

Challenges in teaching business Russian to advanced learners: a case-study

Abstract

The paper will examine problems associated with teaching Business Russian to Advanced Learners at Regent's University London and identify appropriate methodology and techniques to address them. According to CEFR for Languages, advanced learners are those who have achieved 'effective operational proficiency' (C1) or 'mastery of proficiency' (C2). It means that these learners should 'understand a wide range of demanding longer texts and recognise implicit meaning and also express their ideas fluently and spontaneously' (C1) or 'understand virtuously everything heard or read with ease and be able to summarise information from different spoken and written sources' (C2). Typically, advanced learners of Russian at Regent's University struggle to fulfil most of the above criteria, for a variety of reasons: (1) students are deemed to have become advanced learners after returning from their SPA (Study Period Abroad) in Russia, but sometimes the SPA has an effect of lowering the students' overall level of the competence; (2) the 'advanced learners' do not properly understand more complex grammatical phenomena and are unable to use complex grammatical constructions, e.g. participles, gerunds, numerals; (3) they fail to acquire political vocabulary, to enable them to understand or summarise political or business news; (4) their speaking skills are inadequate; (5) they generally lack motivation to achieve a genuine advanced level in Russian language; (6) they lack effective strategies to enable them to learn a foreign language in an organised manner; (7) their writing skills are weak, especially for academic and business purposes. The paper will also provide a detailed overview of the grammatical phenomena necessary at this level of language proficiency as well as practical examples of exercises designed to achieve it.

Keywords: problems, teaching, business, Russian, learners, Regent's university, London, methodology, techniques

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Introduction

In this case-study we will look at a problem we often encounter at Regent's University London, in connection with Level 6 learners of Business Russian. Level 6 is the highest level of language proficiency within the university language programme, and it is designed for those students who have completed three semesters of learning the Russian language and have spent a one-year Student Period Abroad in Russia. We have decided to base our case-study on the latest (4th) edition of J. Biggs and C. Tang's book *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* as we consider this work to be the most comprehensive study of teaching and learning at university level. Our task, therefore, will be to compare our own approaches to teaching and learning with those offered by Biggs and Tang. We will also analyse the concept of 'constructive alignment' – the central theme of Biggs and Tang's work and explain how we use this concept in our teaching.

According to Biggs and Tang, 'In constructive alignment we systematically align the teaching/learning activities, as well as the assessment tasks, to the intended learning outcomes'.¹ We will attempt to follow this principle, but first, we will look at the Level 6 Module's Intended Outcomes:

A. Knowledge and understanding: At the end of the module, learners will be expected to:

A13: be able to demonstrate critical knowledge and understanding of the contemporary economic, socio-political, and cultural dynamics of the country or countries where the foreign language is spoken, and their relation to wider international developments;

B. Cognitive skills: At the end of the module, learners will be expected to:

- i. B13: be able to critically analyse and evaluate models and concepts within international business
- ii. B15: be able to integrate and evaluate complex information and data from a variety of sources;

C. Practical and professional skills: At the end of the module, learners will be expected to:

C14: be able to use the target language(s) competently and effectively as a medium for understanding, expression and communication in professional and social situations;

D. Key Transferable skills: At the end of the module, learners will be expected to:

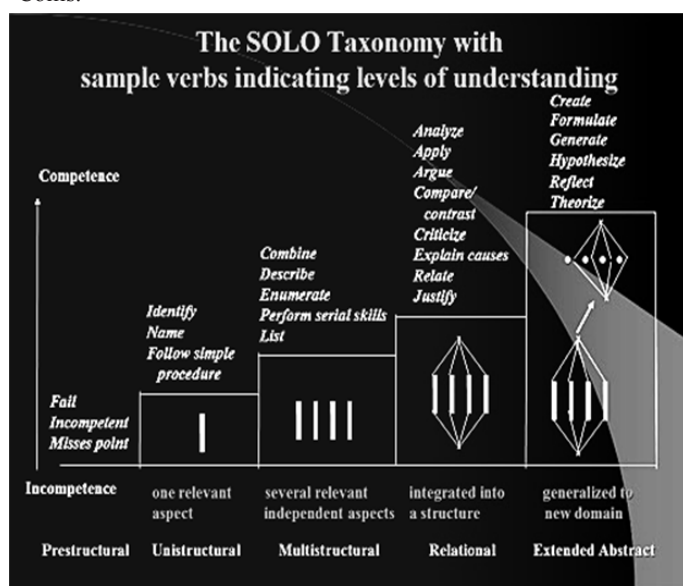
D13: be able to show evidence of learner autonomy, continuing professional development and commitment to lifelong learning in a self-reflective manner.

