

## TEACHING RUSSIAN IN JAPAN (Ethno-Sketch)

GALINA AVAKIANTS

Teaching Russian in Japan dates back to the 18th century. From the very first contacts between Russia and Japan both languages were studied for practical purposes, but regular teaching for professional purposes appeared relatively late, at the end of the XIX century, when an interpreter's school was opened. Before that " ... Japanese specialists in Dutch served for purposes of communication with Russians or those who learnt Russian by themselves"<sup>1</sup>.

It is common knowledge that nowadays the decision to learn a certain language is also influenced mainly by its possible practical use. 'Pure' interest also exists. In the case of the Russian language the waves of interest can be seen very clearly : for example the older generation of Russian specialists in Japan were fascinated by the leftist movement (the same as everywhere else in the world) and idealized the Soviet Union ; now the younger generation as in other countries starts learning Russian because of the commercial potential.

I'd like to relate my own experience of teaching in Japan.

My first surprise was to discover the same tendencies in teaching and learning foreign languages as in Russia. The learning of foreign language can be pursued for various purposes : to learn to read fiction, scientific literature, or newspapers, or one may want to master everyday conversation or just learn some scientific vocabulary. Anyway, the tasks are divided into mastering either the written or oral aspects of the language. In Japan, surprisingly similar to Russia, the written aspect seems to be regarded as being more important by people. For example, it would be considered normal if a university graduate could brilliantly read and write an oriental language, even ancient texts, and yet stammers when speaking it. (To be fair I should mention that of course different school traditions do exist. The University of Vladivostok traditionally was oriented toward training interpreters, whereas St.Petersburg University has an old traditional scientific school, specializing in the reading of old manuscripts.) Nobody would conceive of such a situation for modern European languages, but with oriental languages it is 'excusable', "they are so difficult..."

Similarly in Japan the gap between mastering the written and oral aspects of a foreign language is striking, but the attitude towards it is rather tolerant : "it's so difficult..."

In Europe or the USA however learning a foreign language means before everything the ability to speak it. Thus a weak knowledge of the written aspect is, in its turn, excusable. I could highlight this with numerous examples : a Japanese or Russian can maintain a conversation on practically any topic, making lots of mistakes of course, but producing an inexhaustible stream of passive vocabulary, whereas an American or European would talk fluently to you on ... 3 to 5 topics. One step beyond-and there's little vocabulary.

Respectively it refers to the simultaneous study of the country and culture when a for-

---

<sup>1</sup> Ivanova, p.14

eign language is being learnt. For Russians and Japanese it's a part of the tradition, while in America and Europe these aspects are separated. Funnily enough the hierarchy of languages (I mean psychological attitudes) into more simple or more complicated and therefore a higher or lesser 'excusability' for not mastering them, which exists is common to all the countries mentioned.

In Russia it is impossible not to speak a modern European language (such as English, German, French) after graduating from an appropriate college. [This may be connected with the old tradition of having learned to speak those languages from one's childhood.] But if one doesn't speak, let us say, Albanian - then it is further up the hierarchy and therefore is a lesser sin. In Japan similarly such a hierarchy assumes that you must be able to speak Korean or Chinese, but not speaking a European language is therefore a smaller sin.

Closely connected to this is a homework hierarchy : an oral task wouldn't even be considered (even if an oral examination is to be set-an aspect which is always a stress for Japanese students), however a written homework will be completed perfectly.

What can be considered Japanese peculiarities in learning Russian?

A series of sets of ritual behaviour exists, which surely occur when learning other languages as well. These are : the necessity of looking a person directly in the eye (for Japanese a direct look is not polite, however an evasive look is very negative for Russians); the necessity to speak using a stronger voice, and finally the most difficult, the necessity of addressing the person you are talking to directly, using direct addressing forms. (As we know, for a Japanese the polite address is exclusively in the 3rd person). Students are usually very amused when this direct construction is taught in class, but never use it in conversation. [It is interesting to mention, that Russians when learning German tend to avoid the German construction "Sie, was möchten Sie?" as it is absolutely impolite in the Russian language.]

