

MODERN METHODS OF TEACHING RUSSIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TO NON-PHILOLOGY STUDENTS

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Abstract: Teaching Russian as a foreign language (RFL) to non-philology students has been an active area of research for the last several decades. There has been a constant increase in the number of students learning Russian, due to the growing role of the Russian language in the academic environment and to the development of international relations in this area. The ultimate purpose of teaching Russian to international non-philology students is for them to speak Russian fluently (first of all, in a specific discipline), to express their thoughts, to understand their interlocutors, to reproduce and interpret orally and in writing the information obtained from print and audio sources. Learning Russian for professional purposes for non-philology university students is not only a means of mastering their future professions, but also a possibility to competently communicate in the professional environment and easily adapt to constantly changing working conditions.

This study aims to show how RFL is taught to non-philology students at the current stage of development of higher education, to specify the challenges and the teacher's tasks in this area and, finally, to discuss the development of communicative competence among non-philology students.

Keywords: Russian as a foreign language (RFL), methodological techniques, learning principles, professional and personal development, computer technologies, RFL training areas, non-philology learning aspects .

INTRODUCTION

A modern specialist is expected to meet new requirements in terms of education and competence, due to innovative processes taking place in various areas of modern society and, above all, in science and technology. These processes require higher education to search for new ways of upgrading and development. Modern university language education is aimed at upgrading RFL training system and at bringing it into conformity with European and Russian educational standards (Petrova, Kurbatova and Solyanik 2010).

Russia is a modern country strengthening and expanding its political and economical positions internationally. For this reason, a growing number of international students want to attend Russian universities, and more and more students strive to master the Russian language as a means for receiving training in the chosen field of study. In Russian universities providing education to international students, RFL became an academic discipline in the 1950s and 1960s, and since then it has been developing, improving and searching for new ways of teaching the Russian language to international students (Pinevich 2011).

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At present, almost every university having programs in the Humanities and other fields of study offers RFL courses. The Russian language is, along with the other academic disciplines, a compulsory course for international students taking university preparatory courses, for students pursuing specialist, bachelor, master and doctoral degrees, and for trainees. As a means for international and professional communication and the language of Russian science and technology, the Russian language is of great interest, first of all, to international students taking courses in non-humanities disciplines (Mets, Mitrofanova and Odintsova 1991). This field of study is referred to as “teaching the Russian language and other disciplines to international students, depending on their professional interests and needs in the Russian language and on the length of study” (Shtchukina 1990).

The Russian language training is now taking place in the context of global changes within the entire education system: language learning goals, students’ needs and learning conditions have undergone major changes. One cannot fail to see that changes in quality replaced those in quantity and that students themselves were given the opportunity to determine not only the linguistic, but also the cultural content of language courses. At present, learning goals and objectives in RFL courses are determined precisely by the needs of the learners.

Learning Russian as a means for pursuing a specific academic program constitutes the main distinctive feature of the Russian language courses offered to non-philology students. The students’ prime goal is to acquire professional knowledge and skills in a language other than their own (Dubinskaya, Orlova and Saenko 2004).

It goes without saying that professional Russian language programs have become one of the main directions in RFL teaching methodology.

Russia’s joining the Bologna process poses new challenges to RFL teachers, one of them being the early implementation of new technologies into the learning process and the creation of new learning approaches and methods allowing for fighting off severe competition and for maintaining the high level of Russian education.

METHOD

Just as it is the case with other disciplines, methodology has at its disposal specific research methods ensuring the reliability of conclusions and the credibility of references. These methods are based on the dialectics characterizing the methodology (methodology is a study of knowledge acquisition and reality transformation methods). The main difficulty in conducting research in the Russian language methodology and teaching is that, as a rule, the discipline under investigation may not be distilled from its multifaceted relations and influences in order to be studied in its pure form. The influence of additional factors often badly distorts the research outcomes (Farisenkova 2002).

