

The practices of exposure to russian cultural heritage in the training of the russian language as a foreign language in higher education

Las utilización del patrimonio cultural ruso en la formación de la lengua rusa como lengua extranjera en la educación superior

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ABSTRACT:

The key aspect of the paper is the set of the best educational practices of the Altai State University operating as a participant of the University network system of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The focal point of the article is the practice of exposure to Russian cultural heritage targeting to uplevel the Russian language proficiency among Russian students and incomers to Russia. The article also concerns the exposure to Russian cultural heritage as an effective tool for teaching Russian as a foreign language. There is much evidence that today the quality of language education provided by a university is becoming one of the crucial factors in promoting Russian education, science, history, and culture abroad. A primary concern of the paper is the inclusion of linguistics in several educational areas. Linguistics – as the basis for integrated language teaching – plays a pivotal role in building the architecture of a network university of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Keywords: cultural heritage, education, Russian as a foreign language, the Altai State University, the University of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

RESUMEN:

El aspecto clave del documento es el conjunto de las mejores prácticas educativas de la Universidad Estatal de Altai que opera como participante del sistema de red de la Universidad de la Organización de Cooperación de Shanghai. El punto focal del artículo es la práctica de la exposición al objetivo del patrimonio cultural ruso para elevar el nivel de competencia del idioma ruso entre los estudiantes rusos y los que ingresan a Rusia. El artículo también se refiere a la exposición al patrimonio cultural ruso como una herramienta eficaz para enseñar ruso como lengua extranjera. Hay muchas pruebas de que la calidad de la enseñanza de idiomas impartida por una universidad se está convirtiendo en uno de los factores cruciales para promover la educación, la ciencia, la historia y la cultura rusas en el extranjero. Una preocupación principal del documento es la inclusión de la lingüística en varias áreas educativas. La lingüística, como base para la enseñanza integrada de idiomas, desempeña un papel fundamental en la construcción de la arquitectura de una universidad de red de la Organización de Cooperación de Shanghai.

Palabras clave: patrimonio cultural, educación, ruso

1. Introduction

In recent years there has been a renewed interest in Russian studies. A key role in promoting Russian culture belongs to Russian universities. The paper features the Altai State University located in the center of Asia, in the transboundary macroregion which is of much importance to Russia. The region comprises the junction of Russian borders with Kazakhstan, China, and Mongolia. The uniqueness of the geographical position implies a direct contact with the countries historically close to Russia, i.e., Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Armenia, and geographically close states, i.e., Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India. The geographical location predetermines the specific character of the work and the search for new approaches to the use of cultural heritage in teaching Russian as a foreign language. The purpose of the article is to present the experience of the Altai State University in the profit of exposure to Russian cultural heritage for the study of the Russian language in Russia and in the countries of the Asian region.

2. Methods

Describing the study methods, it is critical to mention that the Russian Language Council under the supervision of the Government of the Russian Federation, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation developed a special Support Program of the Russian Language and Education (The Support Program, n. d.). The program contains the models of the exposure to Russia's cultural heritage for the study of the Russian language and the competitive positioning of Russian education.

The program determined the vectors of the work of the universities in the areas which are as follows:

1. The exposure to Russian cultural heritage to improve the level of Russian language proficiency among Russians and immigrants to Russia;
 2. The exposure to the cultural heritage of Russia to study the Russian language on the territory of the countries of the Central Asian region.
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3. Discussion and results

The implementation of the first vectors of the program implies traditional and new methods, as well as educational technologies in accordance with the requirements of the federal educational standards. However, there is much evidence that there is a deep "narrowing of the educational field" in the area of philological and cultural instruction in higher education in Russia. The reduction of the control admission figures of budget students to these instructional areas today actualizes the problem of teaching faculty members who are ready and able to implement the tasks of state policy in the sphere of exposure to the cultural heritage to uplevel the Russian language proficiency. In this context, it is necessary to make the maximum use of additional education and extracurricular forms of work in higher education.

