

10 | ELT Curriculum Innovations in Russia: Positive Changes and Concerns

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INTRODUCTION

The chapter is focused on current changes in the Russian education system, and training of teachers of English, in particular. Among the most significant innovations is the introduction of a Unified State Exam (USE), Higher Education (HE) reform and changes connected with the integration of technologies into the teaching process. The author explores in detail how these innovations are implemented into the curriculum for English majors at tertiary level. The aim of the article is to show positive trends, share some of the best practices as well as concerns about the recent changes.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE RUSSIAN SYSTEM OF EDUCATION

In general, all children regardless of race, religion, ethnic or social background have access to education which is guaranteed by the Constitution of the Russian Federation (Article 43). The formal schooling comprises primary, secondary and high school. General school education is free, and for children aged 6-15 it is compulsory. At present the idea of making 12 years of schooling mandatory is being discussed.

There's a great diversity of schools both in the public and private sectors: schools with advanced programs in selected disciplines such as Foreign Language, Mathematics, Biology, etc.; schools with developed out-of-school activities giving a profound mastery of Fine Arts, Economics, Sports, and other fields; schools in which senior grades work under the auspices of HEIs and many others. Each school designs its own curriculum, basing it upon the Basic National Curriculum recommended by the Ministry of Education. In addition to the required fields of study, the Basic National

Curriculum provides for disciplines which could be added because of being specific to the particular region in which the school is located as well as optional disciplines in accordance with the interests of students. A foreign language (in 70% of schools English) is a compulsory discipline. This is begun in primary school, and lately special emphasis has been placed on it.

After secondary school children are to take exams, and they are given a choice to either continue through high school, or to go to vocational, technical schools, or other secondary professional institutions which run both general education and profession-oriented courses. High school graduates can further their education in different Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The number of HEI students has tripled over the last fifteen years (Chistokhvalov, 2006). HEIs enroll students on the competitive basis for free, but there's a growing tendency for universities to charge fees.

OBJECTIVES OF THE REFORM IN EDUCATION

Education in Russia is undergoing a transitional period now. Taking into consideration the best practices in education of different countries, Russia is trying to find its own way of reforming the education system both at school level and HE stage. According to the 'Concept for Modernization of Russian Education Until 2010,' the main aims of the reform are

- to renovate the structure and content of education
- to provide a high standard of education
- to ensure continuity of general and professional education for life-long learning
- to integrate the Russian education system into the world educational area.

The 'Federal Target Program for the Development of Education (2000-2010)' has been worked out in order to reach these goals.

HIGH SCHOOL INNOVATION: UNIFIED STATE EXAMINATION

The major innovation at school level is the introduction of the USE after finishing high school. It is gradually replacing a traditional exam (often oral) which aimed at testing knowledge in a particular subject, and was organized by each school independently. The USE is a standardized

competence-based test administered by a special board appointed by the local ministries of education. It was designed to ensure curriculum succession at school and university levels, and also to improve the final examination system for students at school and entry tests in HEIs.

The USE in English was first launched as a pilot project in 2001. Its structure and content have been improved in accordance with feedbacks received both from students and teachers; now the test consists of 5 parts (Listening, Reading, Grammar and Vocabulary, Writing, and Speaking). All in all, it has 48 tasks; the time allotted is 2 hours 50 minutes (see Table1).

TABLE 1
USE Structure

Language Skills	Number of Tasks	Time Length
Listening	15 tasks	30 min
Reading	9 tasks	30 min
Grammar & Vocabulary	20 tasks	40 min
Writing	2 tasks	60 min
Speaking	2 tasks	10 min

The pilot showed that the introduction of the USE made it possible firstly, to increase objectivity in the evaluation of language knowledge; secondly, to give a guideline for quality assessment nationwide; thirdly, to change the existing admission policy of many universities. In addition, the experiment highlighted schools with higher quality training. Moreover, it had a very positive wash back effect on teaching English in general. Teachers started to train students test strategies, practice more listening and writing tasks, and made classes more communicative.

However, there are a lot of challenges that have to be coped with before the USE becomes the only form of assessment of high school leavers' knowledge in 2009. Quality of tests, organization procedures, its conformity with HEI profile are still being widely debated as the offered tests are not yet perfect. It stems from the fact that testing is a new field in Russia; we haven't had testing traditions, and need more qualified text experts and item writers to ensure the quality of assessment. The control over the recommended administration procedure has to be tightened, too. Due to a limited budget it is hard to provide adequate standardized training for examiners all over the country. Another concern is that this test checks not academic skills but general English, which does not allow, for example, pedagogical universities to choose applicants able and motivated to master the language, and thus it can't entirely substitute an interview or a placement test for entrance to the university.

