

Learning RFL and UFL in Ukrainian Universities: Focus on Arabic Students

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Abstract: *Purpose: To determine the peculiarities in learning Russian as a foreign language (RFL) and Ukrainian as a foreign language (UFL) by Arabic students at Ukrainian universities. Material: 112 Arabic francophone students aged 21-22 studied at preparatory departments in 5 Ukrainian universities participated in the research (n=54 studied UFL, n=58 studied RFL). Results: The test demonstrated that students who learned UFL showed the best results in listening (arithmetic mean of errors = 5.98, t=2.8, deviation of mean = 0.08, p≤0.01), worst results in grammar (arithmetic mean of errors = 6.67, t=2.9, deviation of mean = -0.18, p≤0.01). The students who learned RFL done more errors in grammar (arithmetic mean of errors = 7.81, t=2.9, deviation of mean = 0.02, p≤0.01), and showed the best results in speaking (arithmetic mean of errors = 7.22, t=3, deviation of mean = 0.24, p≤0.01).*

Conclusions: the research determined that the social and politic situation in the country influences a lot on the language skills of foreign students. The research confirmed that Ukrainian language is easy to learn than Russian language at least for the Arabic francophone students. The profound study of the problem issues, individual approach, and linguistic environment could solved the revealed problems.

Keywords: RFL; UFL; peculiarities; Arabic students; language skills.

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1. Introduction

Language is one of the main indicators of the ethnic origin of a nation. Today Ukraine is in a difficult period of development, it is fighting for Ukrainian language in the education system. During the years of state independence, Russian language paradoxically prevailed in both education and science. At that time, the foreign students studied RFL from textbooks written by well-known Russian linguists or from textbooks written by Ukrainian authors based on methodological techniques developed in Russian universities. Despite this fact, the increased interest of foreigners in Ukrainian culture and language has generated a demand for learning UFL. In spite of the fact, the state standard for studying UFL has not approved yet by the Ukrainian Government, at most universities in Western and Central Ukraine foreigners successfully learn UFL following the European recommendations on language levels (Council of Europe, 2001).

Altbach P. et al. (2007) emphasized that internationalization of higher education is the trend of the 21st century, especially in programs for international students. According to official statistics students from Arab countries, today are among the leaders (along with Chinese and Indian) who come to Ukraine to study. They need to learn an elementary course of Russian or Ukrainian language for everyday communication and study at Ukrainian universities.

Most Arab students speak both French and Arabic languages. This bilingualism helps them in learning RFL and UFL. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the study, they have some problems that are the focus of our study.

For years, scientists tried to find an optimal way to solve or at least to minimize the problems of learning RFL and UFL, but still this topic is under discussion due to absence of universal solution.

Straker J. (2016) made serious literary review devoted to the role of language competence study in international student's life and concluded, that active communication and participation into university activities helps a lot in any language mastering

Nowacka D. (2015) analyzed selected textbooks for learning UFL and found out the most balanced among them according to external criteria.

Bidenko L. et al. (2017) determined the main problems in the conception of learning. The authors focused on the audio-lingual technique of learning UFL consists of introducing new lexis and grammatical structures.

Dmytruk L. (2017) presented the effectiveness of using innovative and information techniques and video presentations in the educational process of teaching UFL. The author determined that multimedia presentations improve the teaching process providing information support in a visual form and help students learn the material faster and more efficiently.

Budnik A. (2017) confirmed the effectiveness of the language portfolio method for international students' study. This method develops critical and creative thinking and capacity for self-analysis.

Erofeeva I. (2015) specified the peculiarities the educational process connected with learning RFL and determined that lexis learning and communicative conception of learning are the most effective.

Profound interest of modern linguists in the peculiarities of learning RFL and UFL determined the relevance of our study.

2. Materials and methods

Participants.

112 Arabic francophone students aged 21-22 studied at preparatory departments at 5 Ukrainian universities (author's affiliations) participated in the research. Among them, 54 students learned UFL and 58 students studied RFL. All students gave written consent to participation in the research. The Arabic students were participants of research due to their quantitative superiority among all foreigners who studied at the chosen universities at preparatory departments. **The main** selection criterion was their ability to speak French, which considered more close to Slavic languages, than English language.

Design of the study

The research lasted 10 months (2018-2019 academic year). During this period, **Arabic francophone students studied** at the preparatory departments learned the language course (RFL \ UFL) of 600 hours (300 classes). The expected level of language proficiency at the end of the course was B1-B2 according to the European recommendations on language levels. The language program included the following aspects: listening, grammar, reading, speaking, and writing. The language program based on the comprehensive textbooks "Krok" ("Step") (for learning UFL) and "Drug" ("Friend") (for learning RFL). At the end of the course, students passed the exam in the form of a control test, which included tasks for each studied aspect. The purpose of the test was to determine which language (RFL \

UFL) better learned by *Arabic francophone students after a common period of study*. The study *hypothesized* that *Arabic francophone students have better results in UFL than in RFL after completing the language course*.

Methods

The sample design was a stratified random sample (only Arabic francophone students selected as participants). The following indicators of descriptive statistics were determined: arithmetic mean, deviation from mean and significance point (Student's t-test (t)).

Statistical analysis

The control test designed in form of questionnaire containing 100 questions, divided into 5 categories according to the 5 studied language aspects, 1 point for every correct answer. MS Excel used for data processing.

3. Results

The results present in Table 1.