Unfortunately, the Level 6 students who return from their SPA (Student Period Abroad) in Russia typically struggle to demonstrate the above Intended Outcomes. Here is the list of their deficiencies:

- i. They have not properly understood the more complex grammatical phenomena and are unable to use complex grammatical constructions with participles, gerunds or numerals;
- ii. They fail to acquire a political vocabulary to enable them to understand or summarise political or business news;

- iii. Their speaking skills are inadequate owing to the lack of practice both here and during their SPA in Russia;
- iv. They generally lack motivation to achieve a genuine advanced level in the Russian language;
- v. They have no effective learning strategies to enable them to learn a foreign language effectively;
- vi. Their cognitive skills appear to be very weak, especially for academic and business purposes.

In order to identify the Level 6 students' cognitive skills more precisely, we will examine the SOLO (The Structure of Observed Learning Outcome) taxonomy diagram, first developed by Biggs and Collis.²



According to Biggs's taxonomy diagram, the Level 6 students can, at best, be placed only at Level 3; here, students can 'pick several aspects (of the task) but they are unrelated'.¹ The operative list of verbs appropriate to that level combine, describe, enumerate, perform serial skills, list describe precisely the Level 6 students' cognitive skills, whereas, at the very least, their language skills should correspond to Level 4, described by Biggs as the level at which students learn how 'to integrate (aspects of the task) in a whole (relational)'.ⁱⁱ The verbs pertinent to this level analyse, apply, argue, compare, contrast, criticize, explain causes, relate, justify cannot, unfortunately, be applied to the Level 6 students. In other words, the Level 6 students' cognitive skills are still quite low.^{3,4}

In this case-study we analyse and explain the above-mentioned weaknesses often demonstrated by Regent's University advanced learners of Russian and then present an appropriate methodology and the techniques we use to enable these students to achieve the intended outcomes. The case-study will also include both practical examples of learning activities designed to achieve the above-mentioned objectives, and samples of the formative assessments aimed at measuring the students' performance against the intended learning outcomes. To begin with, we would like to mention the issue of student diversity at Regent's University London. We have students here from all over

of the world, and this ethnic diversity creates additional problems in the classroom with regard to the learner's learning perspective – i.e. what the student intends to learn – and also with regard to the learner's learning strategies and style of learning. But, according to Biggs and Tang, 'teaching that engages students' learning activities appropriately minimizes differences of ethnicity between students as far as learning itself is concerned'.ⁱⁱⁱ To engage Regent's University Level 6 students' learning activities in such a way as to allow them to achieve the intended outcomes, we first try to motivate them by giving them tasks they consider meaningful. As Biggs and Tang state.^{iv}

Nobody wants to do something they see as worthless. Neither do they want to do something, however valued, if they believe they have no chance of succeeding. In both cases, doing the task will be a waste of time.⁵

For our students, a meaningful task is the one that teaches them transferable skills they will be able to use in their future work. This can be writing a summary of the news they listen to using their individual wikis, presenting a case-study in class, doing an assignment on fractional numbers, or taking part in the 'Discussion Boards' where they write comments on a statement placed there by the lecturer. Later we will show examples of the tasks we offer our students but before doing so we would like to concentrate on two concepts introduced by Biggs and Tang. The first concept concerns surface and deep approaches to learning, and the second concerns two kinds of knowledge – declarative and functioning knowledge. According to Biggs and Tang, the surface approach includes:^v

Rote learning selected content instead of understanding it, padding an essay, listing points instead of addressing an argument, quoting secondary references as if they were primary ones -the list is endless.⁶

