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Refresher Courses for School Teachers of English at Tomsk State University

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Abstract

This paper examines the reasons for the development of English for foreign language teachers' (EFL teachers) refresher courses at Tomsk State University. The emphasis is on some topical issues of the organization and content of training courses for EFL teachers to develop their language teaching strategies and assessment skills to evaluate students' written answers according to the required checking and assessment criteria of the Unified State Examination (USE) in English. The author describes the training procedures carried out at Tomsk State University and specifies the methodological support and efficiency of educational arrangements.

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1. Introduction

The introduction of the USE has been a very important step in the Russian education system. University admission is now awarded on the basis of the Unified State Exam tests that serve both as a school final examination and for university matriculation. The exam gives potential students the opportunity to apply to several universities simultaneously, permitting student mobility to increase significantly. The higher the points, the more opportunities; high scores might open the doors of elite universities to school leavers and increase their chance for getting a state-budgeted place. Having analyzed the range of those educational establishments benefiting from high USE scores, we

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can distinguish two groups. The first group comprises the secondary schools: the more graduates with high USE scores they have, the better the schools' reputation. The second group is the universities. Freshmen with more than 70 points (out of 100) are considered to be high-performance students, while, freshmen with less than 50 points are the opposite. All Russian universities are interested in enrolling applicants with high scores. The interdependence of universities and secondary schools is obvious and encourages their cooperation in EFL instruction to satisfy the needs of the present-day society.

It is important to note that the Russian Unified State Examination in English is an exam with the tasks in a standardized form based on monitoring and measuring materials (MMM). Successful fulfillment of the tasks students can determine their proficiency level according to the federal state standard for complete secondary education. The MMM in English are of pragmatic character and are developed based on communicative-cognitive and competency-based approaches. The above materials test not only the students' knowledge about the foreign language but their language proficiency as well. The requirements for school leavers within the framework of the USE have considerably influenced the content of school education in foreign languages. Since the USE is a part of the regional education quality monitoring system, the objective of the present article is to consider teachers' training in adequate evaluation of written answers in the context of the regional education quality monitoring system.

From the very beginning, the principal position of the Federal Institute of Pedagogical Evaluation in Moscow in relation to the USE helped to avoid mistakes that are typical of national exams in foreign languages in some countries where the exam consists only of computer-marked tasks. Tasks with full answers constitute an important part of the exam in foreign languages in Russia since only these tasks check productive skills and increase the differentiating capability of the MMM. Thus, they help to ascertain the leavers with the highest level of language educational results. The inclusion of such tasks in the USE structure makes the criticism on the part of those who consider the exam a slot-machine process of matching unfounded.

It is necessary to say that tasks with full answers are especially significant for humanitarian disciplines since they enable examination experts to check the quality and achievement level of complicated intellectual communicative skills: to write a coherent text; to formulate ideas logically and consistently; to give arguments and counterarguments; to make conclusions and support them with examples. In this paper we will examine the framework of the school teachers' training course designed to meet the challenges of our modern educational system.

2. Teachers' training course design

2.1. Target competences

Nowadays, communicative competence is said to cover the following competences: speech competence i.e. the ability to use the language we learn as a means of communication and cognitive activity; a language/ linguistic competence i.e. language acquisition in accordance with topics and the field of conversations; sociocultural competence (including sociolinguistic) i.e. knowledge about the sociocultural specificity of other countries, the skill to create the models of both verbal and non-verbal behavior according to the above specificity, the skill to understand and interpret the linguocultural facts adequately; compensatory competence i.e. the ability to find a way out when speaking a foreign language but having a deficit of linguistic means; educational cognitive competence i.e. further development of academic skills to improve a foreign language proficiency and use a foreign language for education and self-education.

