A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AS A TOOL OF INFORMAL LEARNING AND MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

Foreign languages have become nowadays a major social issue, an individual challenge for people wishing to enter the internationalized and rapidly changing labour market: a major challenge for nations in their attempts to regulate migration flows. In this context, an individual should speak at least one foreign language. The French language plays a vital role in the world today as it is spoken on all continents by about 274 million people. It is one of the six official and one of the two working languages of the United Nations, as well as the official or working language of several international or regional organizations, including the European Union. The French-speaking community symbolizes cultural, linguistic and political diversity. Preserving this plurality is a challenge today. In this context, appeared the idea to create a French-speaking environment uniting French citizens, nationals of former French colonies, students and pupils, studying the French language as well as foreign students from European countries speaking French as a foreign language - the French-Russian Friendship Club « POCIDELKI » of RUDN University which embodies the values mentioned above. The French-speaking area of POCIDELKI has become a place of exchange and intercultural dialogue in a non-French speaking area. In this article the authors analyze the role of the French language aimed at communication between students, representing different countries, cultures, societies and religions. The object of the article is to prove that studying a foreign language in an informal atmosphere in a multicultural club can be very effective. The authors implement the comparative analysis and other empiric methods of quantitative estimation.

Keywords: multicultural education, informal learning, pedagogical innovation, intercultural communication.

1 INTRODUCTION

It is useful to understand different steps of the evolution of French-speaking community. There is a historical and cultural difference between a language used for international communication and language used for the expansion and cohesion of an empire. It should be noted that the status of languages in the knowledge society of the 21st century takes on a new place in relation to the status it used to have until the 1980s. Many people have the natural intuition that learning a language can not be limited by the school context, because speakers are expected to have real communication skills, which are difficult to acquire in a guided environment. At the same time the French language is not only a communication tool but also conveys the values of tolerance, openness and solidarity being a living testimony of French culture. Learning French helps to form individuals and contributes to personal development through the acquisition of the universal principles of intercultural dialogue.

According to V.T. Klokov [1] when we speak about the French language and we want to specify its different statuses depending on whether we are at one place or another of the globe, it is necessary above all to concentrate on ethnolinguistic, ethnocultural and culturo-linguistic specificity to identify the society and particularity of French-speaking countries.

Thus by ethnocultural identification we understand the awareness of the belonging of individuals to a defined group, which has a history, a culture and a language of its own; by ethnolinguistic identification - the awareness of a group of people that they belong to an ethnic group determined by the use of one language or another; by cultural-linguistic identification - the awareness of an individual and a society to belong to the culture of the language they use. From this point of view and on the basis of these criteria, we can say that within the framework of the French-speaking community there are many ethnic groups each having a different and particular history with specific cultures and a diversity of languages. On the other hand, the appearance of community of the French-speaking countries of Europe, America, Africa, Asia, Indian territories and Oceania, the presence in these countries of a certain status of the French language and a common culture allows us to speak of a cultural-linguistic
identification of several peoples belonging to different national groups. If one follows this point of view expressed by Klokov V.T. in his book "French in Africa", the French-speaking community is a result defined by the cultural and linguistic identification of the society and the individuals at the international level.

2 METHODOLOGY

The authors have used different Russian and foreign sources dedicated to the mentality studies, the attempts to trace the post-colonial state of the countries and especially of peoples’ mind disturbed by the foreign influence of the French language and its expansion. Other online materials, articles and lectures of well-known analytics discussing the double effect of the linguistic impact were taken into consideration.

Along with general research methods (generalization, observation, commenting, comparative analysis etc.) and statistical methods this research also includes surveying. Students of different origins were asked to answer questions concerning the foundation of a special speaking space that helps to create a comfortable atmosphere and motivates the students to speak the foreign language they study. As the survey was aimed at studying the POCIDELKI community, the respondents who took part in the survey were both interested in the French- and Russian-speaking environment as the POCIDELKI community was created as a Russian-French friendship club. It was interesting to find out whether the French language is considered to be the foreign one or the native one by the respondents, whether a “True Frenchman” or a “True Frenchwoman” is the one who just acts to promote the universal values that can be transmitted with the French language or is it somebody who has the French citizenship.

