

LATIP 2021**International Conference on Language and Technology in the Interdisciplinary Paradigm****TEACHING RUSSIAN SIGN LANGUAGE: METHODOLOGICAL
PRINCIPLES AND THEIR IMPLEMENTATION**

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Abstract

To solve the problem of establishing contacts between the Deaf and the hearing in Russia, popularization of Russian Sign Language (RSL) and training of RSL interpreters are essential. This leads to the necessity of developing an effective methodology for teaching RSL. The study involves a comparative analysis of practical and methodological textbooks for teaching American Sign Language (ASL) and RSL. The article outlines the guiding principles and recommendations for organizing and planning sign language classes. These were discovered and formulated on the basis of the abovementioned analysis, an overview of RSL classes given by the deaf teachers at Novosibirsk State Technical University (NSTU), personal consultations with the teachers; and a survey conducted among the RSL teachers and the students majoring in Linguistics and studying RSL as a second foreign language at NSTU. The main guiding principles include implementation of all classroom communication in SL; gradual development of receptive and expressive skills; presenting new lexical and grammar material in context; and other. With regard to these guidelines, an RSL training module was developed and introduced as part of “Practical course of a second foreign language” for 2nd year students majoring in RSL interpreting. The efficiency assessment of the conducted training was carried out via a post-training survey among the students and its further analysis. The survey has shown that all respondents assessed positively the content, structure and conditions of the lessons.

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1. Introduction

The implementation of full-fledged communication among Deaf people is carried out with the help of national sign languages that are independent linguistic systems and serve as the main means of communication for the Deaf. The legal status of Russian Sign Language (RSL) was established in 2012, when it was recognized as the language of communication in case of hearing and speech impairments, including the spheres of oral use of the state language of the Russian Federation. The implementation of teaching RSL is vital for solving the problem of establishing contacts between the Deaf and the hearing in Russia.

Currently, Russia lacks standardized instructions for organizing the process of teaching RSL, consequently, approaches to the learning process vary at different educational institutions. The relevance of developing an effective methodology for teaching RSL is due to the fact that most of the training courses and textbooks in Russia were focused on developing skills in “signed Russian” which follows the grammar of spoken Russian, meanwhile members of the Deaf community use RSL with its own grammatical and lexical features (Zaytseva, 2000, p. 22). As a result, students know the meaning of separate signs but do not understand the Deaf signing (Zaytseva, 2000, p. 13).

2. Problem Statement

Traditionally, one of the main goals of developing a methodology for teaching sign language is to ensure successful communication between the Deaf and hearing persons. In most cases, it is also associated with training sign language interpreters (Chow & Omar, 2019; Metzger, 2005). Currently, the most effective training of SL interpreters is carried out in the West, in some European countries and the USA. The organization of training in Russia is in many ways inferior to that of the above-mentioned countries.

In Russia, there are no unambiguous instructions for the RSL teaching implementation. Most of the teaching aids in Russia are focused on gaining the knowledge of "word – sign" correlation, regardless of the grammatical structure of RSL. Meanwhile, the Deaf use RSL with its own grammatical and lexical features. In view of this, RSL teachers of NSTU are convinced of the need to develop a different system which is based on the communicative approach and the method of immersion in the culture of the target language (Minaeva, 2017, p. 112). Thus, taking into account these perspectives we deem it necessary to develop an efficient way of RSL training planning and implementation.

3. Research Questions

- It is necessary to consider the theoretical foundations and history of teaching sign languages.
- It is crucial to study and analyze American Sign Language and Russian Sign Language textbooks.
- It is important to formulate the guiding principles for organizing RSL training.
- It is necessary to detail guidelines that will ensure the efficiency of the identified principles implementation.

- It is crucial to develop a training module in accordance with the specified guidelines.

4. Purpose of the Study

- To identify the main principles of RSL teaching process organization and detail the guidelines for implementing them.
- To develop an RSL training module.

5. Research Methods

Theoretical base of the study includes research works focusing on:

- history of teaching sign languages (Brien et al., 2002; Cokely, 2005; Geilman, 2001);
- sign language teaching methodology and guidelines for organizing the educational process (Cokely & Baker-Shenk, 1991; Minaeva, 2017; Zaytseva, 1999);
- teaching curriculum guides (Dimskis, 2002; Kamneva, 2016; Kamneva et al., 2016; Osokina, 2013; Smith et al., 2008; Zaytseva, 1999).

