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Chinese Educational Traditions and their Impact on the Process of Learning Russian

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Abstract

This article analyzes the problems which are faced by university teachers of Russian as a foreign language, as well as the experts who train Chinese students on technical disciplines in Russian language. Recently there has been an increase in number of those students who learn Russian in order to continue education in Russia on technical specialties. However the level of preparation of Chinese students in their country is rather low. This problem is acknowledged both by Russian and Chinese teachers. The authors of the article analyze the reasons of the arising difficulties. The article compares modern Chinese and Russian approaches to training of Russian as a foreign language. Basing on the empirical data and the published Chinese sources the authors explain the difficulties in training Chinese students. In the conclusion there are given recommendations both for teachers of Russian and for teachers of technical disciplines, which present a more effective way of training Chinese students in a foreign language. At the same time the authors take into consideration the features of the teaching technique that has been historically developed in the People's Republic of China, as well as the specifics of interpersonal communications in Chinese higher educational institutions.

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1. Introduction

The teachers working with Chinese students usually notice that the students develop a number of qualities, such as diligence and the ability to memorize a large volume of information. They also mention that students have a good perception of structural organization — educational learning materials in the form of tables, dichotomies. However it takes Chinese students a much longer time and much many efforts to acquire Russian than it happens with European students. The Russian and Chinese languages differ significantly at the phonetic level, which does not allow Chinese students to hear and distinguish some Russian sounds. There are also distinctions in a grammatical system. As well as there are certain cultural behavioral models that limit the possibility of fast acquisition of the material.

What are the reasons for such difficult perception and acquisition of the new training material? Is there any difference in a teaching technique? What are the differences in goals and objectives of teaching? First of all, for this purpose it is necessary to understand that educational process in China differs from the process accepted and widespread in Russia.

2. Peculiarities of the training process organization

It is necessary to remember that the essential part of a lecture is given to students in the form of textbooks or disks. All training materials are coordinated with the teaching department that controls teachers with the help of video cameras. Improvising and deviations from the coordinated training materials are not encouraged in teachers. There is a constant supervising of how well the classes coordinate with the approved plan. What are the reasons for such control? First of all, that is tradition. Second, it concerns the ideological control. Third, handing out the unified printed materials to all students solves the problem of strong dialect distinctions of residents of the different provinces of China. Southerners do not understand northerners in a large number of cases, but they all have the same hieroglyphs. If the teachers are advised to follow manuals and plans strictly, it is clear they do not require from students to develop critical judgment, have discussions and to be able to compare various sources of information. Information is given in order to be learned automatically.

The methodology of providing with the material does not change from 1 to 4 grades. Usual classroom hours consist of 95% of the teacher's monologue. The exception only concerns listening and speaking which are carried out unusually for the Russian students as well.

Listening is the test that students complete independently using earphones. Questions of tests represent short situations with 2-4 choices of answer.

Speaking takes an insignificant part in the curriculum — no more than 10% of the total amount of lessons. Usually educational group includes at least 20 people (sometimes much many).

Therefore the average student can say at most 2-3 phrases in Russian in a week. Even students of older grades experience big difficulties with a spontaneous understanding of the speech.

At best the student learns cliché phrases from the textbook from which he, or she, builds the text like a construction. Skill of speaking is not considered to be significant in the Chinese system of language training.

Not only does such manner of conducting lessons develop very few skills of informal conversation, but it also differs significantly from rather spontaneous and free manner of conducting lessons in Russia. The Russian teacher can ask questions about the weather, news, upcoming movies, etc. within the given topic of the lesson. He/She has almost no limitations in the selection of training material. Final control, questions, structure of examination is usually organized by the teacher himself. In the People's Republic of China the system of final control is much stricter and there is a unification at all levels of training beginning from school.

3. Peculiarities of the goal-setting process in studying the language

Leaving school all pupils pass the so-called ‘Gaokao’ (高考), which is the unified state examination for all school students in China. It is carried out in spring, within three days, for graduates of schools of all country. Examination takes place in writing, in the form of filling of tests. The results of examination have a direct influence on the students' acceptance into the universities. The teachers (from middle to high school) spend all the classroom time working at the skills necessary for examination. Three subjects are obligatory: Chinese, mathematics and a

foreign language (usually English, but it can also be Japanese, Russian or French). Though the greatest concern is connected with the necessity to pass mathematics by all graduates of schools, today Education Commission authorities of China realize that ‘Gaokao’ in general does not promote development of critical thinking. Besides, pupils suffer from the increased stress during test time. Recently the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China has developed the plan of reforming the examination structure. The reform will come into force approximately in 2017. In 2020 there is the plan for the changing of examination system. Examination in a foreign language will be reconsidered most significantly.

Depending on how well a high school student passes Gaokao, he/she has different chances to enter one or another university and to become successful in the future professional activity. All training in school is aimed at achieving high results at the final examination. That is why both teachers and pupils from young age are concentrated on the development of the skills of test-solving but not on the ability to create adequate communication in a foreign language. Chinese teachers mention the necessity of enlarging the present methods of training, the importance of finding more intensive development techniques of the skills of speaking and listening, particularly because of the essential differences between Chinese and Indo-European phonetic structures.