Research methods

1. **Synthesis of best practices** implies studying professional achievements by a number of creative teachers and highlighting the general and most important points, which further implementation leads to considerable increase in learning efficiency (Farisenkova 2003). Synthesis of experiences is a more advanced stage of knowledge acquisition than mere description of the experiences of specific teachers, since the objective of any methodology research consists in revealing training trends, which makes it possible to set up an efficient training system. In their turn, these common trends can only be revealed if multiple cases of dependence of learning outcomes on techniques in use are observed and analyzed. What is crucial is that these trends must be tracked in the work of various teachers and under different conditions.
2. **The study of the history of methodology:** The study of any phenomenon must be conducted by taking into consideration its historical development: it is impossible to understand what the phenomenon under investigation represents today and what its prospects for development are without understanding how it appeared and developed.
3. **The analytical description method** (when studying and analyzing professional literature on the given topic, on linguistics, on the Russian and foreign language teaching techniques and on computer language acquisition).
4. **Sociological teaching methods:** (a) interviews with students attending preparatory courses and with master and doctoral students aimed at revealing their communication needs when studying RFL; (b) surveys conducted among international students with a view to identify their reasons and needs for studying RFL. A survey meets the precise objectives of the research study, corresponds to age-related peculiarities and possibilities of the surveyed students; some questions are multiple-choice questions, and some invite the surveyed person to provide his or her own answer; each proposed answer gives a different number of points, thus facilitating statistical and mathematical data processing. One of the advantages of surveying is that the data obtained in the process of using this method lends itself to easy quantitative treatment and is of high scientific value.
5. **Combination of empirical and theoretical research methods:** This means the study of language learning activities by international students taking RFL courses based on academic resources (academic articles, textbooks and professional study guides).
6. **The statistical method** has been used when processing and analyzing the survey results.

RESULTS

Summing up research studies in the Russian language teaching to international students, the following main features of RFL teaching in non-philology academic disciplines can be singled out (Table 1). It should be noted that division by training areas is rather tentative, since all of these areas are interrelated and may be applied comprehensively.

TABLE 1: DEVELOPING LANGUAGE SKILLS AMONG NON-PHILOLOGY STUDENTS ACCORDING TO THE MAIN RFL TEACHING METHODOLOGY AREAS

| <i>Training areas</i> | <i>Language skills</i> | | | |
|------------------------|---|---|---|--|
| | <i>Listening</i> | <i>Reading</i> | <i>Speaking</i> | <i>Writing</i> |
| Personality-oriented | Choice of methods, content, teaching techniques and learning aids depending on the learner's interests, goals and the Russian language learning objectives. | | | |
| Cultural | The learner's adaptation and socialization in a new cultural and language environment, stimulation of interest in studying the Russian language and culture, activation of acquired language skills, formation of socio-cultural competence | | | |
| Communicative | A means of professional communication in a specific discipline | A means of enriching the learner's Russian vocabulary, thus facilitating a more efficient reading/ understanding of texts | A means of professional communication in a specific discipline | – |
| Innovative | Efficient, quick and independent (including distance learning) knowledge acquisition, enhancement and expansion, innovative learning strategies, reduced training time (direct contact with the teacher), easy access to information | | | |
| Linguistic Methodology | – | A means of enriching professional vocabulary, teaching basic academic Russian, effective Russian language teaching | A means of acquiring skills for producing coherent texts independently in scientific and professional communication | A means of acquiring skills for reviewing and annotating professional literature |

| <i>Training areas</i> | <i>Language skills</i> | | | |
|-----------------------|------------------------|--|-----------------|--|
| | <i>Listening</i> | <i>Reading</i> | <i>Speaking</i> | <i>Writing</i> |
| Test-oriented | – | A means of preparation for test assignments in academic and professional communication | – | A means of preparation for test assignments in scientific and professional communication |

The four language skills acquisition (listening, reading, speaking, writing) depends, first of all, on the academic discipline and on the linguistic competence level of the learner (Surygin 2000).

As a rule, at the basic level, the learner's interests have little to do with the chosen field of study: in the preparatory, 1st and 2nd year courses, the RFL teacher aims at developing those language knowledge and skills that will allow the international student to communicate in a new language, to take university courses in the chosen field of study and to show interest in Russian culture and language (Levina 2003).

At the more advanced level, given the learner's gradually increasing need to work with specific and specialized texts, the teacher is expected to develop the international learner's language skills necessary for adequate professional communication in Russian, to emphasize the foreign professional's acquisition of the most important communication skill in professional life, which is his or her active involvement in practical activities and communication.