The study uses theoretical methods including critical analysis of scientific and methodological literature on the problem, comparative analysis of ASL and RSL textbooks.

The empirical base of the study is represented by the survey conducted among the students majoring in Linguistics and studying RSL as a second foreign language at NSTU; the survey conducted among RSL teachers of NSTU; overview of RSL classes given by deaf teachers at NSTU; pilot training; post-training survey among the students.

Statistical methods included qualitative and quantitative analysis of research results.

6. Findings

To resolve issue 3.1, we have reviewed literature focusing on the history and theoretical foundations of teaching British, American and Russian sign languages (Brien et al., 2002; Cokely, 2005; Osokina, 2014; Zaytseva, 2000). The review revealed that the need for organizing SL training in different countries was mainly related to the need for training SL interpreters. Substantial work in this field was initiated in the UK in the 1970s, which resulted in the recognition of the British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter as a separate profession. During this time, much was done in the field of teaching American Sign Language (ASL).

The problem of organizing RSL training has been an issue for a long time in Russia and former Soviet Union countries. Nevertheless, it was not given due attention. One of the reasons for that lay in the status of RSL, which was officially recognized as a language only in 2012 (Osokina, 2013). Currently, RSL interpreters are being trained in higher educational institutions in Russia. An apt example is training of RSL interpreters at Novosibirsk State Technical University (NSTU).

The traditional RSL teaching system employed to train and retrain RSL interpreters is based on spoken Russian, consequently, students mainly develop the skills in “signed Russian”, not RSL itself. However, the use of “signed Russian” does not meet the requirements of modern society, which recognizes the right of the Deaf to use their own language. In this regard, RSL teachers of NSTU consider

the training system focused on “signed Russian” as outdated due to legislative changes and experience of foreign colleagues (Minaeva, 2017, p. 112).

The methodological basis for teaching the RSL course at NSTU is the concept of students’ “immersion” in the target language. Grammar is studied mainly through practical communication in RSL, in the process of reproducing the teacher’s utterances, dialogues, and monologues. Communication between the teacher and the students is carried out in sign language. RSL should also be the mother-tongue of the teachers. The teaching staff of the RSL Department at NSTU is represented by deaf teachers and CODAs (children of deaf parents). Along with this, the practice of deaf teachers’ recruitment is not widespread in Russia.

To resolve issue 3.2, we have carried out a comparative analysis of practical textbooks and methodological guides on RSL and ASL.

To provide a more detailed review of the process of formatting and developing skills in ASL, we have analyzed the systems of exercises presented in the ASL teacher’s guide “Signing naturally. Teacher’s curriculum guide” (Smith et al., 2008), which is accompanied by a textbook for students and DVD materials. The training course is focused on achieving communicative goals in everyday interactions, and therefore the proposed units include various exercises that allow using diverse strategies for applying the knowledge gained in practice (Smith et al., 2008, p. 9). The structure of each lesson contains three main types of activities: *introduce*, *practice* and *evaluate*. In addition, there are *warm up*, *wrap up*, *homework* tasks. Vocabulary items and basic grammatical patterns are introduced through dialogues. The grammatical structures included in the course are determined by the communicative goal, accordingly, students learn grammar in the context of communication activities. Besides, the lessons presuppose emphasis on behaviour appropriate to the situations from linguistic and sociocultural points of view (Smith et al., 2008, p. 12).

In contrast, the analyzed systems of exercises from RSL textbooks (Kamneva, 2016; Osokina, 2013) are mainly based on knowledge of spoken/written Russian. They contain a large number of exercises based on textual material; vocabulary is mainly presented out of context; and there is no emphasis on the features of RSL grammar patterns, which negatively affects students’ language acquisition. This confirms the assumption that the RSL training implementation requires methodological optimization.

