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Situational Communication in Teaching Russian as a Foreign Language to Beginner Learners

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Abstract

The paper presents the results of a study that explores the real teaching experience designing different kinds of speech situations during lessons of Russian as a Foreign Language for beginner learners. The study was carried out at National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University in the 2014-2015 academic year. The primary concern was to discover the most productive set of expressions and speaking turns for situational communication. The outcome is an algorithm of designing speech situations and a typology of speech situations. The paper may be of interest to practising teachers of Russian as a foreign language, students from teacher training colleges and to anyone who is interested in the methodology of teaching Russian as a foreign language.

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1. Introduction

The successful mastering of any lexical and grammatical topic and understanding the subject of communication in a foreign language is best of all achieved through speech interaction. Active and interactive methods of teaching underlie the modern educational process and help to immerse international students in active communication in the language studied (in our case Russian). Among the activities which develop and enhance students' communicative

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skills are turn-taking, open discussions, collective decision-making, etc.

A literature analysis shows that the importance of situations, gestures and actions when presenting new language material was emphasized as early as the 19th century by Felix Gouin. His ideas were reproduced in such methodological systems and approaches as “situational language teaching” and “the oral approach”. Currently situational education is considered to be one of the most effective and modern methods of teaching foreign language communication.

In situational communication the subject content is evident, which is why the speech material is memorized easily and automatically. Learning occurs in the process of speech activity: the learner retains new material through personal experience in communication and reproduces it afterwards in speech. As G. Neuner says, “learning of foreign language inevitably brings us into contact with a new world in which, although their world ‘in principle’ is similar to our own world (in its elementary dimensions of living) and they do rather the same things as we do, people have arranged their environment differently and arrange their social behaviour according to different conventions” (Neuner, 2006). Therefore, it is crucial to model real-life speech situations and provide the context for foreign-language speaking in the classroom.

Involving students into situational speech interaction supports the achievement of important *psychological objectives*:

- Increases the willingness of students to come in contact with each other and with the teacher, thus creating conditions for partnerships and breaking down personal barriers to communication.
- Decreases anxiety and enhances students’ psychological preparedness for communication in the foreign language (as a rule, international students experience an enormous moral and intellectual load, having to cope daily with a number of challenges caused by new living conditions, a new system of learning, and a new social environment).
- Enables students challenged by the new linguistic context to integrate more easily into the new social environment.

And besides, *methodological objectives*:

- Ensures the natural need to revise the language material constantly.
- Improves the skill of selecting the appropriate speech material and thus contributes to the development of spontaneous communication.

The main aim of the present paper is to describe the most effective types of situations for communication in Russian as a foreign language at a beginner level.

This requires addressing a range of following tasks:

- To conduct a review of the methodological literature on the problem of situational communication.
- To study the practical experience of teachers of Russian as a foreign language at Tomsk Polytechnic University (a questionnaire survey was conducted among the teachers whose pedagogical experience varies from 5 up to 20 years).
- To single out the most productive set expressions and speaking turns for situational communication during lessons of Russian as a foreign language.
- To develop an algorithm of designing speech situations.
- To establish a typology of speech situations effective at teaching Russian as a foreign language to beginner learners.

The study took place in several stages.

February 2015: definition of ‘situation’ as a methodological term.

March – April 2015: building a typology of speech situations used during lessons of Russian as a foreign language for beginner learners.

May 2015: drafting questionnaires and conducting a questionnaire survey among teachers to identify the most productive set expressions and speaking turns for situational communication during lessons of Russian as a foreign language.

June 2015: processing and analyzing the data collected through the questionnaire survey.

July 2015: determining the stages of conversation modeling in a definite communication situation during the lesson.

August 2015: describing the algorithm for designing speech situations.

2. Discussion of research results

2.1. Definition of 'situation'

The idea that “speech takes place in situations” (Halliday, 1965) is significant for the methodology of foreign language teaching. The situation-based approach not only makes it possible to elicit the learners’ foreign language expression, but also to develop their sociocultural competence which is seen as “an understanding of the social context in which language is used: the roles of the participants, the information they share, and the function of the interaction” (Savignon, 2002).