It is widely known that motivation is a deciding factor in learning foreign languages. Russian is usually a second foreign language, therefore it's often a university requirement and not a student's own choice. Therefore, the singular aim to pass and then forget the language immediately will influence students' behaviour during the whole period they are learning it. It can turn out to be even comical. For a example, a student of mine addressed me before the examination, made a passionate speech about the difficulties of the Russian language and offered ... to read a piece of Russian literature translated into Japanese and write a subsequent resumé to get a credit.

Usually at the very beginning students' reactions to the teacher's questions and remarks make one confused : if a question asked seems to be difficult a student immediately consults his comrades from all four sides, even if it is a test (a similar situation is hardly acceptable in Russia) ; an old trick usually just of bad students, i.e. murmuring, re-asking several times etc. suddenly seems acceptable behaviour for the the whole class. It is a long and hard struggle to teach a student to *give* an answer to a question, even if the answer is wrong. In their turn students get extremely irritated when a teacher continues waiting for an answer, when the student has already clearly shown by using all of the above-mentioned methods that he is unwilling or cannot give an answer.

"It took me at least four lessons before my patient waiting for an answer from weak students stopped being taken as something very unpleasant and started to be taken simply as being normal for me"<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Giacomuzzi, p.20

In general all the attempts to create an atmosphere of active intercommunication faced several hurdles. First-boys/girls. When improvising dialogues it's difficult to get the students to speak with a partner of the opposite sex. Naturally, to create a 'mixed' society the teacher should propose a special way for the students to take their seats; normally, they produce 'girls rows' and 'boys rows'.

The second problem is to change the style of speech, make it more conversational, make students use the 2nd person singular when speaking to each other. Third, the ability to roleplay in the lesson, to use roleplay and create a variation on the already learnt dialogue. We know that even simple repetition of certain constructions and dialogues during lessons is very effective and leads to a certain level of automatic usage, but produces a negative reaction from learners. "...learners generally do not regard mere repetition in the language classroom as a serious activity..."<sup>3</sup>) The author of the book from which the above quote was taken explains that by doing drills they cannot express themselves. But my students were definitely stunned when offered the opportunity to roleplay, not to merely repeat but to create a similar situation and play with the new words, they seemed to enjoy more just reproducing the same initial dialogue (every single pair!).

Strange as it is for me, working in groups creates big problems.

Students tend to communicate with the teacher individually, though group-work allows them more practice at the lesson. It may be a product of the traditional "oriental" attitude to the teacher, the system of question/answer, where a student immediately gets the information based on the teacher's knowledge; this always seems preferable, rather than getting it by themselves and possibly making a mistake.<sup>4</sup>

It is worth mentioning the attitude to homework. I have already mentioned, that an oral task does not have full status and even hardworking students don't push themselves to prepare it. With written tasks we have to take measures against the typical reaction of rejection;" and keep the writing within the limits of the language to be practised, learners seem perversely to deviate from the content specified thus producing unpredicted errors of language."<sup>3</sup>

The situation arises due to the lack of speaking means, and as all of us know that an inability to express ourselves at the adequate level makes us feel ourselves in a position of being a child. In group training this is aggravated as "initial anxiety or anxiety-hostility conflict"<sup>4</sup> appears.

This is when each of the participants is worried about how much the others know. As Curran shows stability within a group is achieved through the levelling of the participants, where the best one retreats into shadow, "usually trying to minimize his knowledge, and even apologize for it, since he recognized his threat to the group's security and his own isolated position"<sup>5</sup>

In my case the conflict was solved less satisfactorily and not in a typical way. Although a student, who was able to speak significantly better than the others, motivated them to study harder, in the end of the ends he sort of 'frightened them off' the continuation of their studies.

<sup>3</sup> Prabhu, N.S., p.64

<sup>4</sup> This reminds me of an misunderstanding we came across during a language practice in Mongolia as students. Our top-class teacher was unpleasantly confused because we didn't put questions to him. We, in our turn, were annoyed because of our lack of self-study. Illustration: we come across unknown words in a text, the teacher suffers because we don't ask him, we suffer because there's no dictionary and are ashamed to ask such a trivial question.

<sup>5</sup> Curren, Charies, p.150

One of the most unusual peculiarities in my teaching practice is the total absence in Japanese students of the concept of 're-telling of the text', that means that without special training a student can either learn the text by heart, or read it or give answers to the questions. However any logically built re-telling of the text in the student's **own words** is absolutely impossible at the task and comprehension level ; it is completely obvious that similar tasks had **never** been set before the students at any previous stage of their learning process. After persistent training they started re-telling to a certain extent, but not all of the students managed to do it satisfactorily.

