


SHARING METHODS OF TEACHING RUSSIAN AS A FOREIGN
LANGUAGE AT AN ELEMENTARY LEVEL

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The author reflects on the experience of teaching Russian as a foreign language at a private school. The author develops some innovative methods of teaching vocabulary and offers new ways of perfecting the vocabulary skills at the initial level of teaching Russian.

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Searching for new ways of teaching foreign languages more effectively has been a serious problem in Georgia because of the following reason: the processes of globalization in the modern world have opened new possibilities for population as to mobility and communication across the globe. This has made it critical to find new methods and approaches for teaching foreign languages. This is true about the Russian language as well, which has gone through a transformation process in Georgia from its previous status after the fall of the Soviet Union. Almost two decades after the fall of the Soviet Empire there is an obvious distancing in Georgia from the Russian language and the Russian culture. Under these circumstances in the country, the question of learning Russian as a foreign language has assumed a new reality of urgency: it has become of paramount importance to create a structure of the Russian language courses and a course of the Russian area studies, to open private schools with intensive Russian courses (in compliance with the new tendencies of the Western European system of education, parallel with state educational institutions there are private schools functioning in Georgia, which have been affected by the process of education system realignment in the country). Methods and techniques of teaching Russian as a foreign language are still in the formative process in the country. These methods are being tested-piloted at the educational centre "Russian School" in the town of Gori (Georgia). In this context, we think that sharing this teaching experience will be of interest to our colleague-practitioners.

One of the main problems for the teachers of the centre was developing methods for teaching vocabulary at an elementary level, because vocabulary is an essential part of all language

activities, and building up vocabulary skills is the main goal of teaching any foreign language. Teaching vocabulary at an elementary level of language learning has practical implications. At this level a student must be able to cope with standard everyday situations, establish and maintain interpersonal contacts, have command of standard language skills.

The main goal of teaching vocabulary at an elementary level is formation of permanent skills for correct usage of vocabulary units. As known, vocabulary units are words, word collocations, and clichés. These units should be used as well as recognized during the regular conversation flow.

Hence, it is possible to successfully use acquired vocabulary skills when a learner knows the meaning of a word, its phonetic sound and graphical form, rules of usage and possibilities of word formations of the given word.

During the vocabulary skill formation process, it is important to determine the number of vocabulary units that is possible to introduce within a single thirty-minute lesson. From the point of view of psychologists, the number of units that can be introduced during initial lessons can be 20 to 25 and may vary onwards, depending on the level of difficulty of mastering the new vocabulary.

At the elementary level of learning the Russian vocabulary, learners may encounter certain difficulties related to coincidences, or discrepancies of the meaning of words, structure of words and other factors in the native language and the foreign language. Therefore, it is equally important to methodically and intelligently arrange the language material and group the vocabulary according to the types of difficulty of mastering certain units.

According to the point of view of

many language methodists and teachers-practitioners working in the field of teaching Russian as a foreign language, teaching vocabulary at the elementary level should be based on the following topics:

1. Working on grammar topics – verb tenses, verbs of movement, ownership, state, prepositions with cases, prepositions of space and time, linkers and linking words.

2. Working on vocabulary topics – family, house (furniture and room), quality and characteristics, big vs small, many vs few, counting from 1 to 100, human body, animals, fruits and vegetables, berries, colors of objects, dishes, clothes, food, store, plants, transport, town/street/village, nature, weather, time of year, day and night, entertainments and celebrations, music, sports, school/university, travelling, at a doctor's/at an ambulatory, professions.

As we can see, the number of vocabulary units that needs to be taught is quite large. Therefore, the process of forming vocabulary skills at the Russian language lessons has three stages: presenting the new material, exercises/drills and consolidation/usage.

Let us have a look at the process of working on vocabulary through different stages.

1. New material may be introduced with the help of different methods:

- In an audio-text;
- In a ready-made conversation;
- In individual sentences;
- In a list of words;
- In a text;
- In the process of teaching pronunciation.

2. The teaching stage is carried out with the help of exercises. Goal – consolidation of the new vocabulary and word collocations, formed on the bases of lexical agreement of the components. All

training exercises can be divided into two groups:

A. The exercises focused on remembering the vocabulary, their semantics together with grammar and pronunciation forms. The following are the assignments related to this particular type of exercises:

- Name items on a picture or a photo;
- Select a word from the group of words that corresponds to the given situation (topic);
- Exclude a word from the group of words that does not correspond to the given situation;
- Make up a sentence with the use of the outlined word; use the given example;
- Insert synonyms instead of the underlined words;
- Insert antonyms instead of the underlined words;
- Answer the questions using the given word, and etc.

B. Exercises focused on developing skills to form word collocations.

At this level of teaching one may use some game elements. Following assignments may be given:

Name as many words as possible on the following topic....;

Name a word which would be logical in this case;

Construct a word collocation from the mixed up words.

3. On the final stage students must use the new words in expressions, dialogues and monologues, understand an audio-text, and words in a reading text. The work content at this stage is made up of conditional-speech, situational and contextual exercises in the lexical direction.

Hence, teaching vocabulary at the elementary level should involve the development of permanent skills in using certain vocabulary units in speech, and coping with different practical assignments for everyday social interactions.

One cannot ignore a huge role that songs, funny rhymes and creative reading of children's rhymes in Russian play in developing the vocabulary skills and correct pronunciation in pre-school and elementary school-level children. When using these methods of teaching, it would be better if the teacher developed the listening skill (from the very first lessons).

While teaching verses, songs and rhymes through listening, it is necessary to use the following algorithms of teaching:

1. Listening while using visuals;
2. Looking for familiar words;
3. Working on new words (repeating as a class and individually);
4. Answering questions;
5. Repeating texts as a class;
6. Individual performance.

Such sequence of work simultaneously activates listening perception and thinking activity, which makes it possible to remember a verse or a song more consciously. Connections are made between a word and an object, a phrase and an action. Skills in explaining something in a foreign language are formed, which helps to overcome a language barrier in future. It is the language barrier that makes it problematic to master a foreign language.

A leading type of activity, as demonstrated by teachers' experience, is playing language games. Elements of game suitable for different age groups are of course different from each other. At the elementary and pre-school levels one can introduce word games, didactic games, movement games, musical, finger-puppets, role-plays, games-dramatizations. All of these games are suitable to activate vocabulary. However, the greater variety of the above-mentioned games a teacher combines, the more successful will the result be.

At the beginner's level of teaching Russian as a foreign language to adults, the format of lessons and the content of games are different. Solving of the educational assignments is conducted in the language, conditional-speech and speaking exercises but with assistance. In the methods of language teaching such exercises are divided into imitation, substitution, transformation and combination exercises, and as for the purposes of receiving information – exercises are divided into receptive, receptive-reproductive and productive.

Availability of communicative assignments in game forms is the distinctive feature of all exercises. Oral communication exercise, which aims at reproduction, contains an example of how to complete the exercise. Imitational exercises represent the core of the first

stage of the exercise complex. Individual vocabulary units and clichés, accepted as singular speech units are mastered.

Let's sum up:

Goal of the 1st stage: building up the thematically organized vocabulary.

Goals of the 2nd stage: formation, automation and transferring of vocabulary skills to new language-learning situations.

In the beginning, substitution exercises, and then – exercises related to transformation of the language model are done.

And finally, goals of the 3rd stage: mastering the language skills in conditional-speech and speaking exercises based on an object, a photo, a picture, or a situation. Communication exercise for this stage is a role-play under unknown circumstances. This type of exercise aims at developing a skill which makes it possible to cope with a communication assignment by pulling out the existing language resources.

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