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ELT in a Changing Russia: Traditions and Innovations



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ELT in a Changing Russia: Traditions and Innovations

Abstract:

The present-day situation with English language teaching (ELT) in Russia stems from various historically and culturally determined traditions which can be summed up as follows: depth, perfectionism, deliberate anti-pragmatism; solid theoretical basis; mass production of ELT in the Soviet period; teacher orientation. Under Soviet rule the traditions were strengthened and formulated as pivots of ELT. These were certainties to be followed faithfully and blindly. The whirlwind of Post-Soviet period swept away most of the old ideas and introduced new polarly opposed ones, which could not help causing confusions. The changes and innovations in the sphere of ELT in Russia brought by the new times (omitting those shared with the rest of the world: the advance of new technologies, globalization consequences, etc.): a great variety of motivations, goals, demands, types of learners, language teaching materials and methods; a “discovery” of the cultural barrier, a burst of interest in Cross-cultural studies, the revival of “dead” languages; an intense interest in non-verbal means of communication; a conflict of cultures between teachers and students; introduction of Russian National Exam. Finally, the major, starring, title role that professional communities are called to play in the development of ELT in Russia. It is our cause to replace the governmental orders of the old times with the ideas developed by professionals in language learning and teaching, especially as our profession is unique in the sense that we are both foreign language teachers and learners.

Key words: English Language Teaching, Traditions, Innovations, Russia

The changes, challenges (and confusions) of the present are rooted in traditions (and certainties) inherited from the past.

These traditions are historically, socially and culturally determined and, naturally, have both advantages and disadvantages or, rather, positive and negative aspects. They are important to be mentioned as they underlie the state of the art in the new Russia.

Let us begin with a short survey of the history of foreign language learning and teaching (FLLT) in Russia.

A deep love of foreign languages - and, consequently, a deep interest in cultures and modes of life of other peoples - has always been so typical and characteristic of Russian social life that it might be considered an inherent feature of the Russian national character. Being unique and isolated by its geographic situation (neither Europe nor Asia or both Europe and Asia - as you like it) Russia, unlike most other geographically and culturally isolated countries, has always tried to overcome this uniqueness and isolation, which has resulted in a deep interest (mingled with curiosity and even admiration) in everything foreign, especially in international cultures.

In the 18th century it was German, in the 19th - French, from the second half of the 20th century till now it has been English, English, English ousting other foreign languages and littering Russian.

During the Soviet period the situation with FLLT as part of the educational system went through a series of dramatic ups and downs. In the early years of Soviet power the attitude to foreign languages was negative: they were treated as luxuries of "people's enemies" - aristocracy and bourgeoisie. The most unfortunate one was French as it was most closely associated with the Russian elite society. However, in the late 1920-ies, after heated debates, foreign languages were returned to secondary school curricula. As usual, a pendulum swung forth, one fashion substituted for another one; the new campaign with the slogan: "Foreign languages - to the masses" introduced foreign languages into educational institutions with the same enthusiasm as the previous campaign had banished them. Since that time foreign languages have always been part of the curriculum in the Soviet system of education, but the official attitude to them was far from being positive. Languages of "capitalistic countries" were seen as a suspicious subject that led straight into the arms of "potential enemies", which actually meant the rest of the world. People who studied foreign languages as their major subject as well as their teachers were also suspicious for they were potential spies, potential emigrants and/or potential cosmopolitans. They lacked loyalty and patriotism because they did not seem to be satisfied with their own language, culture, country, world. This attitude, slowly growing milder over the years, remained dominant to the end of the Soviet period. Consequently teaching languages of potential enemies was a dangerous profession. My father never stopped worrying about my having chosen to study and teach English as my way in life.

For decades, under such circumstances, generations of teachers, who never set, their eyes - or ears! – on a native speaker of a foreign language, taught generations of students without any proper equipment, without authentic ELT materials, developing chalkboard theories and poor-but-honest, necessity-is-the-mother-of-invention techniques, and they did it brilliantly.

Thus, the history of the Soviet Union has provided ELT with an extremely interesting experiment. Indeed, ELT in the USSR was an experiment - enormous in scale and with amazing consequences - in how to teach a foreign language if learners (and teachers, of course) are completely isolated from the world where this foreign language is naturally used. "Completely" in this context means just that, with no leakage in the form of radio, television, native speakers, books, newspapers, language teaching materials, no hint of what is called the culture of the nation in the broad, anthropological sense of the word, where "culture" does not mean "arts" but means "the way people live" (how they see the world, what they believe in, how they work, how they rest, what and how they eat, what kind of homes they have, etc.)