At the postgraduate level, the content of language training of international master and doctoral students in RFL program is determined, first of all, by their communication needs in the academic world, the most important of them being fluent reading of professional literature, preparation of conference papers and presentations, article writing skills and participation in scholarly discussions. It is always the text (learning, scientific, specialized) that provides a sound basis for shaping and further developing these advanced language skills in language training. The text lies at the heart of developing comprehensive reading, writing and speaking skills of the postgraduate student at the basic and advanced levels; this is why the issues relating to providing the student with relevant texts and to constantly updating the text library are always followed closely by the teacher. At the postgraduate level of RFL teaching, scientific text is perceived as part of not only linguistic, but also subject content in a specific field of study in postgraduate programs, since reading is an important way of acquiring knowledge for the postgraduate student, and scientific text is a source of relevant and professionally important information for him or her (Mitrofanova 1985).

It is important to point out that the international postgraduate student's subject competence level may be quite high: many of them have fully shaped conceptual and terminological frameworks in their fields of study, some may have professional experience. This is precisely what makes the RFL courses in postgraduate programs different from RFL courses intended, for instance, for international students enrolled in undergraduate programs in Russian higher education institutions.

Given that, today, the goals and objectives of RFL programs are determined, above all, by the learners' needs, a survey has been conducted among the students enrolled in the preparatory program at the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia. The results of the survey show that the prospective students in non-humanities disciplines prefer learning Russian using computer technologies based on academic texts according to their specific field of study. In other words, in RFL programs, teachers are encouraged to select texts by discipline and to make ample use of computer technologies to optimize the learning process.

The proposed concept is based on the comprehensive approach to RFL teaching using specialized texts, taking into consideration the learner's field of study and his or her interests and developing the learner's socio-cultural competence by implementing computer technologies into the learning process (Figure 1).

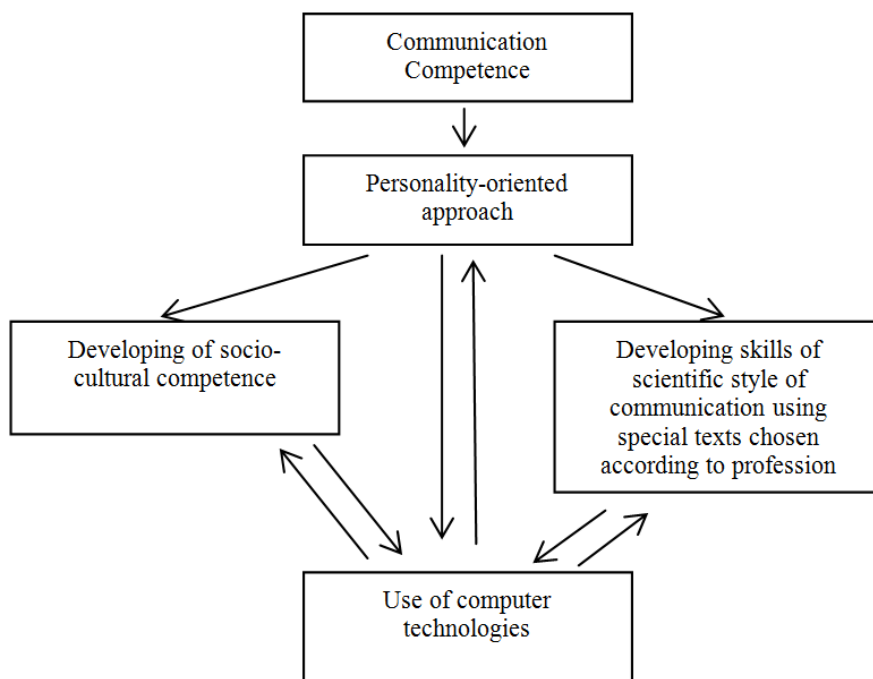


Figure 1: Comprehensive approach to developing communicative competence of international students in non-humanities disciplines

The practical relevance of the study is that the research results may be used in RFL teaching practices or in producing learning materials intended for developing reading, speaking, listening and writing skills of international students.

DISCUSSION

Description of students' spheres of communication relevant to various fields of study, helped determine the learning content for different groups of students. The learning and professional area has become a key area when dealing with non-philology students. Research literature emphasizes the following major areas of study related to RFL teaching to non-philology students:

1. Linguistic
2. Communicative
3. Cultural
4. Anthropocentric
5. Test-based
6. Technological

This set of key areas of study is not invariable; on the contrary, it changes from time to time, which is reflected in academic publications and in PhD thesis topics. The analysis of the conference papers of the International Association of Russian Language and Literature Teachers (St. Petersburg, 2003; Varna, 2007; Shanghai, 2011; Granada, 2015), conducted by the authors of the present article, has made it possible to single out the key areas of modern teaching methodology.