Various authors propose different definitions for the term ‘situation’. This highlights the complexity and diversity of the phenomenon of ‘situation’. For example, a situation can be understood as “an appropriate environment for a given piece of language” (Widdowson, 1978); as one of the forms of social interaction between learners which creates the context for authentic communication (Neuner, Krüger, Grever, 2000); or as ‘a scenario’ which learners can change according to their communication goals and needs (Schatz, 2006). The questions of situation-based teaching have also been widely discussed by Soviet and Russian methodologists. Their conception of ‘situation’ can be presented in the following most interesting definitions: a situation is “the system of interaction” (Passov, 1989), “the unit of communication, its molecule” (Passov, 2002); “a combination of verbal and nonverbal prerequisites necessary and adequate for a speech act” (Gez, 1982); a “concurrence of life circumstances which creates the need for verbal expression” (L’vov, 1999); or a dynamic system of interacting objective and subjective factors which involve an individual in communication and guide their speech behavior inside the given act of communication (Skalkin, 2012).

The existing definitions of a communication situation can be presented in the following way:

- a unit of communication;
- a prefabricated environment or context creating the need for verbal expression in the target language;
- a combination of verbal and nonverbal prerequisites sufficient for communication in the target language;
- a system of social interaction;
- a flexible ‘scenario’ of communication in the target language.

2.2. Speech situations in lessons of Russian as a foreign language

Communication situations in the language classroom can be subdivided into two main groups: *real* and *imaginary*.

Real situations refer to common everyday episodes in the classroom, for instance, the availability or lack of visual aids at the lesson, presence or absence of some students, or interpersonal relationships in the group. Such situations already contain motivation for communication, and thus contribute to the development of communicative skills in the foreign language. These situations, however, do not adequately address the challenge of developing the learners’ communicative competence.

The questionnaire survey conducted among the teachers of Russian as a foreign language made it possible to determine the top five real situations that frequently occur in the classroom:

- student’s birthday;
- coming late;
- absence from lesson;
- getting ill;
- sudden change of weather (snow, rain, strong wind);

Besides the above mentioned, teachers referred to a number of other real situations helpful in developing students’ communicative skills at the beginner level:

- change of classroom;
- latest information from the dean’s office;
- city or university events;
- ethnic and cultural customs;
- common everyday problems (e.g. the pen won’t write, the computer doesn’t work);

- holidays;
- funny incidents;
- any other events, including sad and unexpected.

The survey has revealed that some teachers do not take advantage of the naturally emerging communication situations in the classroom. Teachers who have more than 10 years of pedagogical experience, however, can devote up to 40 minutes (i.e. half of their lesson) to real communication situations.

Imaginary communication situations represent a conversational practice where participants can exercise their communicative skills taking different social roles. Examples of such situations might include a discussion between a seller and a customer, a conversation between groupmates, a talk between a mother and a son about his studies, etc. Imaginary situations can be of two types: *problem-solving* and *conditional* (the latter type of imaginary situations presents conventionally structured situations with preset conditions and requirements, for example, the requirement to use the definite set expressions and speech patterns in communication).

Problem-solving situations are often characterized by a variety of different viewpoints. The collision of views and opinions demands that learners acquire new skills and knowledge, develop their existing skills, and deepen and restructure their existing knowledge.

The following factors should be taken into account when creating problem-solving communication situations:

- the new knowledge and skills acquired in the process of completing the communicative task should be based on previously gained skills and knowledge;
- the learners' linguistic, age, and intellectual capabilities should be taken into consideration while the communicative task is being formulated;
- the previously studied language and speech material (that could be useful when completing the new communicative task) should be reviewed in advance.

A problem-solving situation can be illustrated by the following case:

Мы запланировали экскурсию, но пошел дождь. Какие варианты решения проблемы вы видите?

We had planned an excursion but it began to rain. What possible solutions to the problem do you see?

Such tasks are less common at a beginner level. They are most effective with advanced language learners.

Besides, the survey has shown that at a beginner level any communication situation can be considered problem-solving despite the fact that the conditions of speech interaction and the range of set expressions and speaking turns are strictly determined by the teacher.

Conventionally structured *conditional situations* are the best means to simulate real-life communication practices. Encompassing various types of speech behavior and social roles, they enrich the learners' social experience. In conditional situations both the speaker and the listener are active participants. The listener has to pursue a number of tasks at once: to understand and remember the partner's speaking turn, to match it with the definite situation, to evaluate its relevance to the communication task and, finally, to react to it appropriately. The effectiveness of conditional situations increases if the teacher sets the duration of speech interaction correctly.

Three main components can be identified within conditional situations:

1. *Content*: comprises the information about the conditions and participants of speech interaction. The teacher describes the time and the place of the situation and gives parts to the students. This information can be presented orally or on cards.
2. *Motivation, aim (speech stimulus)*. Speech stimulus causes the need for expression. It conveys the speakers' attitudes and reflects their position, which determines the focus of speech and often its organization.
3. *Creation of atmosphere for communication (speech reactions)*. Collaborative speech interaction always pursues a definite goal to inform, to influence one's partner, to express an emotional reaction, etc. Learners are expected to manifest their speech reaction through a number of speaking turns. The speech reaction to a large extent is determined by the conditions of the situation, although sometimes it can be assigned by the teacher.

