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Research article

## Everyday Problems of International Students in the Russian Language Environment

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### Abstract

The article aims to reveal the typical problems of international students in the Russian language environment. The authors analyzed essays in which students (N=89) voluntarily described examples of everyday language difficulties they encountered while studying and living in Russia. The article is devoted to the assessment of individual cases and examines the most common problems at three levels of the language environment scale: mega (city), meso (university) and micro (personal). The research showed that the most significant issues that require quick solutions arise in the mega-environment for students with a low level of language proficiency. Thus, moving around the city, shopping in stores, and even more so calling a taxi, going to a doctor, ordering services – these are the tasks of really high complexity for them. Language problems are usually resolved with the help of people around them, using English and/or technical means, and in extreme cases, some of them may be addressed to compatriots. As a rule, the University environment does not create problems that require urgent solutions, but insufficient knowledge of the language significantly complicates the learning process. In personal communication students most often use their native language, which helps to avoid stress, but hinders the rapid learning of a new language.

**Keywords:** International students; Russian; Chinese; Russia; Language difficulties; Language environment

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Научная статья

## Повседневные проблемы иностранных студентов в русскоязычной среде

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### Аннотация

В статье ставится задача выявить типичные проблемы иностранных студентов в русскоязычной среде. Авторы проанализировали эссе, в которых студенты (N=89) добровольно описали примеры повседневных языковых трудностей, с которыми они столкнулись во время учебы и жизни в России. Статья посвящена оценке отдельных случаев и рассматривает наиболее распространенные проблемы на трех уровнях шкалы языковой среды: мега (городская), мезо (университетская) и микро (личная). Исследование показало, что наиболее значимые вопросы, требующие быстрого решения, возникают в мегасреде для учащихся с низким уровнем владения языком. Таким образом, передвижение по городу, покупки в магазинах, а уж тем более вызов такси, обращение к врачу, заказ услуг – это задачи высокой сложности для них. Языковые проблемы обычно решаются с помощью окружающих, с использованием английского языка и/или технических средств, а в крайнем случае благодаря соотечественникам. Как правило, университетская среда не создает проблем, требующих срочного решения, но недостаточное знание языка значительно усложняет процесс обучения. В личном общении студенты чаще всего используют родной язык, что помогает избежать стресса, но препятствует быстрому изучению нового языка.

**Ключевые слова:** Иностранные студенты; Русский; Китайский язык; Россия; Языковые трудности; Языковая среда

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## INTRODUCTION

Despite the difficulties that have recently hindered the international exchange of students, it remains an important part of the educational ecosystem. In 2019, in the last pre-Covid year, the number of international students in Russian universities amounted to 297.9 thousand people, and this figure has almost doubled (153 thousand people) since the 2010 academic year. According to the statistics from the Ministry of science and higher education of the Russian Federation, currently, students from abroad study at 688 Russian universities and 465 of their branches. Meanwhile, most of the international students attend one of five higher education institutions. These are Kazan Federal University with 8717 students, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia with 7248 visitors, Moscow University for Industry and Finance "Synergy" with 6123 students, Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University (SPbPU) with 4976 foreign students, as well as Higher School of Economics National Research University with 4362 students.

According to the Federal State Autonomous Scientific Institution Center for Sociological Research (“Sociocenter”) which operates "Project 5-100" that aims to improve the competitiveness of Russian higher education, about 30 thousand Chinese citizens study at Russian universities. Chinese students enrol in 305 universities in 85 cities, primarily in Moscow and St. Petersburg, as well as in the far East and Siberia. Currently most students from China study at Lomonosov Moscow State University, Peter the Great St Petersburg Polytechnic University, Saint Petersburg State University, the Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia and Peoples' Friendship University of Russia.

Most Chinese students enrol for full-time education in Russian universities. Only about 700 out of all Chinese students chose part-time education. Chinese citizens who come to Russia prefer state universities, in particular those that are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of science and higher education of the Russian Federation. In Russian universities they choose in their bachelor degree program such specialities as Humanities and Russian (including linguistics and literature), Economics and management, as well as some engineering and technical specialities, primarily related to construction, machine-building industry, electric power and heat power industry. Under the master and postgraduate programs, Chinese citizens study primarily humanitarian and social specialities, Economics and management, pedagogy and art (Where and How Chinese Citizens Study in Russia, 2019).