To identify the guiding principles ensuring the efficiency of teaching RSL we have looked deeply into implementing SL training. We have studied the methodological guidelines for teachers designed by the USA and Russian educators (Cokely & Baker-Shenk, 1991; Smith et al., 2008; Zaytseva, 1999); attended RSL classes given by the deaf teachers at NSTU, received personal consultations from the teachers; and conducted a survey among the RSL teachers and 50 students majoring in Linguistics and studying RSL as a second foreign language at NSTU. The collected data reveal that the integrity and consistency of developing skills in RSL require the fulfilment of the main principles of organizing and planning RSL classes that have been set out within the framework of the study:

- not to use the voice in class;
- to develop receptive and expressive skills in students gradually;
- to introduce new vocabulary through the meaningful context;

- to introduce exercises aimed at interactions in pairs or small groups;
- to focus on the behaviour accepted in the target culture;
- to develop non-manual marker;
- to organize students' interaction with members of the Deaf community;
- to introduce fingerspelling after at least a few lessons of the course, and others.

Within the framework of this study, we have detailed the conditions that ensure the efficiency of implementing the above stated principles for organizing RSL classes.

The implementation of all classroom communication in SL is considered as one of the most significant principles, since it is aimed at developing students' receptive and expressive skills. If the teacher uses the voice during the lesson, students are more likely to rely on their hearing ability, which negatively affects the development of signing perception. The students are to use their bodies: body language, mime and gestures if they lack the knowledge of some signs. Besides, the teacher should model the structure of SL, which fails with the simultaneous use of SL and spoken language (Cokely & Baker-Shenk, 1991, p. 34) All RSL teachers at NSTU who participated in the survey are convinced of the efficiency of organizing RSL classes without using the voice (100%). 88% of the students who participated in the survey also support this point of view, 6% of respondents do not consider this approach effective, and 6% find partial use of the voice in class acceptable or suggest replacing it with visual aids.

In case of misunderstanding among the students, the teacher should: 1) repeat the passage; 2) paraphrase it; 3) use gestures; 4) use the objects and people around to explain; 5) use visual materials, for example, pictures. Along with this, according to Cokely, at the initial stage, it is permitted to use a written support in the classroom, students are allowed to write down questions and other short comments on the blackboard (Cokely & Baker-Shenk, 1991, p. 35). However, the majority of RSL teachers at NSTU do not consider such a measure to be necessary (80%), while students' opinions on this issue vary: 36% view it as necessary, 50% do not consider it vital, and 14 % detail their opinions and mostly see it as possible or necessary depending on the situation.

At present, the knowledge of lexical and grammatical structures of the language is considered insufficient, and therefore teaching should be based on communication, in which it is important to understand "when, why and who you are going to speak to" (Smith et al., 2008, p. 9). To achieve it, the teacher should include various exercises in the lesson plan to allow the students to use different strategies and practise the acquired skills. New signs and grammar patterns are recommended to be introduced through conversations, dialogues, narratives, etc. The meaning of signs should be clear from the context, presentation can be accompanied by the use of visual materials (pictures, toys, models, etc.), dramatizations, video materials, etc. (Zaytseva, 2000, p. 7). Besides, it is better to begin teaching with personal and concrete information, and after that, make a transition to more abstract ideas: from naming surrounding objects to discussing things that are not present at the moment. The teacher is supposed to create a microworld representing the culture of the Deaf with all the discussions conducted in SL, so that students are motivated to express their thoughts through their signing (Smith et al., 2008, p. 9).

Taking into account the proposed principles and guidelines for organizing the educational process, we have developed a training module consisting of exercises aimed at forming RSL skills. The exercises are based on the communicative approach and presuppose immersion in the culture of the target language.

As a support, we have used the guidance for ASL teachers "Signing naturally. Teacher's curriculum guide". The module is designed for students who begin RSL studying, that is why we have carried out pilot training for second-year students of NSTU majoring in Linguistics and RSL interpreting.

Due to the situation in the world, we faced the necessity of organizing training for students who found themselves outside Russia. Accordingly, we had to adapt the exercises for online interactions, since the classes were held via "Zoom" video conferencing during 8 weeks. During this period, the students studied the following topics: *greeting and introducing oneself, quantitative numerals, shape, colours, family, clothing, appearance, time characteristics, holidays*. They also studied fingerspelling and learned to communicate in RSL, participate in dialogues, ask general and special questions and answer them, present a monologue in RSL, describe a person, talk about objects and people.

