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ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: A CASE FROM A RUSSIAN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Introduction The study addresses the needs of university educators in alternative, more efficient teaching techniques supported by the psychological approach.

Method The introduced method of fairy tale writing, based on the potential of Russian traditional fairy tales, encourages critical thinking, and enhances the problem solving process in the context of international students' identification with an imaginary personality. The defense mechanisms unconsciously applied in the frame of an individual's narration assist in interpreting their emotional state and psychological adaptation levels at a certain point in time.

Results The complexity of the adjustment process should be scrupulously considered, as the nature of individually applied defense mechanisms is dependent on the culture and contextually relevant. Fairy tale therapy gives international students a chance to negotiate identity in writing and acquire positive feelings of attachment and belonging. Instructors benefit from "hearing out" and learning about the students who, in the traditional educational setting, would reveal shyness associated with some cultural predisposition (China, Japan, and Korea).

Discussion The timely changed class instruction style and more person-centered approach can modify the situational adaptation outcomes, and long-duration observation can provide a clearer picture of identity transition.

Arrangements should be made to adequately shift emotional discontent at the critical point, and this is a task for both the local university administration and the national legislative body.

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The theoretical prerequisite of universalism of human emotions enables the educators to perceive the coded message in the narrators' 'voices' and become mediators between international students and university administration.

Keywords: defense mechanisms, emotional state, psychological adaptation, Russian fairy tales, universal semantic primitives

INTRODUCTION

Russian universities participating in the Russian Academic Excellence Project (under the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation) put great effort into attracting foreign students. The infrastructure of the universities is, however, not yet ready to accommodate the needs of the growing numbers of students to their new surroundings. Although all international students face the challenges of cultural gap, some are more vulnerable and marginalized than others: 57% of foreign students interviewed at Ural Federal University (UrFU) speak negatively of their Russian experience, and 65.7% blame the university on their problems with language and context-specific adaptation. Furthermore, 17% of the respondents wouldn't recommend it to their friends as "here it's as though students are forsaken" (Cameroonian student, age 22).

The traditional adaptation systems in Russian universities do not aim at providing tailor-made support, as they mainly accommodate the needs that can be openly expressed. In addition, many students have low to average proficiency in the Russian language and fail to express their concerns or find correct verbal expressions for their troubles or emotions. Despite the fact that the majority of the respondents chose UrFU for its uniqueness – "in six months here I have only met two other people from the UK, so it provides a much better environment for learning Russian than St. Petersburg or Moscow" (UK student, age 21) – still some feel uncomfortable and unable to continue studying.

To fill this gap, the teachers of Russian as a foreign language take the responsibility of creating a communication space that will give students from other cultures an opportunity to reflect upon their experience, recognize the source of discomfort and be in charge of managing their emotional states. The developed teaching method applies the potential of Russian traditional fairy tales, unconventional in teacher-learner interaction in Russian universities.

Theoretical assumptions

Unlike Western linguists and psychologists (Stern 1983), the Russian higher education traditionally pays little attention to the psychology of teaching foreign languages. The published theoretical works, based on the application of psychological approaches (Kitaygorodskaya 1986; Miklyaeva & Rumyantsev 2008; Nikulicheva 2014), for a variety of reasons have not been made use of in the Russian educational environment. The clash of differences and ineffective 'personality constructs' (Kelly 1991), which international students bring to their new lives, lead to dissatisfaction, despair, and even deconstructive behavior. Insufficient knowledge of the Russian language and specifics of the mentality worsen the situation because these students are unable to convey their concerns to the instructors.

In her research, A. Freud (Freud 1946) developed her father's concept of defense mechanisms. This term applies to any conduct that addresses psychological discomfort, which may cause negativism and change interpersonal relations. In the introduced teaching method, the defense mechanisms, interpreted within the context of the individual's writing, can provide explanation of the emotional state and offer an opportunity to initiate alternative teaching strategies.