It is only natural that learning any foreign language leads to an encounter with the other mental system involved. In my case it is interesting to draw examples from Russian literature course. My students of the second year were very embarrassed by the 'love' theme, which is nearly always present in Russian literature. The 'love theme' , so important and characteristic of the Russian literature of practically any period, and the tension of the love-intrigues are perceived by the student as artificial, and as situations non-existing in real life. Thus, in Chekhov's "Lady with a dog" the intimacy of the heroes is absolutely impossible (in the student's perception) and love is totally inconceivable, "they have known each other too short a time for that". Love from the first glance as a category invariably causes polite doubt. The complicity of the situation, doubts, soul struggle and all other soul passions are met with distrust and dislike : "If they really love each other they should divorce their spouses and live together". The juxtaposition "Love versus Duty" in a Russian sense is not perceptible and meets negative reaction.

The speed and time-pace at which human relationships start to be maintained (even not romantic!) leaves the students with the feeling of unreality. For example, the *mise-en-scène* in the "Rodnya" ["Relatives"] movie, where two passengers in the compartment switch from tension to 'old-friends' talk after a funny episode of going through the tunnel breaks the ice (the light goes out, they are both frightened, then total relief comes and that is what brings them closer - something very psychologically understandable) is treated by the student with disbelief "it doesn't happen like that in real life". And in general the psychological 'clichés' drawn by Michalkov, designating and illustrating schematically as theatre decorations the characters and relationships between them, are not deciphered by the students. (An illustration to that is when one of the personages - a girl - is trying to create distance for herself, protecting herself from all the insanity in the relations between her grown up relatives : parents and grandmother, and therefore is always wearing earphones. Students when asked 'Why is she wearing the earphones?' -give an answer : "Because she loves music".)

Likewise comments appear when the students first read the "Queen of Spades" by A.Pushkin. The whole general pattern of behaviour is absolutely strange and alien to the students, the actions of the heroes seem insane, deprived of logic, it is hard to perceive the behaviour of the main hero - Hermann and make comments on it, the difference between love and an action motivated by calculation is not recognised ; in general it seems hard to comment on emotional motivations, e.g. of Lisa. Just another type of pattern is implanted in the heads of the students.

It's interesting that after a year of dealing with Russian stories and the discussion of them, watching Russian movies and discussing them, learning and being exposed to various other aspects of "Russian spirit", gradually and unnoticeably the 'insanity perception' vanishes and turns into recognizable patterns. Thus, reading "The Sunstroke" by I.Bunin students

were not shocked by the situation (as they surely would have been previously!) and the comments were quite adequate. I could only see a one-sided view in the estimation of the heroes, that is to appreciate the heroes as being either 100% positive or 100% negative, the contradictions, complicated features were not acknowledged (or perceived?).

Anyway, it is obviously difficult to understand a hero as a multidimensional person. Let us take Nadezda in the "Shadowed alleys" by I. Bunin as an example. The students identify her exclusively as an example of a true love, other features of her character or any possible doubts concerning the idea of the story, escape them. 'Russian love-story' isn't the only incomprehensible theme. An interesting reaction occurred to Chekhov's stories "Unter Prishibeev" and "Chameleon" as well as to the novel by Zamyatin "We". If A. Chekhov mocks the behaviour of Prishibeev and thus the whole system of false importance, implanted by a bureaucratic hierarchic system, Japanese students do not find this behaviour in the slightest funny or strange; therefore the decision of the court in favour of the peasants is also taken ambivalently, comments such as: "Even nowadays our court would make a decision in favour of the officer" come out. They face the same psychological problems with the "Chameleon" story. "Of course it matters whom the dog belongs to!!" and hence the actions of the policeman are totally justified (and there's no reason for mocking him).

In the case of Zamyatin we also see that an emotional estimation meets with some difficulties. Students simply don't grasp at first that the life depicted is not full, that freedom, emotions, individual space are lacking. The grotesque lines are at first taken as real and normal; it is not clear why this life is bad (this strangely coincides with the initial position of the hero of the novel); only after the commentary of the teacher and numerous discussions the initial perception changes towards critical analysis. I think, that such a non-critical or bewildered reaction towards the criticism of bureaucratic or state institutions in literature results from the hierarchy of everyday Japanese life.

