13 Tracks for Russian university students' multilingual development within remote education during the pandemic

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Abstract

The chapter explores language and non-language university students' practices of foreign language learning within the unscheduled shift to remote studies in Russia due to the COVID-19 emergency. The RUDN University Law Institute experience is considered as an example. The paper explores common and specific features of foreign language, translation, and interpreting skills training within the Law Institute language and non-language programmes. The research rests on the case study methodology, considered from the policy-making and managerial point of view. The findings reveal both common features and specificities of multilingual university education of non-language and language students. The study also confirms the need for the educational institutions to draft specific guidelines on language courses implementation for different target audiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, remote online teaching, foreign language, translation and interpreting skills, multilingual development, degree programmes, LSP, RUDN University, Russia.

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1.   Introduction

The goal of the present case study is to consider various tracks for university students' multilingual development within mandatory remote learning during the current pandemic.

The case study population includes 1,129 students of at Bachelor of Arts (BA), Master of Arts (MA), and PhD jurisprudence programmes, professional conversion programmes and masters' courses on legal Translation and Interpreting (T&I) – the educational field is linguistics. The materials considered cover legal regulations, evidence from the university practice, students and teachers' comments (over 3,102 items that include legal orders, students' and teachers' items of oral and written communication), while the methodology is based on the analysis of regulations, observation of students and teachers' activities during online classes, analysis of students' live oral and chat-based reactions, students' academic records and messages to the administration, as well as consideration of teachers' reports and oral information during the Foreign Languages Department regular meetings.

Among further case study variables are federal and institutional regulations (Sections 2 and 3), particular programme contents, opinions of teachers and students, and their languages of study (Section 4). Some conclusions are drawn on features of remote education that are common to the various educational programmes analysed and others that are specific to each individual track (Section 5).

2.   Federal level

Russia has been affected by the COVID-19 since February 2020 when the information systematically came from other countries. Since mid-March the Russian Federal Ministry of Science and Education has transitioned universities to fully distant education. The quarantine regime was gradually introduced across the country, Moscow was in lockdown from March 30th

to June 9th, 2020. Due to the vast territory, the regional socio-economic differences that influence the educational capacities of respective universities, and the diversity in terms of higher education institutions programmes, as well as the student population socio-cultural specifics across the regions, the ministry had to shape solid federal policies and tailor them to regional and local levels. The ministry thus initiated comprehensive measures and adopted a number of regulations, starting from the 14th March (see Order No. 397[4] and Order No. 566[5]) and held regular nationwide video conferences[6] with all the Russian universities' rectors to monitor the situation and tailor measures to local conditions.

During the period from March 16th to March 19th each university launched a situation task force to provide university campus emergency transition from on-site to remote format, to monitor student and staff health, to foster sanitary measures and social distancing, to ensure medical service, administrative and financial support for students and staff, and to maintain the smooth operation of the university infrastructure. In order to raise public awareness thereof, during the above mentioned period each university launched a special website to inform students, their parents, and teachers on the various aspects of university operation during the COVID-19 emergency. These sites have posted federal legislation and respective university internal regulations that standardised the procedure and requirements for the universities' activities during the health emergency since March 19th, 2020, including information in several languages to meet international students' needs[7].

Russian higher education institutions, as other universities across the world (Marinoni, van't Land, & Jensen, 2020), had to enhance their digital environment for training. Almost every Russian university now has its own Learning

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4. https://www.garant.ru/products/ipo/prime/doc/73645128/

5. http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_350030/

6. Video Conferences on Education during COVID-19 (2020). Russian Federation Ministry of Science and Education YouTube Channel, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCtKQPCIdo9bDaSAw9y8A69Q

7. https://covid-19.rudn.ru/index.html#measures

Management System (LMS), while it's scope, capacity, and quality depend on the institution size, the financial situation of the region, etc. However, before COVID-19 most universities' LMS which traditionally included multimodal educational toolkits for disciplines, testing systems, survey tools, etc., operated as a supportive blended learning component to the traditional full-time/part-time learning in class (Pevneva & Edmunds, 2020).