This study proceeds from the assumption that a better acquisition of "the other" for a limited study period (the Russian academic year usually lasts ten months) is preconditioned by a non-traumatic environment, created for the purpose of addressing any event, perceived by people as alarming and threatening to their self-image. By activating the unconscious defense, a person regains psychological balance required to cope with real and imaginary difficulties. The international teaching methodology has applied effective techniques of reflective writing (Dillon 1983; Fulwiler 1986; November 1993; Moon 2006), facilitating the direct or tacit description of students' emotional state. Sharing their feelings about life events or literary texts, students develop skills of critical analysis and have the opportunity to manifest their feelings with concurrent awareness of their own and other people's experiences (Auerbach 1999; Pavlenko 2002; Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004). Writing things down provides a natural context for the development of verbal literacy and also serves as a psychologically comfortable "conversation" between international students and an their native speaking instructor through opening new channels for troubling emotions and gaining perspective (Smith 1999, 2006).

Although some Russian educators regard the importance of writing as an essential part of foreign language teaching (Galskova 2003), the mainstream language teachers prefer to pursue the strategy of developing speaking communication skills in the class, as practicing

writing is challenging and time-consuming. It's worth noticing that sometimes international students are reluctant to communicate directly, owing to spoken language imperfection or national specifics of their country of origin: the habit of suppressing emotions in order to maintain "a harmonious situation" and "protect each other's dignity" (Wei 2014, p.262). This results in anxiety and emotional discomfort from the inability to be heard, leading to further alienation and dissatisfaction with themselves and others.

Inspired by B. Ray's method of TPRS (Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling) (Ray & Seely 2008), we have devised a method of Fairy Tale Telling (FTT), which has been tailored to our foreign students' needs. Like TPRS, the FTT technique helps create a favorable learning atmosphere in the Russian language classroom by maintaining emotional exposure through dramatization of imaginary stories, whereby the individual writing of fairy tales triggers an emotional response to the troubling environment.

The effectiveness of fairy tale therapy in psychological counseling has gained a wide popularity (Von Franz 1996; Hall 1983; Tatar 1987; Higgins 1994; Vachkov 2007; Yefimkina 2006; Zinkevich-Yevstigneeva 2015; Tkach 2008; Chekh 2009). From psychological perspectives, fairy tales have traditionally been seen as a replacement activity that promotes awareness of new events through the prism of a person's return to oneself as a child, experiencing the laws of life and ways of social manifestations of constructive power. The leading principles of fairy tale therapy are personal awareness of one's abilities, opportunities, and value of one's life; understanding the cause and effect of events and actions; knowledge of the different styles of mentality; meaningful constructive interaction with the environment; inner feeling of strength and harmony. When students create their stories, they shift a critical state of mind or personal crisis onto imaginary characters, as if opening a safety valve. When teachers read students' metaphorical language, they grasp implicit signs of their state of mind and detect possible traces of a positive frame of reference. If the signals are mainly negative, teachers infer that some corrections to the training procedure and input should be made, with the focus on the students' new energies and creation of a new meaningful life.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study we proceed from the assumption that unvoiced emotions affect the general emotional state of a person and lead to dissatisfaction with oneself and social surroundings, which ultimately results in unproductive cultural adaptation and low academic progress.

To corroborate the suggested hypothesis, we apply the concept of universal semantic primitives, allowing the interpretation of emotions in terms of various languages (Goddard

and Wierzbicka 1994; Wierzbicka 1996). This provides actualization of certain emotional components, prevalent in the text of the fairy tales written by our international students. Based on the principle of anthropocentrism of language, we apply a hermeneutical approach when analyzing the general emotional tone of the students' imaginary stories. To explain the defense mechanisms which are contextualized by the narrators and define a level of psychological adaptation to the new settings, we rely on the taxonomy of typical stress reactions (Berry et al. 1987; Schmitz 1994a, 1995). We believe that this framework can help understand personality and, in our case, the international students' voice through the metaphorical verbalization of their emotions.

Participants

The experiment included thirty-two international students from European, Asian and African countries. The students were enrolled in different Master's degree courses at UrFU, and it was their second year in Russia. As an essential part of the university curriculum, all international students have to take a Russian language course during their studies: lectures and tutorials are delivered in Russian and English. The Russian language competence of the students varied from low-intermediate to intermediate. This discrepancy was due to the fact that prior to the 2015-2016 academic year, they completed a one-year crash course in Russian at UrFu, and some studied Russian before coming to the host country. The experiment consisted of 19 female and 13 male students, aged 23-29.