Problem-solving and conditional situations can be effective in preparing students for spontaneous communication. Any speech situation is a micro-topic and helps to develop skills of foreign language expression in a variety of life circumstances.

The analysis of the teachers' practical experience has demonstrated that situational speech interaction takes

place, as a rule, at the final stage of studying a conversational topic. Some teachers use speech situations to review the material learnt. At the same time, the teachers, whose pedagogical experience exceeds 10 years, emphasize the effectiveness of speech situations in learning new language material and employ them at various stages of the lesson.

The volume of the utterance produced by each of the participants of a speech interaction may vary from 5-7 up to 20 speaking turns. 40% of the teachers believe that the speaking turns should not be long (the shorter, the better), whereas 60% of the teachers maintain the opinion that the speaking turns should be extended. Actually, each particular case is determined by the type and the goals of the lesson.

Furthermore, the teachers have expressed their views on the factors that should be taken into consideration when devising speech situations. The interpretation of the answers given to open and yes-no questions in the questionnaire has revealed the importance of the following items:

- the goals and objectives of the lesson: mastering new grammar or a lexical topic, or reinforcing the material learnt (40% of teachers);
- the practical relevance of the speech situation: after mastering the material under study the learner becomes an active communication participant and can take part in a greater number of other similar speech situations (40 % of teachers);
- the appropriate selection of set expressions and speaking turns to be used for conversation modeling (12% of teachers);
- the peculiarities of natural everyday speech and the need to approximate educational communication situations to natural ones: the usage of set expressions and constructions characteristic of natural everyday communication (4 % of teachers);
- the volume of the utterance produced: building short and extended statements and dialogues consisting of a definite number of speaking turns (4 % of teachers).

It is necessary to note that the last two items are of minor significance at a beginner level as the total number of structures that the learners can use is not large.

2.3. Stages of working with speech situations

It is important to emphasize that in the process of mastering foreign language communication through speech situations the learners should be focused on memorizing, and afterwards using, the definite speech patterns (or 'regular patterns' according to N. Chomsky) rather than isolated set expressions and speaking turns. A speech pattern is distinguished from a sentence because it obtains a particular lexical, grammatical and phonetic content only in the definite utterance (Examples of speech patterns are provided in Table 1). Nonetheless, the usage of set expressions and ready-made speaking turns enables the learners to avoid grammar mistakes and makes their speech clearer and more comprehensible for others (Examples of set expressions and speaking turns are given in Table 2). Learning set expressions and speaking turns is mainly required for the development of dialogic and spontaneous speaking skills as it facilitates the process of shaping ideas into an utterance (Drozdova, 2013). On the whole, the usage of set expressions, speaking turns and speech patterns in foreign language communication helps to avoid overloading the learners' short-term memory, and thus gives them the opportunity to employ new speech material that could raise their partners' interest in conversation.

Table 1. Examples of speech patterns.

Question – reply	Statement – question	Statement – statement
1. Direct reply	Statement	- Привет! Мы хотим пойти в кафе.
Кто это?	- Привет! Мы хотим пойти в кафе.	
Это студент	Clarifying question	- Я пойду с вами. Очень хочу кушать.
2. Affirmative reply	- А в какое кафе?	
Это турист?		
Да, это турист	Prompting question	
3. Negative reply	- Я пойду с вами?	

Это турист?	Emotional response
Нет, это не турист. Это студент	- Здорово! Вот бы покушать!
4. Clarifying question	
Чья это сумка?	
Какая?	
5. Echo-question	
Ты идешь с нами?	
С вами?	
6. Repeated question	
Как Вас зовут?	
Маша. А Вас?	

Table 2. Set expressions and speaking turns used in situational communication.

