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The Russian Language in Modern Scientific and Educational Environment
TEACHING RUSSIAN PHONETICS WITH HELP OF MOUTH
HARP MUSICAL INSTRUMENT

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Abstract

Teaching Russian phonetics has always been a challenge for teachers of Russian as a foreign language. Articulatory differences between sounds of native and Russian languages, pronunciation training, internalization of sound patterns of the target language imply comprehensive efforts that can be aided by various musical instruments. The purpose of this study is to identify key phonetic issues for students from China and South Korea and to overcome such issues with help of a Yakut traditional musical instrument, a variety of mouth harp. Methodological background of the study includes a comparison of phonetic structure of languages, observation, examination, and generalization of personal experience of teaching in a non-native speaking audience. The study involved 250 international students of the Foundation Department of Ammosov North-Eastern Federal University. In the course of work, students performed various phonetic exercises using mouth harp. The results of the study indicate a positive trend in acquisition of Russian sounds by non-native speakers. It resulted in clear pronunciation of individual sounds and complex combinations with double vowels, as well as in distinguishing between voiceless/voiced consonants by ear, and in enhanced number and quality of pronounced words and phrases. The obtained results were structured to elaborate a range of mouth harp exercises for practicing sounds that represent a difficulty for non-native speakers. This allowed to consider the opportunities of using the musical instrument in techniques of teaching Russian as a foreign language more broadly. Such opportunities lie in cultivating imagination and ear for music in students, while removing intercultural barriers.

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1. Introduction

New educational traditions that improve learning process, combine audio and video, and involve participants in the process to the fullest extent are assuming special importance in methods of teaching Russian as a foreign language. The following contemporary researchers have addressed phonetic aspect of the Russian language in non-native speaking audiences: Bryzgunova (1977), Barhudarova (2015), Balykhina et al. (2015), He, Sin'sin (2018), Loginova (1997), Shutova & Orekhova (2018), Yang Fang (2014), and others. Levi wrote that “a comprehensive solution of practical, educational, and developmental problems of learning is possible only if, in addition to students' consciousness, their emotions are also involved” (Levi, 1966, p. 58). In this regard, various musical instruments are becoming important tools in methods of teaching methods of teaching Russian as a foreign language RFL. Scientists claim that music and phonetics are related. It is no coincidence that it was addressed in scientific works by Graf (1994), Il'enko (2006), Zubareva (2014) and others. However, the mentioned studies did not consider local aspects, in particular, the use of specific regional musical instruments in teaching Russian phonetics to non-native speakers.

2. Problem Statement

The study is based on the author's experience of teaching Russian as a foreign language to international students at Ammosov North-Eastern Federal University of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia). The university has many overseas students, also from China and South Korea. This is because “the Russian language has always been carrying out its mission, uniting, developing, strengthening, shaping” (Strel'chuk & Shaklein, 2018, p. 15). Non-native speakers decide to live and study in Russia, expanding their knowledge of culture, life, and mentality of Russia's people through linguistic environment. This allows them to practice speaking and writing on a daily basis. Conservative decision-making yields results over time, but they are not comparable to continuous search for new solutions in domain of the RFL methods.

There is a need to tailor a system of exercises for non-native speakers to master the phonetics of the Russian language. The system is based on the use of a Yakut traditional instrument – khomus mouth harp. Many peoples of the world have their own similar musical instruments (for example, marranzano in Italy, morchang in India).

3. Research Questions

It stands to mention that the Russian language is not genetically related to the native languages of Chinese and Korean students, and phonetics of the Russian language has two sides: perceptual and productive, which makes it more difficult for international students to quickly absorb phonetic material. This is expressed in an ability to simultaneously identify a sound by ear, and to be able to reproduce this sound. “Auditory-speaking skills are automated auditory and speech-motor operations that provide both perception and implementation of units of different levels of phonological component of a given language in accordance with its standard” (Lyubimova, 2006, p. 270). In the process of mastering oral speech,

international students should gradually learn the elements of articulatory movements, learn to control their speech organs, and feel how they change their positions (Shcherbatyuk, 2019, p. 80).

In a situation when speakers of such languages as Korean and Chinese are in the same classroom, it is difficult for a teacher to find a universal set of tools and techniques for teaching Russian phonetics. To this end, we find it necessary to focus on the issues of teaching phonetics to non-native speakers in terms of shared points and differences in phonetic systems of the languages. Since classes on pronunciation are a teamwork of students and a teacher, it would be advisable for an RFL teacher to take into account the peculiarities of the students' native language in order to achieve an effective result.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify key phonetic issues for students from China and South Korea and to overcome them with help of Yakut mouth harp musical instrument. This scientific fact served as the basis for undertaking a teaching experiment involving students from China and South Korea.

5. Research Methods

The study involved methods of theoretical analysis of literature on RFL teaching techniques, observational method, which included continuous observation of international students' learning process, as well as method of experimental pedagogical research, thanks to which the opportunities of using mouth harp musical instrument in RFL lessons have been revealed.

