



Foreign Language Teaching in Technical Universities in Russia: Problems and Perspectives

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Abstract

Integration of the Russian system of the higher engineering education into the global educational domain compelled Russian universities to enhance the importance of humanities in the engineering programs with a special focus on learning foreign languages. In the modern interpretation the foreign language is considered not only an instrument of the cross-cultural communication, but also an essential tool for the international professional development and career growth. On the one hand, the statistics proves that the language situation in Russia is getting better year by year. On the other hand, we must admit that the system of language education at the university level still comes up against serious problems of historical, economic or political background, for which reason there are processes in the system that hamper solution of the tasks set before the university.

In the framework of the paper the authors endeavor to analyze these problems, systemizing them as crucially important to the improvement of the language situation in general and those which can be solved then with less efforts and investments. The experience obtained allows the authors to cite from their point of view "the best practices" of European universities like TUM (Germany) and UPC (Spain) with the aim to import some elements of them into the educational system of Russia.

Being based on the results, the authors are developing the recommendations that may contribute to improvement of the current situation with the language proficiency in Russian universities.

Introduction

Both at the moment and in the immediate future, *the foreign language competence is of particular importance for the personal and professional self-fulfillment of any expert. To date the language competence in Russia has rather low level compared to that in the European countries. Thus, according to the study undertaken by EF English First in 2013 Russia was placed only 31st among 60 countries where English had not been an official language [1]. It is apparent that there exists the problem which is to be solved at the level of higher school. However, prior to debating on what is to be done to improve the efficiency of the language education and what kind of tools and techniques are to be used, we suggest making the comprehensive review of the existing problems as the major barriers to the promotion of the language skills in conditions of the university training.*

Problems of the modern language education in the Russian technical university

In the current interpretation of the objectives of the language education in the Russian technical university the major focus is made on the development of metacompetences, that is, some holistic professional knowledge and skills, which include single or multiple competences [2]. In this regard, the primary goal of the language education is not just the formation of the foreign language communication skills, but the community, where the foreign language is the means to gain the additional professional knowledge as well as the means to solve the professional tasks [3].

There comes up the question as to what hinders the realization of the set goal. Why so far, despite the considerable efforts and investments in the development of the linguistic competences of the universities, one has to report the available language barrier, which is a serious obstacle to the development of the professional career of the graduates at the international labor market in conditions of the globalized world economy.

The analysis of the language system in Russian universities, the surveys of the teaching staff and the graduates, as well as the personal experience allowed the authors of the article to draw some conclusions on the existent problems and propose some specific measures of the improving interference to revive the current situation.

The primary significant problem to be distinguished is *the continuity of the school and university education, oh rather its absence*. To date, the mismatch between the one and the other is observed yet at the level of the school and higher education standards. The current system of the secondary



education is incapable of providing the students with such level of the language skills that would comply with "the entrant requirements" specified by the university programs. The "entrant requirements" are referred to the level not lower than B1 by the European grading scale of the foreign language proficiency level [4]. As a result, in reality, these requirements are not met, and the universities have to complete as to what the applicants have not been taught in the framework of the school program [5].

The second problem is *no national educational foreign language standard available in Russia*. There is a suggested program in foreign languages for the non-language high schools, but it requires the follow-up revision, as it was developed more than five years ago [6]. As opposed to the Federal State Educational Standard (FSES) for the school where the foreign language is regularized as an obligatory subject at all levels of the secondary education, FSES for the high professional education does not permit compulsory learning of the foreign languages, for example, at master's degree level, although some universities provide for such possibility. Number of the semester credit hours for this discipline may vary in different universities from three to twenty hours or more that is not helpful for creation of the unity of the educational milieu at the federal level. The implementation of the academic mobility programs appears hampered without switching to this system [7].

Next problem is *the inertness of the teaching staff and the university system as a whole as for the mastering of the educational technology*. The educational process is poorly updated as for its focus on the independent search, analysis of the situations and estimation of the outcomes. The learning is mainly based on the line flow of the knowledge transfer subject to the traditional model, when the dominant role is played by the teacher.