Nonetheless, the USE remains a major point of the school system modernization. It facilitates achievement higher standard of teaching English and also has a great impact on the coordination of the curricula at school and university levels thus creating continuity in education.

HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM

Tertiary level of education is the most revolutionary domain: both its content and structure are radically changing. Traditional HE national curriculum can be compared to a 'set-menu' where all the courses were compulsory, had fixed prices (academic hours), and were served in a certain sequence in accordance with ministerial guidelines. Now we are slowly but steadily moving towards an 'a la carte menu,' with HEIs gaining greater autonomy in planning and organization of the educational process, with flexibility of structure and reinforcement of individual student's work, which consequently increases the learner's responsibility for their learning path.

Russia is among 45 countries–participants of the Bologna Process, “an intergovernmental initiative which aims to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010” (p. 1). It was launched in 1999 with the goal to establish a common structure of higher education systems across Europe. The countries committed themselves to elaborating national frameworks for qualifications compatible with the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA.

The educational sphere is identified as a priority at national level in Russia. A lot is being done along the lines of the Bologna Process to develop flexible and lifelong learning routes. Russian HEIs receive funds from the government for the implementation of projects aimed at renovating the structure and content of education. For example, in 2006, seventeen winning HEIs were awarded State support totaling 5 billion RUR. The main competition criteria included development of a two-tier HE, implementation of joint curricula with foreign partners, and academic mobility of students and staff. In 2007 the State support will make up 15 billion RUR (Chistokhvalov, 2006).

The most significant changes include, firstly, formation of multi-tiered HE system; secondly, incorporation credit system instead of traditional course hours, and thirdly, development of a system of quality assurance in education. The RF Federal Law 'On Higher and Postgraduate Professional Education' (no. 125-FZ of 22 August 1996) defines three HE degrees:

Bachelor (for a period of no less than 4 years), Specialist (5 years) and Master (6 years). The majority of students enrolled in HEIs (92.4%) are still involved in Specialist studies. Bachelor and Master degrees are in the process of being established.

ELT CURRICULUM FOR ENGLISH MAJORS

The HEI curriculum is based on The State Educational Standard of Higher Professional Education, which is a set of nationally recognized requirements laid down by the State which determines a mandatory minimum for the contents of educational programs, the maximum work load assigned to students, as well as general course loads and requirements to be met by graduates.

In the presentation, the curriculum offered to future teachers is explored as an illustration of major changes. Samara State Pedagogical University (SSPU), Institute of Foreign Languages, provides a five-year education leading to a Specialist degree and awards diplomas of the teacher of 2 modern languages; English, German, and French are taught in the Institute; Italian has been offered as a minor since 2005.

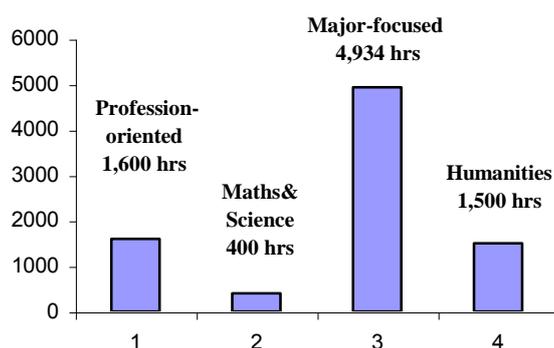
While the New State Standards are being worked on, the Institute, as well as other HEIs, follows the Standard issued in 2000 which introduced three components, federal, regional and departmental, within each block of required disciplines. This gave certain freedom to HEIs in making decisions concerning subjects to offer, and encouraged the implementation of elective courses to better satisfy the needs of students and labour market in the region. It also motivated the faculty to develop courses related to their academic research.

The diversity of subjects fall into four blocks: Humanities, Maths and Science, Profession-oriented and Major-focused (see Figure 1). The first block offers courses in Latin and Ancient Culture, History of Russia, Russian Language, Philosophy, Economics – the federal component; Sociology, Culture Studies, Political Science – the regional one. World Religions, Fundamentals of Law, History and Culture of Great Britain, the USA, Germany, France are taught on the initiative of the Institute.

If we look at the profession-oriented disciplines which comprise 1,600 academic hours, we will see that they all touch upon different aspects of teaching profession, for instance, Psychology, Theory of Education, Pedagogy, Methods of FL Teaching, Health and Safety Studies; Using Mass-media in Teaching, Culture of Speech; and Developing Sociolinguistic

Competence, Methods of Teaching Young Learners, etc.

