RESEARCH ARTICLES

Acquisition of English Argument Patterns By Russian EFL Students
Adquisición de Patrones de Argumentos en Inglés por Estudiantes Rusos de Inglés Como Lengua Extranjera

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Summary

Foreign (especially English) language learning has witnessed growing popularity in Russia over the last decades due to the enormous change in economic, political, legal, and cultural domains in the current period. The increasing need for good English speaking and writing skills put forward a demand for the accurate use of lexical items and grammatical structures by those who study English as a foreign language (EFL). Lexical and grammatical accuracy acquires a crucial importance in reasoning and argumentation. A slapdash word or syntactic construction in the argument structure may submit the listener to a conclusion, which is completely different from what the speaker implied. Such issues may be particularly frustrating in academic, legal, business, medical, and other types of institutional discourse. The rules of Aristotelian logic, underlying the good majority of reasoning structures, are generic. Therefore, it is a certain difference between the two languages, native (Russian) and foreign (English), that makes Russian students of English misinterprete logical chains and use irrelevant lexical items and grammatical constructions.
Keywords: Argumentation, Reasoning, English, Russian, Academic Discourse.

Resumen

El aprendizaje de idiomas extranjeros (especialmente el inglés) ha sido testigo de una creciente popularidad en Rusia durante las últimas décadas debido al enorme cambio en los dominios económicos, políticos, legales y culturales en el período actual. La creciente necesidad de buenas habilidades para hablar y escribir en inglés planteó una demanda para el uso preciso de elementos léxicos y estructuras gramaticales por parte de quienes estudian inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL). La precisión léxica y gramatical adquiere una importancia crucial en el razonamiento y la argumentación. Una palabra chapucera o una construcción sintáctica en la estructura del argumento puede someter al oyente a una conclusión, que es completamente diferente de lo que el hablante insinuó. Tales cuestiones pueden resultar particularmente frustrantes en el discurso académico, legal, empresarial, médico y de otro tipo. Las reglas de la lógica aristotélica, subyacentes a la buena mayoría de las estructuras de razonamiento, son genéricas. Por lo tanto, existe una cierta diferencia entre los dos idiomas, nativo (ruso) y extranjero (inglés), lo que hace que los estudiantes rusos de inglés malinterpreten cadenas lógicas y utilicen elementos léxicos y construcciones gramaticales irrelevantes.
Palabras clave: argumentación, razonamiento, inglés, ruso, discurso académico.

Introducción

Following the end of the Cold War, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning has gained an increasing popularity among various age groups and social strata of Russian society. The growing popularity of English in Russia, however, soon faced the problem of unqualified teaching. Due to the infamous Iron Curtain very few (if any) Russian teachers of English had had sufficient experience of communication with native speakers – American, Australian, British, Canadian, etc. When the supply critically lags behind the demand insufficient or outright poor quality service becomes inevitable, and that is exactly what happened to EFL training in Russia. Naturally, certain improvements have been made in the past couple of decades. Nevertheless, overall proficiency in English is still rather low. According to EF EPI, Russia holds #42 among 88 participants and only #27 among 32 rated European countries. By comparison, former countries of the Eastern Bloc like Poland, Romania, and the Czech Republic hold ##13, 16, and 20 among all rated countries respectively. It was only in 2018, according to EF official website information (EF English Proficiency Index, n.d.), that Russia was able to change its proficiency level from Low to Moderate.

This said, we have to admit that some serious issues with EFL teaching and learning in Russia still stand. We do not aim to cover them all in this paper and would rather concentrate on a particular issue, acquisition of English reasoning and argumentation patterns by Russian

students. This, in turn, has quite a number of various aspects concerning vocabulary, grammar, and discourse relevance. Thus, quite a number of speakers of English in Russia show poor argumentation skills and somewhat vague awareness of English reasoning structures. This, along with more subtle differences between Russian and English discourse models, often leads to misunderstanding by both Russian- and English-speaking counterparts.

