

**FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING (FLLT) AS THE MOST WIDELY-SPREAD WAY OF SHATTERING BARRIERS TO INTERNATIONAL AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION. A VIEW FROM RUSSIA.**

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What is the situation with foreign language learning and teaching in Russia nowadays? An answer to this question is supposed to reveal the culmination of FLLT evolution at present. The present is now habitually called “the era of globalization” and its characteristic feature is supposed to be, among other things, swift, exciting changes and development in almost every sphere of human life and activity. Indeed, nowadays the words global, globalization are absolute champions both in popularity and, consequently, in the frequency and variety of usage. Both words, as is well-known, mean something international, relating to the whole world, which is now seen – and called – the global village defined as “all countries of the world when thought of as being closely connected by modern communications ...”<sup>1</sup>. But the global village cannot survive without a global language.

However, the global village peoples still stubbornly speak their national languages. The word stubbornly is supposed to draw attention to the fact that teaching the native language which is undergoing great changes under the pressure of the global language and culture is not less needed or important than teaching foreign languages which now, actually, implies, mostly and invariably, English. This is not clearly seen by either the peoples of the global language, or even by the speakers of national “non-global” languages. Russia – alas – illustrates the underestimation of the problem quite powerfully.

All this makes the profession of both foreign and native language teacher extremely necessary and important – like never before. Consequently, the development of modern language learning and teaching has been accelerating – like never before, either. What is the modern language teacher nowadays? An expert in a great “bunch” of spheres of knowledge and life: the language she/he teaches, pedagogy, psychology, anthropology, social studies, cultural studies, arts, politics, technology, etc.? The modern language student, then, is a recipient of all this knowledge.

I will try and discuss the state of the art in this very creative and artistic profession which is both most necessary and most difficult nowadays.

First of all, some preliminary remarks.

The tradition of profound love for foreign cultures and languages is a kind of backdrop on the stage where FLLT lives and works, suffers and flourishes. It is on this stage, with this backdrop that FL teachers and students live and work.

Before I come to the actual traditional ways of teaching the basic language issues it is necessary to make a few brief historical comments about our heritage from the closest immediate past: the Soviet time.

1. In those days – or rather years (decades) – we got the following experience: how to learn and teach our beloved foreign (mainly European) languages when it is not prestigious or rewarding in any way, but suspicious and even dangerous because they were seen as languages of hostile nations and potential enemies. (The same situation was with Russian in “the capitalist countries” (especially the world leaders – Great Britain and the USA, both English-speaking, which made doing English to us even more suspicious). So, one had to be a hero - rather a heroine! to do it.

2. Thus, the history of the Soviet Union has provided Foreign Language Learning and Teaching with an extremely interesting experiment. Indeed, FLLT in the USSR was an experiment – enormous in scale and with amazing consequences – in how to learn and teach a foreign language if both learners and teachers are completely isolated from the world where this foreign language is naturally used. “Completely” in this context means just that, with no leakage in the form of radio, television, native speakers, books, newspapers, language teaching materials, no hint of what is called the culture of the

nation in the broad, anthropological sense of the word, where "culture" does not mean "arts" but means "the way people live" (how they see the world, what they believe in, how they work, how they rest, what and how they eat, what kind of homes they have, etc.)

Under these circumstances Soviet teachers of English, this most unpopular language in the eyes of the Soviet government, were teaching only one of the four main language skills: reading. Indeed, there was nobody to speak to, nobody to listen to and nobody to write to. This last item – writing – was especially dangerous and, consequently, practically non-existent because a paper of any sort written to a native speaker of a suspicious foreign language was a document confirming “communication with foreigners”.

Now the two most important discoveries, trends, tendencies, innovations born after Perestroika and developing in this country at present.

The revolution of the early nineties last century in Russia, the collapse of the Soviet Union concerned the area of FLLT very greatly because it meant the advance of the era of free international communication at a mass scale after many years spent behind the Iron Curtain.

The language barrier immediately has become an irritating obstacle preventing people from enjoying “the luxury of communication” which includes all the privileges, advantages and opportunities that open, mass international communication has offered.

It was then that “a discovery” of another serious obstacle on the way of international communication took place: the cultural barrier. Thus, an ever-increasing interest in cross-cultural studies is a natural result of the previous history of the country when it was bottled up for so many years. The triumph of the communicative approach, the urgent need for speech production skills inevitably has led to the idea that the use of language largely depends on the background knowledge of the world where this language is actually used as a means of communication.

The problem of “what to teach” seems to be more important and more difficult than “how to teach”. As you understand, it is an eternal question of form-and-content relationship: both are equal in importance but, quoting George Orwell, one is more equal than the other.