The subject matter of the paper is the policy in the field of teaching the Russian language and culture in the Altai State University. The University's department of arts, the department of mass communications, philology and political science created a special educational environment at the university, as well as introduced the center of culture and education. Undoubtedly, the educational environment plays a special role in popularizing the cultural heritage of Russia and studying the Russian language at the University and in the region. There is a special center for student creative activities and leisure time which includes rehearsal rooms, a dance hall, a vocal studio, an exhibition hall, a concert hall, the art gallery "Universum", the museum of Archeology and Ethnography of Altai. Based on this infrastructure, the students' groups of artists, actors, musicians-performers organized the Philharmonic University Russian Orchestra, the youth choir, theaters, poetic clubs and other

creative groups that popularized the legacy of Russia through cultural and educational programs. Additionally, the University offers lectures, exhibitions, master classes, musical concerts, poetry readings, theatrical performances, and educational excursions (Nekhvyadovich and Chernyaeva 2016).

To create the atmosphere of interethnic and intercultural interaction of Russian and foreign students, the University also offers unique centers for studying cultures and languages of Asian countries, as well as Asian expert-analytical center for ethnology and international educational cooperation. There are also a special and exclusive Honorary Department of the "Kazakh Way and N. Nazarbayev", the Russian-Chinese Center of Education, Culture and Academic Mobility, the Center of the Language and Culture of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan, the Center of the Language and Culture of the Republic of Tajikistan, the Center of Interactions with National Diasporas, the association of foreign students (Zemliukov and Dubina 2013). The work of these centers makes it possible to evoke mutual interest in the culture and languages of Russia and the Asian countries.

There is much evidence that the university's publishing projects were an effective form of popularization of the cultural heritage of Russia. They also serve to uplevel the Russian language proficiency of students and the entire population of the region. With the support of the Governor of the Altai Territory A.B. Karlin, for five years the University students and teachers had been collecting the materials for the first in Russia six-volume book by Georgy Dmitrievich Grebenshchikov, nine-volume unique collection of works by Vasily Makarkovich Shukshin with scientific commentaries, a one-of-a-kind anthology in five volumes "The Image of Altai in Russian Literature". During more than fifteen years the linguists of our university had been collecting oral testimonies from rural residents of the region, which became the basis of the scientific work "Altai village in the stories of its inhabitants". An interesting finding was that two hundred philologist students and historians contributed to these projects.

The Altai Territory is particularly attractive for residents from the countries of Central Asia. Annually, the flow of incomers to the region increases by about 1.5 times. To create conditions for their linguistic and socio-cultural adaptation in the region, the Altai State University with the support of the State A.S. Pushkin Institute of the Russian Language in Moscow created a testing center for migrants. Since January 2015, 1,500 people have passed migration testing and testing for Russian citizenship. Currently, due to the changes in the migration legislation, such activities have been especially popular by the territorial bodies of the Federal Migration Service, who applied to the Altai State University to provide additional testing in other cities of the Altai Territory.

The experience of the testing center for migrants allows us to state that the preparatory courses and the exams are not enough. For successful language adaptation and uplevelling of the Russian language proficiency there is an actual need of government support provided in the form of subsidies for training at preparatory departments of universities. Today, educational experts perform this work on a contract base with the full reimbursement of training costs.

Public initiatives that are important as modern social projects supporting and developing the Russian language stress the demand for the study of the Russian language. Several reports have shown that the innovative linguistic project "The Total Dictation" only in the Altai State University annually attracted more than 400 participants. For three months they were scrupulously increasing their fluency in Russian according to an accelerated but high-quality methodology. "The Total Dictation" noted the importance of self-identification among Russian people who implied that "a literate person is the one who owns his national culture". The project demonstrated a great desire of the Russian population to know more about their native language.