4. Significant phonetic differences

There is one more reason why oral speech and listening present such a big difficulty. Words and sounds in Chinese are pronounced differently — not only are there 4 tones in the language, but there is also an aspiration, as well as nasal diphthongs. That is why Chinese students who studied with Chinese teachers hear and understand little of the Russian speech. At the same time they can read fluently and write tests perfectly. For instance, children learned Russian letter “Т” as the sound similar to Chinese — with strong aspiration in pronunciation. In the speech of the native speaker of Russian they hear the letter “т” differently. The Russian sound indicated by the letter “т” does not exist in Chinese at all. This is just one of the number of similar examples. Chinese language differs significantly from Russian at the phonetic level. The Chinese history, culture, traditions, communication manner is also very different from what we have in Russia.

5. Cultural differences

There are also difficulties in training caused by essential, socially important differences in the culturally accepted behavior of Chinese and Russians.

The Chinese social system is strictly hierarchical. Authoritative style of teaching is widespread. It leads to development of constant sense of fear of any teacher and does not promote development of skills of speaking. Moreover, Chinese teachers consider that the student has to be afraid of seniors first of all. In the opinion of Chinese people, this is the way of showing respect towards the person standing on higher step of hierarchy. Additional complexity is created by theory of “keeping face” which is essential to Chinese. A student cannot ask a teacher difficult questions that can be potentially polemical. If a teacher does not answer, he, or she, will “lose face” in public. And the student who asked an uncomfortable question will be the teacher’s worst enemy.

The established traditions influence the teaching technique. Similar to that, there are cultural features in selection of training material. In the middle of the 20th century Russian language was very popular in China. Still nowadays people who have studied in the USSR publish textbooks and teach Russian at universities. However within the past 60 years there have been a great number of changes in Russian life, as well as in the vocabulary of Russian language.

6. Specifics of training material

Special attention should be paid to the widespread Chinese materials which are used for training. Textbooks are often very abstract, they differ significantly from modern life in Russia. In dictionaries and grammars there given the examples of the constructions with such words that were used in the language of the 50-70ths.

For instance: Comsomol members, collective farms, collectivization, etc.

The vocabulary given in the Russian-Chinese dictionaries is outdated: students often have to translate scientific vocabulary using English dictionaries.

However the problem of textbooks getting old (in terms of the subject, phraseology and vocabulary) is noticeable mostly to teachers who are the native speakers coming to work from Russia. In Chinese scientific articles authors place emphasis on the need for updating the technique of teaching, enlarging the range of approaches to the material that is being studied.

7. Understanding of the problem of Chinese teachers

Chinese teachers, as well as Russian, notice differences in approaches to introducing and acquiring of material in the Chinese and Russian educational traditions.

In the articles Chinese teachers mention the different purposes for studying a language. At the Chinese public high schools the purpose of studying a language is the acquisition of any foreign language for passing an examination of Gaokao. The Chinese teachers first of all teach grammar. In Russia, learning Russian by the Chinese students is not only aimed at passing an examination but it is also connected with using the language in the course of study and work.

It happens very often that gifted students in Chinese educational institutions do not realize the potential of the development of language. Whereas, during the work with the Russian teachers they show excellent results, first of all because of the difference in the methodology of teaching the language.

The aspects of the teaching methodology which are considered to be obvious and widespread in Russia, are represented at the Chinese universities as 'new' and are seldom used. The need for the appliance of such new techniques is explained in details.

So, authors write that it is necessary to develop interest in Russian studies, practice elements of speech etiquette, learn Russian songs. It is essential to use Russian in the course of lessons as much as possible, create situational dialogues and organize the out-of-class actions connected with the Russian literature and culture. It is also advised to stimulate interest of pupils with the organization of competitions on knowledge of language, to create wall newspapers, etc.

Basing on my own experience in general and the observations of the authors of various mentioned articles, it can be possible to develop a number of recommendations for the teachers working with the Chinese students.

Recommendations

Considering all the above mentioned, there are many obvious reasons why it takes a longer time for Chinese students to acquire the language. Therefore, it is obviously necessary to transform training materials taking into consideration peculiarities of behavioral models of Chinese.

So, at the first stage of studying it is more productive to use to ways of teaching behavior providing materials that are traditional for China. The teacher at this point should be a little authoritative and categorical.

It is not necessary to expect from the students active participation in discussions specifying questions and requests for further explanation of material.

It is essential to encourage and stimulate polemic and critical judgment of the learning material gradually.

It is worth paying special attention to the needs of continuous visualization of new speech material. It is desirable to duplicate all important information in writing.

As for the supply of material, it is better to explain in details why it has to be learned, what aims are pursued in studying this or that subject or vocabulary.

Realizing the essential difference in methods and the purposes of teaching in the Chinese and Russian educational environments will help to understand better the reasons and motives of various behavior patterns of students in the course of training and examination.

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