



English for Russian Faculty

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Abstract

Internationalization is an important challenge for the Russian higher education system today and one of the biggest obstacles is the lack of the English language proficiency among the faculty. This deficiency is especially true for the technical and engineering universities who are attempting to address the lack of English language proficiency. There are a number of theoretical and practical approaches to foreign language acquisition. The Russian academic tradition of a foreign language teaching, however, was basically aimed at reading and translation skills based on works of the leading European and American theoreticians. The modern trend is communicative approach, the goal of which is to teach practical skills in language application.

In the 2011-12 academic year, Kazan National Research Technological University started a project funded by the university of teaching English to faculty. Initially, 50 most active faculty were selected and divided into five groups of ten according to the results of their placement tests. Each group met twice a week for four academic hours of English throughout the whole academic year. The achievement test at the end of the academic year included grammar, writing, and an oral lecture presentation in English. Out of the 50 faculty, 37 persevered through the whole program and showed significant improvement in English proficiency. Information about this program spread around the university by word of mouth, and many more faculty members showed interest for the academic year 2012-13 with an enrollment of 170 faculty (out of 150 planned) and 15 study groups. After one semester, the program has achieved 100% retention with all members still attending the courses.

This paper describes the program created at Kazan National Research Technological University to improve the English language skills of their faculty and will focus on analyzing the academic progress of the faculty and teaching methods which are used in order to work with adults.

Background

While Russia was part of the Soviet Union, it was a "closed" country with limited international contacts where education and science developed successfully though independently. In science, there were a large number of journals in the Russian language, and the conferences which were held in the Soviet Union, were only in the Russian language. In technical and engineering education, all the textbooks and manuals were in Russian, either written by the Soviet scientists, or translated into Russian from other languages. The latter was true for very few textbooks, e.g. textbooks in physical chemistry by Peter Atkins (Oxford). English language teaching, especially at technical and engineering universities, was aimed at reading and translating foreign publications. This approach, however, was shared at that time by many European scholars [1]. The communicative approach [2] also entered the Russian educational system in the late 20th century, however, it did not spread everywhere.

Moreover, there were very few native English language speakers in the faculty and thus opportunities to practice communication skills were limited to major cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg. Furthermore the Russian language was used for communication in science and education in all the socialist countries. The result was that neither students nor faculty had a real need for English language proficiency.

The situation changed with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia became an independent and democratic country open to the global educational community. After signing the Bologna declaration at the Berlin Conference in 2003, Russia started active participation in global education at which time the weak command of the English language by faculty and students was apparent. The lack of foreign language proficiency among the faculty is explained by the fact that almost all of them are graduates of the Soviet-era universities. In order to solve this problem, universities developed their own different and unique solutions. This is especially true for the universities which are now aiming at integration onto the world educational and scientific space.

Several years ago the Russian Ministry of Education and Science launched a new project of differentiating the universities according to their educational and research activities. Thus, a special competition was held where universities vied for the status of National Research University with resulting additional funding and privileges. Over 2000 universities in the Russian Federation participated in the contest, and 29 of them finally awarded the status. Kazan State Technological University (KSTU) was one of them, and in 2010 it was renamed into Kazan National Research Technological University (KNRTU).

Internationalization of the Faculty

The goal of KNRTU development as a national research university is “to provide personnel and scientific research developments for industrial cluster of multifunctional polymer and composite materials and goods” [3]. One of the tasks set in order to reach the goal is the integration of the Russian and international scientific schools through a number of actions, including professional development of faculty in the world leading universities and scientific centers and inviting world leading professionals to give lectures and workshops at the university. These activities are funded by the Russian Ministry of Education and Science. Thus, since 2010, the number KNRTU faculty going abroad to visit the leading scientific and educational centers for the purposes of professional development, research, fellowship and participation in international conferences, workshops, symposiums, exhibitions and other events, grew significantly. In 2002 this number equaled 61, growing to 84 in 2009, 327 in 2010, and 401 in 2012.

Due to the visits to foreign scientific and educational centers, the number and quality of direct contacts with foreign professors has also increased. For example, in 2002 KNRTU had 15 partners in 13 countries of the world, and in 2012 the number was 93 partners in 32 countries. By ‘partners’ we mean only the organizations which have signed an agreement on cooperation, or a memorandum of understanding with KNRTU. Today, together with partner organizations, KNRTU hosts a number of international scientific schools and conferences every year, i.e. in 2012 there were 21 events of this scale at the university (to compare, in 2002 KNRTU hosted only 2 international conferences). Moreover, the interest to KNRTU in the world has started growing, and the number of foreign delegations to the university has increased from 10 in 2002 to 43 in 2012 (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Development of International Relations at KNRTU in 2002-2012.