Common speaking turns		Greetings	
Спасибо.	Thank you / Thanks.	Доброе утро!	Good morning!
Большое спасибо.	Thank you very much.	Добрый день!	Good afternoon!
Пожалуйста (в ответ на "спасибо").	You're welcome.	Добрый вечер!	Good evening!
Пожалуйста (просьба).	Please.	Спокойной ночи.	Good night.
Вот, пожалуйста (что-то даешь).	Here you are.	Привет!	Hello! / Hi!
Понимаю.	I see.	Здравствуйте.	How do you do?
Хорошо.	All right / OK.	Давайте встретимся в ... (фойе).	Let's meet in the ... (lobby).
Ничего.	That's all right.	Приятно познакомиться.	It's nice to meet you.
Не бери в голову!	Never mind!	Рад Вас снова видеть.	I'm glad to see you again.
Сколько?	How many (much)?	Как Ваши дела?	How are you?
Как долго?	How long?	Как успехи?	How are you getting along?
Кого спросить?	Whom should I ask?	Какие новости?	What's the news?
Не понимаю.	I don't understand.	Давненько вас не видел.	Haven't seen you for ages!
Извините, я не расслышал.	Sorry, I didn't catch you.	Можно узнать, как Вас зовут?	May I ask your name?
После вас.	After you.	Передавай привет Николаю.	Say hello to Nick for me.
Requests		Спасибо, с удовольствием.	I would like to do that, thank you. / With great pleasure, thank you.
Пойдемте со мной!	Come with me!	С удовольствием.	I am pleased to do so.
Пожалуйста, вызовите врача.	Please call the doctor.	До свидания.	Goodbye.
Не одолжите...?	Can you lend me...?	До встречи.	See you later.
Сделайте одолжение.	Will you do me a favor?	До скорой встречи.	See you soon.
Можно взглянуть?	May I take a look at it?	Счастливо.	Take care of yourself.
Можно одолжить Вашу ручку?	Can I borrow your pen?	Не пропадайте.	Let's keep in touch.
Что это?	What's this?	Emotions	
Что это значит?	What does this mean?	Я не уверен.	I'm not sure.
Почему бы и нет?	Why not?	Не думаю.	I don't think so.
Чем скорее, тем лучше.	The sooner the better.	Боюсь, что нет.	I'm afraid not.
Wishes		Невероятно.	It's incredible.
Поздравляю!	Congratulations!	Боюсь, что Вы ошиблись.	I'm afraid you're mistaken.
Поздравляю с днем	Best wishes for your	О, как жаль.	That's too bad.

рождения!	birthday!	У меня плохое настроение.	I feel blue.
С рождеством!	Merry Christmas!		
Наилучшие пожелания в новом году!	Best wishes for a Happy New Year!	Это отвратительно.	It's disgusting.
Желаю счастья сегодня и всегда!	Happy many returns of the day!	Не торопитесь.	Take your time.
Христос воскрес!	Happy Easter!	Не обращай(те) внимания на то, что он сказал.	Don't bother with what he said.
Желаю Вам счастья и многих лет жизни.	I wish you many years of happiness.	Остыньте!	Cool it!
Поздравляю от всей души.	Heartiest congratulations.	Не унывайте!	Cheer up!
Желаю Вам поскорее выздороветь.	I hope you'll get better soon.	Какая жалость!	What a pity!
Счастливой поездки!	Have a nice trip!	Вот так сюрприз!	What a surprise!
Удачи!	Good luck.	Вы, должно быть, шутите!	You must be kidding!
Давай еще раз встретимся!	Let's meet again!	О боже, какой кошмар!	Oh dear what a mess!

Working with speech situations is realized in several stages:

1. *The preparatory stage*: the stage of studying set expressions and a speech pattern (demonstration and semantization).

Studying new words and phrases that might fill a speech pattern with new content goes in parallel with the process of conversation modeling. New vocabulary can be presented without translation – with the help of visual aids, which is definitely a great advantage. During this stage each element of a speech pattern is analyzed separately. The teacher comments on the grammatical and phonetic peculiarities of each element, and then gives the students a number of drills that are considered particularly effective at a beginner level.

2. *The main stage*: the stage of producing a speech situation.

The speech pattern is used in the definite speech situation which is prompted with the help of visual aids, leading questions, and question-and-answer exercises. Automatization of the speech pattern usage skill is achieved through learners' repetitive performance of numerous speaking exercises aimed at eliciting students' expression in the foreign language.

3. *The concluding stage*: the stage of free usage of a speech pattern in new communication situations.

Having expanded their vocabulary and having mastered the definite speech pattern, the students can communicate actively in new situations within the topic studied. The students can express their ideas freely in a chain of sentences or can be involved in face-to-face interaction in pairs or in small groups. Pair and group activities are advantageous to the learners since, according to J. Richards, they give "greater opportunities to use the language and to develop fluency" (Richards, 2006).

Of course, at a beginner level students' speech will be rather primitive in content and language form due to a restricted stock of vocabulary and grammar structures. Nevertheless, this fact should not impede the creation of conditions for situational communication in the classroom. Though the creation of a natural situation for language acquisition involves "much more effort than providing foreign language teaching" (Wilton, 2009) and "requires extra attention on the part of the teacher in terms of preparing students", stimulating them "to use accurate grammar and pronunciation" (Richards, 2006), the results are usually well worth the effort. Through situational communication students not only acquire new knowledge but also their motivation for foreign language learning increases. Table 3 below illustrates some speech situations that can be used during lessons of Russian as a foreign language.