This relationship between the formation of a communicative competence and personal enhancement is emphasized in the federal component of the Federal Standard for General Full Education where in addition to the acquiring of a communicative competence another goal is set as the "development and training of the ability for personal and professional self-determination, social adaptation; formation of social activism of a citizen and patriot as well as the subject of intercultural cooperation; development of such personal traits as communicational culture, the ability to work in collaboration including the process of intercultural communication; development of the ability and willingness for self-studying a foreign language and with its help for further self-education in various spheres of knowledge; acquirement of creative and research experience with the help of a foreign language to be used in other subject fields" (The Federal State Educational Standard for the Secondary (Full) General Education 2012). On the

one hand, a communicative competence is a subject-related one as it belongs to the subject “Foreign Language”. On the other hand, it is a key cross-curriculum competence the absence of which makes the direct and indirect communication in any sphere, storage, transfer and accumulation of scientific and daily knowledge impossible. Thus, the formation of communicative skills of written speech in the course of teaching foreign languages and the corresponding forms of control come to the fore.

2.2. Basic criteria for the evaluation of C Part “Writing”

To support the above statements, we will analyze the fragments of two basic scales provided by the Federal Institute of Pedagogical Evaluation for the assessment of Part C “Writing” of the USE in English (Federal Institute of Pedagogical Evaluation 2015). The first fragment (Table 1) is taken from the scale used for the assessment of item C1 – a personal letter. The maximum number of points in each of all three criteria is 2. But if the communicative task has not been solved (criterion 1), experts put 0 in all criteria.

Table 1. A part of the assessment scale for the task “Personal letter”

Points	Solution of the communicative task	Text organization	Language proficiency
	Criterion 1	Criterion 2	Criterion 3
2	The task has been done in full: the content covers all aspects mentioned in the task (full answers are given to all the questions, 3 questions on the specified topic have been asked); the right style has been chosen in accordance with the purpose of a personal letter and addressee; the accepted rules of politeness accepted in the language have been observed.	The utterance has logic; the choice of logical connectors is right; the text has a right division into paragraphs; the structure of the text corresponds to the rules adopted in English-speaking countries.	The vocabulary and grammatical structures used in the utterance correspond to the given task; there are almost no spelling and punctuation mistakes (not more than 2 minor lexico-grammatical mistakes and/or not more than 2 minor spelling and punctuation mistakes are permissible).

The second fragment (Table 2) is taken from the scale used for the assessment of item C2- a composition. The maximum number of points in each of four criteria is 3 and in one (‘Spelling and punctuation’) it is 2. But if the communicative task has not been solved (criterion 1), experts put 0 in all criteria.

Table 2. A part of the assessment scale for the task “Composition with the elements of argumentation”

Points	Solution of the communicative task	Text organization	
	Criterion 1	Criterion 2	
3	The task has been done in full: the content covers all aspects mentioned in the task and reflected in the additional assessment scale; the style has been chosen in a right way (a neutral one).	The utterance has logic, the structure of the text corresponds to the given plan; the choice of logical connectors and their use is right; the text has a right division into paragraphs.	
Points	Vocabulary	Grammar	Spelling and punctuation
	Criterion 3	Criterion 4	Criterion 5
3	The used vocabulary corresponds to the given communicative task; there are practically no violations.	The used grammatical structures correspond to the given communicative task; there are practically no mistakes (1-2 minor mistakes are permissible).	
2			There are practically no mistakes in spelling. The punctuation in the text is right.

Thus, both tables illustrate the importance of teaching the students to solve the communicative task while writing their answers at the USE in English.

2.3. Statistical results analysis

The statistical analyses of the USE in English results in Tomsk in 2013/2014 enable us to make some conclusions about the level of language skills and linguistic abilities of school leavers in “Writing”. Let us examine Table 3 representing the results of the learners’ performance while doing a “Personal letter” task:

Table 3. Performance of the task “Personal letter” (%)

Personal letter	Criterion 1	Criterion 2	Criterion 3
2013	81.89	84.72	46.04
2014	73.1	83.9	53.2

Table 3 shows that while writing a personal letter (a “Basic level” task), the examinees decreased their results in Criterion 1 “Solution of the communicative task”. This means that they did not cover all the aspects indicated in the task or had some stylistic mistakes. However, most written works had logic and corresponded to the format (Criterion 2). The examinees showed their sociocultural knowledge: they knew how to write address date, to address a pen friend, to start and sign a letter. They demonstrated their ability to organize the text of a personal letter and cover the content that is impossible without basic linguistic abilities, language skills and the knowledge of letter writing. As far as Criterion 3 is concerned, the results of 2014 are higher than in 2013. Despite the fact that the task success is not determined by the number of lexical and grammatical mistakes but by the realization of a communicative task, it is necessary to pay attention that Criterion 3 increases the requirements to the knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, spelling and punctuation even on a basic level.