There are 8,500 international students at Peter the Great St Petersburg Polytechnic University. SPbPU offers a wide range of degree and non-degree educational programs for them: Degree programs in Russian as well as Degree programs in English, short-term and exchange programs (Summer schools, Russian Language Programs, etc.). Chinese citizens are the general group of international students (about 3,000 students).

Such a large number of international students allow us to consider SPbPU as a transcultural University that requires a new level of language competence, cultural and national exchange (Baker, 2016).

The main problem faced by international first-year students is the language of the country of their study (non-native language), the level of which is rarely sufficient for



carrying out the daily tasks including communication, shopping and other errands and learning. Interaction with the external world of the student is based on the language of the host society in one or another of its manifestations.

The Russian language is quite difficult for international students to learn, both in terms of pronunciation and grammar (Kazanina, 2017; Medina et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2020). However, unlike China (He & Chiang, 2016; Jiang et al., 2019), for example, Russian education does not create English-medium instruction, but offers pre-University training programs, Russian language courses. During their studies, international students continue to study Russian as a foreign language, and English as a part of the National Curriculum, together with local students. The need to immerse yourself in a language environment with different Cyrillic and Latin spellings is another challenge for international students (Valieva et al., 2019).

The research of Trenkic and Warmington (2019) confirms that there is a direct relationship between the language, literacy skills and academic performance of Chinese students at the British University. Researchers point out that if students do not feel themselves quite confident as language users, they get into a difficult situation. They are afraid of speaking in front of the class due to shame, shyness, and self-doubt (Girardelli et al., 2020, p. 10). Students understand that people might perceive them as unmotivated or not hardworking (Shin & Sterzuk, 2019, p. 154). Moreover, sometimes the imperfection of language skills causes microaggressions in everyday life, and students do not know how to cope with it (Ee, 2013). The research (Kim & Harwood, 2020) shows that language proficiency influences the desire to interact with international students. Overall, the study of international students of different nationalities around the world indicates that the level of language proficiency linked to academic achievement and sociocultural adaptation (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Andrade, 2006; Cao et al., 2016; Constantine et al., 2004; Dao et al., 2007; Ladum & Burkholder, 2019; Wang et al., 2012; Zhang & Brunton, 2007).

### **EDUCATION OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT PETER THE GREAT ST. PETERSBURG POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY**

During a year international students study Russian either in their home country or at one of the preparatory departments of Russian universities, and also they can take language courses. The Test of Russian as a Foreign Language (TORFL) is offered to prospective students after successful completion of the Russian language course as a part of University Foundation Program. Also at Peter the Great St Petersburg Polytechnic University, there is an opportunity to pass the entrance exam in the Russian language, developed by the teaching staff of the Higher School of International Educational Programs. It consists of two parts that evaluate both the spoken language and the academic language used in the educational process.

SPbPU has been providing pre-University training since 1965. Over the years, more than 16,000 international students from Europe, Central, North and South America, Asia and Africa have completed the program. Educational programs and curricula in all academic disciplines take into account the requirements of the standards



of Russian secondary schools and standards for the first year of higher education. More than 50% of the time is devoted to learning Russian.

For international students who do not speak or do not speak Russian well, universities have special preparatory departments that provide the support necessary for further higher education in Russia. In addition to learning the Russian language, students of the University foundation program study subjects that correspond to their future speciality, and to the extent sufficient for further study at the University. In other words, students not only learn spoken Russian but also the basic vocabulary of their speciality. The University foundation program is designed for one or one and a half academic years, depending on the requirements of the concrete University and the level of training of applicants. At SPbPU educational process takes a year (the total number of hours is 2,376, of which 1,116 are classroom hours), but there are also intensive programs designed for 6 and 8 months. During this period international students also get acquainted with the Russian culture, mentality and the city, where they are going to study. All educational programs meet the state requirements for programs that prepare foreign citizens for the mastering of professional educational programs, which were developed with the active participation of SPbPU specialists. The results of SPbPU research on adaptation processes of international students were also taken into account when researchers were developing the programs. Depending on the future specialization of students, the University training program is divided into three directions: Engineering, Economics and Humanities. Basic engineering disciplines: Russian language, mathematics and physics (additional subjects: computer science and chemistry). For Economics basic disciplines are Russian, mathematics and social studies (optional subjects: computer science and history). The Humanities basic disciplines include the Russian language, history, social science basics (optional subjects: literature, mathematics and computer science).

