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# *Teaching Pragmatics of American English in Russian Tertiary Education*

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***Keywords:*** pragmatics, competence, project-based learning, foreign language, Russian students, higher education.

***Abstract:*** This paper aims at the possibility of developing pragmatic competence with Russian students of higher education. It considers implementing project-based learning (PBL) with student-centered approach in semi-artificial language learning environment designed by the educator. The main objective of this study is to identify the effectiveness of teaching pragmatic competence with PBL for undergraduate students in Russia. An experimental study with undergraduate second-year students was conducted at MSPU (Moscow Pedagogical State University). To evaluate the effectiveness of instructions in PBL method e-portfolios and rubrics were used as an assessment tool. The rubrics as evaluation tool with criteria and levels of achievement within the cycle of 8 pragmatic awareness-raising projects were implemented to evaluate teamwork and individual contribution to group task. Digital student's portfolio served as a motivation tool for the students and a form of written individual feedback from the instructor, evaluation, and formative assessment.

## 1. Introduction

New paradigm of linguistic higher education requires improvement in foreign language training of undergraduated students. The successful training of interpreters, which largerly depends on methodological strategies and approaches of tertiary education in Russia, is of particular importance today. This paper offers an analysis of the possibilities to develop pragmatic competence that may be adopted for Russian linguistics students of English.

One of the main goals of teaching foreign language is the formation of students' communicative competence. It involves the ability to percieve and reproduce foreign language according to the rules of conversation and speech acts (apologies, requests, promises etc). It is impossible to achieve this goal without grammatical, pragmatic, and socio-cultural skills. Traditional grammar-translated method with face-to-face instructions is still in use in Russian classroom. Students are simply being funnelled information from their educators and the process to aquire foreign language is conscious. Planning a course by using this method, the educator first thinks which grammatical schemes to cover. Texts with selected highlighted sentences are used for grammar analysis. Everything ends up with a translation, first from the foreign language to the native language, then vice versa. As for the text, it is usually a so-called *artificial* text, where meaning of the context is inessential: it is not important *what* you say, rather than *how* you say it. Some educators believe that texts should be

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chosen with the content that would turn down, rather than attract students, because the main goal is to master grammar. Text illustrations in black and white were at minimum or absent in study books. Since 1960s first foreign textbooks began to make their way into the USSR. In 1965 the only and very famous study book in English was published - “Bonk." More than one generation has mastered English, for better or for worse. The main disadvantage is that the traditional method creates the ideal prerequisites for the so-called “language barrier,” because a person stops expressing and simply combines words through some grammar rules in learning process. This way of aquisition foreign languages prevailed until the late 50's and was the only way everyone was taught. [ 6].

Nowadays Russia has access to majority of the books published abroad, however, teachers of Baby-boomers generation prefer to use study books from the era of the Soviet Union due to their cultural mentality and nostalgia of “the old good days” and Soviet education system.

It is clear that there is a need to rethink methods and improve content of university courses. It should be noted that some methods still develop, and one of them is the formation of pragmatic competence. It is in the stage of development, the process of its formation incomplete, which allows making adjustments and changes in order to optimize the process of teaching foreign languages.

In order to improve language learning process we considered teaching pragmatics and introducing a curriculum with project - based learning (PBL). Techology of project- based learning method is not new in Russian higher education, so we implemented it in teaching pragmatics. That means a transition from a model teacher - centered learning frame to student - centered one.

We faced another challenge: Which English to teach? Study books from the USA are not very common in Russia due to heavy influence of British English publications. Another aspect should be considered that British English language is prevailing in Russian secondary and tertiery education. As an example, European Comission style Guide for English-language authors and translators suggests to use ‘British English’ for reasons of stylistic consistency and the variety of English on which the Guide bases its intsructions and advises [ 3].

Globalization is cleraly contributing to increased integration of international job markets and students/teachers academic mobility, including Russia. “As a result of U.S. government exhange programs, more than 50, 000 Russians and Americans have had the opportuninty to take part in academic or professional exchanges during past decades,” according to the information of the U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Russia [7 ]. An interdisciplinary team of researches from Center for Data Science, New York University, and Professors from the Univesities of Palma de Mallorca, Spain has published “The Fall of the Empire: The Americanization of English,” where it shows a shift from English of the United Kingdom to English of the United States. They found out that American English is the dominant form of English outside the UK and even within the UK borders [ 4].

There is no doubt that Russians are exposed to American English daily: internet and social media, TV shows and movie theaters, academic mobility, vacation or business trips. That means young generation of Russia needs to learn American English standars in academic setting along with British English one.

## 2. Research Design and Method

This research used the qualitative data to measure pragmatic competence according. 40 undegraduate students with English level 1B according to Common European Framework of References (CERF) were selected for this study. The setting selected was Pedagogical University of Moscow. Data arise from the analysis of curricular documents, surveys answered by teachers and students and pre-test and post-test control group design was employed. Information was also obtained from the participant observation.

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8 Project-Modules were implemented with speech genre project-modules in semi-artificial language environment and they were designed by the instructor. Formative assesment of students learning was performed with rubrics and e-portfolio based on authentic materials while working in collaborative teams. Formative assessments has been recognized as one of the methods to improve learning and teaching [ 1].

## 2.1. Competence-Based Learning with PBL

The idea of competency-based eduction as means to improve education system design and quality assurance Russia has been striving to develop for the past few years. The concept of competences with learning outcomes in the framework of student-centered learning approach has been developed for the past two decades in Europe.