Our practice of FLLT has shown that learning rules of grammar (and we always did it in full splendour, i.e. with all the minutest exceptions to the rules) as well as learning vocabulary (which usually implies learning the so-called “meanings of words”) is not enough to enable learners to use the language, to communicate, to develop active skills, the skills of speech production. That is where the issue of cultural awareness comes to the forefront.

One of the main reasons for this is that the concept of meaning invariably leads to extra-linguistic reality, to the native speakers’ world reflected by the language. Indeed, the meaning of the word is usually defined as referring a complex of sounds (oral speech) or that of graphic signs (written speech) to a certain object or phenomenon of the real world. Thus, metaphorically speaking, the meaning of the word is a thread or a path connecting the world of language/speech with the real world. Consequently, the meaning of a foreign word leads to the foreign world where this word lives and functions.

A burst of interest in cultural studies is caused by “a discovery” that actual communication is impossible without profound background knowledge of the world of the target language. Indeed, our broad experience of teaching English as a foreign language at a very large scale has shown very clearly that this sociocultural component of ELT is extremely important because the actual communication, the process of speech production (speaking, writing) is impossible without the background knowledge of the English-speaking world, i.e. of the culture, mode of living, traditions, history and moral codes of the language users.

Thus, if a lack of cultural background knowledge kills a foreign language, turns it into a dead one, then cultural studies are the magic wand that revives it, returns it to life. That is why, in present-day Russia, where real, live communicative skills are in such an incredible and unimaginable demand, cultural studies have become an indispensable part of Foreign Language Teaching.

That is why at the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Area Studies, Moscow State University, some important innovations have been introduced:

1) a new discipline in the curriculum “The World of the Language under Study” which has been given one third of the time allocated to the studies of foreign languages (the world of English/French/German,

etc.). This includes the world of Russian, the state language of this country and the mother tongue of the majority of population;

2) a new idea of adding “area studies” (in Russian *регионоведение*) as another choice for students of foreign languages which results in their acquiring two qualifications 1) an expert in a particular area/region (the North America – USA, Canada, Western Europe – the UK, France, Italy, Germany, Russia), 2) an interpreter/translator of at least two foreign languages: the language of the region and another one by the choice of students. That is why the former name of “The Faculty of Foreign Languages” was changed for “The Faculty of Foreign Languages and Area Studies”;

3) a new – “revolutionary”! – idea that FLLT must be accompanied by profound studies of the students’ native world, language, culture, history, in our case – Russian. From the very start of educational activities at our School of International Studies an annual course “The Russian World” was introduced for all first-year students from all programmes. Another course “The Russian World in the Context of World Civilizations” has been read to all second-year students. These courses are considered to be indispensable for training experts in international communication because the partners of our graduates will be interested mainly in getting information about their native, that is, Russian world.

We have been doing this since 1992 when the newly-born Faculty of Foreign Languages recruited its first students. About 15 years later this idea was supported at the State level by the latest Federal State Education Standard which was introduced by the Ministry of Education. It proclaimed that “basic national values are the essential element of the fundamental core of education content”.

Here are a few pieces of evidence that the idea has been supported both in Russia and abroad.

“I am very glad that the programme of our local Olympiad in Perm includes questions and tasks concerning Russian history and culture. Here, in Perm we have been pondering how to cultivate patriotism in our students of English” (Perm Association of Teachers of English).

“The good mission – to be the bearer of Russian basic cultural values – has become a duty of the foreign language teacher” (Tatiana Gorbunova, Kungur, Perm Region).

“It’s an admirable idea to teach your students about their own country. I was struck when I was at last able to talk freely to Russians in 1988 about how ignorant many people were of their own history. Of course, history had been distorted and suppressed in the Soviet times. In Britain people are also ignorant of their own history, let alone anyone else’s; and without any excuse”, Sir Roderick Braithwaite, British ambassador in Russia (1988 – 1992), wrote in January, 2016.

“For many years in China in the process of FLT greatest attention was paid to giving students a lot of background knowledge about the world of the languages under study while their ability to inform speakers of these languages, about China and Chinese culture was neglected. It exerted negative influence on the cultural orientation of the students, on the efficiency of foreign language studies”, Dr. Yang Ke, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, China. Concerning the Question of Including Information about Chinese Culture in the Syllabus of Teaching Russian in Chinese Universities (*Philologicheskkiye nauki. Voprosi Teorii i Praktiki*. 2014, №11. Tambov, 2014).

Consequently, Russia has been included in our programme of Area Studies as a most important region. The goodwill mission of this programme’s graduates is to let the world know about a view on Russia through the eyes of Russians in the languages of the world.

This idea is supported by the well-known quotation from the great Goethe saying that one must also study foreign languages so as to get a better grip on one’s own.