If applicants have a sufficiently high level of preparation for the future speciality and only need to learn the language, SPbPU has an educational program "Russian as a foreign language." Training in this program allows you to prepare for the first level certification test. That indicates an intermediate communicative competency in Russian as a foreign language. Also, this course ensures the readiness for the comprehensive exam in Russian as a foreign language, the history of Russia and the basics of the legislation of the Russian Federation (for those who want to get Russian citizenship in the future, these are usually citizens of the former Soviet Union republics). Foreign citizens study in groups of up to 12-14 people. Usually they have classroom studies in the morning and in the day time for 5-6 days a week. Independent work of students is provided by both the library fund and electronic resources. For international students a tutor service and excursions are organized around the city, suburbs and university campus. There are also different on-campus activities such as Russian conversation club, the video and music studio "Red Brick," cooking classes, literary evenings, festive and sporting events. During their studies international students receive support from the group of Russian students, which is so-called "Tutor Forces" (a tutor organization of SPbPU). A tutor is both a friend and an instructor. It is a voluntary student organization of Peter the Great St Petersburg Polytechnic University, the main goal of which is to



provide a comfortable and friendly environment for international students in the process of their social and cultural adaptation to life in Russia.

The general forms of tutor's activities include organizing thematic events aimed at introducing students to the traditions and culture of Russia and other countries. Russian students with the support of the University administration have developed a reference guide for international students. Every international student can get it for free in addition to a student ID card. This guide helps them adapt to the new environment and includes the following information: safety tips, emergency actions and medical recommendations, contact details of information services of the city and the University, as well as legal assistance, recommendations on transport, recreation and entertainment, shopping, tourist services, and a mini-dictionary.

In 2020 Peter the Great St Petersburg Polytechnic University and Qingdao Hengxing University of Science and Technology launched a joint educational program to prepare Chinese students for study in Russia. University foundation programs have always been in demand among Chinese applicants. So the opening of foundation courses at the sites of SPbPU university partners in China is a logical step in the context of the coronavirus pandemic and temporary restrictions on movement between countries. During the academic year Chinese students will study Russian language and other disciplines in Russian according to the profile of the future speciality. Chinese teachers will teach them based on the methodological materials of their colleagues from SPbPU. Also, the Polytechnic University teachers will conduct weekly online lessons in selected disciplines and Russian, and at the end of the year they will come to Qingdao for full-time final exams.

Students from the former Soviet Union republics tend to consider themselves as people who know the language well since they used to speak Russian in their homeland. They do not feel a significant perceived cultural distance from Russia (Galchenko & van de Vijver, 2007). They watch Russian TV channels, learn the language at school and read books in Russian. In fact, despite a good understanding of the spoken language, they have little knowledge of the scientific language, and their written speech can be grammatically incorrect.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

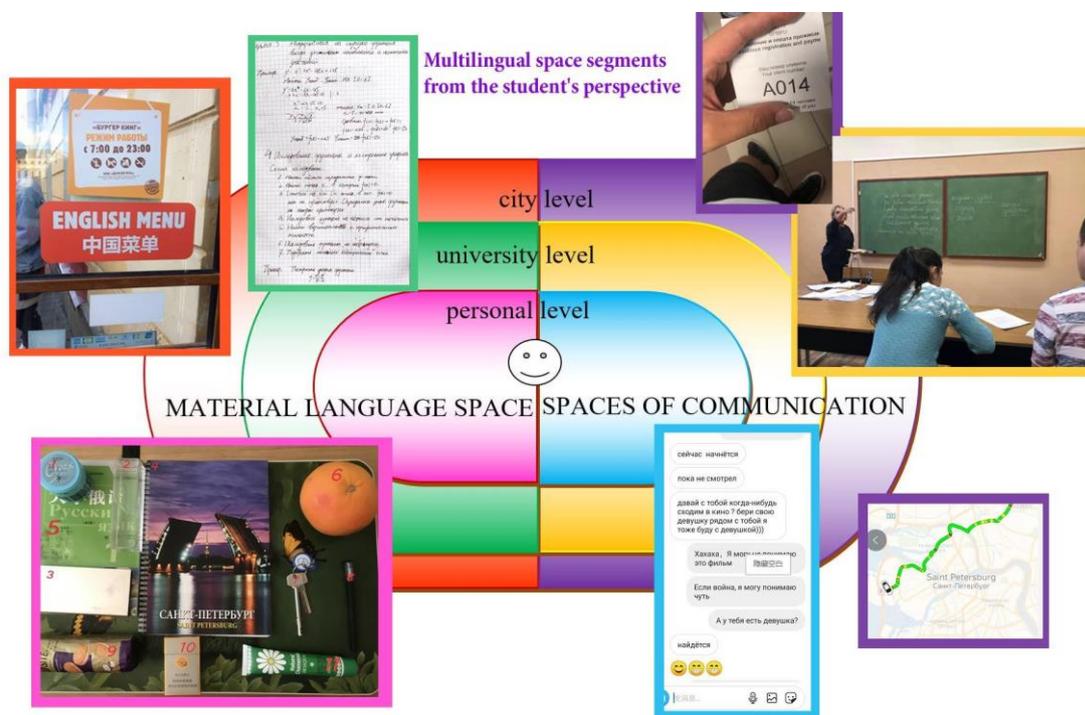
At the end of the first semester (December 2019 – January 2020) international students of Peter the Great St Petersburg Polytechnic University took part in writing a free-form essay about the language difficulties they encountered when they arrived in Russia. Students also assessed their proficiency in Russian and English. Students of the first year of bachelor and master degrees took part in this research. Undergraduates had not got their bachelor degree at Russian universities, so this was the first semester of study in Russia for all of the participants of the group under research. The sample consists of 89 students, 68 of them are Chinese citizens, and the rest are from different countries: Mozambique (1 student), Bolivia (1 student), Vietnam (1 student), and also from Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan (a total of 18 students). All participants