3. Institutional level

3.1. RUDN University framework for remote learning

The university has designed a special site on the COVID-19 issues on its corporate digital platform[8]. This site specifies the education process, its requirements, and resources and procedures, among other topics. The site covers the following common issues which have been agreed upon at the point of transition to remote education:

- curricula changes;
- classes timetable on the university-tailored Microsoft (MS) Teams platform;
- procedure for student's individual studies in case of illness, stay in another country/region within another time zone, etc.;
- resources and tools for online learning;
- support service for teachers and students on the use of digital tools (University LMS, MS Teams, cloud servers, virtual whiteboards, and other resources);
- recommendations for video recording of online classes (for those who failed to join);
- tools and regulations for mid-term and final assessment, for graduation and admission;
- exam proctoring system;

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8. http://eng.rudn.ru/

- rescheduled laboratory classes;
- individual online consultations for students;
- surveys of students and teachers regarding remote education in emergency;
- organisation of traineeships and internships;
- issues of tuition fees decrease due to remote format;
- situations where students are absent from classes;
- certificates issue procedure (transcripts/extracts from the grade book, etc.); and
- student volunteering activities to help peers and teachers.

3.2. RUDN University profile within multilingual education

RUDN University was established in Moscow in 1960. Traditionally this university enrols students from over 150 countries across the world and currently integrates about 30,000 students. RUDN operates as a comprehensive university with faculties and institutions that offer over 470 programmes on various specialties at various levels of higher education. One of the RUDN educational process specifics includes a multilingual education through various formats, including standard foreign language classes for all university students at bachelors, masters, and PhD levels, a qualification programme for specialised translation skills training for non-language students of various specialties, and degree courses for language students. Each university faculty has a department of foreign languages that runs the above courses.

The above landscape explains why RUDN University has had to provide comprehensive and audience-specific solutions to foreign language teaching (including Russian for foreigners) and T&I skills training of language and non-language BA, MA, and PhD students amidst the emergency transition to remote education. The mentioned training rested on a university-wide framework for distance learning and depended on the language/non-language nature of programmes, the kind of degree programme and the theoretical/applied nature of a particular programme subject.

4.   Tracks for students' multilingual development at RUDN Law Institute

The Foreign Languages Department of RUDN Law Institute runs different programmes, including the following:

- foreign language training in four languages (English, French, German, Spanish) for students who study only Jurisprudence at BA, MA, and PhD levels;

- a four year long professional conversion programme with a qualification diploma in legal translation in eight languages (Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, in addition to English, French, German, Spanish); and

- a two-year long MA course in legal T&I (English-taught theoretical disciplines, working language pairs combine two of the above mentioned eight languages with Russian).

The above courses have obvious difference in their content scope and workload, see supplementary materials.

4.1.   Common features of different programmes

The mentioned programmes differ in many aspects. However, they required a number of common administrative features during the COVID-19 lockdown. First, training on the MS Teams platform was recommended due to the need for the students, teachers, and institute and department administration to have an easy access to the educational process and its monitoring. The change of platform was not recommended as the break between classes within the overall institute timetable was ten minutes.

A strict schedule was set for students to submit their home assignments to the teacher each week; submissions were not accepted after a particular deadline.

Each teacher of the department checked weekly about 200 students' assignments (from all the Law Institute language programmes). A similarly strict schedule was set for teachers to check students' papers and deliver them back before the respective online class for discussion, as students needed to distribute their preparation time over all the curriculum disciplines.

Compared to the above, before the COVID-19 lockdown there were two stages of evaluation, namely mid-term (the middle of the Autumn or Spring semesters) and the corresponding end-of-term assessment. By the respective dates of the mid- and end-term evaluation procedure, students could submit the assignments that they had failed to produce in due time or ask for consideration of their improved and revised assignments.

Furthermore, the content of each discipline taught either in four or in eight languages required a strict and transparent balance in terms of the same list of task types for each week, the same number of assignments (number of test items, the number of characters in the assignment texts), and the same assessment criteria (proportion of scores and errors, error types). All this became especially critical from the angle of equal educational rights of students who study different languages within the same programme and discipline. Students strived to maintain their high academic record to uphold their academic reputation and obtain a bursary.