Table 4. Performance of the task “Composition with the elements of argumentation” (%)

Composition with the elements of argumentation	C 1	C 2	C 3	C 4	C 5
2013	45.91	54.09	47.92	29.06	32.83
2014	52.8	57.8	50.6	33.9	53.0

Table 4 shows that the results in all the criteria in “Composition” (the “Proficiency in English” level) in 2014 were higher than in 2013. This means that students were taught to avoid such typical mistakes of the previous year as: substitution of one genre of a written work by another one, departure from the theme and topicality; lack of style matching; lack of correspondence of argumentation to the expressed thesis (opinion); repeated arguments in expressing opinions; lack of full argumentation; wrong counter argumentation; inability to formulate the problem at the beginning of the work and make a conclusion at the end of it; a wrong division into paragraphs; logical mistakes including the disparity of the author’s viewpoint in the second paragraph and the conclusion; lack of or wrong use of logical connectors; lexico-grammatical and spelling mistakes; lack of a required number of words.

The above analysis proves the organization of training for school teachers to be necessary and useful. The course helps aspiring teachers to become aware of developing exam skills and strategies for reaching higher results since the key feature of the USE is to assess the ability to apply all the core skills using the language as a means of communication, and express ideas in speech or in writing in a stylistically correct form.

2.4. Structure, goals, and acquired skills

The purpose of the activity in the sphere of organization and conducting of the USE on the territory of Tomsk Region is the development of methodological support for the adequate evaluation of students’ knowledge of English. The above activity involves the training of experts, formation of the Subject Commission, working out of new methodological recommendations for the training of students for the USE and evaluation of the examination

results (Savitskaya, 2015).

In order to provide school teachers with guidelines on how to help students prepare for the high-stake examination and with reliable information about the format, content of the USE and the system of checking and evaluating the C Part “Writing” of the exam, the Faculty of Foreign Languages and the Institute of Distance Education of Tomsk State University (IDE TSU) organize the courses. The course combines classroom and on-line training which enable both Tomsk and out of town teachers to be involved in it. Training within the framework of the courses is conducted by the Deputy Chairman of the Tomsk Regional USE in English Commission who is a member of the University staff. The goals of the courses are: to increase the effectiveness of language teaching in the sphere of writing; for school teachers to have an idea of checking and evaluating Part C (“Writing”) according to the developed criteria; to promote the formation of the skill to check and evaluate pupils’ written answers at the USE in English.

To achieve the goals, the following tasks are to be realized within the framework of teachers’ training:

- to give the teachers an up-close look at the key provisions of regulatory and program materials which cover the content, structural and organizational features of the USE as a new form of summative assessment;
- to form the competences of teachers in the field of modern technologies for testing and evaluation;
- to ensure a high quality of digestion of the course content by forming teachers’ reflexive skills.

The form of the organization of teachers’ training includes seminars, self-directed learning and tests. The seminars and self-directed learning are organized according to the teaching and learning materials for the chairmen and members of the Regional Subject Commissions which are annually published by the Federal Service of Supervision in the sphere of Education and Science and the Federal Institute of Pedagogical Evaluation (Verbitskaya & Makhmuryan, 2015).

Having done the training course, the teachers should remember that being a productive skill, writing includes both the mechanics of writing and some special skills. In order to pass the USE successfully, their students should be able to: identify the context and write for a given purpose; identify the target reader; select relevant information in the input texts, make sure all points are covered; use their own words whenever possible without copying words from the input texts; show control of the structural and lexical range expected at the level, produce complex sentence structure and clause density; organize and produce a text of specific length of a given topic (Table 1, Table 2). The technology of teaching to create an independent written work includes the following technologies: product-oriented writing (teaching concentrates on the creation of an independent text) and process-oriented writing (teaching concentrates on the process of creating a written text). Within the framework of the former approach the fulfillment of such tasks as gap-filling, completion, sentence combining, unscrambling and expansion is recommended. Within the framework of the latter approach three stages are to be mentioned: pre-writing (planning); writing (realization of an idea, writing of an introduction, body and conclusion) and revision/editing/post-writing (checking process).