voluntarily agreed to participate in the research, and are aware of the use of their essay data in an anonymous form.

We would like to note that when discussing language difficulties, students wrote about either difficulty in multilingual space or linguistic problems related to the learning and use of the Russian language (we do not consider the latter in this research). Analyzing language difficulties, we get into the world of human interaction with the outside world, in the learning of cultural practices considered as an integral part of the language (Rafieyan et al., 2014). Most students believe that their problems with an orientation in various life situations to be language issues. The practical reason for this may be when faced with such circumstances (moving around the city, currency exchange, shopping, food, receiving services, etc.) in the native language environment the young person will somehow be able to get the necessary information to make a decision.

The student comes across a defined language in material culture, which includes a variety of objects: from food and kitchen utensils, furniture, technical devices, stationery and books to buildings and monuments (Aronin, L., & Laoire, 2013, p. 227; Aronin et al., 2018). Or they may also encounter language in the course of oral or written communication. We divide all the covered problems into three levels according to the scale of multilingual space (fig. 1).



**Figure 1.** Multilingual space segments from the student's perspective (Bylieva et al., 2021)



### Macro multilingual space

Macro multilingual space for international students is a city, considered as a set of material objects that carry a verbal message on the streets, in shops, canteens, banks, medical, entertainment institutions, in transport arteries, and people who do some work or simply move around the city. Students interact with them for whatever reason.

Although students come to Saint Petersburg and immerse themselves in the Russian-speaking environment, their level of English proficiency is also a significant factor if it is higher than Russian. Material urban culture and partly University culture consider English as a second language, lingua franca. Speaking English, international students can communicate with a significant part of the local people.

A student from Mozambique describes the difference between the language environment of Saint Petersburg and a small city near Saint Petersburg – Pskov, where she had started her studies:

*In Pskov, almost no one spoke English. It was very difficult for me because I could not communicate with anyone or express myself. In Saint-Petersburg the situation is different, more people speak English. And Whenever I needed help, they understood me and helped me (01Mozambique05R09E)*

Numbers in addresses is another challenge for students from China. Several young people described mistakes in house numbers that they made, confusing the position of number in the numerical digit. In general, the entire visual sign system of the city, including letters, numbers, and drawings, is not always clear to the newcomer:

*When I first came to Russia, I did not understand the road signs and bus and metro signs in Russian. I got lost several times and decided to stay at home more often and communicate only with Chinese friends (40Chinese04R05E)*

When international students get into an unfamiliar language environment, they get lost, feel insecure, and it takes a lot of effort to do ordinary things. Individuals with low levels of Russian and English proficiency tell about some of the consequences of "linguistic mutism" emotionally, even though these results may be sad. A person describes himself as not knowing what to do and very concerned. When the student did not know how to get to the right place, how to change money, how to rent an apartment, only a "linguistic intermediary" solves that sort of problems. In most cases, it was a familiar compatriot who knows Russian better. Relatives, friends or fellow students, who acted as a means of universal protection from the difficulties of the urban language environment, solved all situations that the students could not cope with themselves. Although such challenges cause stress for an international student, we reckon that they are one-time and contribute to the acquisition of experience. There was no repetition more in any of the essays.