FIGURE 1
Four Blocks of Subjects



Major-focused courses constitute the biggest group of disciplines (4,934 hours). Among the core subjects at federal level are lectures and seminars in Linguistics, History of the Language, Theory of Phonetics, Lexicology, Theory of Grammar, Stylistics, Country Studies, Theory and Practice of Translation, Typology, and English and American Literature. It is significant that English is used as the medium of instruction. The curriculum also includes 2,200 hours of Language Practice which embraces integrated teaching of all language skills and systems: phonetics, grammar, vocabulary, writing, listening, speaking and reading.

A wide range of major-focused subjects are presented as elective courses at departmental level which is quite a new trend. They are Text Analysis and Text Constructing, Discourse Analysis, English/American Political Discourse, Basics of Rhetoric, Intercultural Communication, History of Linguistics, Fundamentals of Philological Research, and Framework of Myth in Literature just to name a few. This innovation contributes a lot to the individualization of education and strengthens students' motivation for mastering the language.

The total students' work load is about 22-27 hours per week. In the course of studies they have to take 37 graded course exams, 40 pass/fail exams and two finals. In addition, three course research papers and a diploma research paper are required. Focus on academic research is

traditionally one of the strongest points of Russian university education. English majors can conduct research in the field that they are most interested in, for instance, theory of education, philology, culture studies, applied linguistics and others.

PRE-SERVICE TEACHER TRAINING: BEST PRACTICES, INNOVATIONS AND CONCERNS

Increasing autonomy in curriculum planning resulted in close integration of disciplines in SSPU. The coordination of syllabuses of Information Technology (IT) in teaching (Maths and Science block) and Language Practice (major-focused block), for instance, produced a very successful outcome in the form of students' project works on the topic 'Around the World.' The students used technologies (Intel-Teach to the Future program, in particular) to create an information booklet, a MS Power Point presentation and a web-site. The demonstration of the products in their English class led to the pass in IT in teaching course and an item in portfolio in Language Practice.

Incorporating technologies in language teaching is definitely a present-day feature of education in Russia. It assisted the appearance in the Institute of electronic textbooks, supplementary interactive lessons for home study, technology-based assessment which gradually replaces oral examinations, etc. However, it presents a great challenge to teachers who need to constantly upgrade their professional level. Especially, it is hard for the older generation of teachers who make up more than 50% of the SSPU faculty.

Using technologies partly solves the problem of reducing the number of contact hours, the tendency we are deeply concerned about. We have to find new ways of organizing and controlling individual work of students to assure quality of preparation. But it's becoming more and more difficult to maintain a traditionally favored serious, systematic, fundamental approach to training language teachers with the focus on speech accuracy and all-rounded education.

Teaching practice is also an important part of the curriculum; it's scheduled three times during the course of studies, each time with a different focus. For instance, the first one is held in children's summer camps and lets future teachers communicate with children outside the classroom and organize various free time activities; two more are devoted to working with children in class. The language teaching practice combines

both observation and giving classes in two foreign languages they study. One of the recent positive changes in this field is the Institute's participation in organization of foreign language summer camps together with non-governmental institutions such as the English Language Center (www.englishsamara.ru). The combination of fun leisure activities with the language teaching proved to be very effective not only for developing speaking skills of students, but also for acquiring initial professional skills of group management.

At the English Department of SSPU students are traditionally engaged in extra-curricular activities. We have a 20-year-old tradition of the English Speaking Club activities. All the meetings turn to real festivals of students' talents. Very often the sittings of the English speaking club are related to the topics on the curriculum. The students are encouraged to demonstrate in a creative manner what they have learnt. One of the yearly meetings is dedicated to culture issues. The emphasis on raising cultural awareness is important for promoting tolerant attitude to other cultures. Fostering such values as respect for yourself, other people, and environment, contributes to the formation of a new generation of teachers, help to shape their personalities.

These values underlie the concept of all textbooks published by the faculty. We are proud of the results: our chair has published 15 textbooks intended for students of pedagogical universities, which contain interesting cross-cultural topics, interactive communicative tasks, and project-like activities. They also incorporate tasks for students' micro-teaching which are conducive to their professional coaching. Development of socio-cultural competence is also the objective reached in the textbooks. It's of crucial importance to would-be teachers, as they are going to be mediators of both language and culture, and agents of cross-cultural communication. The textbooks are highly evaluated by students and colleagues from other universities. New, high-quality in-house materials are also a typical characteristic of modern times.