Indicator	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Foreign Partners	15	17	14	18	24	33	39	40	42	76	93
Partner Countries	13	15	12	10	15	19	20	21	20	27	32

Foreign Delegations	10	10	7	12	12	19	13	12	35	44	43
International Events	2	1	3	2	3	2	1	5	4	17	21
Faculty Visits Abroad	61	60	66	77	155	75	92	84	327	418	401

All these facts contributed to the motivation to learn the English language as the language of international communication. The faculty felt the need to communicate with partners directly and independently without any help of the interpreters.

Approach to Improving English Language Skills

Traditionally, the KNRTU Department for Professional Development of University Professors runs the 72 hour English language courses for the faculty. This program is within the 'Foreign Languages for Professional Activities' profile, and it was accredited in 2007. Every year around 20 professors attend these courses. Obviously, this number is not sufficient for a national research university which sets integration into the world educational and scientific space as its development priority. Therefore, the Academic Council of KNRTU made a decision to forward the task of university faculty training in foreign languages to the Department of Foreign Languages for Professional Communication.

The Department developed an English language program for 200 contact hours (an academic hour in Russia is 40-45 minutes) and 100 self-study hours during the academic year. The experiment started in the 2011-12 academic year.

In September 2011, over 50 university professors were tested, and, according to results of the test, 5 different level groups were formed: one elementary group, three pre-intermediate groups, and one intermediate group. The on-line tests of Education First were used [4]. The total number of faculty who studied English during the academic year was 59.

The faculty, who participated in the program, came from different structural subdivisions of the university representing diverse background and expertise:

- Rubber and Elastomer Technology and Processing (FRETP)
- Petroleum and Petrochemistry (FPPC)
- Nanomaterials and Nanotechnologies (FNNT)
- Chemical Technologies (FCT)
- Mechanical (MF)
- Power Engineering and Technological Equipment (FPETE)
- Design and Software Engineering (FDSE)
- Light Industry Technology and Fashion (FLITF)
- Food Engineering (FFE)
- Food Technologies (FFT)

The following regime of classes was selected: two classes per week, each class 4 academic hours during the semesters, and self studies during the academic holidays. Due to business trips and additional scientific and conflicting academic activities, all professors could not attend all the classes and only 33 of them completed the course.

This retention rate at first glance would appear to be low. The statistics shows that in case of long-term 3-4 year programs run at KNRTU where students pay their own money for the language studies, the retention rate is often as low as 30%. This can be explained by too high expectations on the one hand, and the necessity to study too hard on the other hand. Everybody can speak his native language. When one see somebody speaking a foreign language, it sounds very natural and easy, and people suppose that they can also master this skill easily. Moreover, this is an incorrect understanding of the market economy in which Russia is entering where people think that, if they pay for a service, they should get it. In the case of learning a foreign language, people expect that a language can be ‘inserted’ into their minds for the money that they pay. Lack of hard work and little practice make achieving the English language proficiency impossible and they quit.

In addition there is one more obstacle in the way of language students which is peer pressure to be discussed in more details later. In the first year of our experiment, the retention rate was 44% and the remaining 56% were rather successful.

At the end of the courses, a final achievement test was given, and every professor had to demonstrate a fragment of either their lecture or a scientific report in English to the audience. Traditionally, oral communication skills in a foreign language are very difficult to achieve in the Russian system of education. Fluency in a foreign language has always been assessed according to the ability to read and translate the texts which can be assessed in written exams. Assessing oral communication is difficult at all levels of language proficiency and not assessed by written tests. Oral skills were not assessed in the elementary level as it was too early for them to give lectures in the English language. However the intermediate level groups were quite successful at oral presentations and several members of the pre-intermediate level group expressed a desire to give presentations and succeeded.

In every group, the last classes in the year were filled with presentations. Every group member was to give a 15 minutes presentation in front of the group. They had to demonstrate their presentation skills and command of the professional terminology in their field of expertise, communication skills in the English language, interaction with the audience, and get a measure of the comprehension of the material presented. The group members were not simple observers and were motivated to participate in the lecture and to give their feedback. The audience also participated in the evaluation of each presentation.

The presentations were videotaped, and then analyzed together with the presenter. All the students stressed that this was a unique and useful experience for them, to test both their professional and language skills. The assessment was based on impressions of the presenter, the teacher, and the audience.

Table 2 – Results of Training in 2011-12.

