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Russian for Professional Purposes: An Experiential and Instruction Based Approach to Advanced Competency Within the Russian Language

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Introduction

Originally, this project aimed to increase Russian language fluency in the legal domain by developing an advanced-level course titled “Russian for Professional Purposes.” As progress in course development proceeded, it was moved into conceptualizing the project as a whole and then piloting it with students. This innovative curriculum broke ground in the way of assessing language proficiency within individual professional domains. The project integrated experiential learning with Russian language instruction through domain-specific language modules, e.g., business, law, medicine, journalism, international relations, chemistry, and engineering. An online portfolio was constructed that consisted of exercises designed to measure improvement in each of the language skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

Methodology

Dr. Brown, Dr. Jordan, and I worked in two phases: course design and course development. We pooled our resources and created a course that went live during the Spring/Summer 2018 terms. We incorporated the process of “Backwards Design.” Backwards design represents a method of curriculum development, in which the following 3 steps are involved: (1) identify desired results; (2) determine acceptable evidence that the desired outcomes have been achieved; and (3) design activities that will facilitate the development of the desired skills (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998).

Results

Working as a researcher, I learned to conduct needs assessments, apply principles of backwards design to help students in the pilot to develop language modules reflecting their professional interests as well as mine, assessed portfolio platform design and development of rubrics, developed multiple courses, and conducted a course evaluation. The course was administered over the Spring and Summer 2018 terms with constant and almost daily interaction with students via the on-campus online course.

To demonstrate that learners met the desired learning outcomes, Dr. Brown, Dr. Jordan, and I took a lexical approach and focused on the usage of collocations by students. Collocations are highly valuable in acquisition of any language because they cannot be predicted by a learner of the language. (Benson & Benson, 1993). Additionally, they are nonrandom combination of two or more lexical units that is typical for both a language as a whole (texts of any type) and a definite type of text. (Yagunova & Pivovarova, 2010). The use of collocations in use by our students that are non-native speakers was really intriguing. First of all, because students’ poor collocational knowledge can be due to the fact that collocations associated with the language that students are learning are interfering with the collocations of their mother tongue, but also due to vocabulary negligence in comparison with grammar and unawareness of the importance of collocations in language learning. (Begagic, 2016).

Students took the following steps in building their active usage of collocations:

Step 1: Find a short text within your field.

Step 2: Highlight a minimum of five-word combinations.

Step 3: Find the translation for those word combinations.

Step 4: Check which word combinations actually are collocations* (base your decision on how frequently they appear in a concordancer, such as Reverso Context) or which words in those word combinations should be changed to make them collocations, e.g., *принять пакет > принять закон*.

Step 5: Provide an example of the collocation from any source or create your own example sentence.

At the end of the terms, we asked students to write an elevator speech or cover letter in the target language and we evaluated their submissions to see usage of collocations. Additionally, students partook in standard pre- and post-Oral Proficiency Interview tests at the beginning and end of the term. In the results of our preliminary findings, students still made mistakes while using collocations; however, they made far higher improvements in sheer quantity of collocations used correctly.

A point of comparison in TESOL research:

- Around 5 combinations per 100w for native speakers
- Around 6 combinations per 100w for non-native speakers

Durrant & Schmitt (2009)

Due to the increase of correct collocation usage, we were able to determine that students raised their overall ability to communicate reading, writing, speaking, and listening more effectively.

Discussion

The findings from this study have major implications for future research and instruction. The effect is two-fold: (1) from a research standpoint, we can begin to track correlations between proficiency test scores and collocation use, types of collocations that are used or unused by non-native speakers, and instructional intervention. (2) Instruction based teaching can continue to be improved by providing potential algorithms and tools for independent study, foster field-specific vocabulary building, and promote language intuition.

Conclusion

This research was presented at the annual conference of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) in New Orleans during fall semester 2018 and plans for further conference presentations and article publications are upcoming. The opportunity to increase the performance of students' fluency for professional purposes was really gratifying and we look forward to additional results through further research. Additionally, we have now incorporated the concepts from the collocation focus into a prep course that we teach on campus.

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