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Teaching Russian Language Writing to Chinese Students

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Abstract

The paper deals with analyzing the typical errors (and their causes) for a variety of reasons in teaching Chinese students to write in Russian. We focus on the explanation “Chinese Russian” which shows some specific features of Chinese people’s perception of the world, and an understanding of the linguistic psychological mechanisms of these “language errors”. This analysis in the frame of non-native Russian language pedagogic theory helps us to improve analyzing ability, linguistic knowledge and language skills of students and to improve the efficiency of the Russian as a foreign language teaching process.

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1. Introduction

In the age of frantic penetration of the newest information technology in all areas of international scientific and cultural exchange, the role of writing as one of the most important forms of speech is growing vehemently because it is aimed at fixation and delivery of information in written form in accordance with the context of communication. The skills we form in the given writing skills are justly considered the most difficult ones among other speech skills being set in higher education by programs in Russian as a foreign language. They require students to have appropriate knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, and developed stylistic and syntactic skills in arrangement of verbal and cогitative activity.

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2. Some peculiarities of teaching Russian language writing in China

A natural component of the content area of Russian-majoring students’ speech is its result – text which, as a product of verbal and cogitative activity, links where continuous interaction of language and thinking takes place. However, because the worldview of the Chinese language does not correspond with that of Russian, teaching of the notional structure of Russian text should be implemented from the point of view of interaction of verbal and cogitative processes (Sun Yuhua, 2001, p. 95).

2.1. Material

We base our analysis on written text. Written text is an important subject for study, because it reflects Chinese learners’ errors and mistakes due to their sociocultural perception of the world. Many studies have shown that people from different cultures see and perceive things differently and that is probably due to how their culture shaped the way they view the world. When teaching Chinese learners to write in Russian special attention should be paid to the notional structure of the Russian text and the need for the analysis on the basis of interaction of verbal and cognitive processes (Sun Yuhua, 2001, p. 95).

2.2. Methodology

The program of education in Russian as a foreign language, functioning at Chinese universities, defines its objective in the following way: “By the time of graduation the learners should develop the ability to write a composition on a required topic with the volume of 150 words during 30 minutes without communicatively significant mistakes” (Liu Liming, 2004, p. 27). It should be mentioned that achieving this objective is rather challenging for several: lack of the latest literature, audio and video materials in Russian; Chinese students experience difficulty with reading and listening skills; and lack of experience with the target language to form their linguistic intuition. In such conditions it is rather difficult to achieve progress in language learning. It is also important to note that the traditional Chinese methodology of teaching a foreign language is based on an approach that stresses the primacy of writing texts over spoken discourse.

In the aspect of teaching writing skills, the Chinese methodology does not involve practice of a wide range of skills and abilities in transformation and reproduction of ready-to-use written and verbal sources. Thereby, such important kinds of analytical processing of textual information as annotation and abstracting are practically out of use while teaching writing skills at Chinese universities. Meanwhile, the given forms of written speech are known to have significant methodological potential in terms of students’ analytical thinking development, their creative skills activation and, in the end, their language and speech competence improvement.

Chinese students have millennia-old culture of their own nation with its centuries-old traditions and morality and social norms. That is why while teaching the Russian language and getting acquainted with its culture, in accordance with the principle of dialogue of cultures, it is necessary to underline not only the historical and cultural relations of Russia and China but the similarity of universal human values defining the moral world of these two great friendly nations, being reflected in the picture of folk art, wisdom of Chinese and Russian historical personalities, and in the creative work of famous people of art and culture.

Creative dictations accepted in Russian methodology are worth adopting at Chinese higher education institutions. In this case students write down the beginning of the text exactly as it was told by their teacher and afterwards they finish it according to their imagination and thoughts. Such a kind of dictation is recommended only in conditions where students have already learned most of the vocabulary and grammatical structure. Regarding cultural peculiarities and similarities we activate students’ sense of language preventing translingual and intralingual mistakes.

2.3. Typical mistakes in students’ written works

Speaking about teaching writing skills it is reasonable to mention mistakes in students’ written works. These mistakes can be divided into three main groups:
Group number one – slips of the tongue. Russian as a foreign language is difficult for students in terms of speaking, listening, reading, and, especially, writing because it requires students to have a rich vocabulary, to use a higher level of lexical and grammatical structures, strict adherence of words. That is why students make various lexical, grammar and stylistic mistakes in their written works.

Group number two – textual mistakes, which are regarded as structurally and notionally deviant from the norm, while genre, stylistic and communicative structure of the text - as a product of speech production activity of information producing to its receiver in accordance with communicative goal and communicative strategy? (Donskaya, 1999: 17). Complex functional styles and peculiarities of Russian speech make it impossible for students to pay attention to everything.

Group number three includes mistakes that occur because of huge difference between Russian and Chinese cultures which leads people to diversity in the manner of thinking, everyday habits, outlook on life, etc. The influence of native culture reveals both directly and indirectly. Language reflects culture and language is thought as a culture. The difference between national cultures is a major obstacle in intercultural communication.

In general, in L2 acquisition researchers distinguish two major types of mistakes: translingual and intralingual ones which exist among different classifications of mistakes in speech of “secondary” linguistic identity. The result of interference of the native language into a foreign one on the level of performance while learning it makes the mistakes translingual. In this case, typical mistakes of Chinese Russian-majors are those connected with breaking the rules of Russian grammar – failure in agreement between the words according to their gender, number and case. Intralingual mistakes are those reflecting the specificity of the language learning process, the run of this process. In this connection they are defined as “mistakes of development”. For example, they are connected with failure to recognize stylistic synonyms, the words of the same lexico-semantic group and others. Zalevskaya (1999) called them genetic mistakes in the meaning because they can help to follow genesis, formation of bilingualism in the process of second language acquisition.