During traditional teaching, workload balance and assessment were not so critical as programmes in various languages differ in terms of coursebook unit materials, number and type of exercises, and specific individual preferences within the group. Moreover, sometimes students fail to prepare written assignments for their class activities and nonetheless manage to compensate the lacking material through active engagement in classwork. Workload and assessment criteria became sensitive in the online format as the scope and quality of students' preparation for online classes were more obvious and transparent. The same applies to the work of the teacher who had to prepare more explanatory materials (additional visual/printed data to be uploaded in the online classroom) and provide more detailed information to each student regarding his/her submitted

assignments and online class performance evaluation (oral, printed/typed info about the type and number of errors).

The online format set forth a strong argument for the flipped classroom methodology (e.g. Abeysekera & Dawson, 2015) with respect to both applied and theoretical disciplines across the programmes. Most students strongly supported the format as it allowed them to follow individual pathways of material processing while leaving room for preliminary individual consideration of the data, conceptual as well as applied exercises.

Furthermore, written communication with students and among teachers took more time. The department meetings were conducted once a month before the COVID-19 lockdown; during this period, they were held weekly. They covered the following themes:

- up-to-date information on the students' attendance, performance, problems, and the psychological climate in the groups;

- special training and support for those who were isolated for quarantine in the university campus dorms with COVID-19 infection in light forms and wanted to continue their studies; and

- coordination and possible change in resources and technical issues in the same groups of T&I programmes several teachers worked in.

At the same time, students wanted to get detailed recommendations on their performance and explanations about marking of their assignments. Before the pandemic students could get all the replies during face-to-face classes and consultations. During the lockdown they only had the opportunity to address their questions via their university e-mails. Teachers had to reply in writing as well. Both teachers and students, regardless of the programme they were affiliated to, unanimously complained about their increased workload in general, beyond the online contact hours, due to preparation issues, as well as to the burden of working in front of the computer screen for longer, in comparison to

traditional education. Students and teachers also reported challenges related to the quality of internet connection.

4.2.   Programme specificities and challenges

4.2.1.   *Non-language students of BA in Jurisprudence*
programme (only European languages)

- **1st year students (beginners, European languages), general language**. The course covers phonetics and pronunciation training, basic grammar, and speech pattern training in standard communicative contexts, related to students' everyday academic life and socio-cultural activities. Students had limited speaking capacity, and teachers tried to develop communication of question-reply format and engage students in role plays. This was often slowed down by technical and sound issues that caused disappointment and gave a negative impression of the technology-facilitated classes. It also fostered the feeling of disrupted personal contacts, though the teachers worked with cameras 'on' and asked the students to do the same during their replies and communicative activities. Other challenges referred to the use of Russian both in oral and chat-based communication by students who wanted clear explanations, and teachers who had to meet students' requests for online contact-hour time.

- **1st year students (non-beginners, European languages), general language**. The course covers grammar knowledge revision and communication skills development within the context of official and everyday life. Public topics of social importance are the subject of discussions. The challenges mentioned with reference to beginners' groups were less obvious. Teachers had to be more attentive to students' personal compatibility in the online group and consider their personal learning styles. Video, audio recordings, and assignments related to mini group projects produced positive student feedback. Students gradually adjusted to the use of a foreign language for oral and chat-based

communication. The teachers' comments on grammar or vocabulary mistakes were not always accepted as students were rather confident in their communication abilities. Within the online settings they were eager to focus on this activity and not on the discussion of errors, which could take place after the lesson. At the same time, some students (about 15-25%) wanted to discuss their mistakes and scores as a top priority within the online class itself. They often preferred to do this in Russian, which led to some disruption within the learning environment.

- **2nd and 3rd year students, legal language disciplines**. The course covers the texts in English about branches of law and aims to help students learn background legal terminology and speech patterns that are specific to oral and written communication in legal settings. The activities included online training of terminology pronunciation and use in context, discussion, presentations, written translation as a home task. The challenges referred to some extensive use of Russian in cases when troubles emerged in the group while searching for and selecting legal term equivalents within bilingual contexts. Third year students worked more rapidly and efficiently. Their better results are likely to be associated with the fact that they were more experienced in law branches and knew the subject context.