The FLLT traditional features, or “certainties” can be summed up as follows.

1. Perfectionism, Deliberate Anti-pragmatism

The motto of Soviet times was: "The Soviet means the excellent" (cf. "Proud to be American"). Soviet ELT set the same goal: to give perfect knowledge of the language under study. As languages as a means of communication did not exist it was confined to reading:

- 1) Classical authors for philologists and foreign language teachers.
 - 2) Professional texts for everybody else, (i.e. for students of other subjects).
- Consequently, the idea of perfectionism resulted in a wide, deep, and thorough study of grammar.

2. Depth, Thoroughness, Solid Theoretical Basis.

There has always been a firm belief that a really efficient solution to the problems of language teaching must be sought for with the help of linguistics, that the practice of ELT must be based on theoretical studies of language, that theory and practice must go hand in hand as it will do a lot of good for both of them.

We feel especially strong in such fields as vocabulary teaching, socio-linguistic and cultural studies, lexicography, phraseology, collocation – i.e. in all those spheres of linguistic knowledge, which are centred on the study of the word's meaning.

This is how it was explained by U. Weinreich, an outstanding American linguist: "Soviet linguistics was never infected with the paralysis of semantic interest which caused most

scholars during the Bloomfieldian period of linguistics in the U.S. to abdicate all semantic investigation to other ineffectual sciences...(Weinreich, 1963 p.60). The word infected shows, in my opinion, the silver lining of the Iron Curtain, which was, not only a barrier isolating Russia but also a shield protecting it from infections.

Using theoretical studies of foreign languages as the basis for practical purposes – first and foremost for ELT – is a very positive Russian tradition and principle but its negative by-product is the overloading of both scholarly papers and FLLT manuals with abstruse technical terms and specialized jargon.

3. Mass Production and Teacher Orientation.

Since the time of the Soviet Union modern languages have been a must on the curriculum of both secondary and higher education. The number of students of foreign languages in Russia is more than 20 million people.

It is no longer the 'piece-work' of foreign language teaching to the elite 'off-spring' of the Russian aristocracy. It is mass production. It requires special mass-production techniques and mass-production-oriented teaching materials.

The standardized, centrally governed foreign language teaching used standard textbooks and was meant for standard, uniform students with standard motivation or rather the lack of it. A result of this tendency was that ELT was teacher-oriented, and the needs or problems of an individual student were neglected. Again it went very well both with the collectivist culture of Russians and with the neglect of the individual which was a pivot of Soviet ideology. To be individually minded was a great sin, people were taught to subordinate their individual needs or desires to the goals of the collective.

This resulted in a rigid, severe and distant kind of teacher-student relations which is quite dangerous because learning a foreign language, like no other subject, requires a special psychological approach, the atmosphere of relaxation, trust, even love and faith. However, the mass-production situation of teaching an obligatory subject is not exactly favourable for establishing the atmosphere of love and friendship or some special attention to the problems of the individual.

4. Changes, Challenges and Confusions of the Present-day Situation in Russia.

The beginning of the "Perestroika" period in the early 1990ies, the collapse of the Soviet Union, all the sudden, drastic and dramatic changes in Russian social life caused a real revolution in the sphere of ELT. Generally, – for EL teachers – it was a very positive revolution (though I realize it may sound like an oxymoron) because at long last peoples of the USSR got a great chance of international communication. It resulted in an immediate unquenchable thirst for knowledge of foreign languages, mostly and overwhelmingly, English. Indeed, all the newly acquired possibilities, freedoms, forbidden

fruit of old times suddenly became unreachable for a “trifling” reason: the language barrier.

However, the “negative” output was determined by the fact that all the unique and heroic experience of ELT at the Soviet Union time could not help teachers of foreign languages to satisfy new demands. This situation, when an unprecedented urge for foreign language learning was ever increasing and angry armies of potential learners attacked helpless teachers who suddenly found themselves in the centre of public attention – this situation was equally dramatic and frustrating for both sides. It could not help causing very many problems, challenges and confusions.

These new difficulties of ELT life in a Post-Soviet Russia, as I see them, can be divided into two groups.

The issues that are shared with the rest of the world:

1.1. The advance of new technologies.

Only one innocent remark! Now and again the use of power-point programmes seems to be superfluous, unjustified and its main purpose is “to be with it”, to show that the speaker has mastered all the contemporary gadgets. The most vivid example, in my humble opinion, is when the speech is duplicated on the screen. The visual presentation overwhelms, to a great extent, the oral, and it is easy to imagine a day when the speaker becomes superfluous and unnecessary.