According to Paltridge and Starfield , the fundamental issues in the teaching of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) are "how to identify learner needs, the nature of the genres that learners need to be able to produce as well as participate in, and how we can know that our learners have been able to do this successfully, and, if not, what we can do to help them to do this" (Paltridge, Starfield, 2013). Needless to say that without good argumentation skills learners of English will scarcely be able to produce (or successfully participate in) any genres at all. Given the part that good argumentation plays in education and its results, as well as in other types of discourse (science, law, business, politics, etc.), understanding the sources of error and finding ways to bypass them is of the essence.

Up to date, however, the research in the field is very limited. As practicing teachers of English in Russia, the authors of this paper have to admit that efficient practical ways of teaching English argument structures to Russian students are yet to be found. Therefore, the paper below presents some research results and a survey of Russian students' communication skills concerning argumentation and reasoning in English along with some practical implementations.

Argumentation in English and Russian: similarities and divergences

Vocabulary level

There is a Russian joke about a man who proudly declared that he was one of the best students at school and could speak English quite fluently. Then he added that his 'fluent English' could only be understood by the alumni of the same school.

Decades of isolation from the Western world and English-speaking countries in particular left both Russian teachers and students of English in a sort of communication vacuum. Some English books (mostly classics) and records were issued in Soviet Russia but they were clearly insufficient to fill the vacuum. Vocabulary is the most flexible and variable part of the language. Therefore, it is only through sustained communication with native speakers that a non-native speaker can keep track of the changes that continuously occur. Unfortunately, such communication was not an option for the vast majority of those who learned EFL in Russia back in 1980-s or earlier. Even textbooks were filled with examples of outdated, awkward or even incorrect word usage.

Considering our study, the most widespread errors concern the use of nouns 'reason' and 'cause', conjunctions and adverbs like 'because', 'since', 'for', 'why', 'therefore', and some prepositions. A textbook that we do not name here to avoid compromising its authors even used the '*reason because' phrase a couple of times instead of 'reason why'.

On the vocabulary level, confusion is mainly a manifestation of the native language pressure upon the learner. Thus, nouns 'reason' and 'cause' have distinctly different meanings in English, whereas in Russian both may be (and commonly are) referred to by the same word. According to our observations, Russian students generally avoid using 'reason' at earlier stages of learning and use 'cause' instead, even though such substitution is not justified. Some typical errors recorded between 2010 and 2019 include:

- *the cause for which he did it (instead of 'the reason why he did it');

- *I don't see any cause to be so rude (instead of 'I don't see any reason to be so rude');

• *there is no cause to go there (instead of 'there is no reason (for) going there').

It is possible that Russian students prefer to use 'cause' rather than 'reason' due to the conjunction 'because', which shares the same root with 'cause' and is more generic. Some errors concerning 'cause' and 'because' involve both vocabulary and syntax, which will be treated later in this chapter.

Another common lexical mistake resulting from the native language pressure is the misuse of 'how' in sentences like '*How do you think?' instead of 'What do you think?' As we see, word-for-word translation of Russian words into English every once in a while makes incorrect phrases.

Textbooks do not emphasize such details. EFL textbooks issued in English-speaking countries will hardly ever do that, for they are targeted at larger audiences and are not designed specifically for Russian students. Russian-issued EFL textbooks could possibly put some emphasis on the matter, but those are yet to be written.

All in all, vocabulary peculiarities are not the main issue. At higher levels of the English language acquisition most students learn to differentiate between lexical items and make good use of cross-language similarities by simply extending their vocabulary. More subtle and still more serious issues, however, lie in the realms of syntax and discourse patterns.

Syntax level

The comparative research of argument structure in English and Russian is very limited and has never reached practical levels relevant to ESP goals. Therefore, all we have to deal with in theory is restricted to a number of works relating argumentation and reasoning in Russian, which we can compare to the corresponding English data.