The only case, when compatriots played a joke on a student from Turkmenistan, is connected with her first acquaintance with a subway:

*It was the first time I saw the subway in my life since we have not got one. I did not know how to get through the turnstile in the subway. My friends said that I*



*had to give my first and last name when crossing the turnstile, which, of course, looked ridiculous. Unfortunately, it was my first time here. I did not understand anything at all, as if I had fallen from the moon. As a result, I said my first and last name loudly to get through the turnstile, and it did not open. It was the first joke from my close friends. I felt ashamed, but I kept myself in my hands. Then a subway employee came up to me and explained that I need to buy a token or buy a travel ticket (03Turkmen).*

The residents resolved less difficult situations, which in most cases showed hospitality and a desire to help (8 against 1 episode of microaggression on the part of an 8-year-old boy). International students also mentioned other ways to solve this sort of problems: by using technical tools (Internet translators, Google maps, an app for metro rides, etc.) and implementing their English speaking skills (by those who have a level of English proficiency significantly higher than Russian).

A Chinese student says that having settled far enough away from the University, she experienced difficulties, and even missed her bus stop. However, further she shares her positive experience: "After a few days, I got used to it. And even the bus drivers told me: "Chengxin, we reached your stop". I appreciate drivers' help" (01Chinese04R07E).

Another example of a successful solution to a problem related to transport:

*When I first arrived in Saint Petersburg, I took a taxi for the first time. I could not communicate with the driver, so I was worried very much. Then the driver started talking to me using an electronic translator, and I finally got to my destination safely. The driver also told me: "Welcome to St. Petersburg". It makes me think that the Russians are very friendly.*

In the next case a student uses an online translator after having several attempts to solve a problem with the help of passers-by:

*To save time, I asked the local Russian for the address of the University preparatory course, but I did not speak Russian well enough. A few times I failed it. Finally, I used a translator app on my mobile phone to explain which University I needed (50Chinese06R05E).*

Unlike Chinese-Russian translation, which has long been supported by online translators, some students from the Eastern republics had not this advantage in the fall semester of 2019. For example, the Turkmen language appeared in Google translator only in February 2020.

Overall, one of the main challenges related to the language environment of St. Petersburg, which students described was relevant to transport (35 mentions). A large city with the complex transport arteries: a subway, hundreds of bus routes, trams, trolleybuses for new arrivals turn out to be a trap. Even at the airport in St. Petersburg, where most of the information stands and signs are in Chinese, students from China experience difficulties that they attribute to a lack of understanding of the language (5 people). One of these students writes:



*Boarding was a big problem for me, because everything was in Russian. I could not find a place to store my luggage and get tickets. I almost missed the departure time (03Chinese05R06E).*

Most frequently, students do not understand what customs officers and other airport employees told them:

*Because I did not know what the personnel was saying or what they wanted me to do, I ignored what was said. Every time I said “Yes” or “No”. So when the officer asked me to take off my glasses, I also said “Yes”. At that moment he got angry, but I did not say that deliberately. Then a Chinese man who knew Russian and was near me explained what they wanted from me, and I was confused (19Chinese04R03E).*

The language landscape of the Saint Petersburg metro is Russian-English. The names of all stations are transliterated in Latin letters on all diagrams and signs, and there is no Chinese language. Students complain that they can not find their way around, do not understand where to get in and out, can not understand the names of the announced stations because of the noise, and often end up in the wrong place. Students often turn to other passengers for help – with more or less success:

*Metro. In my opinion, this is the place where I most often made mistakes. I missed the stations and could not find my line. And it was very difficult for me, but I asked everyone. Some of the people helped, and some did not (01Chinese04R07E).*

Many of the students found a technical solution in the form of maps, apps, and so on:

*I had problems on the subway. I often missed stations, got lost, but I was helped by passers-by who told me which station to change at, which one to get off at. But over time, I got used to it and downloaded a metro map to my phone (02Chinese05R05R).*

However, at the same time the students recognize the benefits of using the metro:

*I think that the metro ride here is very convenient. It is much more convenient than the city I live in. The metro here covers the whole of Saint Petersburg. It is very convenient to go where I want to go, so I want to get a metro map. When I first entered one of the metro stations, I found an employee to ask him, but I could not understand him because I still didn't speak Russian well. I really couldn't do anything about it. But I had one senior international student with me who helped me in time (50Chinese06R05E)*