FTT Description

The application of fairy tales in our classes does not fit into the traditional understanding of the method. In our praxis, 'therapy' is a planned, systematic and organized process, broken into several stages and submitted to the logic of foreign students' adaptation to another learning environment. The first three stages lay the foundation for the individual's creative writing, with the first stage focusing on diagnostics of the students and choice of language treatment (troubleshooting). During the second stage, the speech practice, different from the traditional training exercises, triggers the students, encouraging further cognitive search. A special manner of telling tales, demonstrated by the instructor (or via audio and video recordings, films), conjures up the idea of devising a student's own resources to reproduce the same in their own words. No clear borderline differentiates the second and the third stages, but the objective difference of the third stage consists in a joint instructor-student research in ethnic and cultural differences of Russian fairy tales, national and other tales. As a rule, the first three stages last from one to one and a half months. At the fourth stage, the students take up writing their own tales. Here, the concept of a tale is seen in a broader context including

ghost stories and parables. When students take up writing a story, it can result in any genre mentioned.

In FTT, the most productive writing techniques are:

1. make up a story using the given words (usually 10);
2. out of ten given words, select one that seems the most important (a key-word) and make up a story based on this word;
3. think about a subject you would like to discuss now and make up a story;
4. draw what you like/are interested in now and make up a story based on your picture.

In our Russian language class FTT is, first and foremost, a diagnostic and adaptation tool. The regular procedure includes a set of pictures from foreign language textbooks, performed in various techniques (contour, detailed scheme, abstract picture, detailed representation, photo, etc.), depicting a variety of subjects (animals, human beings, mythical creatures, buildings, landscapes, etc.) and filled with a range of emotional components (neutral, inspirational, frightful, humorous, etc.). Students are asked to choose a picture they like and make up individual stories using the chosen subject; students also decide on the function of the subject. They are free to choose the form of performance and its presentation: in person, pair- or group (up to 4 persons); to hand it in to the instructor (not making public), to read out, to stage, etc.

RESEARCH MATERIAL

At the first and second stages, Russian fairy tales with simple plots and narrative serve as instructional material. The texts are selected according to the principle of learning by induction — vocabulary, content, syntax, plot — from simple to complex lexis and grammar. Culture is the central aspect, and these simple narratives help immerse students in real Russian culture and demonstrate speech praxis as different from the textbooks. The narrative of the first stage shows the rhythm and pronunciation, and is mainly recital in nature (e.g. Kurochka Ryaba [The Motley Pullet]). At the second stage, the narrative repertoire broadens with world stories in Russian (e.g. Kolobok [Little Round Bun] – The Gingerbread Man; Grandmother, Granddaughter and Hen). Additionally, audio, video, and film adaptations are made use of (e.g. Masha i Medved [Masha and the Bear]). Stories are selected according to more sophisticated rhythmic patterns, larger volume, and widened vocabulary. At the third stage, students independently select stories on the assumption of language self-diagnostics, interests, and psychological state related to the adaptation phases. The Russian tale Volk i Semero Kozliat [The Wolf and the Seven Kids] is one of the narratives of the stage. The fourth stage represents the process of creating fairy tales.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main task of FTT is to ensure that students are mindfully incorporated into their new settings and that their new language skills are being developed to the full. Table 1 below describes the potential of the FTT method in general, and some particularities can be mentioned concerning each stage. For instance, one of the auspicious moments of the first stage is in the biological constituent — the stories are short, with simple vocabulary and iterative (left hemispheric) rhythm, impacting heartbeat, respiration, blood vessels, etc. The tales, selected in accordance with this rhythm, and reading them aloud, provide, to some extent, the synchronization of breathing with biorhythms and subsequent normalization of palpitations, etc. By the end of the class, the students show no anxiety or uneasiness, and demonstrate emotional balance. This is brought about by the so-called eureka effect, a learning insight gained by the students from the first weeks of training. It implies breaking stereotypes and acquiring knowledge about a new culture, which the students will have to integrate themselves into for a potentially long period.

The speech praxis of the second stage awakens interest and academic curiosity. The tales at this stage belong to more complex rhythmic groups underlying musical and poetic texts of varying meters. Traditionally, this type of narrative targets 5-7-year-old children, as their cyclic rhythm affects the production of speech.