Zaliznyak argued that causal conjunctions in Russian are well able to form utterances expressing either cause or reason (in her terminology, 'proper cause' and 'reasonable cause'). She sets out two types of relations expressed in Russian by similar grammatical structures: first, 'P is the cause of Q', and second, 'P is the reason for assuming Q' (Zaliznyak, 1992).

Later, Ragozina applied the same ideas to Russian and French data (particularly concerning the use of causal conjunctions), which led her to the conclusion that both types of syntactic complexes have similar "perceptive and processing mechanisms" (Ragozina, 1997) in spite of the fact that their surface structures seem to be different.

Such semantic features of Russian conjunctions, adverbs, and syntactic structures where they are used are often distracting for Russian learners of English, since English grammar rules are generally more rigid.

To highlight the difference, let us start by considering why-questions in both the languages. In English, those are normally indicative of cause-effect correlation, i.e. the speaker is aware of the effect and wants to learn about the cause of it. In Russian, however, the corresponding adverb has a wider usage indicating both cause and reason. Hence a very common mistake made by Russian EFL students:

S1. *Why do you think so?*

Sentence S1 seems very natural for a Russian learner of English, as it perfectly corresponds to the common Russian question about the reason for assuming something. Actually, the correct English question would require a causative construction rather than why-question, and a good choice would be as in S2:

S2. *What makes you think so?*

This, however, might pose a problem for Russian students. At least, according to the authors' observations, sentences like S1 are very 'popular' among them, especially in unprepared talks. It should be noted that the Russian sentence with a causative verb (i.e. the exact equivalent of S2) is grammatically and lexically correct. However, it sounds somewhat unnatural and is not generally used. The more common way of asking such questions in Russian is like in S1. Thus, the functions of 'why' in English and its Russian equivalent are asymmetric since the Russian adverb is capable of introducing both cause-clauses and reason-clauses while its English counterpart is normally restricted to cause clauses only. Let us illustrate it by the following pair of sentences:

S3. *Why do you think John is nervous?*

S4. *What makes you think John is nervous?*

To a Russian learner of English, those sentences may look as meaning the same thing, although there is a striking difference both in their semantic and deep structures. In S3 'why' is related to the clause 'John is nervous', which is an assumption made by both the speaker and the listener. In S4, however, this is just the speaker's presupposition. In other words, both the speaker and the listener agree on this point in S3, but they may disagree on that in S4, as the following transforms respectively show:

S5. *John is nervous. Do you know why? (i.e. can you tell me the cause of his being nervous?)*

S6. *You say John is nervous. How do you know that? (i.e. can you give me the reasons for your assuming that?)*

The difference in grammar is obvious when we point out that 'John is nervous' is a that-clause in S3, whereas in S4 it is a why-clause, but not a that-clause:

S7. **Why do you think that John is nervous?*

S8. *What makes you think that John is nervous?*

The parsing procedures for S3 and S4 are presented in P1 and P2, respectively:

P1. *[why] [John nervous] [you think]*

P2. *[what make] [you think] [John nervous]*

Generally, why-questions are a widespread tool for asking about the reason for an assumption in Russian, whish is not the case in English. Hence, Russian EFL students quite often produce irrelevant sentence in class, especially in pair-work, role-playing, etc. Consider the following example:

A1 – *I don't like this 'Sponge Bob' series.*

B1 – *Why?*

A2 – *Because Sponge Bob is so stupid!*

B2 – *Why is he stupid?*

The use of 'why' in B1 is justified as long as it refers to the clause 'I don't like', although the more accurate question would be 'Why not?' Actually, the full form of the question here would be 'Why don't you like 'Sponge Bob' series?', and it is perfectly correct. B2, on the other hand, is confusing. It sounds as if Student B were asking about the cause of Sponge Bob's stupidity, whereas in fact she meant to inquire about Student A's reason for assuming that Sponge Bob was stupid. A relevant question here could be something like 'What

makes you think he is stupid?' or 'What's so stupid about him?' However, few students actually use such patterns in similar contexts preferring B2 patterns instead. This is very common for earlier stages of EFL learning and often lingers into later stages as well. Since omitting a proposition in why-questions is common in Russian, EFL students easily transfer this pattern into English without a second thought. Explaining where they are wrong is sometimes time-consuming.