6. Findings

Within scope of methodical guidelines for teaching RFL, there are works focused on teaching Russian phonetics to the Chinese and Koreans (Bykova, 2016; Gulimire & Titkova, 2018). But they lack a comparative aspect, i.e., they suggest how to teach phonetics to either the Chinese or Koreans. Based on the sources studied and on own experience of work in a multinational audience, we shall further consider examples that illustrate similarities and differences of the above languages.

To begin with, in Chinese and Korean languages consonants are aspirated. For instance, the Russian [g] sound is aspirated with the sound [x], resulting in [gx] and [kx]. In view of this, Chinese and Korean students face a challenge in distinguishing Russian voiced/voiceless consonants. This was mentioned by Strelchuk: "At phonetics and phonology level, the following features can be identified in speech of Chinese students. For example: nondistinction of voiced/voiceless consonants: gruba (instead of gruppa; group), tratitsia (instead of traditsia; tradition), etc." (Strel'chuk, 2014, p. 240). Also, non-native speakers find it difficult to pronounce the [r] sound, combining it with the [l] sound, and ultimately pronouncing something in between [l] and [r], sometimes even a [z] as in Chinese language.

Such phonetic errors are understood by Kolesnikova (2018) «as articulation errors (not modifying the meaning of a word) that result from phonetic interference or phonetic negligence, showcasing insufficient phonetic skills in the studied language» (p. 127).

We should mention the following mistakes made by both Korean and Chinese students. This is “insertion or omission of individual sounds (phonemes): unyi (umnyi; smart), sypasibo (spasibo; thank you)” (Strel’chuk, 2014, p. 240). The Korean language does not allow an accumulation of consonants at the beginning of a word, so Koreans pronounce the word stop as sytkhop with an aspiration. The above examples prove that the influence of the vowel harmony law in Korean and Chinese languages complicates learning of the Russian language. “Hence the non-distinction of [l]-[r], [ts]-[s], [i]-[i]: K[l]asnaya p[r]oshchad’ (Krasnaya ploshchad’; the Red Square); b[i]l (bil; was)” (Strel’chuk, 2014, p. 240).

In addition to common typical difficulties, the Chinese face several pronunciation problems. Based on our observations, it can be argued that in the Chinese language there is a sound standing in between [z] and [i], similar to the Russian [i] vowel, which has similar features. Therefore, Chinese students pronounce [i] based on the Chinese version of this sound.

A distinctive pronunciation problem among Korean students is a habitual (as in the Korean language) softening of all consonant sounds of the Russian language. In our opinion this is due to the fact that Korean alphabet consists of consonants that do not have hard and soft versions. For example, the word shkola (school) is pronounced by a Korean student as [ɛ:kolʰa], and shokolad (chocolate) as [ɛ:akalʰat] or [ʰeakalʰat].

Thus, we have identified certain phonetic difficulties faced by Chinese and Korean students. In order to resolve them and make the process of learning the Russian language interesting and learner-friendly, we decided to invite the students’ attention to the regional culture.

In order to acquaint students with ethnic aspects, materials about Yakutia, its ethnic traditions, and the culture of the Sakha people were presented at the RFL classes. The students visited museums, including the Museum of Khomus. As a local souvenir from the museum international students bought a khomus – musical instrument handmade by Yakut metalsmiths, preserving ancient traditions. This instrument sparked interest among students. As a result, an idea came up to use this Yakut instrument to teach non-native speakers the sounds of the Russian language.

In Russia khomus is most commonly known as vargan (mouth harp). This is one of the oldest musical and ritual instruments of the Sakha people.

It has a ‘cosmic’ sound that covers a wide sounding range: since ancient times it has been considered an instrument of the Yakut shamans. Despite its small size, it can produce mesmerizing sounds that mainly imitate sounds of nature and animals, tunes of the traditional epic songs. (Puteshestvie po Yakutii, 2019)

We turned our attention to the hidden possibilities of this musical instrument, which, from our point of view, is capable of stimulating the work of human articulatory organs, thereby, making it possible to easily reproduce the most complex sounds. In contemporary musical world, terms “khomus therapy”, “mouth harp meditation” are becoming popular; thanks to special vibrations khomus music has an ability to penetrate deep enough to touch the most subtle heartstrings of an individual. Further we shall consider its action from the point of view of improving articulation skills of non-native speakers.

In the process of playing, mouth harp (khomus) is pressed against teeth, and larynx serves as a resonator. Changing the articulation of speech organs and breathing allows to change the timbre of a sound wave. In addition, new tones of sound can be obtained by changing the position of diaphragm, as well as by numerous pharyngeal, laryngeal, lingual, labial, and other methods of sound production. Herewith, an individual must be aware of which parts of speech organs interact to produce a particular sound. We assume that practicing the most difficult Russian sounds like “r” and “l” with help of khomus will be more effective than intuitive onomatopoeia and repeating after a teacher. We also believe that this type of exercise will train and enhance activity, flexibility, and speed of the tongue movement, which will allow to pronounce and combine sounds of varying complexity.