With the respect to the most significant results of the Altai State University in promoting the international positions of Russian culture, the Russian language and literature in the countries of Central Asia, it is important to mention the most notable achievements which are as follows:

1. The building up of open online electronic educational resources created by the Altai State

University teachers and the portal of the A.S. Pushkin Institute called "Education in Russian". The combination of these courses made it possible to create a single online architecture used actively by the instructional experts from the Altai State University to teach foreign students the Russian language and Russian culture within the framework of basic educational programs and at the preparatory department with subsequent trainings in various educational institutions of the Altai Territory.

Of much importance were various activities which sought to promote open electronic educational resources and conduct sociological research. With their help it was possible to collect a database of potential applicants from among foreign students.

2. The development of strategic contacts with the representatives of foreign educational organizations. The contacts originate from registration for the online training on the portal of the A.S. Pushkin Institute "Education in Russian". The contacts connect Russian educational experts not only with prospect students but also with the professionals who seek upgrading in the field of teaching the Russian language as a foreign language. The current study proved that the practice of contact making was very promising, as it provided a steady interest in the Russian language and culture in those foreign countries in which until recently there had not been any due attention to training Russian. It is interesting to note that nowadays the Altai University provides education to students from 13 Asian countries. Over the past three years, the University has seen a 4-fold increase in the total number of foreign students and the share of foreigners in the above contingent of students amounted to 6.5%, which indicates that there is a steady demand for Russian education.

These findings stress the effectiveness of the Altai University's collaboration with many important international organizations. The most notable of which are: the University of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Eurasian Association of Universities, the Association of Higher Educational Institutions of the Far East and Siberia of the Russian Federation and the northeastern regions of the PRC, the International Association for Continuing Education, the Asia-Pacific Network of Quality Assurance Agencies (APQN). The encouraging collaborative results highlight the importance of cooperation in the field of Russian studies.

3. The integrating role of the Altai State University itself which brings together students and experts. In 2012, the Altai State University generated the Association of Asian Universities, which nowadays includes 36 universities from 8 countries worldwide (The Support Program, n. d.). At present, there have been applications from universities from India and Iran. Within the framework of this association, educational professionals implement effective work to promote the Russian language and education in Russian. This paper provides an account of the most important activities in the field: the traditional international student forum "Altai-Asia", the international educational forum "Education without Borders", a special summer language school of the Association of Asian Universities.

4. A close partnership with CIS countries and Russia's near abroad countries. The Altai State University expands the academic partnership network and creates representative centers in partner universities. Over the two years, the Altai University has generated a network of Representative Centers in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Mongolia. An important educational practice is a system of interaction from planning joint work to university testing procedures. During the academic year the Altai State University experts provide guidance visits to partner universities, hold master classes, and the days of prospective students, webinars on preparation for testing, competitive events (academic competitions, competitions of scientific research works) which they organize with the help of the Internet technologies. The centers offer preparatory courses for prospective students, and methodological assistance for teachers. In general, there is much evidence that for prospective students such events are an excellent opportunity to receive not only quality counseling assistance but very often it is an opportunity to prepare for entering Russian universities, especially in such subjects as the history of Russia and social science.

The results of this study show that it is important to expand assistance of Russian compatriots living abroad. These results further support the idea that it is essential to preserve their cultural and linguistic self-identification. Following this purpose, the Altai State University has developed and implemented a complex of events for foreign countries, i.e.,

the advanced courses for teachers of the Russian language, including special courses for tutors with the help of distance learning. The courses are the part of a special instructional program entitled "Traditional and Innovative Technologies in Teaching Russian as a Practical Course of the Foreign Language". The programs were in demand in Mongolia, Sri Lanka, and Laos. What is surprising is that in twenty years the teachers of the Altai State University have been the first ones to bring Russian culture to Laos. An important objective of such contacts is the establishment of literary and cultural ties with the countries of Central Asia. Regarding this purpose it is relevant to develop the translation of Russian classical literary works. It is interesting to note that the Altai State University is the first one to offer the translation of poems by the famous poet Robert Rozhdestvensky's into the Persian language. The results of our study indicate that the important form of promoting Russian education, language and culture in Asian countries is the recognition of the university as an international center for youth scientific, educational, and cultural cooperation and communications. The university has accumulated a considerable experience and potential to implement large-scale international student projects. The most important projects are as follows.