For you French is

- a foreign language
- native language
- second native language
- a language having good prospects
- a language that helps to transmit human values

1. Who would you call a “True Frenchman” or a “True Frenchwoman”?  
   - a person having French citizenship
   - a French speaking person
   - somebody who acts to promote the French culture

2. Do you think it is important to create a French-speaking space like POCIDELKI in a country where French has the status of a foreign language?  
   - yes
   - no
   - difficult for me to say

   If you gave a negative of an indefinite answer to the question above, please go to question 4.

3. If you do then what should its activity be aimed at?  
   (please enumerate the kinds of activities in written or oral form)

4. When you come to POCIDELKI meetings, what do you appreciate most  
   - cultural exchange
   - language practice

5. Who do you think should suggest topics for discussion?  
   - French speaking members
   - Russian speaking members
6. Do you think it is important to create a Russian community in a country where Russian has the status of a foreign language?

- yes
- no
- not so sure

3 RESULTS

Boutros Boutros-Ghali said that “the French-speaking community was born of a desire felt outside France”. The idea of creating a space where French would appear as the main tool of intercultural communication was one day born at the Russian University of Peoples’ Friendship. Bringing together 154 nations, the University promotes cultural and linguistic diversity. The French language occupies an important place among the foreign languages taught at the RUDN University. At the same time, the number of French-speaking nationals who come to study at this university is quite important. Once in Russia foreign students face adaptation in a foreign country and mastery of the Russian language is one of the first skills to acquire. However, to allow a successful adaptation, it seems necessary to create an atmosphere that can be perceived by most foreigners as convivial, which would make them want, first of all, to adapt to new living conditions such as climate, the differences of the educational system, housing at the university residence, the character of Russian people often severe at first sight. Representatives of foreign countries find themselves out of place. From the French point of view, the perception that the Russians have of France can be very interesting. Little by little the discussion begins and one can understand then that many have a particular sensitivity towards this country. Often it is a very pronounced attraction for French art: music, literature, cinema. Many students explain: “I chose the French language because it is very beautiful and I like how it sounds”. For a very long time, fluency in the French language was considered a sign of belonging to the nobility and the cultural elite in Russia. With the installation of “the Iron Curtain”, the Russian people learned to appreciate everything that was related to the foreigner, especially France, instead of valuing the culture, history and language of their own country. Today access to the outside world is allowed, but representatives of a foreign culture are often viewed and judged on the basis of the clichés that were formed during the Soviet era.

In this context, the idea of the creation of a Francophone space was born. It includes:

- Nationals of metropolitan France
- Nationals of French-speaking countries-former French colonies
- Students (pupils), studying French
- Foreign students from European countries speaking French as a foreign language.
- Foreign students from the CIS countries speaking French as a foreign language.

This space was named the French-Russian Friendship Club POCIDELKI where:

- The idea of a friendship club goes hand in hand with the values that are at the root of the creation of the Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia which houses this French-speaking community, and which fits well with the fundamental principles of the International Organization of the French-speaking country.
- The club is considered French-Russian because of the languages that are used by the participants.
- The word “POCIDELKI” was initially translated into French as “RETRouvAILLES” (get-together) but finally the Russian version was borrowed without translation because this notion remains specific to Russian culture and can be seen as a “contextual loan” that foreign participants use themselves by mentioning the activity of the club in question.

The activities carried out in the group are very diverse.

1. Activities that aim to bring foreign students closer to Russian culture, which will enable them to better adapt to life in Moscow, to motivate them to learn and improve the Russian language.
2 The discovery of the different cultures of the French-speaking countries in the form of presentations made by the French-speaking members of the POCIDELKI club. Any presentation is followed by a translation into the Russian language which allows the students to train in the interpreting.

3 The discovery of Russia - trips outside Moscow.

4 Cooperation and exchange with the various institutions aiming to promote the French-speaking world in Russia.

5 Bilingual discussions that aim to allow an exchange of points of view, the practice of language (French and Russian), reflection, communication between participants.