- **2nd year students, background course on legal documents translation**. The course content covers the translation of personal documents, standard format of contracts, powers of attorneys, and appeals to the government bodies. The course objectives are in line with those of the legal language disciplines above. However, this course uses a variety of learning materials and document samples. A problem occurred with the document layout which is known to have specifics in each national legal culture. At the beginning of the course teachers could hardly persuade students that this point did matter for legal translation quality. Ensuing discussions took time and effort and often meant waste of time for explanations in Russian and not in a foreign language. The positive signs consisted in the students' extensive outsourcing of

supporting bilingual information to defend their choices. This practice developed bilingual analytical skills, helped students to get used to providing comprehensive oral explanations and written commentaries and glossaries to the documents.

- **1st and 2nd year MA in Jurisprudence students (beginners and non-beginners, European languages)**. The language module covers academic foreign language and foreign language for legal purposes. The materials for groups of beginners and non-beginners differ in terms of complexity. However, students understand better the need to improve their language skills in relation to their further career. Therefore, students were ready for online project work, for oral reports preparation, and for debates on legal topics. Unfortunately, learners were less ready to discuss errors during the online classes. Thus, the online tests for grammar and vocabulary training served as an efficient solution. Relevant data were obtained from the observation of students' performance of tasks and teachers' reports analysis. The programme assumes that the masters thesis oral defence shall be in a foreign language. This is mandatory for all RUDN master's students regardless of their specialisation. Thus, to train students for the corresponding procedure in terms of language, communication strategies and tactics, report text structure, etc., the course includes simulations based on the material related to the masters students' specialisation in law. What can be done orally and individually within traditional classroom or consultations, required additional time for teacher's online work with a student, both in oral and written forms.

- **1st and 2nd year PhD students (non-beginners)**. This level focuses on training students for legal research conducted in a foreign language. It incorporates training with regard to students' specialisation and a particular topic of legal research, the development of skills for legal text analysis, and information processing and its translation. The course content looks more specialised when compared to the masters level. This warrants a higher level of individualised materials to be incorporated into the course. On the other hand, group members are already specialists

in law and they can use their professional background to ask questions and engage in discussions during online classes. However, these higher levels of specialisation of masters and PhD students require language teachers to acquire, maintain, and enhance his/her legal knowledge in a foreign language as well. Moreover, extra hours of online individual consultations are required to work with students who have to pass the exam in a foreign language. In Russia this is a condition for PhD students' admission to the thesis defence procedure. Under the Russian federal regulations, the exam requires that the student fulfilled the individual translation assignment (the text size is about 15,000 characters) and drafted a report on a monograph written in a foreign language. Such a procedure required teachers to deliver practically individual online supervisions to each student.

4.2.2. Non-language students of BA in Jurisprudence programme with professional conversion course with a qualification diploma in legal T&I (eight languages)

This programme provides a deeper and more intensive learning of foreign language T&I skills training when compared with the language module for non-language students.

The online learning features of this programme students can be detailed into several aspects: as far as 1st year students (beginners and non-beginners, European languages groups) are concerned, students' higher motivation and stronger commitment to learn a foreign language should be mentioned. It resulted in an overall better academic achievement in the groups. The course contents and learning environment did not differ much from the features described earlier with respect to non-language students (see 4.2.1.).

However, some specific comments should be provided with reference to 1st year students who decided to learn Oriental languages as beginners. They had their first semester in March 2020, when they started practicing hieroglyphs, tones, etc. In a traditional class format, in the case of our Law Institute, these classes

are conducted by native speakers of Arabic, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese. The teachers consciously use a very limited amount of Russian for explanations as they have visual support tools at hand (pictures, symbolic figures, white board, etc.). However, the use of these tools within online communication required techniques of uploading the respective data in the chat or through ppt or video files. This meant additional work for the teacher. The technology issues related to the quality of sound turned out to be sensitive when it concerned oral communication in tonal languages.

- **2nd and 3rd year students (European and Oriental languages)**. The course contents included the translation of legal documents (the experience was similar to that described in section 3.2.1), Computer-Assisted Tools (CAT) for legal translation, and consecutive interpreting practice. CAT tools for legal translation revealed students' interest in applied projects related to the topic under study. Unfortunately, the online format of ppt presentation or word format did not always allow students to incorporate the data of translation memory due to the electronic tables' complexity. The group often had to limit themselves to listening to oral speaker's narratives. This decreased the audience's interest in the topic. There were also some initial difficulties with the description of the tools in the relevant foreign language. The consecutive interpreting training was a real challenge. If the video/audio recording was used students often faced trouble with the sound quality. Other challenges stemmed from the situation when students concentrated on the picture right in front of their faces and put less effort into activating their audio channel.