1.2. The consequences of globalization: global language and cultural problems.

And again only one comment, which is so ‘well-known’ in all non-English-speaking countries: English ousts other languages as objectives of FLLT and litters mother tongues of some over-enthusiastic nations. I mean Russian, of course, because a flood of English borrowings has reached a point when it is next to impossible to understand Russian mass media if you do not know English.

As my task is to describe ELT in modern Russia I will not discuss the problems of the whole world now.

The issues that concern – first and foremost – Russia:

2.1. A Marked Change in Foreign Language Learners.

A great variety of students of all ages, types and social classes with a still greater variety of motivations (tourism, joint business, studies abroad, immigration, etc.) are now substituting for the “standard” students with the only motivation, namely, to obey the orders of educational institutions. This requires new methods, new teaching materials,

and new types of teachers. At the first stage of “A New Russia” historical period, it was not just confusion it was chaos.

2.2. A Revival of ‘Dead Languages’ and an Intense Burst of Interest in Cross-cultural Studies.

After the collapse of the USSR a new era – that of free mass international communication – began.

With all the changes in our new life, English, at long last, has become an actual means of international communication, and the dead language has turned into a living one. Consequently, the communicative approach to ELT is in the centre of both teachers' and students' attention. The tasks of ELT are different, and the skills required are new, too. After so many years devoted exclusively to mastering the skills of reading, now speaking, listening comprehension, and writing they are in great demand.

Thus, an ever-increasing interest, a real boom in area and cultural studies is a natural result of the previous history of the country when it was bottled up for so many years. The triumph of the communicative approach, the urgent need for speech production skills inevitably has led to the idea that the use of language largely depends on the background knowledge of the world where this language is naturally used as a means of communication. That is how the cultural barrier was discovered in Russia. The “discovery” was quite unpleasant (two obstacles instead of one to be overcome), especially as the new one seemed to be more dangerous for at least two reasons: 1) it is invisible and, therefore, unrealizable; 2) cultural mistakes are perceived with much greater intolerance (avoiding the word aggression) than language ones.

Our practice of ELT has shown that learning rules of grammar (and we always did it in full splendour, i.e. with all the minutest exceptions to the rules) as well as learning vocabulary (which usually implies learning meanings of words) is not enough to enable learners to use the language, to communicate, to develop active skills, the skills of speech production..

One of the main reasons for this is that the concept of meaning invariably leads to extra-linguistic reality, to the native speakers' world reflected by the language.

Indeed, the meaning of a word is usually defined as referring a complex of sounds (oral speech) or that of graphic signs (written speech) to a certain object or phenomenon of the real world. Thus, metaphorically speaking, the meaning of the word is a thread or a path connecting the world of language/speech with the real world. Consequently, the meaning of a foreign word leads to the foreign world where this word lives and functions. However, it is not a straight path connecting the two worlds: the real one where objects and phenomena live and their equivalents function. Between these two worlds there is another one: that of thinking, or conscience with the notions and

concepts of the objects and phenomena of the real world. That is where the path makes a zigzag determined by the national culture. The meaning of a word may seem exactly the same (i.e. referring to the same object of the real world) but the concept behind the word at the level of thinking is different because of the difference in cultures. Thus, *babushka* lives in the Russian world while grandmother lives in the English-speaking world and they are far from being equivalent even though both are terms of kinship with seemingly the same meaning. Indeed, the difference in cultures, the sociocultural component determines a difference in “meanings” and in the use in speech. Russian and English-speaking *babushkas* are different in their social role, behavior, manners, clothes, tastes, mentality and some other aspects.

Another example, the word *house* seems to be equivalent in meaning to the Russian word *dom*. However, the difference in them is not only in the volume of their semantics: *dom* is much wider than *house* because it covers quite a number of English words meaning a dwelling: building, block of flats, mansion, bungalow, caravan and some others. However, a hidden trap for partners in an act of intercultural communication is the cultural difference in the architecture and the social role of these kinds of dwelling. Translation is a good indicator of this. Indeed, a sentence like ‘That morning she had a headache and stayed upstairs’ is untranslatable into Russian. It cannot be understood by the meaning of its words without a commentary explaining the cultural difference between the two concepts of a house. Indeed, the English upstairs is enigmatic for Russian speakers because in a Russian *dom* it does not imply bedrooms and restrooms, it may mean any kind of rooms. In a typical house in the North of Central Russia “upstairs” is a place to keep the family’s cattle in winter. This bright cultural idea is determined by the geographical factor: it is quite cold there in winter so heating a separate house for the cattle is difficult, effort consuming and expensive. The cultural “architecture” of a Russian northern house kills two birds with one stone: the warm air from “downstairs” where people live goes up and saves the family’s animals from the cold of severe northern winters.

