

LINGUOCREATIVE POTENTIAL OF LANGUAGE PLAY IN
TEACHING RUSSIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract. *The paper proposes a staged model for developing the linguocreative competence of learners of Russian as a foreign language through language play. Building on the definitions of E.A. Zemskaya and V.Z. Sannikov and on second language research into play, the model links three operations, recognition, interpretation and production, with CEFR levels from A2 to C1 and with the mechanism of play typical of each level. Special attention is paid to Uzbek-speaking learners, for whom Russian and Uzbek interlingual homophones such as *tyt* and *tut* are proposed as material for bilingual play tasks.*

Keywords. *language play, linguocreativity, linguocreative competence, Russian as a foreign language, interlingual homophones, Uzbek-speaking learners, CEFR.*

Introduction. In Russian linguistics E.A. Zemskaya, M.V. Kitaigorodskaya and N.N. Rozanova describe language play as the cases in which the speaker «plays» with the form of speech and a free attitude to this form acquires an aesthetic task, however modest [1, p. 172]. V.Z. Sannikov adds that the deviation is recognised by the speaker and admitted on purpose [2, p. 23]. Both definitions presuppose that the player knows the norm he breaks, and this presupposition makes language play a natural ally of foreign language teaching.

Second language research came to a similar conclusion from a different direction. G. Cook distinguished play with sounds and letter shapes, which creates rhyme, rhythm and alliteration, and play with grammatical structures, which creates parallelisms [3, p. 228]. E. Tarone argued that language play deserves serious attention in acquisition research [4], and her study with M. Broner found in a Spanish immersion classroom both play for fun and play as private rehearsal of new forms [5]. N. Bell showed in a case study of native and non-native speaker interaction how humorous play can support the learning of the forms involved [6], while J.A. Belz interpreted the bilingual puns of learners of German as an expression of their multicompetent self [7].

In the methodology of Russian as a foreign language the notion of linguocreative competence was introduced by Chen Nianzu, who defined it as the adequate perception of non-standard use of language means together with the ability to work with creative texts, from distinguishing play from ordinary expressions to decoding and interpreting its meaning [8]. This model is addressed to learners at level B2 and above and rests mainly on the reception of authentic texts. Our earlier paper described the levels of the language system at which play is realised in the classroom [9]. The aim of the present paper is to propose a staged model that extends linguocreative training to the elementary and intermediate levels, includes the production of play by learners and uses the interlingual resource available to Uzbek-speaking students.

Materials and methods. The material includes Russian texts traditionally used in play activities, namely folk tongue twisters, homonymic puns and sentences with punctuation ambiguity, as well as Russian and Uzbek interlingual homophones selected by the author. The study combines definitional analysis of the literature, componential analysis of play mechanisms, contrastive analysis of Russian and Uzbek vocabulary and didactic modelling of task sequences.

Results and discussion. The analysis shows that linguocreative competence can be decomposed into three operations of increasing difficulty. Recognition means noticing that a text deviates from the norm. Interpretation means restoring the norm and both meanings that the play brings together. Production means creating one's own play within a given mechanism. The skills listed by Chen Nianzu [8] cover the first two operations, whereas production turns the perception of creativity into creativity proper. Table 1 links the operations with the mechanism of play and with the CEFR level at which each task becomes accessible.

Table 1. Staged model of linguocreative tasks

Level	Mechanism	Example	Operation	Task
A2	phonetic	Шла Саша по шоссе и сосала сушку	recognition	find the alternating [ш] and [с] and read the line faster each time
A2, B1	phonetic and graphic	был and бил, мыл and мил	production	compose a two-line rhyme with one minimal pair
B1	lexical homonymy	Косой косой косил косой	interpretation	separate the meanings 'squint-eyed', 'oblique' and 'with a scythe'
B2	syntactic ambiguity	Казнить нельзя помиловать	interpretation	place the comma in two ways and explain both readings
C1	phraseological transformation	newspaper headlines with modified idioms	production	restore the source idiom and create a headline for a university event



A2 to C1	interlingual homophony	тыт and tut, бор and bor	production	compose a bilingual pun and explain it to a Russian speaker
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Phonetic play opens the sequence because its mechanism is transparent even at level A2. For Uzbek-speaking learners minimal pairs with *ы* and *u* combined with hard and soft consonants are especially productive, since Uzbek has no phonemic opposition of this kind, and a rhyme built on such a pair makes the learner pronounce the contrast deliberately. Lexical and syntactic play requires interpretation. The pun *Косой косой косил косой* forces the learner to separate homonyms belonging to different parts of speech, and the sentence *Казнить нельзя помиловать* shows that the position of a single comma changes the meaning of the whole utterance. At level C1 the material shifts to modified idioms in media texts, where interpretation depends on knowledge of the source idiom and of the cultural background behind it.

The most specific resource for Uzbek-speaking learners is interlingual homophony. Our selection includes pairs in which a Russian word coincides in sound with an Uzbek word of a different meaning, such as *мym* ‘here’ and Uzbek *tut* ‘mulberry’, *бор* ‘pine forest’ and *bor* ‘there is’, the interjection *ой* and *oy* ‘moon, month’, *сон* ‘sleep, dream’ and *son* ‘number’, *бой* ‘battle’ and *boy* ‘rich’, *муз* ‘ice’ and *tuz* ‘salt’. In ordinary lessons such coincidences produce interference, but in a play task they become an object of reflection. The Uzbek sentence *Bu yerda tut bor* ‘There is a mulberry tree here’ contains the sequence *tut bor*, which a Russian listener perceives as *мym бор* ‘here is a pine forest’. When learners explain this double reading to Russian-speaking peers, they act as bilingual mediators and use both languages consciously, which corresponds to the multicompetent stance described by J.A. Belz [7].

The selection of play material follows four criteria derived from the model, namely transparency of the mechanism for the given level, vocabulary

within the lexical minimum of that level, a limited amount of cultural presupposition below level C1 and ethical neutrality of the text. Recognition tasks precede interpretation tasks, and production is introduced only after learners have interpreted several examples of the same mechanism, because a pun that remains unclear creates frustration rather than motivation. The model has not yet been tested experimentally. Its next stage is a teaching experiment with Uzbek-speaking students of Russian, in which the three operations will be assessed separately.

Conclusion. Language play develops linguocreative competence when tasks move from recognition through interpretation to production and follow the growing complexity of play mechanisms. Starting with phonetic play at level A2 makes linguocreative training possible long before the advanced stage. For Uzbek-speaking learners interlingual homophones such as *mym* and *tut* turn a typical source of interference into material for conscious bilingual play.

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