Table 3. Speech situations.

Stage	Type of activity	Example
Preparatory stage	Reading	- «TV presenter». Imagine you are a TV presenter. Present the news, the weather

	<p><i>Read with proper intonation.</i></p> <p><i>Give a definition for the lexical item / translate.</i></p> <p><i>Explain the meaning of the grammar structure.</i></p> <p><i>Read the dialogue and dramatize it (observe the rules of pronunciation and intonation).</i></p>	<p>forecast, etc. (the learner reads the text observing the rules of pronunciation and intonation).</p>
Main stage	<p>Analogy</p> <p><i>Read the text and reproduce an analogous text (observe the rules of pronunciation and intonation).</i></p> <p>Partial modification</p> <p><i>Ask a question corresponding to the given communication situation.</i></p> <p><i>Answer your groupmates' questions using the given set expressions and speaking turns.</i></p> <p><i>Match the speaking turns used in questions with those that are used in replies.</i></p> <p><i>Make up speaking turns from the given words; present your speaking turns to the class.</i></p> <p><i>React to your partner's statement with a short simple phrase depending on the communication situation (greeting, request, gratitude, agreement, disagreement, surprise, affirmation, negation, indignation, etc.).</i></p> <p><i>Insert the missing speaking turns into corresponding gaps in the dialogue.</i></p> <p><i>Extend the speaking turn (e.g. explain the reason for refusal).</i></p> <p><i>Build a speaking turn from several phrases given.</i></p> <p><i>Arrange the given set of different speaking turns into the dialogue; add additional speaking turns of your own.</i></p> <p><i>Complete the dialogue inserting some missing speaking turns into the corresponding gaps.</i></p>	<p>- «Packing a suitcase». You and your friends are going traveling around the world. What things are going to take with you? (The learners make active use of the vocabulary from such topics as «Clothes», «Hygiene», «Leisure activities», and special set expressions).</p> <p>- «Birthday». Tomorrow is your birthday. Invite your best friends to the party. Tell them that the party will take place on Sunday at 5:00 p.m. (The learners use the vocabulary from such lexical topics as «Going on a visit», «Inviting someone to a party», and special set expressions).</p>
Concluding stage	<p>Creative interpretation</p> <p><i>Make up a dialogue according to the topic given.</i></p> <p><i>Make up a dialogue according to the circumstances specified.</i></p> <p><i>Transform a monologue into a dialogue.</i></p> <p><i>Use the list of situations and the list of set expressions to make up a dialogue.</i></p> <p><i>Use the given micro-dialogues and set expressions to make up a larger dialogue.</i></p> <p><i>Use the pictures as prompts to make up a dialogue; employ the definite set expressions.</i></p> <p>Role-playing (The learners produce their own dialogue)</p> <p><i>Role-play a dialogue</i></p>	<p>- «Laying the table» for breakfast/ dinner/ supper/ birthday party. Discuss with your friends/ members of your family what and where you need to put the food, the cutlery, the dishes.</p> <p>- «My room». Your family has moved to a new big house. Now you have a big and spacious room of your own but there is no furniture in it yet. Ask your friends for advice on how to furnish the room.</p> <p>- «Organizing your fridge». You have bought many products at the supermarket and you need to arrange them on the shelves and in the drawers of your fridge. Comment on the best place in the fridge for each product; tell about your gastronomical predilections.</p> <p>(Visual aids on the topic "Food" can be used here).</p>

3. Conclusion

The authors have addressed the problem of situational communication in foreign language teaching. According to the research plan, the definitions of a speech situation were studied, a questionnaire survey among the practicing teachers of Russian as a foreign language was conducted, and a typology of speech situations that can be implemented during lessons of Russian as a foreign language was developed.

A 'speech situation' is a complex phenomenon but since it is considered 'a unit of communication' it becomes essential to employ different kinds of speech situations in the process of foreign language teaching, including at the beginner level. The questionnaire survey has shown that the teachers of Russian as a foreign language (especially those who have been working with international students for more than 20 years) make active use of speech situations during their lessons. The questionnaire had an open questions section which made it possible to analyze the teachers' methodological views on using speech situations and discover the most productive set expressions and speaking turns for situational communication.

The authors have described the stages of modeling speech situations. The outcome is a typology of speech situations that can be implemented during lessons of Russian as a foreign language; some examples are provided.

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