THE ISSUE OF LEXICAL INTERFERENCE IN TEACHING LSP

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Abstract

This article aims to develop a set of methodological principles to help overcome lexical interference of Russian in ESP learning. This is a complex task. Using authentic training materials, audio courses, newspapers, magazines, and online content, providing adequate methodological handling of foreign language features, identifying challenging lexical peculiarities of the English language, estimating the most probable manifestations of interference on the lexical level can help expose the main causes and roots of lexical interference and errors in LSP learning.

By identifying the areas of convergence and divergence in the use of language means, we will be able to detect the scope of interference, estimate probable challenges, and devise ways of dealing with errors caused by lexical, as well as other types of interference.

The study deploys the methods of complex semantic analysis of interfering lexical units.

Keywords: LSP teaching, interference, lexicology, economic discourse.

1 KEY FEATURES OF LEXICAL INTERFERENCE

As pertains to professional communication training, the issue of reducing lexical interference holds a controversial position in foreign language methodology: while the issue obviously poses a challenge, it remains relatively unexplored in terms of methodological aspects involved. The most significant obstacles and errors in foreign language teaching have to do with the linguistic phenomena taking on contrasting shapes in the target and native languages.

While interference is manifested in a language within all of its levels, the lexical level is most heavily exposed to interference. This is because the lexical system of any language appears less organised as compared to other language systems, which means that it is more ‘open’ in nature. Lexical interference is defined as borrowing of lexical units from a foreign language in the context of bilingual/multilingual environment, expressed in either transfer of phonemic sequences from one language to another, or in the shifts in the semantic structure of the lexical unit in the mother tongue, or in the synthesis of structures established based on foreign word-forming models [1].

Human history has been evolving against the backdrop of interminable migration processes that facilitated contacts between languages and shaped the development of cultures. Any ‘migrating’ language obviously evolves in the setting of an ongoing contact with other languages and is thus exposed to certain influence on their part, which, in turn, instigates certain alternations in its structural composition.

The vocabulary of most of the world’s languages incorporates a significant number of words common to two or more languages. Their occurrence can be traced to specific historical reasons – common etymology of languages, prolonged domestic and cultural communication of peoples speaking different tongues. Lexical interference stems from disparity, variance in terms of the volume of notions, in particular, when it comes to international roots and the so-called ‘false friends of a translator’.

The emerging requirements posed to communication are generated by cultural and linguistic contacts and can be met by:

- creating new lexical units using the resources of the recipient language;
- introducing new meanings to be expressed by the existing lexical units;
- borrowing words from another language.
The first two solutions are categorised as the processes of semantic borrowing, inasmuch as creating neologisms and extending the meaning of words implies borrowing of the plane of content inherent in foreign lexical units. The third solution, on the other hand, requires that the recipient language borrows both the plane of content and the plane of expression inherent in foreign words.

2 LEXICAL INTERFERENCE IN LSP TRAINING METHODOLOGY

The greatest difficulties and errors in teaching foreign languages are associated with the linguistic phenomena that differ from the similar phenomena intrinsic to the mother tongue. Hence, special importance should be attached to the development of methodological typology of linguistic phenomena, of studied and taught languages, to help anticipate difficulties. Available findings presented in research papers on typology issues and comparing the structure of native and foreign languages in various subsystems are recognised insufficient. However, not all methodologists agree that major discrepancies between languages are what causes major difficulties in learning a foreign language. The question that remains is whether more time and attention should be devoted to the most prominent differences between languages, or perhaps to the points of least divergence, rather than to the issue of dissimilarity, inasmuch as obvious differences can be traced and overcome more efficiently compared to the differences less obvious in nature.

