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TEACHING ORAL RUSSIAN SPEECH AT THE BEGINNER'S LEVEL

One of the most important and distinctive characteristics of a human being is the ability to exchange information with other people by means of language – that is to communicate. Communicative purpose definitely takes the leading role in a system of educational purposes for teaching/learning Russian as a foreign language. Demonstration of problem-solving skills in real life communication situations determines the level of students' communicative competences, which are acquired together with the whole complex of linguistic and speech skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing. Only well-developed hearing and pronunciation skills constitute the basis for systematic and gradual improvement of all types of speech skills.

International students' insufficient mastery of Russian pronunciation results in their psychological discomfort, reduction of activity-related capabilities in academic sphere, as well as in business, scientific and other forms of communication.

Teachers working with an international audience are well aware that achievement of proper pronunciation of Russian sounds by speakers of other languages, as well as teacher's correction and minimization of accent, entail great difficulties in the educational process. Since articulation of sounds is a complex set of interrelated movements of the speech organs, articulation practice occupies a special place in teaching pronunciation.

The initial stage of teaching Russian to international students usually begins with an introductory course in phonetics, which lasts from 7-10 days to two-three weeks depending on the particular learning environment. It is obvious that development of excellent phonetic skills is a difficult goal to achieve in such a short period. Therefore, pronunciation mastering often continues throughout the entire first year of study.

The main objectives of introductory phonetics course are cut down to teaching basics of foreign language articulatory and acoustic phonetics using the limited amount of lexico-grammatical material, as well as developing reading and writing skills. In addition to acquiring pronunciation skills, students simultaneously develop basic speaking and writing skills. In accordance with the principle of communicativeness, the introductory phonetics course provides knowledge of foreign language sounds together with some basic vocabulary and elementary syntactic patterns. The objectives of the introductory phonetics course usually constitute the main basis for selection of relevant vocabulary and grammatical patterns. Material of the introductory phonetics course is quite comprehensive, but at the same time, it brings together all pronunciation elements: sound articulation and production, speech rhythm and intonation.

Taking into account the importance of the phonetics course, language teachers should strive to bring “communicative value into every moment of a lesson, but only do this whenever it is possible to organize classwork in the way that it is focused on some interesting topic for discussion – a line of verse, lyrics of a song, a maxim or a joke” [3; 64].

Teaching Russian pronunciation to students, lecturers should consider peculiarities of the Russian phonetic system in comparison to other languages. The Russian language, as we know, is a language of consonant-based type, which means that consonants are of primary importance. Consonants influence pronunciation of vowels in speech flow, and not vice versa, which causes various modifications of vowel phonemes. Moreover, the most important feature of the Russian consonantism is distinction of all consonants according to two fundamental opposition categories: a) hardness/softness (hard/soft consonants) and b) dullness/sonority (voiced/unvoiced consonants), which form the core of the phonological system of the modern Russian language. The opposition of hard and soft (or plain/palatalized) consonants is inherent in quite few languages, and as stated A.A.Reformatsky, for the Russian phonetics it “is the basis of the Russian phonological system, the most significant feature of its sound system”.

Palatalization is observed during articulation of the Russian soft consonants: the middle part of the dorsum of the tongue lifts back to the hard palate and the tongue moves forward. However, lifting up the middle part of the dorsum of the tongue does not constitute a perceptible articulation moment.

Perceptible articulation moments refer to such movements and positions of the speech organs that can be felt, made a comment about (visually or mentally), seen (for example, in a mirror) or performed consciously and thoughtfully. Pronouncing most Russian sounds, international students should take into account perceptible articulation moments common for the language, which mainly include movements of the lips and sound articulation, work of the tip of the tongue, the front part of the dorsum of the tongue together with the passive speech organs, the lower and upper lips, alveoli, the front part of the hard palate; movements of the tongue back and forth, vibration of the vocal cords, as well as pressure and direction of the air flow; general tension/laxity of the speech organs; nature and extent of oral cavity opening [4]. In addition to perceptible articulation moments, the Russian language distinguishes imperceptible articulation moments as well. These, for example, include movements of the back or middle parts of the tongue, movements of the uvula etc.

Distinguishing pronounced hard and soft consonants, as well as articulation of the palatalized sounds cause great difficulties for international students. Therefore, it is recommended to explain soft consonant articulation to students and practice pronunciation using exercises that "make" speaker's tongue advance forward so that the tip of the tongue is pressed against the lower teeth and the front part of the tongue moves back to the alveoli and the front of the hard palate. Soft consonants are produced by switching from articulation of soft consonants to articulation of hard consonants and vice versa.

The voiced/unvoiced consonants opposition is observed in many languages around the world. However, the Russian voiced consonants constitute, above all, the backbone of the consonant system, as pronunciation of voiced consonants involves vibration of the vocal cords throughout the entire sound production process. Therefore, it is recommended to practice pronunciation of voiced and unvoiced consonants in different positions: a) before vowels; b) before sonorants; c) between vowels; d) in a word ending; d) before voiced consonants; e) before unvoiced consonants; g) as oppositions of mixed-up sounds (d/t, b/n, w/f and other) first in different word forms, and then - in the same word form, as switching position of the speech organs from articulation of voiced consonants to articulation of the unvoiced ones and vice versa is also one of the key features of the Russian articulation basis.

Several Russian phonemes are very difficult for speakers of a wide variety of languages around the world, because these particular languages do not have any similar phonemes.

Consonant [l] causes difficulties for almost all foreigners, as it is not only very different from a quite close “Central European” /l/, but also from a much more close English and Italian equivalent. Therefore, we can recommend the following exercise for practicing /l/ articulation: set (with force) the tip of the tongue against the lower teeth, which prevents from incorrect articulation with pressure out on the alveoli (although Russian speakers often articulate this sound using the upper teeth).

Major problems arise during pronunciation of the following hushing sounds as well: [sh], [zh], [shch], [ch] and, to a lesser extent, [ts]. The correct articulation of [ch] requires lifting of the dorsum of the tongue and lowering of the tongue back down, when the sound [sh] should be pronounced with a tip of the tongue curved backward. Another important feature is additional labialization, without which the sound loses some of its specific characteristics.

Study of the Russian vocalism should begin with acknowledgement of the fact that the degree of lifting the tongue and labialization (or its absence) are the distinctive features of most Russian vowels. Then, there are also differences in pronunciation of vowels in stressed and unstressed syllables and compatibility of different vowels within a word and at the word junction. The following vowel positions in stressed syllables are usually distinguished as the main ones: a) an isolated position; b) between hard consonants; c) after soft and before hard consonants; g) after consonant /j/; d) between soft consonants; e) after hard and before soft consonants. Training pronunciation of vowels in the stressed syllables begins right from the very beginning of the learning process – the very first lesson.

Sound [y] is the most complicated if we consider pronunciation of all Russian vowels. It is in lower and “less” front position than European [i]. Training pronunciation of Russian [y] usually implies the following exercise: pronouncing [y] to feel the exact position of the speech organs during articulation of the sound, and then stretching the lips as if pronouncing [i].

Studying phonetics must necessarily be combined with intonation practicing, which eventually results not only in a comprehensive work on articulatory-rhythmic speech component, but also in decent emotional expressiveness.

The consistent, gradual and systematic work aimed at the speech organs' training and developing, is a rather complex system comprising practice of clear sound articulation and proper intonation, building skills in intonation and implementation as the highest form of phonetic and intonational phrase perfecting.

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