It should be mentioned that the types of mistakes of groups number one and two are sometimes not recognized by a Chinese teacher, although a Russian teacher notices them easily and corrects them and in this case students have no trouble in comprehension of the material. The mistakes of group number three are more difficult to deal with because even a Russian teacher has some difficulties correcting them, yet students hardly understand the reasons for this correction. In particular, some customs, things and phenomena belonging to a native country’s culture, but lacking in other nations are more difficult to express and understand.

2.4. Sinicisms in speech

Among such mistakes Sun Yuhua (2001b) distinguished some which reflect the peculiarities of Chinese imaginative outlook revealing itself in the case when a Chinese symbol points thought-speech of the one writing or speaking at imaginative reflection of reality. Such mistakes have been called Sinicisms (Sun Yuhua, 2001b: 37–38), which denotes language traits peculiar to the Chinese. From our point of view, Sinicisms can be met not only in students’ speech but also in a speech of Chinese specialists in Russian Studies.

Let us take as an example of Sinicism the expression “Merry Park”. This is how some authors of compositions have written about the parks of Dalian. The analysis and interview with those who have used this word combination revealed psycholinguistic mechanism of this Sinicism appearance. It is connected with the corresponding Chinese hieroglyph. The Chinese symbol consists of two parts, the left part of which means “merry”, “joyful”, “happy”, i.e. it has several meanings. The right part of it has the meaning of “place”, and in this combination the symbol means “merry (joyful, happy) park”. This compound word in Chinese has been formed by means of root composition where elements relate to each other as attribute and determinatum. In the Russian speech of Chinese Russian-majors there often appear the word combinations with the meaning of “object and its attribute” according to word-building pattern of Chinese root composition from words which are nouns. They have no cognate adjective as, for example, in the expression “quay highway” with the meaning of “a highway along the quay”.

It should be noticed that in Chinese press presented in the Russian language there are similar Sinicisms: “In order to conserve this landscape district for mankind securely and forever, the national park requested inclusion into the list of the world natural and social heritage of UNESCO” (Wang Jintan, 1999: 48). The prominent word combination
has the same structure and meaning as the word combination “merry park”. The Chinese hieroglyph means: the left part (two hieroglyphs) – “landscape, picturesque view, landmark”), the right part – “district” and in descriptive context in Russian word combination “landscape district”.

Consequently, this specific Chinese view of the world is transferred to attitudinal word combinations with the structure “noun+adjective”. This is one of the reasons for appearance of Sinicisms in the speech of Chinese Russian-majors.

Another case of Sinicism appearance is connected with sociocultural linguistic traditions. Russian verb “sluzhit” (to serve) and cognate noun “sluzhba” (service) have an etymologically common root “sluga” (a servant) and a common seme of “to make oneself useful by means of their service” (Lekant, 2004, p. 199). In the Chinese noun which is expressed by the symbol of “service as a duty” there is the same seme of “to make oneself useful by means of their service”. That is why the meaning of this noun and the verb having a common root and the similarity of meaning – “to serve gladly, to do your duties (job) with joy” is close to the Chinese verbal consciousness and verbal etiquette. For this reason, a student, addressing the Russian participants of an excursion with the words of hope that her service was satisfying (in the text “they liked it”), uses exactly this word but not the Russian word “rabota” (work) and she makes it consciously.

The third case is when a Sinicism appears in speech as an individual image begotten by a personal perception of the matter of speech. In this case, for some authors the city of Dalian means Port Arthur, since it means the symbol of beauty of coastal Southern city associated with Port Arthur.

There is a supposition that more research on this problem could reveal some other kinds of Sinicisms. On the level of this research they should be considered as a verbal mistake, but not a lexical error, a kind of verbal exoticism for Russians, but being characteristic to verbal consciousness of Chinese Russian-majors who studied Russian in conditions of natural language environment absence.

2.5. The purpose of error analysis

Error analysis of Chinese students’ works while writing in Russian is a justified research method aimed at: 1) quantitative evaluation while comparing written utterances of Russian-majors who have reached different levels of development of “secondary” linguistic identity; 2) revelation of mistakes nature corresponding to the data available in modern research; 3) distinguishing of specific mistakes of Chinese Russian-majoring philologists; 4) justification of Russian as a foreign language teaching methodology in order to prevent different kinds of mistakes in speaking and writing; 5) qualitative analysis of the level of speech development at the final stage of Chinese Russian-majors’ teaching; 6) development of collective and individual learning strategies in the conditions of natural Russian verbal environment absence.

We would suggest the necessity for joint actions of Russian and Chinese teachers and researchers. Their collaboration in teaching writing skills will also encourage some cultural communication between Russia and China, and improve students’ level of written communication in different genres.

3. Conclusion

We consider writing as an essential component in teaching Russian as a foreign language. Traditional teaching methods hinder the formation of the students’ sense of language. To adopt the theory of teaching Russian as a second language in professional teaching, working on writing skills will improve the students’ knowledge and cognitive skills.

Consequently, while teaching Chinese learners writing in Russian the above discussed negative factors restraining the process of university study should be taken into account. In order to increase the efficiency of the Russian language teaching to Chinese students we should use more effectively the potential of the cultural and methodological richness of the Russian school for teaching Russian as a foreign language.

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