This is one of the reasons why the contrastive hypothesis of foreign language mastery has given way to the cognitive theories and the hypothesis of identity. The cognitive theories consider the process of language mastery as an active, creative process, while the hypothesis of identity postulates the universal nature of all processes of language acquisition, which concerns both native and foreign tongues (first, second, or third) [2]. Pursuant to this assumption, ‘the phenomenon of language interference has no relevance in the process of language acquisition’ [2]. Along with that it is specified that ‘linguistic correctness is not the ultimate learning goal, and the orientation towards real communication relies upon the teacher’s tolerant approach to the students’ mistakes [2]. However, as acknowledged by N.D. Galskova, the hypothesis of identity ‘...is more relevant to language acquisition in the natural environment and cannot fully apply to the learning processes taking course outside the country of the target language’ [2].

One of the most important premises of the third, ‘crosslingual’, hypothesis is the thesis stating that in the course of foreign language learning students establish their own crosslingual systems, mixed crosslingual codes, and build their own personal hypotheses concerning the language elements being studied. The proponents of the hypothesis of the crosslingual code believe that mistakes arise (in particular) due to interference, as well as the insufficient mastery of linguistic and speech material, and the deficient training tools and activities implemented. Mistakes, however, are viewed as a manifestation of students’ creative potential, their attempts to use a foreign language as a means of communication. Mistakes are eliminated using the learner-centered approach [2].

The idea of creativity presented in the latter two theories is discussed somewhat one-sidedly. Back in 1969, I.N. Gorelov cautioned us stating that ‘...speech activity cannot actually be regarded as free or creative if you keep in mind the plane of expression, which is at all times regulated by the dynamic (in terms of its diachronic development) and at the same time constant (meaning that it can only be ultimately explained in the framework of synchronic description) language system, which is only able to fulfil its communicative and social goals thanks to its adherence to the conventionally established regulations. [...] Creativity should inevitably be reduced to the ability to combine previously memorised and well-honed structures that can be viewed as basic structures in terms of frequency characteristics’ [3]. In the latter two theories, the main criterion of language mastery is whether the student is able to ‘talk, read, and listen to a foreign language’, and ‘mistakes made in the process should not be viewed as an obstacle to communication’. In other words, ‘the key criterion of foreign language mastery lies in mutual understanding between the communicative partners, rather than linguistic correctness’ [2].

Many methodologists believe that conversational mistakes made by students learning a foreign language are triggered by native language interference, i.e. ‘the state of linguistic competence where two codes and two normative systems – of the native and target languages – are not fully differentiated’ [4]. ‘Interference refers to a substation of the models inherent in the target language by the corresponding elements intrinsic to the native language or an intermediary language, or modification of the first following the patterns of the latter’ [4]. Of course, it should be mentioned that when it comes to mistakes, interference is not solely to blame, and one of the aspects of interference research should be the issue of its proportion in relation to the intralingual amalgations and analogies [5]. Another issue to be addressed is the question of whether greater attention should be devoted to

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the units belonging to different language levels and posing the greatest challenge in the learning process, or perhaps it is the frequency, semantic value and communicative relevance of the units belonging to different language levels that should be considered the key factor.

Thus, since not all methodologists place emphasis on interference, the process of error elimination is sometimes devoid of the attention it deserves. Here, much depends on the general methodological policies of individual teachers. When it comes to teaching future economists that need to master the foreign language of professional communication, teachers’ attitude towards mistakes takes on particular importance [6]. We believe that the study of interference and related conversational mistakes made by students poses an interesting and rewarding research issue.

While at the initial stage the teacher might feel that in terms of the principle of comprehensibility it is sufficient to resort to the units and models similar to the ones inherent in the native language seeing that such approach appears psychologically justified (as the students grow confident in their own potential), at an advanced level this strategy might bring students to a dead-lock as they encounter difficulties trying to look for similar structures common to the native and target languages [7; 8]. And these difficulties come from interference.

3 THE KEY AREAS OF INTERFERENCE AND THE TYPICAL MISTAKES MADE BY STUDENTS

One of the main causes of interference and lexical mistakes is that students are confident that the words they use only have a single meaning. This confidence and the interference that stems from this confidence bring about erroneous utterances that are actually word-for-word translations from Russian into English compiled using the structures peculiar only to the student’s mother tongue:

‘What about the target audience’ (instead of As for…)

‘Advertising company’ (instead of campaign in the relevant context)

‘So and my colleagues’ (instead of Like my colleagues)

‘Whom I see’ (instead of Look who’s here!)