In our teaching practice we often come across a surface approach to learning when, for example, students learn by heart the news report they are going to present in class without understanding its grammatical structure, or when they compile vocabulary lists leaving nouns, adjectives, verbs etc. in the forms first encountered in the text and memorized in this way. On the other hand, according to Biggs and Tang, a deep approach to learning, as opposed to a surface approach 'stems, from the student's side, from an intention to engage the task meaningfully and appropriately and from the teacher's side, from teaching in a such a way as to explicitly bring out the structure of the topic or subject'.^{vi} For us 'to explicitly bring out the structure of the topic or subject' means first teaching our students learning strategies. For example, a learning strategy for the preparation of a news report will involve instructing students to:

- a. Look up all unfamiliar words in the dictionary and enter these into their vocabulary books, ensuring that the words are recorded in all their dictionary forms, i.e. Nouns and adjectives are recorded in the singular and in the nominative case (the latter in the masculine gender), verbs – in the infinitive form etc.;
- b. Convert the words you want to enter a vocabulary list into their dictionary forms;
- c. Translate into english all idiomatic expressions;
- d. Find correct english equivalents for all russian proper names so

ⁱⁱⁱBiggs J, Tang C. *Teaching for Quality learning at University*. 2011. p. 5.

^{iv}*ibid.*, p. 35.

^v*ibid.*, p. 24.

^{vi}*ibid.*, pp. 26, 27.

¹Biggs J. *SOLO Taxonomy*; see <<http://www.johnbiggs.com.au/>>. 2019.

ⁱⁱ*ibid.*; see <<http://www.johnbiggs.com.au/>>. 2019

that, for example, the German city which is known in Russian as 'Кёльн' will be translated back into English as 'Cologne', or the Russian 'Крым' will be properly translated into English as 'the Crimea';

- e. Identify the main idea of the news item and shorten it using a special procedure;
- f. Compile a list of useful political and economic vocabulary for the class;
- g. Follow instructions on how to begin and end a news report.

The second concept analysed by Biggs and Tang, the concept of declarative and functioning knowledge, is also extremely relevant to our teaching. According to Biggs and Tang, 'declarative knowledge refers to knowing about things. It is public knowledge subject to rules of evidence that make it verifiable, replicable and logically consistent'.^{vii} Of course, declarative knowledge is important for language learning especially at lower levels, where students need to learn facts about the country whose language they are learning (in this case Russia) or where they need to memorise grammar rules, vocabulary lists etc.; however, our ultimate aim is to equip the Level 6 students with a higher level knowledge, the functioning one. Biggs and Tang give such a definition of the functioning knowledge:^{viii}

Functioning knowledge is the knowledge that informs action, where the performance is underpinned by understanding. The learner does not only receive pre-existing knowledge but is actively involved in putting knowledge to work; if declarative knowledge is steered internally to the learner, as it were, functioning knowledge travels externally. Returning to Biggs' SOLO taxonomy diagram, we see that functioning knowledge corresponds to its 'Extended Abstract' Level 5, where such verbs as create, formulate, generate, theorize, hypothesize, reflect are appropriate, in other words, corresponding to the cognitive skills of the higher order.⁷⁻¹⁰

Why functioning knowledge is so important to the Level 6 students is discussed below:

Here are illustrations: Level 6 students need to know how to use Russian numerals (especially fractions) or how to convert participial constructions into the relative clauses and vice versa in order to take part in business negotiations and be able to read and understand reports with numerical data, as well as give presentations containing numerals. They also need this sort of functional knowledge in order to understand the content of the contract they are about to sign. To equip our students with a functional knowledge of the Russian language, we have devised several learning activities which serve this purpose. For example, we have created individual wikis for them on a VLE 'Blackboard' where they write summaries of the news they have listened to. We also involve them in discussion using another VLE tool 'Discussion Boards', where they write comments on a statement provided by the teacher and the other students. These learning activities encourage students to create, formulate, generate, theorize, hypothesize, reflect, in other words, to use their functioning knowledge which, according to Biggs, corresponds to an Extended Abstract Level of cognition. Here is a statement on advertising in the Soviet Union and in the post-Soviet era and the comments of two students (their mistakes are underlined).