6 Cooperation with Russian schools (master-class to promote the French language and to allow students to get an idea of the French-speaking community. This also allows members of the club to know the atmosphere of Russian schools)

7 Scientific activity

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8 The activity of the Franco-Russian Friendship Club POCIDELKI on social networks

- Open Group Vkontakte (103 members)
- Group with limited access on Facebook (166 members)
- WhatsApp Group (143 members)

Communication platforms are a global growing trend. On one hand, the Whatsapp discussion group offers a simple and convenient means of communication between the different members of the group. It is through Whatsapp that the group is animated in the most direct way. A continuous sharing of information, exchanges as much cultural as personal, allow to organize the weekly activities, to know the opinion of the participants and their availability for the good progress of these. In this way, WhatsApp helps to strengthen friendships in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere full of spontaneous exchanges and almost daily.

On the other hand, Facebook allows us to promote POCIDELKI's own events, but also to communicate on more official events that take place in additional platforms but always close to our interests such as projection of films, exhibitions, concerts, festivals, etc.

4 CONCLUSIONS

During our research, we noticed three trends that illustrate the willingness of Russian and French-speaking students to improve their knowledge of the French language and the culture of French-speaking countries:

1 Russian students start studying the French language outside the university, they learn the grammar rules and the vocabulary in a complementary way to the courses and then use their knowledge during the exchanges with the French-speaking students.

2 Russian students actively consult with Francophones about the language and culture of the countries they represent and whom we are fortunate to welcome.

3 French-speaking students in turn try to use their knowledge of the Russian language and do not hesitate to seek advice from the Russians about how to use a particular word or grammatical construction correctly.

By participating in various discussions on any type of subject Russian students can acquire the skills that will enable them to be successful in disciplines such as journalism, interpretation, translation, linguistics, intercultural communication. The idea that emerges from these meetings is not to find a conclusion to all these discussions. On the contrary, it’s is the exchange with others, the opening of the world and its culture that matter and that happens thanks to the use of the French language.

At RUDN University we managed to create the "free space" where students have an opportunity to practice the language in an informal atmosphere which could allow them to better integrate into the existing Francophone space and to cross the language barrier that we all have from the beginning of the study of this or that language. In our opinion, meetings of this type help students to start speaking much more quickly and to overcome the difficulties of the language thanks to the presence of an informal atmosphere where no one obliges them, for example, to follow the grammatical rules. Moreover, the conversation with student-speakers of the same age is more relaxed than with the teachers, during which students are often afraid to make mistakes and sometimes can not express themselves because of their fear of receiving a bad grade.

From this point of view, it can be concluded that Russian and French-speaking students not only improve their knowledge of the language, but also gain the ability to explain their thoughts, by confronting the rules of their mother tongues and confronting the representatives of different peoples and nations.

The survey presented in the upper part of the article was also suggested to the representatives of different cultures and different nations present at the International multicultural festival traditionally organized at Peoples` friendship university of Russia on the 1st of May. In 2019 France finally took part in this beautiful event, although the people acting to represent the French culture were of double
origin mostly whereas the metropolitan French students only came to enjoy the process. This event was considered by the authors of this article as a perfect occasion to carry on the survey.

All categories of POCIDELKI members became subject to the survey

- Nationals of metropolitan France
- Nationals of French-speaking countries-former French colonies
- Students (pupils), studying French
- Foreign students from European countries speaking French as a foreign language.
- Foreign students from the CIS countries speaking French as a foreign language.

The survey results state as follows:

- Most part of the respondents find that a “True Frenchman” or a “True Frenchwoman” is the one who acts to promote the French culture (80%), whereas this person doesn’t have to be a French citizen (5%)
- All categories consider it important to create a French speaking space in the country where French has the status of a foreign language (90%). The same result was obtained in the question related to the Russian community abroad (100%)
- As far as the preferences for the discussion topics are concerned, 50% of the respondents find that both French speaking and Russian speaking members of the POCIDELKI group should put forward their ideas, and in some cases (40%) topics should be suggested by the discussion manager.
- Both cultural and linguistic aspects are of great importance to the POCIDELKI members (50%
50%). The result given above proves that any kind of extra activity between French speaking students/pupils is of great value and helps to create the necessary atmosphere that eases the stress and brings about the communication flow that is indispensable and motivates to study the language and be able to express his or her ideas.

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