Similar to why-questions, because-clauses also bear some differences between English and Russian sentence patterns. These differences are, however, more subtle and even more difficult to recognize by Russian EFL students. The English conjunction is very similar in use to its Russian counterpart, in the first place. Probably, this makes because-phrases a preferred tool for expressing causal relations by Russian-speaking students. Alas, the similarity is not 100% identity, which sometimes submits students to making mistakes, especially when connecting different clauses and propositions.

For example, 'because' (and it is very similar to Russian) can introduce both cause-clauses and reason-clauses by relating either to the direct statement or to the proposition:

S1. *Tom was fired because he had wasted company's money (cause-clause).*

S2. *I know Tom was fired, because his colleagues told me (reason-clause).*

Sentence S1 answers the (hypothetical) direct question "Why was Tom fired?" Sentence S2, on the other hand, answers the indirect question "How do you know that Tom was fired?" In fact, because-clause in S2 is related to the proposition 'I know' rather than to the clause 'Tom was fired', which is indicated by the comma. To this extent, the use of 'because' perfectly corresponds to the use of its Russian equivalent, which facilitates the acquisition of parallel structures by Russian-speaking students. However, in some instances the pressure of the native language also provokes errors with 'because'. For example, sentence S2 can be inadequately transformed into S3:

S3. **Tom was fired because his colleagues told me.*

Here the clause 'his colleagues told me' is related to the direct statement instead of the proposition, which is omitted. Such omissions are no big deal in Russian, although English is rather sensitive to them.

Overall, the differences between the English conjunction 'because' and its Russian equivalent are generally the same as those between the corresponding interrogative adverbs. While because-clauses in English normally avoid ambiguity, similar Russian sentences can be ambiguous. Russian tendency to omit propositions sometimes makes gives rise to sentences that look rather odd in English. Consider the following:

S1. *The road is wet because it has been raining.*

S2. **It has been raining because the road is w*et.

Naturally, by using sentences like S2 students imply that wet road is the reason for assuming that it has been raining, not that it is the cause of the rain. The correct form can be provided by the extended sentence, as in S3:

S3. *I think it has been raining, because the road is* wet.

Alas, not so many Russian EFL students care to make such extensions.

Other conjunctions used to introduce logical sequences, like *since*, *therefore*, *so*, *hence* etc. generally follow exactly the same patterns as their Russian equivalents with only slight differences in punctuation. The use of since-, therefore-, so- and hence-clauses usually poses no

problem for Russian EFL students, at least not on the spoken level. For example, 'therefore' conjunction and its Russian counterpart are used to introduce reason rather than cause-clauses, which makes their usage quite similar in both the languages. Unfortunately, most students focus on why-questions and because-answers instead, which makes them prone to all the typical errors mentioned above.

Discourse level

Different languages represent different cultures, and different cultures develop different discourse models. This does not imply, of course, that discourse models rooted in other cultures are *always* very different from our own, but sometimes they are. According to Wood (1997), some Asian languages, particularly Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, have patterns of argument that differ greatly from English. Wood also refers to a study showing that Korean academics trained in the US tended to use correct English discourse models, while their colleagues who only worked in Korea wrote "with no statement of purpose of the article and a very loose and unstructured pattern from the English point of view".