Linguistic (or linguistic methodology) area of study

The linguistic area of study comprises a wide array of issues relating to research on teaching different branches of linguistics: phonetics, lexicology, morphology, syntax, graphics and spelling, word formation and phraseology. These issues are often described as belonging to linguistic methodology, since methodology-related conclusions that are presented as teaching principles are made on the basis of the analysis of linguistic patterns of language, followed by the elaboration of various ways of implementing these principles into teaching. Language knowledge and skills (ability to apply language knowledge in real-life situations) are some of the typical learning outcomes in the linguistic area of teaching methodology.

The linguistic area of study is the oldest of all language teaching methods, since different language teaching techniques were elaborated as early as Antiquity. It dominated the methodology of RFL teaching before the emergence of the communicative area of study. Development of reading, speaking and writing skills depended precisely on teaching various branches of linguistics to students. This

approach was most popular in Russia in the 1960s through 1980s. The importance of studying all aspects of the Russian language at all stages of language training and in all its forms and manifestations is evident, since this ensures the viability of the linguistic area in teaching methodology.

Communicative (or activity-based) area of study

The communicative area of study in teaching methodology comprises issues relating to communication or communicative activities. Drawing extensively on achievements in communicative psychology, foreign language training psychology, psycho linguistics and verbal pragmatics, this area helps learners to better master a foreign language in terms of communication. Research on speech acts and intentions, discourse, communicative competence and verbal and behavioral strategies, among others, are of high importance to this area of study. In this case, language training typically leads to language skills acquisition.

The communicative area of study is also called activity-based, which is practically the same, since communication is one of the types of human activity by exterior signs and by inner structure. Teaching communication skills (development of language skills) has a lot to do with teaching other types of human activity.

The significance of the communicative area in teaching methodology is due to the emphasis on communication objectives almost in all modes of RFL teaching. This area is directly related to the linguistic area of study, first of all, because language skills depend on the learner's mastery of different aspects of language, and, secondly, because the linguistic component of communicative competence proves to be its key component and underpins the performance of its other components (Popova 2013).

No matter how much modern curriculum developers speak out against the communicative area of study, it will remain the leading area in teaching methodology, since the main function of any language is communicative, and people learn foreign languages in order to communicate in them.

Cultural (or cross-cultural) area of study

The cultural area of study is related to the study of Russian culture's place and role in teaching Russian. It encourages teachers to teach various aspects of Russian culture to international students, reflects the learner's interest in Russia and in native speakers' lifestyle and creates conditions for getting fluent in Russian in its cumulative function (Krotova 2015).

Modern research reveals two trends in the interpretation of culture for educational purposes, the first of them being the linguistic and cultural trend (from linguistic aspects to cultural ones), which analyzes linguistic entities comprising national and cultural semantic elements, non-verbal communication means and everyday communication standards.

Basically, the linguistic and cultural methodology is a form of vocabulary or phraseology teaching methodology, which is related to the linguistic area of study. It can also be regarded as a way of developing the socio-cultural component of communicative competence, which is related to the communicative area of study.

The second trend concerns linguistics and cultural studies (from cultural aspects to linguistic ones), according to which the main objective of teaching a foreign language is the foreign culture and the main objects of study are linguistic awareness, linguistic concepts and linguistic worldview. At the same time, the language is considered as a form of representing cultural facts.

The development of cultural studies in light of linguistics led scholars to acknowledgment of the fact that it is of utmost importance not only to teach foreign language to learners, but also to shape their personalities in a way that learners know how to build bridges through intercultural dialogue. In its turn, interest in promoting the dialogue of cultures and in intercultural communication issues has led to the development of methodology for intercultural education by means of RFL teaching (Berdichevsky, 2011). In general, the cultural area of study in teaching methodology is expected not to lose its significance in the future.