At the third stage, students have to select fairy tales independently, examine new vocabulary, resulting in increased discussion of the plots and characters and comparison with the similar national and international stories. At this point, the focus of teaching speaking is on the ability to express personal opinion in Russian and share it with the peers.

At the crucial fourth stage of FTT, the students, who are less acclimated to the Russian language class format, would choose contour drawings or abstract pictures with mystical animals or creatures, and fabulous buildings that create frightful mental pictures or magic motifs. The characters of such tales should overcome difficulties, fight against evil forces and defeat them. The overall frame presumes trust in positive outcomes and safety or well-being. On the whole, the fourth stage is characterized by absolute trust in the instructor, but not every student is able to share emotions with the group members. At the beginning of the fourth stage, 35-45% of the students read out their individual stories. Some students (20-25%) dramatize their work, and there are some (15-20%) who are able to engage group mates in staging a tale. However, 10-20% of the students are still reluctant to make their stories public, and mainly create parables about their feelings before and after coming to the university, which also confirms trust in the instructor. Another favorable aspect is students' interest in

each other's stories and tact they show relating to those who prefer maintaining the status quo. Within two or three lessons, all the students gain courage and are motivated to write their fairy tales. Table 1 summarizes the benefits of the method.

Table 1. Advantages of the FTT method

Stages of FTT	**Language progress**	**Forms of interaction**	**Emotional rapport**
First stage	Development of the speech fluency (pronunciation and articulation)	Teacher-student	Confidence and emotional security ('adult-child' relationship scheme with the parents-and-child perceived model)
Second stage	Development of the listening skills (individual rhythmic picture of a selected tale)	Teacher-student and student-student	Increased students' confidence, peers' assistance
Third stage	Development of the speaking skills, logic and meaningfulness of the students' remarks	Student-student and group, teacher-student research	Well-disposed, safe
Fourth stage	Development of the writing (and reading) skills, increased general Russian language command	Group or teacher-student	Friendly, motivated

According to Wierzbicka's (Wierzbicka 1999) classification of human emotions and the idea expressed by Shakhovsky (Shakhovsky 2008), this research supports the assumption that via psychological mechanisms, emotional processes are reflected in the meaning of the words,

used by the individual to verbalize feelings. A certain emotional experience finds its way in the corresponding word meaning.

Acknowledging the fact that emotional components in language semantics should be examined together with the person's culture, this study presupposes that human emotions are universal. It follows from this that people belonging to different cultures name the basic human emotions ("love", "hostility", "joy", "grief", "sadness", "kindness", "anger", "fear", "shame", etc.) using the similar vocabulary; when creating fabulous texts, individuals endow their characters with emotions or describe their mood, and this enables self-expression.

Sample analysis

Here are three fairy tales written in Russian but translated into English for the research convenience and interpreted as exemplary.

1. The tale about defenders (Khaga, Gabon)

Three people are working together for one big company — Volodia, a manager, Anna, an accountant, and Anton, the director. Besides their functions, they are also entrusted with the defense of the Earth. Every evening, some unknown evil forces make an attempt to attack the Earth, but Volodia, Anna, and Anton stand up to the enemy. Each time they join hands, they gain miraculous strength and withstand the assault. Although they have this miraculous strength, they can't get married or communicate with other people. Otherwise, the miraculous strength will abandon them and the Earth will lose her defenders. That's why the three people sacrifice their personal happiness.

This is a redemptive story (McAdams 2006 p.16), depicting the desire to sacrifice and make the world a better place. Though the number of positive emotional descriptors ('defense', 'join hands', 'gain miraculous strength', 'withstand', 'have this miraculous strength', 'defenders', 'personal happiness') are almost the same as the number of words with a negative sense ('evil forces', 'attack, 'assault', 'abandon', 'lose', 'sacrifice'), the emotional intonation is palpable. The narrator implies that the power of the defenders is in their unity, and they can overcome every problem if they temporarily reject personal interests in the name of the group.