- **4th year students**. They had to do their translation internships and pass the final qualification exams that included written and oral part. The internship stage did not cause any trouble as it traditionally takes place in the offline individualised format. The exam proctoring system allotted more time for the students' passports demonstration. The exam included the written translation of an academic legal text. The oral part covered sight interpreting of a legal text in a foreign language into Russian,

consecutive bilingual interpreting on legal topics, the report in a foreign language on individual legal research. The consecutive interpreting was the most challenging part, as in earlier years. The challenges with this exam item did not depend on the online format of the exams, even though poor sound and sound breaks were taken into account.

4.2.3. Master's students in legal T&I

The course covered theoretical disciplines, applied subjects with no translation or interpreting components, and T&I. The distant format of the MA course revealed the most efficient training formats in each of the disciplines.

Flipped classroom techniques were used to organise the study of theoretical subjects that are mandatory under the Russian federal higher education system requirements. Students got all the material from the university LMS. To foster student skills in the English-based discussion of theoretical topics, teachers selected for each discipline open access video lectures delivered by English speaking prominent scholars in the related research field and the online classes focused on the oral discussions.

Applied disciplines with no translation/interpreting component were successful in the case study format. They were first designed by teachers and more materials were then prepared by students. Applied disciplines with a translation component caused no trouble because students were interested in the assignments as the materials provided a direct link to their future profession. English (or second foreign language)-based discussions of translation procedures and their relevant outcomes created some additional impetus.

Sight interpreting of written texts caused additional workload for teachers who had to prepare the text as the presentation slides to be uploaded to the screen, with written teacher comments on the errors (that had to be anticipated and envisaged ahead of the lesson) in the chart. Consecutive and conference interpreting sometimes turned into trouble due to technical issues, for instance, low sound quality due to dispersion.

5.   Concluding remarks

The emergency transition to online learning revealed some common and some specific features with regard to the learning practices of the language and non-language university students within the unscheduled shift to remote studies. The common features refer to administrative, organisational, technology, and disciplinary issues. The above situation in the particular Russian university under study goes in line with other universities' experience both in Russia (Almazova, Krylova, Rubtsova, & Odinokaya, 2020) and other countries (Neupane et al., 2020; Zalite & Zvirbule, 2020) that mention similar critical points.

The Spring 2020 lockdown in Russia confirms a number of points. In terms of teaching quality, strict and comprehensive planning of all aspects of the educational process as mutually dependant components are strongly required from the national and local university management. The teachers' role as psychological facilitators increases, in addition to their didactic duties and responsibilities, while the importance of students' academic and social maturity becomes more crucial. Specific awareness-raising activities seem relevant for 1st year students to help them understand academic policies and practices in the digital environment.

As far as specificities are concerned, the academic context analysed here mostly focuses on a particular field of university education (cf. Brammer & Clark, 2020; Usak, Masalimova, Cherdymova, & Shaidullina, 2020). The present study reveals which specifics relate to the particular language programmes' contexts and to the corresponding teachers and students' activities.

The emergency transition to remote learning made it possible to identify the strong and weak parts of educational programme contents, check the relevance of various training techniques, and tailor them to particular language programmes and disciplines. The observation of the learning process in groups that operate within different language programmes confirms that the teacher needs to prepare more specific materials, written explanations, and comments for each particular subject.

Furthermore, the RUDN Law Institute emergency move to remote multilingual education of various student audiences reveals that guidelines for the academic faculty should be drafted to coordinate, balance, and specify training tasks during the situation under study. Moreover, the learning/teaching of languages and translation skills within the particular programme contents requires a more individualised approach from each teacher to each student in terms of lesson planning and management within remote training during the pandemic emergency.

The present study has some limitations as the multilingual education features were considered within a single university institute. Further studies will integrate faculty and students of other specialties and expand to other universities.

6.   Supplementary materials

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