Anthropocentric (or personality-oriented) area of study

Interest in the learner's personality and, overall, anthropocentrism in the Humanities has resulted, in Russian teaching methodology, in the propagation of anthropocentric, or personality-oriented, teaching methods. The key points of this theory were borrowed from foreign concepts, such as non-directive teaching, individualized learning, autonomous learning and humanization of education (Mitrofanova and Khavronina 2015).

The personality-oriented approach gives the learner considerable freedom in choosing learning objectives, content and learning strategies, textbooks and, in some cases, teachers. This approach ensures appropriate conditions for the learner's personal self-realization and personal growth and directs the learner's activities and his or her ability to face challenges, while maintaining equal, positive and supportive teacher-student relationships. The personality-oriented approach to training means that the learner's personality is central, while the teacher is but a helper or a counselor. In this case, the learning process as a whole takes on an anthropocentric aspect in terms of learning objectives, content and organization. Today, anthropocentric vision of learning is popular in Russia and abroad and, furthermore, is dominant in high school and higher education. There are grounds for believing that anthropocentric vision of learning will continue to develop and foster ideas about cooperative learning.

Test-based area of study

Testing has lately assumed an added significance in Russian language training programs. This is logical, since it is important to identify the learner's level of language proficiency for a specific profession.

Researchers' awareness of this need resulted in the emergence of a number of new methodological considerations:

1. Levels of language proficiency (detailed descriptions have been given of each level);
2. Test theories (model tests, guidelines on testing and academic publications on testing issues have appeared; the state RFL testing system has been designed);
3. Training aimed at the learner's achieving a specific level of language proficiency (new textbooks and test preparatory sessions have appeared).

It is important to note that, today, the testing theory exerts a growing influence on RFL programs in their different forms, modifying them with account of the specific nature of language tests and the learner's level of language proficiency. It can be assumed that the influence of testing on the language training process will be maintained.

The negative aspect of this approach is the loss of attractiveness and creativity as far as language training is concerned. The only incentive to study a language becomes preparation for the language proficiency test, the learner putting the achievement of a particular proficiency level at the core of language training. A strong emphasis on testing diverts the teacher's attention from studying itself and from specific learners, and the learning process turns into teaching to the test. Given that the teacher usually focuses on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, language programs lose content materials that are not reflected in that document and are difficult to assess: literary texts and intercultural communication, problem-based approach, let alone the learner's personality. Also, tests do not take into account the individual approach to the learner and his or her abilities, and much has been said on the topic nowadays. Thus, test-oriented approach to education hinders achievement of social and intercultural educational objectives and individual approach to learners. This is the reason why some European curriculum developers are skeptical about increasing the importance of testing in foreign language training.

Technological area of study

One of the best and fastest ways for non-philology students to become fluent in Russian is to use new learning tools, such as computer technologies that play an important role in modern life and foster the learning process (Ismailova, Gleason, Provotorova and Matukhin 2016). A wide array of uses of the computer as a

learning tool exists today; a variety of exercises is created for use in computer training programs; computer-based communicative training courses have also been developed, along with the basics of electronic textbooks; and, finally, psychological and linguistic aspects of language training dialogues with the computer have been elaborated (Ismailova and Matukhin 2016). Out of all educational tools, computers are the best to consider learners' individual needs and interests, to understand language acquisition strategies, to differentiate ways of presenting learning materials, to assure individual training modes and to create a wide range of incentives aimed at involving learners into communication in a foreign language and at increasing contact time with the language being studied to a maximum degree (Beloglazova and Bondareva 2015).

A new field of study related to using information and communication technologies, namely, digital language training, has been developing from the 2000s on. The teacher aspires to create his or her own computer-based learning and assessment programs, distance education courses and educational websites. The main objective of digital language training is to provide learners with theoretical and practical basis for studying foreign languages within the new context of the information society (Gartsov 2009). In practice, research conducted in this field of study has produced the following results: emergence of the e-learning environment in higher education institutions; creation of digital classes, workshops, virtual excursions, traditional and distance education courses, teleconferences, webinars and digital textbook collections; development of multimedia study guides (for example, "The Russian Language in the Mirror of Russian History") and comprehensive courses focusing on Russian culture (for example, "Travelling through Russia"), etc. (Anisina 2013; Balykhin 2008).

The following parameters are specific to the computer as a new kind of technological learning tools: large memory, high performance, the possibility of presenting study materials while analyzing answers, adaptability, interactive communication and the possibility of working in constant dialogue mode.