‘I have forgotten my documents at home’ (instead of I have left...

‘If to speak about…,’ (as an introductory phrase As regards…)

‘…, how it proved,…’ (as it turned out – conjunctive adverb ‘how’ is used inappropriately instead of conjunction ‘as’)

‘I very like’, ‘I very want’, etc.

One of the difficulties in using negative constructions is that the Russian language deploys the so-called double negation, which is not inherent in English. This brings about mistakes like ‘I don’t know nothing’ and occludes comprehension of sentences where negation of the opposite does not constitute a mistake, but presents a logically correct construction based on the trope of litotes, as in ‘I haven’t taught French for nothing all these years’ or ‘It’s not an easy thing to do and I can’t afford not to do it well’.

The source of interference at the lexical level is a mismatch, the difference in the scope of notions, in particular when it comes to international roots and the so-called ‘false friends of a translator’. Thus, students perceive the term ‘actual cost’ in the meaning ‘relevant cost’, while in English it actually means ‘real price’. The word ‘extravagant’ in modern English contexts means ‘excessive’, ‘redundant’, rather than ‘exotic’; ‘receipt’ is not a recipe, but a bill from a store; ‘dramatic’ is often translated as related to drama, while the context actually implies ‘something significant’.

Another typical source of interference is students’ inclination to choose the first meaning of the lexical unit as described in the dictionary. Thus, for example, in the sentence ‘We had an argument with the waiter about the bill’, the word ‘argument’ is not used in its primary meaning (‘reason’, ‘point’), but expresses one of its secondary meanings (‘quarrel’, ‘debate’, ‘disagreement’).

It is also important to note the cases of reverse interferential influence when the Russian language perceives and gradually accepts foreign elements such as ‘Bye-bye’ – the tautological conversational formula of farewell typically used in English.
Identifying the scope of similarities and differences in the use of linguistic means inherent in the native and target languages, and studying their cultural peculiarity, one can discover the areas of interference and outline the ways to overcome mistakes arising due to various types of both linguistic and linguacultural interference.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

When it comes to learning a foreign language, the mother tongue obviously affects the use of the target language [9,10,11,12]. As demonstrated by the many years of LSP teaching experience at the RUDN University, one of the efficient tools that can be used to neutralise interference is instructional translation that can be applied at all learning stages, especially at the beginner level, both in case of full overlap of meanings in the native and target languages, and in case abstract notions intrinsic to the Russian language cannot be explicitly explained. It is also important to turn to translation whenever there is a discrepancy in the scope of polysemantic words and their lexical compatibility. However, if students comprehend the meaning of the words, or if these meanings are efficiently interpreted by the teacher, translation appears to be redundant, sometimes even with terminology [13].

Linguistic properties of lexical-semantic variants of lexical units require differentiated selection of the techniques that could be applied to semantise them and determine the order of presentation of meanings at each stage of LSP teaching. Therewith, basic meanings should be studied first, while derivative meanings should be studied at a later stage with obligatory mapping of affiliations with previously learned meanings. At this stage, the integrated method can be applied, which involves selection of synonyms and antonyms, translation, structuring of phrases and sentences. When familiarising students with the associative properties of a polysemantic word, it is advisable to apply schemes and graphic demonstration tools.

The key prerequisite for successful enriching of students’ active vocabulary, prevention and elimination of interference is the system of special exercises developed based on the analysis of mistakes that students make in their oral and written tests at various learning stages. It is also important to evaluate the results of experimental work conducted.

Investigating the phenomenon of linguistic interference in the framework of LSP teaching at different levels provides an opportunity to address the issue in the most deliberate way, significantly reduce the number of mistakes arising due to interference, and improve the quality of profession-oriented communication and translation.

REFERENCES