Table 1. The errors rate in control tests of RFL and UFL

Studied languages	Listening, errors		Grammar, errors		Reading, errors		Speaking, errors		Writing, errors	
	arithmetic mean	deviation from mean	arithmetic mean	deviation from mean	arithmetic mean	deviation from mean	arithmetic mean	deviation from mean	arithmetic mean	deviation from mean
UFL (n=54)	5,98	0.08	6.6 7	-0.18	6,3 7	0.02	6,1 9	-0.26	6,6 3	-0.02
RFL (n=58)	7.33	-0.14	7,8 1	0.02	7,7 8	-0.24	7,2 2	0.24	7,6 7	0.14
t mean	2.8		2.9		3.4		3		2.8	

Note: $p \leq 0.01$

Test results showed a good level of UFL / RFL in Arabic francophone students after completing the language course: the error level in the control test was little more than 30%. The students who learned UFL showed the best results in listening (arithmetic mean of errors = 5.98, $t=2.8$, deviation of mean = 0.08, $p \leq 0.01$), worst results in grammar (arithmetic mean of errors = 6.67, $t=2.9$, deviation of mean = -0.18, $p \leq 0.01$). The participants' success in the listening of UFL explained by its melodiousness

and easy audio perception: the words written in the same way as they are articulated. The worst results in grammar stipulated by the difficult grammatical system of Ukrainian language.

The students who learned RFL done more errors in grammar (arithmetic mean of errors = 7.81, $t=2.9$, deviation of mean = 0.02, $p\leq 0.01$), and showed the best results in speaking (arithmetic mean of errors = 7.22, $t=3$, deviation of mean = 0.24, $p\leq 0.01$). The failure in grammar also explained by difficulties of grammatical laws of Russian language, the success in speaking caused by social factors: probably these students had strong social networks with Russian-speaking students because they studied at universities situated in the East Ukraine where Russian-speaking population prevailed.

The majority of language problems related to reproducing vowels in unstressed positions, as well as reproducing letters, which have no analogs in Arabic language. Difficulties also caused by words ending with *-ъ* and *-ь*. The difference in the alphabetical structure of the Arabic and Slavic languages creates certain difficulties at the initial stage of learning. This requires developing an articulation apparatus using special phonetic exercises (tongue twisters). Arabic writing is right to left, which also causes problems in study Slavic languages. Students often omit vowels in writing, because in Arabic alphabet vowels indicate in writing with the help of special signs. The French-speaking Arabic students also mix letters of the Latin alphabet with Cyrillic one, which has the same graphic image.

The study of the grammar of Slavic languages begins with a case system of nouns. In spite of the fact that some cases have full or partial correspondences in Arabic language, changing the words' endings in the case paradigm causes difficulties. The least problems appear with the change of endings in conjugating verbs. The French language has similar changes that is why bilingualism helps foreigners to learn Slavic languages. Difficulties also appear in the category of the gender, which is absent in the Arabic language, verbs of motion with poly prefixes mean the direction and degree of action, possessive pronouns and impersonal sentences that are not characteristic of the Arabic language, although they exist in French.

4. Discussion

Thus, French language makes the process of learning Russian and Ukrainian language by Arab students more effective. The grammatical structure of French language allows using it as an intermediary language more effectively than Arabic language. At the same time, mastering French

language by the teacher is desirable, but not necessary, because students actively use electronic dictionaries in the learning process. The special language courses at further study at the University give the possibility to correct all problem points of language learning and improve language skills.

The authors emphasize that the contribution brought by this paper to the new knowledge to this field is that first in Ukrainian linguistic science carried out the research of problems in learning RFL\UFL by Arabic francophone students. The results confirmed the hypothesis that this category of students has better results in studying Ukrainian than Russian language.

The choice of balanced manual textbooks for learning Ukrainian language to foreign students, explored by Nowacka D. (2015) is a highly important issue. Unfortunately, today there is no one such manual, recommended by the government for all universities of Ukraine. That is why students in different regions of the country study language from different comprehensive books, which influence badly on the language skills' level.

The work experience of the authors shows that the audio-lingual model of teaching Ukrainian as a foreign language, offered by Bidenko L. et al. (2017) is less effective than visual methods and use of IT-technologies in the study process, offered by Dmytruk L. (2017). Multimedia presentations positively influence language perception by students, because help them to save time and take information about different aspects of a foreign language more precisely.

Speaking about language portfolio method in work with international students, offered by Budnik A. (2017), it should be noted, that authors of the article don't use it in professional practice, but it seems to be useful not for a one-year language course, but for profound language learning.

5. Conclusions

Universities in East Ukraine still teach foreign students RFL, although they are already in a transition period, which will lead to the full teaching UFL to foreigners because this required the State Law "About the functioning of Ukrainian as a state language". Among other provisions, this law obliges universities to teach UFL, not RFL to foreign students and to control the quality of knowledge with the help of a mandatory state language exam. The exam designed in the form of independent state testing and will conduct for the first time in 2020. The failure of the test will make impossible the further study of foreigners at the universities of Ukraine. This tightening of requirements by the government designed to popularize

Ukrainian language in all spheres of public life and to promote it among foreign students. Our research confirms that Ukrainian language is easy to learn than Russian language at least for the Arabic francophone students.

The research revealed that Arabic students have problems with Ukrainian and Russian grammar. It is possible to solve this problem through a profound language learning in the further study process. However, the personal perception of language and social networks are also important factors that influence the level of language skills.

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