The statement

Advertising was superfluous in the Soviet Union as there was a deficit of everything – of clothes, shoes, food, consumer goods, etc. But after the collapse of the Soviet Union the advertising business has blossomed. Why do you think advertising existed in the Soviet Union despite its irrelevance and why did it become necessary after the collapse of the Soviet Union?

The first student's comment

In Russia, the theme of advertisement it was very important because it is different before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The population were not rich enough to buy products that have been announced at this period. Only the political elite could allow it some products. However, advertisements are still there, in order to make people to believe these products existed. The authorities were forced to continue advertising products to keep up with this picture.¹¹

The second student's comment

Advertisement was indeed an important feature in the Soviet Union, but for different reasons than after the country's collapse in 1991. Most of the population could not afford the advertised luxury items, and these advertisements were aimed at the political elite. Nevertheless, advertisement was deemed essential to convince the people at large that these items were generally available.¹²

We can see that the first student made many syntactic and grammar mistakes whereas the second one's comment is grammatically and syntactically correct. Obviously, the latter's functional knowledge is much better than that of the first. In other words, the first student has a surface approach to language learning whereas the second has a deep approach. So, the question arises as to how to help students change their surface approach to learning into a deep one so that they can develop and consolidate their functioning knowledge. The answer, we think, lies in the recommendation made by Biggs and Tang, namely in the encouragement of a deep approach to learning. According to Biggs and Tang,^{ix} factors that encourage students to adopt such an approach include, from the teacher's side:

- i. Teaching to elicit an active response from students, e.g. by questioning, presenting problems for them to solve, rather than teaching to expound information;
- ii. Teaching by building on what students already know;
- iii. Teaching and assessing in such a way that encourages a positive learning atmosphere, so that students can make mistakes and learn from them.

In following these recommendations the teacher endeavours to help the Level 6 students adopt a deep approach to learning when they participate in the Discussion Boards forums by:

- a. Discussing with them their mistakes;
- b. Asking them to make corrections which involves re-writing those sentences which contain mistakes;
- c. Asking them to paraphrase and re-write their comments;
- d. Uploading a new statement on the same topic in the discussion boards forum and asking them to comment on it;

^{vii} *ibid.*, p. 81.

^{viii} *ibid.*, p. 82

^{ix} *ibid.*, p. 27

- e. Discussing all the comments in class;
- f. Asking them to give feedback on the comments made by their fellow students.

We finish our case-study with an example of a formative assessment aimed at measuring the students' performance against the intended outcomes. In this case we wanted to measure their functioning knowledge of Russian fractions. This assessment was offered to the students after a two-week engagement in several learning activities on this topic. Here, it would be useful to review some of the principles of aligning assessment tasks with the intended outcomes identified by Biggs and Tang. These are:^x

- a. What and how students learn depends to a major extent on how they think they will be assessed.
- b. Assessment practices must send the right signals to students about what they should be learning and how they should be learning it.
- c. The underlying principle is that the assessment tasks should comprise an authentic representation of the course intended learning outcomes.

Here is an example of the formative assessment test on fractional numerals based on the above principles:

Task: Write fractions as words in the correct cases in the spaces provided.

- i. The trading session on the Russian stock market ended with a slight increase in the main indices. The MICEX rose 0.17% _____ to the level of 1498.97 _____ points.
- ii. 2 The RTS index increased by the end of the trading session by 0.3% _____ to 1535.73 _____ points.
- iii. The trading volume for the day amounted to 358.1 _____ billion rub.
- iv. In December 2012, the situation on the Greek labor market improved slightly: the unemployment rate dropped to 26.4% _____ against the revised value for the previous month at 26.6%.^{13–15}

Conclusions

In order to enable Level 6 students to demonstrate the Intended Outcomes, it is necessary to organise teaching in such a way as to encourage a deep approach to learning which, in its turn, will lead to the acquisition of functioning knowledge. This will mean that the students will have achieved an 'extended abstract' Level 5 according to Biggs's SOLO taxonomy diagram, i.e. a level at which they can make connections not only within the given subject area but also beyond it and are able to generalise and transfer principles and ideas into a broader context. In other words, they will have acquired transferable skills that they will be able to use in their future employment and in life in general.

^x*ibid.*, p.190.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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