Literature presents diverse definition of pragmatic competence. Our vision of pragmatic competence is as a *bridge of knowledge and understanding with its application to the authentic situation*. Project-based learning is an instructional method that helps students to aquire pragmatic skills through facilitated problem solving.They engage themselves and reflect on what they have learned. The educator needs to find balance when they engage with students and PBL process.

Expected levels of performance are based on the competence *learning outcomes* achieved by Russian students, and the learning process is based on an identified set of components in Table 1:

- Sociocultural
- Psychological
- Linguistic

Taking different models of pragmatic competence we based the study on our vision of the pragmatic competence development model.

Table 1: Pragmatic competence.

| Pragmatic Competence | |
|---|---|
| Sociocultural component | • cultural elements that mark social relationship<br>• rules of appropriate behavior<br>• social integration |
| Psychological component | • ability to use utterances appropriately<br>• verbal and non-verbal bahavior<br>• mental state of communication (emotions)<br>• intuition and reflexivity |
| Linguistic component | • knowledge of grammar and vocabulary<br>• cognitive system that produces knowledge |

## 2.2. Semi-Artifical Language Learning Environment

Semi-artificial language environment refers to a portion of authentic or natural language that was used for the projects. By modeling this environment we designed project-modules. Project-based method or PBL provides opportunities for students to engage in real life communication.

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### 2.2.1. Curriculum of 8 Project-Modules

We used a cycle of projects that starts with project "Public Speaking" and focused at students communication fluency. The cycle ends with project "TED Talk," where we evaluated students' verbal and non-verbal communication fluency and accuracy.

We considered speech genres based on Bakhtin's Theory of Speech Genres Reflixivity [ 2]. According to Bakhtin this model could be shaped by teacher's syle. Eight projects were offered to students in Figure 1:

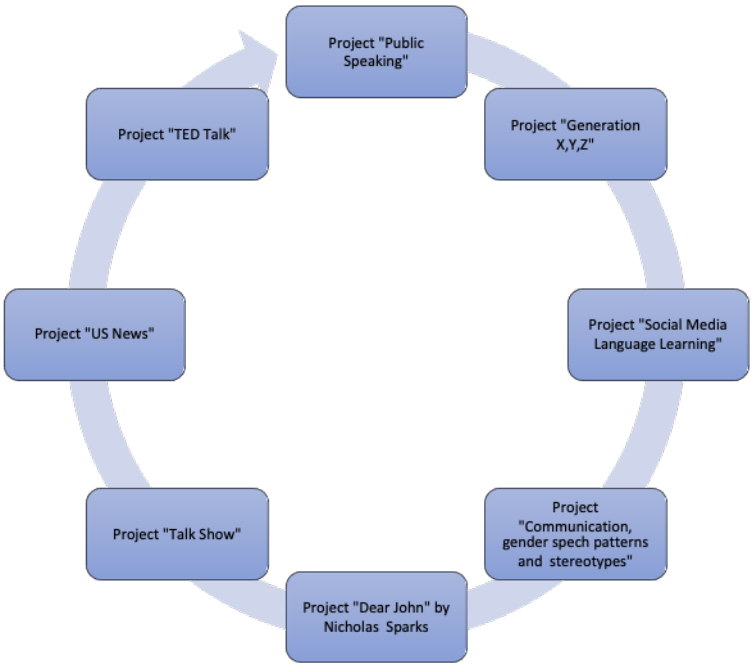


Figure 1: Cycle of 8 projects.

## 2.3. Students Feedback and Instructor's Observation

During our study we experienced few challenges.

First, students did not follow two important cooperative principles working in groups: maximum peer intercation and equal opportunity to participate. PBL method was not new for them, but they were lacking team collaboration and some of them refused to work in groups. They were looking for the peers within their "comfort zone." The instructor considered Russian mentality, and took a decision to use informal CL [ 5] grouping during projects.

Secondly, "summative" assessments are considerably predominant as compared to "formative" assessments in Russian Higer Education. As a part of a "formative evaluation" from students' e-learning portfolio and rubrics we also provided teacher's written feedback. At the end of the study a survey of a course satisfaction was conducted, in which 85% of the students expressed their gratitude on the written feedback in their digital portfolio as the way of keeping it privately. It was a new experience for them, because educators tend not to spend time on collecting students feedback via survey about their method of teaching and the course content.

Thirdly, teacher-student relationship and shifting from traditional forms of learning to student-centered approach was not accepted by the students at the beginning of the study. Students were looking for educator's face-to-face instructions and they had troubles to analyze gathered information.

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Finally, students and instructor provided positive feedback on learning speech genres. Slang, phraseololgy, emotional interjections of American English were considered the challenging part of the study, mentioned by 92% of the students.

### 2.3.1. Immersing into A

It was important for Russian linguistics students to immerse into American culture and language that they studied. It helped them to understand Speech Acts and unconscious pragmatic transfer that they performed at the beginning of the study, especially in Refusals, Appologies, Advise, and Respond to a Compliment. According to students feedback, it raised their awareness in linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity.

## 3. Conclusions

The feedback that was collected from instructor and students were positive.The results suggest to aquire pragmatic competence with PBL is an effective method for Russian students. There is no doubt that the concepts of competency with PBL focus on student-centered approach and requires the application of knowledge and skills. It offers effective problem - solving skills, reflection, promotes flexibility, and helps students to develop their greater consciousness to a language society.

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