1) The Asian students' forum "Education without Borders. Altai – Asia" which was held in 2012 on the initiative of the Altai State University. The aim of the forum was to consolidate students from Asian universities to develop integration in education and culture, expand international academic mobility and cultural cooperation. The basis of the cooperation was the interaction among students and student organizations in Russia and Asian countries. Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan also shared in this activity.

2) The International Summer School for Young Leaders of Asian Countries "History, Culture and Ethnography of Asia". The Altai State University holds the School on annual basis, as well as other events targeted by young leaders of Asian countries, i.e., the Central Asia Youth Leaders' Summit on Public Diplomacy and International Cooperation, the 1st Congress of Young Entrepreneurs of the CIS countries, the Summit of student leaders of the SCO countries.

3) The development of intercultural dialogue among the countries of the Asian region. Many festivals serve this purpose, i.e., the international students' festival of national cultures of the countries participating in the SCO University, the student congress of the peoples of Central Asia, which has been timed to the national holiday of the Persian and Turkic peoples "Nowruz", profile language school of the Association of Asian Universities "Intercultural Communications" (Zemliukov 2014).

Another important example in the field is the victory of the students of the Altai State University in the international student volunteer program promoting the Russian language in Russia and abroad "Ambassadors of the Russian language in the world". There is much evidence that the project is ambitious and promising. A bright example of exposing foreign pupils and preschool children to the artistic heritage of Russia was the international creative contest "Illustrate poems and fairy tales by A.S. Pushkin" (Stepanskaya *et al.*, 2016), as well as the international academic competition in the field of the Russian language "The Wonderful World of the Slavic Word" (Nekhvyadovich, 2014).

Another important finding of the research is the fact that it is possible to draw the line of similarity between North American and European transnational corporations successfully operating in different sectors of global economy and educational structures that export educational services, promoting their native language to foreign students. Such educational corporations are mostly non-governmental organizations with non-governmental funding, but with a strong state support. There are a lot of structures of this type, i.e., DAAD (Germany), British Council (UK), IDP Education Australia (Australia), CIMO (Finland), EduFrance (France), NAFSA (USA). In China the structure of this type is the Confucius Institute. Most of them are engaged exclusively in education, and some occupy adjacent fields, i.e., culture and art. Every day, foreign educational corporations realize hundreds of projects: support programs for the promotion of the native language, exchange of students and scientists, information and advisory services, promotion of national education, specific educational institutions, and programs. The format of such transnational educational

structures is very productive. The forecasts of market research show a further increase in students' mobility with students' localization mostly in six countries (the USA, the UK, Germany, France, Australia, and Japan).

Moreover, according to scientists' estimates, by 2020 most of the inhabitants of civilized states will speak two languages. Interestingly, only 30% of them will stay monolingual. In this context, it is important to achieve the result when one of the most popular international languages will be Russian. However, it is important to realize that for the Russian language it is possible to achieve only that the status of the second foreign language. One of the important findings of the research is the fact that while implementing the program "Russian as a Foreign Language" in Laos and Sri Lanka the teachers had to be armed with an additional educative competence, i.e., the fluent command of the English language. It is interesting to assume that in these countries, English is no longer perceived as a competitive advantage, but as a basic universal skill.

4. Conclusion

At the beginning of the 21st century, the university must be associated with a single global educational space, and one should not underestimate the importance of English as a linguistic component of internationalization. In this context, today the quality of language teaching provided by a university becomes one of the major factors which correlate with the promotion of the Russian language as a foreign language. This is an important issue for future research. This study has outlined that one of the most effective outcomes is the inclusion of linguistics in the number of educational areas of the network university, connecting the countries of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The results of the study show that linguistics is a perfect basis for this new type of integrated language teaching.

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