In fact sometimes it appears that students seem not to understand what this 'digging into the text' - i.e. literary analysis is needed for; literature and literary works are (to their mind) seen more as a fixed imprint of numerous and various pictures.

Here I am not the only one experiencing similar problems, it seems that nowadays this question is arising frequently, it reveals "... the relationship between reading in a foreign language and teaching literature ... This is an area which has been neglected in recent discussions of language teaching, while practice has continued to relate the two"<sup>6</sup>. In real life the syllabus includes in itself not only the usage of language, but the whole aesthetic, cultural and educational complex.

"Both literature and language teaching involve the development of a feeling for language, of responses to 'texts' - in the broadest sense of the word - in both written and spoken discourse."<sup>7</sup> In general it's very difficult to know the difference in a teacher's aims: to use the reading of literary texts in order to deepen the knowledge of the language; to read literary texts in order to teach 'culture'<sup>8</sup>, and at last for which language level which teaching program would be optimal.

In this general schematic analysis of the peculiarities of teaching Japanese students Russian I didn't strive to make critical remarks, it's more of an essay genre which presents

<sup>6</sup> Brumfit, C.J., pp.184, 186

<sup>7</sup> Long, Michael, p.42

<sup>8</sup> Literature and education, p.23

a 'slice' of the teaching/learning process.

A different situation arises during studies with adults. Despite the widely known fact that a grown-up student still tends to reproduce a schooltime model of learning (or the above-described collegetime) nevertheless motivation is a significant factor when differentiating adult students into categories. Here we end up with two major groups : those who learn a language for their own pleasure and those who immediately need it. As has already been described above working capacity strikes you first. Despite the common problems for everybody in this international field of teaching/learning foreign languages, the persistency and depth of knowledge of the Japanese students continues to astonish me assuming of course if (and only if ?!) they have enough motivation. To conclude I'd like to describe a real wonder I came across in my teaching- 'a wonder of an urgent situation' and to draw on a well-known Russian anecdote to illustrate it. It involves a student who was unexpectedly told he had to take an examination in Chinese (and the Chinese language is seen as a symbol of the most difficult of languages for Russians). The student isn't horrified (since it is in the psychological nature of students to deal with lots of examinations with almost no time for preparation), he merely asks the number of the room the exam is going to take place in. (He has no doubt he'll manage to learn the language at a passable level). On the whole everybody understands that the above-described situation isn't realistic and is only to mock the nature of students. To my utter surprise something like this happened to me in reality. Several lazy students who did nothing during the whole year and could barely utter a few words in Russian and who I felt were sure to fail the examination, in almost no time read and answered orally the summer homereading!! It is no secret that they used the notes written out by their more studious colleagues, and possibly a translation as well, **but** it doesn't change the fact, that they had to answer **orally** (and this is always problematic for Japanese) my meticulous questions, retell the story, find in the text the tiny details I was asking them for, deciphering my questions as well!! This small wonder proves my deep faith in motivation and not ability when mastering foreign languages.

HITOTSUBASHI UNIVERSITY

### REFERENCES

- 1 . Ivanova G.D. Russkie v Japonii XIX - nacala XX vv. [Russians in Japan of the XIX - beginning of the XXcc.] Moskva, "Vostochnaya literatura" 1979.
- 2 . Ciacomuzzi-Putz, Renate. "Irgendwie durchwursteln" ...Deutsch als Fremdsprache in Japan, Österreich und anderswo. In : Zielsprache Deutsch, 1988, fasc. 4
- 3 . Prabhu, N.S. Second language pedagogy. Oxford University Press, 1988.
- 5 . Curran, Charles. Counselling-Learning. In : Methods that work. A smorgasbord of ideas for language teachers. Newbury house Publishers, Inc. 1983
- 6 . Brumfit, C.J. Reading skills and the study of literature in a foreign language. In : Literature and language teaching. Oxford University Press, 1987.
- 7 . Long, Michael. A feeling for language : the multiple values of teaching literature. In : Literature and language teaching...
- 8 . Literature and language teaching. Introduction.