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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.

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