The research of English text and discourse in general, as well as academic discourse in particular (Grosz, Sinder, 1986; Mann, Thompson, 1988; Martin, 1992; Chubariva, Rezepova, 2016) reveals a rather strict organization. The structure of English academic discourse is reminiscent of Langacker's (1991) action chain model. In Huenig's interpretation, 'in Langacker's action chain model energy is transferred from an initial object, i.e. the head, to an adjacent object and from there to the next and so on until it reaches the final object, i.e. the tail' (Huenig, 1998). Wallwork (2011) also uses this 'chain' metaphor to illustrate a good model of English scientific discourse where every word is linked to the previous and consecutive words to make a sentence, each sentence is linked to the previous and consecutive sentences to make a paragraph, each paragraph is linked to the previous and consecutive paragraphs to make a chapter, etc.

A good user of English normally keeps this 'chain' model in mind while speaking or writing. They tend to guide their listener or reader step by step towards the conclusion. Hence, a careful user of English never 'rambles', and even if they do digress to elaborate some point or give more details they always let you know where the digression starts, not where it ends. Russian discourse, even academic, is somewhat different. Even a good lecturer may go at great length elaborating some secondary points and then throw in a phrase like 'returning to our muttons', thus switching the listeners or readers several minutes of speech or several paragraphs of text back to the main point. Sometimes such transitions are rather abrupt and even unnerving for an unprepared addressee.

It is well worth noticing here that English culture and its derivatives (Australia, English Canada, New Zealand, United States) are low-context, whereas Russian culture is high-context (Copeland, Griggs, 1985). While low-context cultures tend to be precise in their language, high-context cultures develop rather lax discourse models where a lot of things are understood from the cultural context rather than the text as it is. Thus, Khoutyz (2013; 2015) points out that Russian academic discourse is characterized by higher levels of hedging and ambiguity than English.

Native language habits naturally influence foreign language acquisition and submit RFL students to a rather spontaneous belief that English discourse models are the same. However, the Russian habit of draining information from the context rather than the text itself often males students insensitive to the difference between high-context and low-context discourse models. In other words, from the standpoint of discourse many students continue to speak Russian using English words and sentences. This can be illustrated by some rather typical mistakes made by Russian students of English. The origin of such mistakes is quite obvious: some phrases and sentences, given a word-for-word translation, sound rather odd to natural speakers of either English or Russian. Apart from the above given observations, here are some more.

1. The use of indicative pronouns (like *this/that*, or their Russian equivalents). Those very similar pronouns have, nevertheless, certain differences in usage throughout the languages. While the English *this* refers to an item present here and now, the Russian counterpart very often indicates an item, which has been recently mentioned in the discourse. For instance, the expression *this country* (*city*, *town* etc.) in English means the country (city, town) the speaker is in at the moment (in Russian using *'this country'* for Russia is often considered "unpatriotic" – the more proper way is *'our country'*). It is a little different way in Russian. For instance, a person who is talking about France while in Russia can easily say *'this country'* meaning France – the country they are talking about at the moment, not the country they are in at the moment. A proper English expression would require *'that country'* in similar contexts.

2. Tense correlation (the sequence of tenses in English connected sentences that never occurs in Russian). This means that native speakers of English correlate the dependant clause to the main clause in the past, i.e. link both the events to a certain moment in time, whereas in a Russian sentence the dependant clause might have a present tense verb denoting some action in the past. The correlation between the two events is made according to the main clause, i.e. the clause is not connected with the event it denotes directly, but through another clause, something that has recently been mentioned or implied.

3. The use of negations. In this respect English is a rather logical language. Though sentences like *I won't tell you nothing* occur in colloquial speech, they are considered non-standard by careful users of the language. In Russian double, triple and more negations is quite usual. This actually means that natural speakers of Russian easily (and normally) negate different points in a sentence, while in English one negation is sufficient to make the whole statement negative. (In fact, two negations make a statement positive, according to the rules of logic). This doesn't mean, of course, that Russians are illogical people, but language habits sometimes work against logic.

There certainly can be other observations on this point, but those ones given in this paper show the distinction between the two languages. This distinction should certainly be regarded in the process of a foreign language acquisition to avoid negative interference on the part of the native language and thus lax the divergences that are often the source of mistakes for students.