This sociocultural component of ELT is extremely important because the actual communication, the process of speech production (speaking, writing) is impossible without the background knowledge of the world of the language under study, i.e. of the culture, mode of living, traditions, history and moral codes, etc. of the users of the language.

Thus, if a lack of cultural background knowledge kills a foreign language, turns it into a dead one, then cultural studies are the magic wand that revives it, returns it to life. That is why, in present-day Russia, where real, live communicative skills are in such an incredible and unimaginable demand, cultural studies are becoming more and more popular as an indispensable part of Foreign Language Learning and Teaching.

In brief, we are learning to be less idealistic and more pragmatic, less academic and more realistic. At the same time, our task is not to go to another extreme but to combine both features.

Thus, having realized the importance as well as difficulties of intercultural and international communication has led us to the idea that co-learning and co-teaching both the language and the world where it is naturally used as a means of communication is a must.

This is our discovery №1, which has become common knowledge surprisingly quickly.

2.3. Studies of Learners' Native World.

This is our discovery №2. An innovation, or a new challenge to ELT in Russia is the absolute necessity of developing background knowledge of the foreign language learners' own world, in our case: the Russian world. We came up with this idea in 1992 having included into our curricula courses of "The Russian World" (first year students) and "the Russian World in the Context of World Civilizations" (second year students) as obligatory courses for all our programmes. We have published textbooks and multimedia courses – but alas! – this idea still looks alien to the community of FLLT.

However, we are absolutely sure that some day it will be clear to everybody that besides acquainting our students with the worlds of foreign languages they study, it is absolutely necessary to enlarge their knowledge of their own worlds. Indeed, it is for this knowledge that their partners in international communication may be interested in communicating with them.

Another important reason: it will help to keep the national identity in the era of globalization.

2.4. Non Verbal Communication

An intense interest in non-verbal means of communication also results from the triumph of the communicative approach to ELT in this country. It has come from another "discovery" of language teachers: language is the main but not the only means of communication.

The next radical and striking change caused by the transformation of the object of our studies in this sphere from a foreign language to be used for reading old texts into a foreign language as a means of real, direct communication has been ELT materials.

2.5. ELT Materials.

This is a very big issue because the question of what to learn and what to teach is not less important (putting it very mildly) than the question of how to do it.

In the “good old days” there used to be one textbook (not even a course) recommended to each category of foreign language students by the Ministry of Education. If there is no choice life is simple and easy, it has some stability and certainty. When in the early 1990ies our new life began it was a new era for ELT because with it there came the epoch of mass communication of peoples of the USSR with the rest of the world.

New goals, new objectives, new motifs (a great variety), new kinds and categories of students desperately demanded immediate results from the teachers who were completely unprepared for these changes, especially as far as language teaching materials were concerned.

The gap of those first years was quickly bridged by Western – and a little later – by Russian publishers. Now teachers of foreign languages (especially and mostly English) are lost and confused in the ocean of courses, especially as they/we have not been immune against advertising campaigns (a social-cultural AIDS, as it were). Some of the courses have been of poor quality (content-wise and culture-wise, among other things). All this causes a lot of confusion among teachers, many of whom miss the times when there was no choice and every aspect of our life was centrally governed.

A few chaotic and confused years later it became clear that all the beautifully published courses of Western publishers are universal, i.e. meant for the whole world regardless of national language difficulties and national culture peculiarities. Thus, a very important demand was formulated: the ELT materials must take into consideration our culture, mentality, attitude to ELT, academic habits, educational traditions, on the one hand, and new objectives, demands, motifs, tasks, on the other.

Ideally, ELT materials must combine the best of both worlds: good traditions from our past and good modern ideas from the rest of the world.

About 15 years after NATE (National Association of Teachers of English) had declared this the Ministry of Education heard our cry in the wilderness and issued an order that FLLT materials for secondary school must be written either by Russian authors or by a joint authorship with native speakers of the language under study. In a country like Russia, this order is either ignored or falsified when the name (preferably a well-known one) of a Russian “author” is added to the existing course of foreign publishers.

2.6. The competition between the private (commercial) and the state (free education) sectors – a new disaster unknown to this country.

The problem for ELT at the level of state schools and Universities is simply how to survive, how to compete with private institutions. Salaries of teachers in state high educational institutions are 5-7 times lower than in private ones.

As a result, professional experts in ELT are leaving state schools and universities for banks, travel agencies, foreign firms, and private language schools – simply because they are paid many times more there.