The courses develop the following knowledge, skills and abilities: to prepare students for the USE in English effectively; to know the organization and conducting procedure of the Russian Unified State Examination in English; to know the framework of categories and definitions of the USE: specifications, codifier, demo versions, communicative competences, communication strategies, testing, standardized tests, forms and types of control, forms and types of assessment, parameters and criteria for assessment, communicative tasks, communicative purpose etc.; to work with the instruments determining the checking and assessment procedure of the USE written works; to check and evaluate Part C “Writing” of the USE consisting of two items: C1- a personal letter and C2 - a composition on the basis of the developed criteria; to apply testing technologies and basic structural elements of pedagogical assessment in the sphere of writing; to analyze and correct typical mistakes in the sphere of writing; to analyze the communicative tasks of the USE; to self-analysis of the teacher’s work; to reflect, be open to pedagogical innovations.

The organization of seminars within the framework of the courses adheres to the following pattern: 1) analysis of the assessment criteria and specifications (basic scales and additional ones), 2) development of assessing skills, purposes, principles and technique, 3) opportunities for discussion of all possible options, arguments, examples, etc., The teachers are taught to reveal textual coincidences and to understand the order of a quantification procedure 4) analysis of authentic students’ works. After the evaluation of each work each participant states the number of points

he/she has put and gives comments. After a brief discussion the seminar facilitator gives her recommendations for the teachers to analyze their mistakes. Such a training of teachers seems to be the most productive because it gives an opportunity to discuss the maximum number of debatable works.

The final goal of the courses is to form the ability and readiness of teachers to work as experts of the USE in English in Tomsk Region. Eventually, the development of some uniform approaches to the assessment promotes the qualitative work of the Subject Commission during the examination.

The special characteristics (structural principles) of the courses program are: the competency-based approach is taken as a basis; application of modern educational technologies and innovative teaching -methods both in the seminar course and self-directed learning; use of active teaching methods including role plays, projects, case-study etc.

The material technical conditions of the courses correspond to modern requirements of the Federal State Education Standards. The realization of the practice-oriented component in the course of teachers' training is achieved in the conditions when every teacher is provided with a set of printed materials and handbooks. Information and Communication Technology, which helps to optimize the checking procedure for the course participants, are also used. These technologies are applied not only in the tutorial course and self-directed learning, but in final tests for the teachers.

3. Conclusion

The changing socio-political situation, development of international contacts in all spheres, involvement of more people in these contacts and international integration have increased the role and significance of knowledge and skills in real foreign communication. The very understanding of the above communication in language pedagogics and education in general, has also changed.

The introduction of the USE in foreign languages was stipulated by the need to evaluate the school leavers' general education development in a foreign language according to the state (final) merit rating and with the purpose of competitive selection to secondary and higher vocational educational establishments.

Thus, the organization of methodological support for school teachers in training students for the USE, adequate evaluation of their examination results can be provided by the course of seminars, individual consultations, analysis of their assessment activity, diagnostics of pedagogical professional deficits and difficulties. The teachers' course organized by the Faculty of Foreign Languages with the support of the Institute of Distance Education of National Research Tomsk State University is involved in disseminating language teaching strategies, assessment and testing expertise among teachers. To sum up, training students for the USE in English is not a goal in itself; it is one of the aspects for the formation of their foreign language communicative competence. It is a stage of training based on those communicative-cognitive principles that form the foundation of modern methods in teaching foreign languages. The existing model of the USE in English enables us to estimate a foreign language communicative competence of school leavers fully and objectively. Moreover, it opens new possibilities for the development of the assessment modes and means and can influence the content of teaching process positively.

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