Method and procedure

Total of 81 students participated in the survey. Participants were recruited from high school and university students in Russia who spent between 3 and 7 years in an English program. The first group (G1) was comprised of 17 high school, 8 junior and 19 senior university students who were specifically instructed in English argument structures. The second group (G2) served as a reference group and did not get any special instruction apart from their usual curricula. G2 was comprised of 12 high school, 8 junior and 17 senior university students.

The first part of the study consisted of pre-test instruction, reading session and a multiple-choice test in G1. The procedure for G2 was similar with the exception of the pre-test instruction, so that the students in G2 could only rely on their previous knowledge of argumentation in English. The students were given 20 minutes to read a text of ca. 500 words and then were to mark presented questions to the texts as relevant or irrelevant, depending on whether the answers to the questions could or could not be derived exactly from the text. The tricky thing here was that some of the presented sentences could seem quite relevant from the Russian standpoint, but were outright irrelevant from the English standpoint, something similar to what was discussed in subsections 2.1 and 2.2 of this paper.

The second (and the last) part of the study included a reading and a writing sessions. In the former the students, as previously, were given 20 minutes to read a text of ca. 500 words, but in the latter instead of a choice test they were supposed to write a short statement of the

author's argumentation in the form of a causal chain. Each sentence or clause that did not fit in the causal chain was considered redundant.

The results were compared between the two groups and are presented in the following section of the paper.

Results and Discussion

As expected, instruction helped and the error rate in G1 was considerably lower than in G2 where about a third (in senior classes a quarter) irrelevant sentences (including all of the 'tricky' ones) were marked as relevant. High median-to-mean ratios (never below 80%) show that the results were distributed rather evenly, which is shown in between-group comparison presented in Table 1.

Table (1): Between-group comparison of error rate (vocabulary and grammar)

Level	G1 error rate			G2 error rate		
	Mean	Median	Median-to-mean, %	Mean	Median	Median-to-mean, %
High school	.24	.22	91.67	.34	.31	91.18
University jr.	.21	.17	80.95	.32	.28	87.5
University sr.	.11	.09	81.82	.25	.21	84

Unfortunately, even the pre-test instruction did not yield 100% efficiency, as the errors are still rather common for the prepared group and still stand even at the higher level of language acquisition. The conclusion we can draw from the data is that apart from the instruction excessive training and guidance are required. Indeed, practice makes perfect.

Discourse level seems to be a harder nut to crack, though. As strange as it may seem, instruction seems to have little effect on the results. Moreover, students in junior university subdivision of G1 showed poorer results than their peers in the reference group and performed even worse than high school students in both the groups, as seen from the data presented in Table 2.

Table (2): Between-group comparison of redundancy rate

Level	G1 redundancy rate (N=41)			G2 redundancy rate		
	Mean	Median	Median-to-mean, %	Mean	Median	Median-to-mean, %
High school	.15	.11	73.33	.17	.11	64.7
University jr.	.19	.13	68.42	.15	.14	93.33
University sr.	.12	.11	91.67	.13	.10	76.92

The explanation here may be in the fact that students tend to treat any information presented in a foreign language as relevant. During the discussion one of the students said that she knew some sentences she wrote were 'out- of-the-line', but they were 'too cute to throw out'. Anyway, discourse issues are too complex to be comprised by one short test and definitely require further and deeper investigation.

Conclusion

Acquisition of English argument structures does pose an issue for quite a few Russian EFL students, as is shown in the Results section. Most problematic is the discourse domain. Even direct instruction yields rather modest results here compared with vocabulary and grammar levels.

The fact that the errors linger into higher level of language acquisition shows that students learn argumentation in English by trial and error rather than direct instruction.

Naturally, the survey presented in this paper does not comprise all the aspects of English argument structure acquisition by Russian EFL students. But we do hope to have at least outlined an issue that stands and requires a specific approach to be dealt with.

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