Computer training programs are key elements of computer-based language training. A great variety of computer programs (based on their functional purpose that takes into account learners' progress across the curriculum, on learner-relevant adaptability, and on their methodological purpose that takes into account the interactive-multimedia ratio in relation to computer study materials) is closely bound up with various aspects, levels and proficiency degrees in language training, which all demand different approaches.

Among the best learner-relevant programs are, in our view, the communication-oriented combined adaptive programs, in which it is possible to change ways of presenting study materials depending on changes in exterior and inner learning environment (e.g., the level and the speed with which previous material has been grasped.)

Interactivity of computer-based language training programs holds an important place in RFL training (Solyanik 2013). Computers address the problem of control management at the formal and semantic levels, since they analyze answers provided by learners from the perspective of their conformity to a standard. In this regard, tests are the most common form of assessment.

Analysis of various research studies has shown that the use of digital study materials is accompanied by a number of issues that the RFL teacher must keep in mind:

1. Time limits for computer use, lesson structure, place of computer-based lessons in the curriculum, conditions of computer use;
2. The role of psychological factors: learners' aptitudes and age;
3. Differences between digital and printed text (lesser amount of text perceived by the learner; variations in text volume on the screen; slower reading of digital text; use of hyperlinks).
4. As a curriculum developer, the RFL teacher must be able to be proficient with the following:
 5. Word processors (everything related to working with texts);
 6. Graphic editors (everything related to creating and editing images, drawing);
 7. Business stuff (drawing up digital tables, e-mails, etc.)
 8. Developing the scenario of a computer program, including preparation, correction, assessment, testing and further improvement;
 9. Understanding different kinds of "help", since this allows for directing the learner to the right answer (it is more efficient to use indirect assistance anticipating mistakes and presented as translation, thematic vocabulary lists, etc.);
10. Choosing the answer processing mode: correctness, "marking", anticipation, grammar analysis of answers (the most effective solution is to combine different methods);
11. Using common, specialized and tool programs to create programs by programming.

On the basis of the above, new study materials, including texts and exercises, have been developed and tested online and in printed form.

The results of the trial training program confirmed the possibility and usefulness of RFL teaching to prospective students in non-humanities disciplines by using a variety of texts, since their use in the learning process gives positive results in preparing international students for study in Russian higher education institutions.

In conclusion, the use of computer technologies is, nowadays, not only necessary, but also compulsory part of language training in the context of higher education institutions specializing in non-humanities disciplines.

CONCLUSION

Today, Russian higher education institutions welcoming international students make valuable suggestions on how to teach Russian for professional purposes and develop educational materials fostering language training (Chuvaeva 2015).

For university students enrolled in programs in non-humanities disciplines, the Russian language is a means for acquiring relevant professional knowledge, for familiarizing with Russian and international scientific achievements and, as a result, for getting a degree in the chosen field of study. This is why modern programs, textbooks and study guides on the Russian language aim not only at providing students with linguistic knowledge of Russian, but also at teaching students to master written and oral Russian for use in real-life situations and to read professional literature in Russian (Kurova 2015).

The present article focuses on teaching Russian to international prospective students in non-humanities disciplines and seeks to propose a theoretical and practical explanation as to why texts on fundamental science must be included in RFL teaching to non-philology students with a view to develop future specialists' professional competence in their academic discipline. The research results have elucidated the reasons why international students attending preparatory courses in Russian higher education institutions study the Russian language.

A trial language learning program confirmed our hypothesis on fostering the study of the Russian language by prospective students on the basis of a comprehensive methodology underpinned by various specific aspects of teaching Russian as a foreign language to non-philology students. Our research has revealed the efficiency of this methodology in the formation and development of learners' language skills.

The dynamic character of modern education requires constant updating and upgrading of specifications and guidelines for different Russian language proficiency levels. Today, a great many changes are taking place in education, related to the appearance of new groups of students, reduction of class hours, presence in the same classroom of students belonging to different age groups, increase in class sizes, learners' new communicative needs, etc. Accordingly, teaching methods, principles and educational tools are being updated, and new trends are emerging in RFL teaching. In any case, the teacher working with non-philology students needs to draw on the already accumulated teaching experience and to move further in search of new solutions in terms of content, management and linguistic methodology so as to foster the educational progress of students.

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