To ensure authenticity of the language, many textbooks are written in cooperation with native language speakers. The textbook *Sharpen Your Skills* (Lanier et al., 1997), for example, is the result of a collaborative effort of Samara State Pedagogical University, English Chair and the University of Maryland at College Park, Maryland English Institute, USA. Several projects were launched by the American Embassy in Moscow, for instance, American Studies Project which resulted in American Studies Textbook Series; and by the British Council, Moscow, who sponsored the appearance of the Millennium series (for secondary schools) and several

other projects. This tendency to get away from the textbooks recommended by the Ministry and produce home-made materials allowed to better cater for the individual needs of particular students and to meet the curriculum changes.

IN-SERVICE TEACHER TRAINING

The last decade is characterized by expanding fruitful collaborations between Russian teachers and their colleagues from other countries. The main area of cooperation is in-service teacher training. The necessity of it was clearly revealed by the Baseline Study (Anshakova et al., 2002) conducted (2000-2001) by a group of English language teachers and educators at universities across Russia under the auspices of the British Council, the RF Ministry of Education and the Open Society Institute. More than 100 universities across Russia participated in the research. The two major problems with teaching ESP at Russian universities were found to be poor quality of teaching/learning materials and inadequate level of ESP teacher training. So to improve the situation it was decided to launch the RESPONSE project (Russian Educational Support Project on Specialist English), one of the major aims for which is to focus on in-service teacher training.

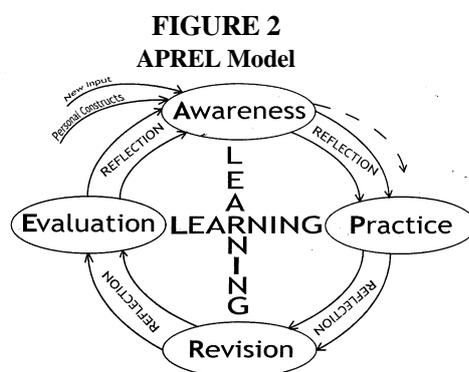
Teacher development (TD) course targeted on ESP teachers is the first ever existing in Russia. It was designed and got ministerial approval in 2005. The course (Almabekova et al., 2005, pp. 9-10) aims to

- help and encourage teachers to revisit and develop further their own individual philosophies of teaching ESP via awareness raising, practice and reflection-based activities
- provide teachers with key strategies and skills for continuing professional self-development
- create opportunities for teachers to share, discuss and try out ideas, techniques, activities and teaching materials
- help teachers develop and encourage action research skills for use in their own classrooms
- increase teachers' professional competence and confidence

The materials were compiled and developed by a group of 15 English language teachers coming from different regions of Russia, led by British ESP experts Pat McLaughlin and Mike Scholey. The Project was

coordinated by Ludmila Kuznetsova, an associate professor of St. Petersburg State University.

The model designed for the course is called APREL (see Figure 2), which stands for Awareness, Practice, Revision, Evaluation, and Learning (Almabekova et al., 2005, p. 12). All the above elements are connected through 'reflection' and form an upward spiral, which symbolizes a never-ending process of learning.



The TD course primarily focuses on methods of teaching, learner/teacher roles, syllabus design, materials development and other relevant issues.

The course is gaining more and more popularity; it has been run in 17 cities all over Russia: Moscow, St. Petersburg, Samara, Kazan, Omsk, Tomsk, Krasnoyarsk, Perm, Nizhniy Novgorod, Arkhangelsk, Kaliningrad, Novosibirsk and others. It invariably receives a positive response from the participants of the workshops. There's no doubt that upgrading faculty will greatly contribute to the success of the educational reform as these are the teachers who always stay on top of all initiatives and innovations.

CONCLUSION

The current Russian reform of education doesn't touch only upon its structure, but also leads to revisiting main approaches to teaching, renovating its content and changing roles of teachers and learners. A lot is being done within the Bologna process: coordinating curricula, upgrading syllabuses, undertaking projects aimed at dual diplomas, integrating technologies into teaching/learning, launching new courses, developing

materials, etc. ELT becomes of paramount importance in connection with the formation of the EHEA. The motivation for learning English is strong and constantly increasing. Therefore, teachers are challenged to promptly respond to the needs of their students, and meet the demands of the modern world. The main challenge is to integrate the traditional Russian system of ELT, which proved to be effective in many ways, into the global educational environment. The professional expertise and creative potential of teachers will definitely facilitate a smooth transition from unified education to education of choice.

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