In order to collect data for analysing the effectiveness of classes' organization and planning, we conducted a post-training survey among the students. According to the survey data, all the students noted that they were interested in the process of learning RSL in class, and confirmed the effectiveness of the approach prohibiting the use of voice ("this approach improves the skills of signing and fingerspelling perception", etc.). According to the answers, the understanding of the teacher's speech in RSL was facilitated by the following factors: "logic and visual materials", "the use of written speech and signs", "attentiveness of the teacher, clear articulation of the lips, gestures, etc.", "applied material", "knowledge of the signs, attentiveness and intelligible explanation of the teacher." Also, all students found the atmosphere in class friendly and motivating; they felt comfortable during the classes; monitored the progress in their skills at the end of each class; and realized the importance of developing a non-manual marker.

In compliance with the data, at the final stage of the class the students managed to clarify the moments that had not seemed to be entirely clear; the sequence of exercises introduced in class is regarded as logical and consistent with its goal; initial exercises (a warm-up stage) made it possible to prepare for further activities, to revise previously studied material; the number of exercises involving work in pairs or groups is said to have been sufficient; the introduction of vocabulary and basic grammatical structures through meaningful context (in the process of dialogue, in a coherent story) is considered effective by the respondents. The students also believe that perceiving fingerspelling is more difficult than perceiving RSL signs, and this requires a higher level of receptive skills; and rank interaction-based exercises as effective ones.

The assimilation of vocabulary was mainly facilitated by: gradually arranged activities in class and revision of the material (40%), presentation of new lexical items in the context (40%), application of visual support during the lesson (20%). 80% of the students confirmed the need to use written language to establish mutual understanding with the teacher at the initial stage of training and find it useful to implement visual materials in the classroom. In case of misunderstanding of the information presented by the teacher, the correct understanding was mostly achieved by: the teacher repeating the given speech segment (100%); rephrasing it (40%); the teacher using gestures (40%); explaining with the help of surrounding objects and with the participation of other students (20%); using visual materials, for example, pictures (40%).

The students have given a positive assessment of their progress in RSL achieved by the end of the training period: “at the moment I have a good stock of signs, I understand fingerspelling, and I can also quickly understand what a new sign means; I can participate in a dialogue”, “with each lesson, my language skills were getting better”; "much better"; etc.

Thus, the designed systems of exercises were developed and introduced in accordance with the guidelines for implementing basic principles of planning and organizing RSL classes, which, along with the systematic nature of the activities and the gradual increase in the duration of signing, is supposed to ensure the efficiency of the proposed module.

7. Conclusion

Traditional RSL teaching systems mainly focus on the acquisition of vocabulary regardless of RSL grammar patterns and communicative skills. It is opposed to the concept of immersion in the atmosphere of the target language employed by RSL teachers at NSTU who are inclined to use the communicative approach in the classroom. To develop the latter we refer to the methodology proposed by the US specialists (Cokely & Baker-Shenk, 1991; Smith et al., 2008).

The consistency and productivity of RSL classes can be achieved through implementing the identified principles of planning and organizing. The detailed guidelines for their application are to ensure the efficiency of the teaching process. One of the main principles of organizing SL classes is to implement all classroom communication in RSL and recreate the atmosphere of the Deaf culture. It is also recommended to introduce new vocabulary and grammar patterns in dialogue form or include them in coherent stories; visual materials can be used as support. Pair and group forms of classroom activities should be predominant, since this will allow students to learn to communicate in situations in which one participant has information that is necessary for the other. Besides, the teacher should use techniques aimed at developing a non-manual marker in students.

The training module designed in accordance with the formulated principles and guidelines is based on the communicative approach; the assimilation of lexical units and grammatical structures is carried out in the context of dialogues. The efficiency of the proposed systems of exercises is due to the sequential distribution of tasks in the structure of the lesson and their correlation with situations of real communication in everyday life. This module can be introduced at the beginning of an RSL practical course.

The post-training survey has shown that all respondents positively assess the way the specified principles and guidelines were employed in class. The content, structure and conditions of the lessons facilitated students' progress in RSL.

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