2. The tale about a merry swine (Nat, Thailand)

Once there was a swine that lived freely on a farm. The only things it did were eating and sleeping. It was quite a merry swine because its owner looked after it well. But unfortunately one day the owner went bankrupt and had to sell the farm and all the animals. So, the swine

was taken to the slaughter-house. It got upset, but realized that it had been destined to become food for people. Soon it was slain and sold to the butcher, and the butcher sold it to the restaurant, and the chef prepared a delicious meal. Now the swine knows it brings joy to the clients as the meal is very tasty.

This is a metaphor story. The word swine is a common Thai nickname for children, so the message here is 'a little girl interacting with the merciless world'. The narrator puts herself in the comfortable state of being a child, as children are unable to cope with evil and no one expects them to be. The negative descriptors ('unfortunately', 'went bankrupt', 'slaughter-house', 'was slain and sold') look bleak, and the overall impression is that everyone has to fulfill what is destined, and whatever happens, has to justify the circumstances.

3. The tale about a school (Singshang, China)

In a deep forest there is a school for animals with a deer as a teacher. The deer teaches little animals to be honest and kind. There is a hare that is very kind and helps those in need, and there is a naughty fox that is always teasing the hare, like this, 'Listen, Hare, why do you have such red eyes? Maybe, because you are always crying?' But the little hare says nothing, just smiles. The teacher-deer also says nothing, just watches.

One day the fox on his way to school slipped on the mud, fell down and hurt his knee. Also, he soiled his beautiful fur coat and began crying. The fox kept crying bitterly even when he arrived at the school. In the class, all the animals began to mock him, asking why his eyes were so red. The only animal that did not mock was the hare, and she said to other animals, 'The fox's eyes are red because I gave him new contact lenses as a present yesterday'. And then the deer-teacher said to the fox, 'Keep this in mind: God helps those who are kind'.

This is a moralistic story with a happy ending. The narrator projects her incapability to integrate socially onto the personage (hare) and calls outer forces for help, as the deer-teacher does nothing (in Chinese mythology a deer is a symbol of status and position). The negative descriptors ('always crying', 'says nothing', 'slipped on the mud', 'soiled his beautiful fur coat', 'kept crying bitterly', 'began to mock him') are neutralized by the positive ones ('honest and kind', 'helps those in need', 'just smiles', 'gave new contact lenses as a present'). The narrator projects a hope that one day she will get over an emotional deadlock. This is strengthened by the moral of the story ('God helps those who are kind').

According to the research into the acculturation phases (Berry & Kim 1988; Berry 2005), the level of psychological adaptation can be interpreted (Schmitz 2005; Schmitz & Berry 2009). Table 2 relates the situation-specific defense mechanisms used by the three student writers to the current phase of their adaptation to the host country.

Table 2. Interpretation of the descriptive indicators of the defense mechanisms

FTT samples	**Defense mechanisms**	**Stress reactions**	**Acculturation style (integration, assimilation, separation, marginalization)**	**Predicted situational outcome/adaptation phase**
The tale about defenders	Reliance on in-group potential (self-persuasion), avoidance	Anxiety, insecurity	Test of integration	Compelled cooperation/Crisis
The tale about one merry swine	Passive opposition (living in a shell), reconcilement	Nostalgia, uncertainty	Separation/isolation	Lack of enthusiasm/ Conflict
The tale about one school	Appeal to outer support (a hope for revenge)	Distress, uncertainty	Test of integration	Sluggishness/Crisis

In the vast research into the adaptation of foreigners to a new environment, homesickness and nostalgia are basic answers for a foreigner's maladjustment, differing in the degree of intensity. Also, personality characteristics, situational conditions, and socio-cultural factors account for the individual's happiness and well-being. However, in a Russian language class the instructors can sense and receive distress signals and apply remedies to mitigate the emotional intricacy of the individual's period of change.

CONCLUSION

The complexity of the adjustment process should be scrupulously considered, as the nature of individually applied defense mechanisms is dependent on the culture and contextually relevant. FTT gives international students a chance to negotiate identity in writing (Pavlenko

and Blackledge 2004) and acquire the positive feelings of attachment and belonging. Instructors benefit from "hearing out" their students and learning more about those of them who, in the traditional educational setting, would reveal shyness associated with certain cultural predisposition (China, Japan, and Korea). The timely changed class instruction style and more person-centred approach can modify the situational adaptation outcomes, and long-term observation provides a clearer picture of identity transition.

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