2.7. A Marked Change in Teachers, Students and their Relations.

A contemporary teacher is less educated theoretically and more pragmatically oriented.

A contemporary student is more open, less inhibited, and much more pragmatically oriented.

What is quite new and uniquely Russian - is their relations, which show a very vivid picture of a conflict of cultures. Indeed, what we have nowadays is not a usual and predictable conflict of generations, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, teachers and students. It is an impressive example of an international conflict of cultures. Indeed, though both sides of the conflict speak the same language and live together in the same place, they were born and brought up in basically different countries: teachers – in the USSR, students – in a new Russia. Teachers were moulded by the very strict system, the Iron Curtain and the powerful ideological propaganda of the Soviet Union; students are products of “perestroika revolution” which implies difficulties and confusions of a transitional period, openness (I am deliberately avoiding the word “freedom”), a strong influence of western cultures, reconsidering most social pivots of the past and radical changes of systems of values. The situation is especially difficult for teachers but nevertheless I am sure that it is our unenviable task to resolve this conflict: we are older, we must be wiser, we are Teachers, and our antagonists are our children, our youth and our future, the future of our country. It is extremely difficult but not impossible.

2.8. Introduction of the Russian National Exam (RNE)

The advance – or rather the advent – of the National Exam has been a significant event that has shaken the ELT world in Russia.

The problem with RNE began about 10 years ago when it was introduced as another new reform of the Ministry of Education “out of the blue” when nobody had the slightest idea of what it could possibly mean (a usual practice of new reforms in present-day Russia – alas!). Teachers, schoolchildren and their parents were equally unprepared. Naturally, it caused a wave of protests, the society split into supporters and opponents of the idea.

Arguments are still going on but the years of very hard work of Russian testers have improved the situation. I agree with Maria Verbitskaya, a guru in English testing here, who sees the main achievement of all the years of the experiment with RNE in the fact that its formidable opponents have become more objective while its ardent supporters have developed a more critical attitude and no longer see it as a remedy (panacea) for all social problems including, first and foremost, corruption.

In my humble opinion, all tests as instruments of evaluation, especially such important ones as the National exams, which determine the future of very young people, cannot help being contradictory. Indeed, on the one hand, the idea behind tests is striving for fairness and objectivity, on the other hand, the grandeur and versatility of a human language cannot be squeezed into strictly limited schemes of tests. On an optimistic note, I would like to emphasize the bright side, or rather the silver lining of this cloud: there will be always room for improvement in the field of tests and testing.

2.9. The Role of Professional Associations in ELT.

Professor Stephen Ryan said at one of our conferences: “Teaching is a lonely profession”. Indeed, lessons are invariably one-actor performances. However, the greatest discovery of the new times in this country is professional communities. Since “Perestroika”, associations of professionals in various fields have been mushrooming all over Russia. From those days our motto has become: “Professionals of the country, unite”. We were weak at the beginning but now we have got a lot of experience and we are certain that we’ll be able to solve our problems, to surmount our difficulties, to meet our challenges, to clear up our confusions – only through professional associations. That is a way to overcome our loneliness, to withstand some unacceptable ideas from lonely bureaucrats that try to govern our field of knowledge and activity having neither knowledge, nor experience in this kind of activity.

As learning a strange language, and through it a strange world-view, strange mentality, etc., is difficult and confusing for most learners, anything that helps to do it is vitally important. And nothing helps more than a well educated, attentive, thoughtful teacher, supported by his/her professional Association.



Professor Svetlana Ter-Minasova, President of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Area Studies at Lomonosov Moscow State University, Russia, and Professor Emeritus in the University was named the keynote speaker at the 5th Asian Conference on Education. She was been appointed the Honorary President of IAFOR Language Research Institute and Member of IAFOR International Advisory Board in October of 2013. Professor Svetlana Ter-Minasova is also President of National Association for Applied Linguistics (NAAL), Chair of the Russian Ministry of Education's Foreign Language Research and Methodology Council, and President and founder of both the National Society for English Language Teachers in Russia, and the National Association of Applied Linguistics. She holds the Lomonosov Award for teaching achievements, Fulbright's 50th Anniversary Award, and was named Doctor Honoris Causa by the University of Birmingham in the UK, the State University of New York (SUNY) in the USA, the Russian-Armenian (Slavonic) University in Armenia, and Visiting Professor of National Research Tomsk State University in Russia.

The keynote address was delivered at the Asian Conference on Education and Asian Conference on Science, Education and Technology (ACE/ACSET 2013) in Osaka, Japan.