Further we will describe the technique of working with mouth harp. First of all, students need to be taught how to fix the instrument in their teeth and feel the position of their lips and tongue. We explain this at the first lesson and help each student to hold the instrument correctly and produce some sounds.

The next step is training how to breathe correctly while playing mouth harp, as well as how to control breathing. To do this, one should learn to control the flow of exhaled air. For example, one needs to inhale some air and exhale it in portions, as if having previously divided it into parts. As a rule, we start this exercise with two breath-outs per one breath-in. After that, the number of exhaled portions should be increased up to six. We demonstrate it to each student individually.

After students have learned how to hold the instrument and breathe correctly, they should start simple exercises, gradually moving on to more complex ones. Exercises with vowels will certainly be the simplest ones for Chinese and Korean students. Articulation of vowels is the key element of playing mouth harp. If we pronounce vowels correctly, at convergence points between them overtones emerge, which allow us to pronounce combinations of two vowels, as, for example, in the word orientatsia (orientation). First, you need to speak out loud all the vowels of the Russian alphabet, then “drawl” these sounds using the instrument, and gradually move from one sound to another in order to hear overtones. For example: [aa-uu-oo-ii-εε-ii]; [aa-oo-ao]; [aa-uu-au]; [aa-ii-ai]; [aa-εε-aε]; the main point is a smooth voiced transition from one vowel to another.

Then you can move on to drilling syllables with [j] sound. Each exercise has a name, derived from the Yakut language. This one is called “Singing Lark”. Students learn to pronounce [ja-ja, jo-jo, je-je, ju-ju]. The main point is fast pronunciation of each syllable continuously in one breath, to practice agility and flexibility of tongue. “Lark” exercise can be diversified by playing the opposite combination [aj-aj-aj]; [oj-oj-oj]; [ej-ej-ej]; [uj-uj-uj]. The tongue should move back and forth at a fast pace, without touching the hard palate.

“Gaggle” exercise is designed to practice distinguishing between hard/soft and voiced/voiceless consonants. We pronounce [g] - [ga] - [ga-ga-ga] – gora [gɔra] (mountain); [k] - [ka] - [ka-ka-ka] – kasha [kaʂɐ] (porridge). These sounds develop fine hearing, they help to learn to distinguish between voiced and voiceless consonants. Syllables are pronounced at least 6-10 times per exhalation. The key purpose of such exercises is to “stir up” the tongue, and then to achieve accuracy of pronunciation. After performing these exercises, students should pronounce these sounds and syllables without using a mouth harp.

Sound [ɣ] is trained through “Wind” exercise, which imitates the wind sound. A learner should stretch out this sound. Combined with the instrument, you can obtain a realistic wind noise. For example: [ɣ] - [ɣɣ] - [ɣu-ɣu-ɣu-ɣu] – shum [ɣum] (noise).

The next exercise is called “Wing Spread”, it involves diaphragmatic breathing. A learner inhales air using their stomach, while pronouncing the sound [t-t-t-t-t], then with help of this sound they exhale with the sound [trrrrrr], herewith, the exhaled air helps to shake up the tongue. To make the task easier, we start with the sound [t], and only after that we try to pronounce [r]. This exercise is repeated three to five times, during intervals between the exercises, students should drill it without a mouth harp.

Here we have mentioned only some of the exercises for illustration; we use a much wider range of them in the classroom. In addition to exercises, we engage students in game-learning. “Guess the Word” language game is aimed at developing interest in the Russian language and removing psychological issues faced when studying Russian sounds. Students are given the following task: “Pronounce Russian words clearly and correctly with a mouth harp so that your partner could guess these words”. For example, a student thinks out a word tetrad’ (notebook) and pronounces it using the instrument. First, a learner can pronounce separate syllables, and then the whole word. Vocabulary can be very diverse, depending on the topic of the lesson or the topic of the game. For example, the topic is “Vegetables”, accordingly, every learner thinks of words for vegetables: p[ɐ]-mi-dor – p[ɐ]mi-dor – p[ɐ]midor (pomidor; tomato); sa-lat – salat (salad); kar-tosh-ka – kartoshka (potato). Learners are warned that the final version of the word may be distorted: it all depends on skills of using a mouth harp. As a result, tongue muscles are activated, students memorize the correct articulation of words, and lesson becomes exciting and informative.

7. Conclusion

Since international students from Korea and China prevail in the Ammosov North-Eastern Federal University, we have analyzed the difficulties they face in articulating Russian sounds and pronunciation. As a result, we have suggested a technique for studying Russian phonetics with help of a traditional mouth harp musical instrument. The data obtained during the experiment indicate that international students learn Russian phonetics better using the traditional instrument of Yakutia. It improves their auditory memory and relieves issues with pronouncing many difficult sounds, which contributes to a less-stressful psychological environment in the classroom and enhances intercultural communication between students from different countries.

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