Faculty	Total Number of Attendants	Finished Courses	Ready to Give Lectures	Moved to Next Level
FRETP	14	12 (86%)	10 (71%)	11 (78,5%)
FPPC	9	4 (44%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
FPPC	9	2 (22%)	1 (11%)	2 (22%)
FCT	1	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
MF	6	4 (67%)	2 (33%)	4 (66%)
FPETE	1	1 (100%)	1 (100%)	1 (100%)
FDSE	7	3 (43%)	1 (14%)	3 (43%)

FLITF	2	1 (50%)	0 (0%)	1 (50%)
FFE	5	3 (60%)	3 (60%)	3 (60%)
FFT	3	1 (33%)	1 (33%)	1 (33%)
Other Centers	2	2 (100%)	2 (100%)	2 (100%)
Total	59	33 (56%)	21 (35,5%)	28 (47%)

Twenty one (21) professors succeeded at giving their oral reports, and 28 professors showed progress based on standardized testing and moved to the next level. The fact that 5 professors stayed at the same level proves different language learning capabilities and deficiencies of the testing method which cannot always give an adequate estimation of the communicative skills (see Table 2).

Influence of Peers on Performance

In our case of ‘corporate’ learning, peer pressure is an important influence. As a rule, all the group mates know each other by their everyday and professional activities. By the time they meet in the group, they all already have certain assumptions and opinions about each other. Professors with very high impact factors of publications may appear in one language level group with Professors who are not that good at science. Naturally, they want to ‘keep face’, and show very high results, but language abilities do not necessarily correlate to science achievements. In his testimonial, one Professor says ‘my main driving force in the English language learning is the competition in the group. I do not want to be worse than the others!’ Unfortunately, this is not always possible, and every group has its leaders and the underperformers.

In some cases, this competition is positive. Because of the friendly atmosphere in the group, faculty praises those who succeed this time, and support those who show a bad performance. However, this peer pressure can become the reason of dropping from the course. The spiral is rapid and fatal: underperform in one class, lag behind in the next class, no desire to attend the third class, and skip it; during the fourth class performance is even worse, and then the decision is made to escape.

Peer pressure could be avoided if groups were formed according to the ‘willingness’ of the faculty to study together. However, we form groups in accordance with the time that is convenient both for the teacher and for the students and their initial language proficiency. The homogeneity of language proficiency in the group has already proven its efficiency and is traditional.

However another problem arises. As a rule, those who attend the English language courses have many other responsibilities at the university. They are active in different types of conferences, workshops, events, grant applications, publications and etc. An option was discussed of sending to the English language courses only those who have enough free time to dedicate to the activity. However this presents the following dilemma: if this faculty member has not excelled at the university in their native language, the chance that they will excel internationally in the foreign language is remote.

In the next year programs, we tried to avoid some of the mistakes that we made in the previous year, and to increase the retention rate.

Follow-on Program

The success of the 2011-12 academic year experiment contributed to the further development of the experiment in 2012-13. This time the plan was to have around 150 faculty attend the courses.

In September 2012, around 180 professors expressed their desire to study, and were tested. Assuming that by the end of the year attrition would reduce the class size, it was decided to keep only 15 groups as planned instead of increasing the number of groups to 18 which would have been required to maintain a class size of no more than 10 people. Our predictions were confirmed and a month later there were no more than 10 people in each group. As of February 2013, 134 professors continue to attend the classes with very positive feedback and results. The professors who attended the courses in 2011-12 are also in the groups. The same regime of classes was selected and the same achievement goals were set.

In January 2013, the experiment was expanded and extended to university administrators, including vice-rectors, deans and heads of different divisions. Two groups were formed, one elementary level group and one intermediate level group. The decision to separate administrators from other faculty was based on our experience with peer pressure. Deans and directors do not want to 'lose face' in the eyes of their subordinates. Furthermore, the schedule for the administrators was chosen to be less and they have two classes per week, 1.5 academic hours (60 minutes) each. The classes are either before or after the compulsory meetings. Nevertheless, the rate of administrators' absence at classes is still high as they are too often away from the office.

Testimonial Feedback

The following excerpts have been taken from a participants' testimonial:

....in the Soviet times we used to study a foreign language without any hope that there will be any chance to use it

.... every PhD student passed an exam in the foreign language..And the result is, nevertheless, zero.

....In the current language program, we discuss different problems and topics that we cannot find time for in our everyday life.

....real problems that I face: my vocabulary was much smaller than that of my younger group mates (I am much elder than the majority of them).

.....due to my professional activities... I miss many classes;

.....If we want our scientists to start writing and publishing their papers in the English language, the principle of long life foreign language learning is to be applied to the professional activities of the university faculty.

Summary

It is evident that, in the world of Russian higher engineering and technical education development and with the international trend of the university education integration, the English language proficiency has become a key competence for the engineering educators. Traditionally foreign language teaching at Russian universities was not aimed at communicative competence development, but rather focused on reading and translating foreign scientific literature. As the result, today's professors do not have a good command of

foreign languages. An option to solve this problem is intensive foreign language courses, and the experience of Kazan National Research Technological University shown promising results.

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