situation in one university to the wider context of English language teaching. Indirect evidence of a very low level of English of university alumni comes from a study on how employers evaluate their job applicants [16] which reported that “[...] a recent survey by Kelly Services 110 of 6500 graduate job applicants from across Russia, mostly young white-collar workers from big cities (population of one million and more), revealed that the majority of candidates at all levels were rated as having poor or no proficiency in English. This finding confirms the impression that exit levels are currently low for a number of reasons, one of which may be that there is no valid, reliable exit test calibrated to an international scale.” [16]:45].

The Federal State Educational standards (2012–2013), among other stipulations, require bachelor degree graduates to be able to communicate freely in the academic environment, to be able to participate in international conferences and to be prepared for international exchanges. These activities are all premised on students being able to communicate in a foreign language (preferably English). Having studied the context of Russian Universities, the researchers [16] suggested that a CEFR Level of B2 would be an appropriate target for students at Russian universities. According to Cambridge English, the agency responsible for the content of IELTS, scores of 6.0 and 6.5 on IELTS both fall within the B2 range [17].

## 2. Context

Ural Federal University (UrFU), situated on the border between Europe and Asia, is one of the largest universities in Russia with approximately 28,000 students and 2500 academic staff. The university has set a goal of entering the Top-100 in the QS World University Rankings (QS WUR) by 2020. This means that the university has to comply not only with national standards but also with the requirements of QS WUR, and the English language (EL) proficiency of its students and faculty has been given high priority. The facilitation system of English language learning by university faculty has been described in detail in Ref. [18], therefore, academic staff is not the focus of this study.

To evaluate the average English language proficiency level among bachelor degree students in UrFU, the administration made a decision to attract an external authoritative body in the sphere of English language proficiency testing, Cambridge English Language Assessment, who conducted an in-depth study: testing about 1000 bachelor degree students, 100 English language teachers, doing classroom observation, talking to University decision-makers. The results of this study were presented in the Needs analysis report [19], which was specific and context based. The findings relevant to this article are presented below.

Students only learnt English for the first two years of their four-year programme. This meant that they study English in class for a maximum of 216 h, spread over two years of study. The report [19] concluded that this was insufficient as most of the students were hardly able to read in English: “At first glance, UFU’s stipulation of 216 h of study, supported by 216 h of contact time, does seem broadly in line with UFU’s stated aim of all UFU undergraduates obtaining a B1 level of language proficiency. However, the CEFR guidelines assume motivated adult learners and discussions with focus groups of teachers suggested that a significant number of students have little or no motivation to study English, seeing it as unnecessary for their future academic or professional success” [19].

The conclusions drawn by the experts aligned with the research into English language teaching previously conducted in Russia. An extensive study supported by the British Council was published in 2002 [20], which collected data from more than 100 higher education institutions in Russia with about 5682 respondents. Data were collected from surveys as well as lesson observations. The results relevant to our study are the following: 1) professional training of teachers was mainly formal and due to lack of financial and time resources was based on internal departmental seminars, which focused on language development, methodology, using a computer, etc., with teachers stating that they follow the Russian educational standards only [[20]:41–42]; 2) error correction in the classroom was on spot in 71% of cases [[20]:92]; 3) teacher-centred approach was the main one in the classroom with the teacher – students interaction mode in 44% of cases and student – student interaction mode in only 8% of cases [[20]:94].

As Ural Federal University initiated the benchmarking into its own situation to see if there is any difference between the situation in Russian universities in general and its own, the university officials were ready to start a professional development programme to enhance English language teaching situation in their own context. The report [19] helped to plan the implementation stages with launching a multi-layered teacher professional development stages: 1) sending twelve teachers to Cambridge English Language Assessment for a two-week professional development course, 2) conducting an in-house teacher training course for those who did not go abroad, 3) running preparation courses for a Teaching Knowledge Test, 4) getting authorization for a CELTA course in UrFU and 5) training own EL teachers in CELTA. All of these were supported and financed by UrFU.

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