

POLYCULTURAL CONTEXT OF LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN HIGHER SCHOOLS

Irina YUROVA¹

1. PhD, Chef of the French Department, State Polar Academy, Saint-Petersburg, Russian Federation
Corresponding author: yurova53@mail.ru

Abstract

The polycultural component is strongly pronounced in the State Polar Academy in Saint-Petersburg, which was created in order to train a new generation of qualified experts for North, Siberia and Far East regions of Russia. Students of 58 nationalities study in the Academy. It is necessary to undertake comparative analysis of Russian, French and national languages, study their typological differences and help students to overcome interference effects that might occur during the process of learning French under bilingual and multilingual context.

Keywords: *interference, national language, native language, proportions, transnational contacts*

In all sorts of activities of State Polar Academy in Saint-Petersburg (Russian Federation) the polycultural component is always and easily revealed. It is explained by the fact that at the very moment of its creation one of the aims of this Higher school was the possibility to train for North, Siberia and Far East regions a new generation of qualified experts who could answer the requirements of nowadays.

The idea of Polar Academy creation first appeared in 1990 during the Soviet-French Expedition to Chukotka which occurred with the patronage of the city of Leningrad with participation of Soviet Fund of Culture and French Arctic Research Center. The first stage of Academy establishment took place in 1991 and its forerunner was brought to life in the form of Polar Circle Alliance. Its first International Study Center started to train national personnel administration of North, Siberia and Far East regions of Russia. During two first years of work the International Study Center attracted attention of experts and society, it was supported by Russian Ministries and French state institutions and social organizations. The Honorary president of Academy is Jean Malaurie, famous French polar explorer, scientist and

writer, Director of the French Arctic Research Center. He devoted more than forty years of his scholar life to indigenous peoples of the North and became a head of the above-mentioned Soviet-French expedition to Chukotka. His personality plays a special role in communication and relations between Russia and France. That's why president of France Jacques Chirac visited Academy several times during his official visits to Russia and brought the patronage of city of Paris to the Academy while being the mayor of Paris.

Today students of 58 nationalities study in the Academy and this determines its multinational experience and forges an understanding of importance of raising up young generation which would be tolerant to different opinions, beliefs, and spiritual, esthetic, and national values.

The French language and literature department considers as its basic scientific orientation comparative analysis of Russian, French and national languages in order to study their typological differences and to help students to overcome interference effects that might occur during the process of learning French under bilingual and multilingual context.

For various reasons – historical, cultural, political, social – the Russian language remains valid in transnational contacts. One of the consequences of this process is the language interference. It is common knowledge that the term “interference” was introduced by the scientists of the Prague Linguistic School and was determined as the process of deviation of the languages in contact. Later such scientists as U.Weinreich, Schjerve R.Rindler, E.Petrovici, E.Haugen and many others focused attention on the phenomenon.

U.Weinreich proposed to identify as interference the cases of deviation of the standards of any language which is the result of knowledge of two and more languages that is in consequence of their contact. Russian linguists share this point of view. V.A. Vinogradov in the Encyclopaedic Linguistic Dictionary [1990] formulates: "Interference - interaction of systems in conditions of bilingualism being the result either of language contact, or during the learning of foreign language by a person" [1990: 197]. Interference may be observed on all language levels, but its most obvious manifestations are in the sphere of phonetics. These last years much attention is paid to the so called "linguistic-cultural interference" owing to the specific character of communication behaviour of the representatives of cultures in contact.

The majority of linguists consider the interference as absolutely unfavourable phenomenon and use where appropriate the words "overcoming", "disadvantage", "barrier" and so on. Meanwhile the practical work shows that we must not set aside the positive aspects.

The manifestations of language interference are at the same time universal (every representative of human race is subjected to it),

specific (they are the same for the majority of representatives of the given language) and individual (each person may have his own interpretation). All of them are to be taken in consideration while teaching foreign languages in schools, including higher educational establishments. However the problem is redoubled if in one group there are representatives of different language collectives.

The wide experience of teaching French in the State Polar Academy shows that the number of students who consider Russian (though they know it very well) as their second language is growing, the native being their national one.

The questionnaire design was undertaken two years ago by the French language and literature department in order to reveal the influence of Russian and native (national) languages on the process of learning French. Seventy students took part in it.

All the respondents could be divided in three categories (fig.1): naturally the greatest number of students -78,6% - consider Russian as their native language. 12,8% indicated that they have two native languages (Russian and the national one). The third category appeared to be rather important: 8,6% didn't mention Russian.

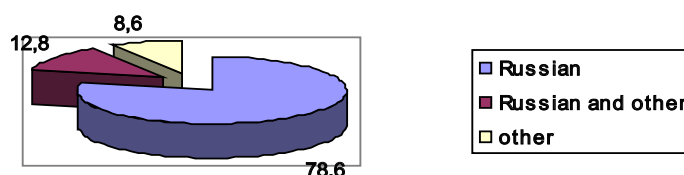


Fig.1. Indication of the native language by the students (number of answers, %)

Figure 2 presents the proportions inside the third category of students ("other"). They

consider Tuvinian, Kalmyk, Buryat, Altaian, Armenian, Mansi as their mother tongue.

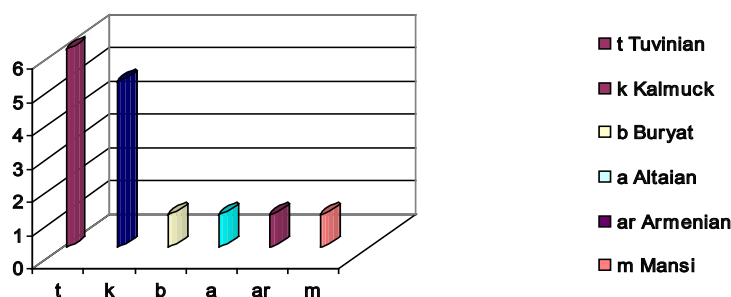


Fig.2. Indication of the native language (if not Russian, absolute values)

Polylingual situation comes to play the increasing role in contemporary world. We can't ignore its influence on linguistic and psychological spheres of human activities, particularly during the process of learning foreign languages. So in usual practice of teaching in the Universities where the polycultural component is large, historical, cultural, social, linguistic, religious and behavioural peculiarities are to be taken into account.

In the atmosphere of multinational situation in a higher school the role of interference might be much more important than in other circumstances. It is necessary to observe the influence of the native language and of other

foreign languages which are possessed by the student. Most obviously the interference manifests itself on the level of phonetics.

References

1. Haugen E. (1957). *Language Contact* // Reports for the Eighth International Congress of Linguists. Oslo.
2. Petrovici E. (1967). *Interpenetration des systemes linguistiques*, București.
3. Rindler Schjerve R. (1983). *Zum Phanomen der Interferenz im Prozess des Sprachwechsels: Ein Beitrag zur empirischen Sprachkontaktforschung* // Gegenwärtige Tendenzen der Kontaktlinguistik. Bonn.
4. Weinreich U. (1953). *Languages in Contact*. N.Y.