Basically this problem has two aspects, which are content-methodological and administrative-managerial. On the one hand, there observed the stagnation in the development of the teaching materials, as well as the use of the traditional approaches, large-scale education, and on the other hand, the introduction of any innovation encounters missing any effective managerial practices. The innovation for the sake of the innovation, as a rule, brings about unbalancing of the established systems and does not give good results, nor makes a great breakthrough, and in some cases even can be harmful. Thus, the introduction of the new technologies appears very expensive process, and the results do not justify the investment.

The problem of *the human resources and poor academic mobility of the teaching staff* is of high importance. The fact is that the teaching and learning activities at the Russian universities are rather inert. They are roughly regulated, where the staffing positions are calculated strictly in accordance with the teaching load for the current academic year. The paid sabbatical, although stipulated for by the law, but in fact is the golden dream which rarely comes true. The missing full-time staffing position will immediately require its replacement, which, in turn, will require an additional payroll budget. Therefore, the department heads do their best not to let the employees go on the long business trips.

In addition to the internal problems, one can identify a number of issues of external impact. These include no well-defined demand of the labor market for the professionals who speak foreign languages. It is known, that the labor market, being a living organism, is constantly changing. In this regard, the requirements made for choosing the specialists at the labor market are "the floating and free" indicators, because they are subjected to the constant changes against the major transformation of the public life, including those under the influence of the techno-economic paradigm and the geopolitical situation [8]. In the meantime, the employers are restricted to the extremely scanty measuring scale of the foreign language proficiency levels: elementary, intermediate, fluency. No precision in the requirements leads to the uncertainty in the design of the learning outcomes of the university educational programs and, as a consequence the failed expectations of the employer [9].

Continuing on the topic of an inadequate precision of the employers' demand, it is worth mentioning the problem of inconformity of the syllabus to the target group and the prompt loss of the actual continuity of the teaching materials. For one thing, the specific characteristic of the Russian language education is the focus on the narrow-subject courses that is supported by the beliefs of the representatives of the different knowledge domains in terms of the close relationship of the specific speech register allowing for the communication in the framework of a particular subject area.

Traditionally the educational process is designed in such a way, that the linguistic subgroups are organized according to two principles:

- 1) The lingual unity and
- 2) The professional focus of the training.

The situation can be considered appropriate, when these two principles are self-consistently collocated, though this is extremely rare and more likely is the exception to the rule. It is against this



background that at least two more problems are generated, i.e. 1) the large-scale education, which leads to the failed consistency in the language knowledge transfer, and 2) the loss of motivation.

The measures to eliminate the language education problems in the Russian technical university

While searching for the solutions of these problems we had to refer to the best practices of the world universities. The analysis revealed that the foreign universities turn away from the courses aimed at the specific students as far as the language education is concerned. There preferred the approach of the groups formation based on the uniform level of the linguistic knowledge, when the learning outcomes are accepted as the skills of the general academic nature, providing for the scientific, research and professional communication.

The task to develop the active professional vocabulary of the students is not the direct responsibility of the teacher. This component is at the disposal of the students to be developed independently on their own. The responsibility of the teacher is to organize and manage the learning process so that to facilitate the accomplishment of the set goal in the best possible way.

The accumulation of the knowledge and experience allows for the summing-up of the efficient best practices of the foreign universities which could be adopted by us as an attractive experience. Here is but not limited to:

- 1) The elective language courses – modular-based teaching; teaching the specific aspects of communication with the alternative choice of the learning content;
- 2) No focus on the narrow specialization of the students;
- 3) Enhancement of the independent work of the students through the exploratory activities aimed at the creation of the research component;
- 4) Involvement of the native speakers in the educational process;
- 5) Taking into account the international aspect in the formation of the linguistic subgroups.

Conclusion

The following conclusions can be made. According to the acquired data, there proposed the following priority development fields of the language education:

- Improvement of the professional skills of the teachers in the field of the teaching methods mainly due to the enhancement of the academic mobility;
- Development of the incentive mechanisms aimed at the enhancement of the research activity of the teachers;
- Elimination of the large-scale education;
- Change in the status of the discipline "Foreign Language" from being obligatory for the elective course;
- Development of the clearer requirements to the language education for the engineers on the side of the labor market.

Note that these measures should not be considered as the stand-alone actions without inner relation. Quite the opposite, they are integrated being at the same time resultant or complementary.

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