Although the metro most often causes problems, there are also problems with other public transport and taxis. Students can technically manage the process of communication during taxi rides with the help of apps. At the same time, this action also implies interpersonal interaction, which, as a rule, causes the greatest difficulties. And even more so when they use phone calls for clarification. A separate problem is a



situation when the taxi driver himself speaks Russian poorly, which is quite common when using budget taxi aggregators where people from the former Eastern republics of the USSR work. But on the other hand, as it turned out, such a situation can be useful, for example, when a student from Tajikistan meets a compatriot taxi driver at the airport, helping to get to the University.

In studies Park et al. (2017), Spencer-Oatey & Xiong (2006) international students in English – speaking environments noted that they rarely experience communication difficulties while shopping. But as a result of this research, we found out that shopping is one of the most popular sources of problems (40 mentions). The language landscape inside the stores is exclusively Russian, except for the city centre. A student often buys the wrong product, having difficulty reading the price tags. Students gave such examples as situations when they bought carbonated water instead of regular water, salt instead of sugar, pork instead of beef, and sugar instead of semolina. One student always ordered only black coffee in the students' cafeteria, because he did not know any other drinks and how to ask for sugar. Another student could not buy laundry detergent:

*One day I went to the supermarket to buy laundry detergent, but since I could not read the product description, I bought several bottles of softener (37Chinese03R04E)*

The situation was even more complicated in budget canteens, where the menu with names is only in Russian, and there are often handwritten price tags, which are difficult to translate as well as read them. Problems increase when direct communication with sellers and waiters is required:

*it was getting colder and colder. But I had only a sweater here, because in China it was not very cold in winter in comparison with the weather in Russia, which was colder than I thought. So I had to go to a shopping centre to buy a warm jacket, but my Russian was too bad. When I first went shopping at the mall, I saw suitable clothes, but I did not know how to tell the seller that I needed a smaller size. I stood there for a while, embarrassed, but then I bought some clothes of my size (50Chinese06R05E)*

Some students often respond inappropriately to the questions of the cashier at the checkout in grocery stores:

*I just wanted to buy only cigarettes. I went to the supermarket and asked if there were any cigarettes. The seller replied: “Certainly! Which ones do you want?” I just answered: “Red cigarettes”. Then she asked me again: “Do I need a plastic bag?” And I answered the last question without understanding: “Yes, Yes, Yes!” I had thought I would know for the future, it might be useful. I got this, and it was an 'interesting' experience (44Chinese05R05E).*

The cashier announced the amount of money to be paid, and it turned out to be a problem for five students:



*At the supermarket I get confused because I do not know the total amount to be paid. I use a 5,000-ruble note every time I pay for my purchases (04Chinese06R06E).*

And there is the alternative solution: “I can show the money to the cashier and let him take it”(27Chinese04R01E).

The more complex the purchase, the more intense the communication required, and the more problems there may be, for example, when buying medicines at a pharmacy. The same issues are associated with going to the doctor, issuing a bank card, etc. Technical mediation of oral communication further complicates interpersonal communication.

Many students pointed out the inability to talk on the phone when it was necessary (specifying the address to the taxi driver, talking to the landlord, ordering food at home, and other services):

*When we first arrived at a dormitory, there was no Internet. Our friend told us that we may book the Internet by phone, given on the billboard in the lobby of our dormitory, but my level of Russian was low. I tried to call in order to make an appointment. During the conversation they asked me if I needed to get the Internet connection. I replied that I did. And then they asked me if I had a router and a network cable and needed a TV? I did not understand the operator. I could only answer and repeat: “Yes, Yes”. I did not understand anything and wanted to end this phone conversation. Then we found a friend who spoke Russian very well. We called again, answered questions and gave them my address. After that, we confirmed the time. The next day we got the Internet installed (44Chinese05R05E).*

When visiting cultural places and different sights, students rarely experienced difficulties (2 stories). They give examples with vague captions in the names of objects in museums and the inability to get a free ticket to the Hermitage:

*In the first month of my arrival in St. Petersburg, I went to the Hermitage. Then I found out that there were a lot of people in the queue to buy tickets. The staff asked me if I had a student ID card. But I did not understand anything at that time, so I just paid for the ticket. At home my friend told me that I had wasted my money(43Chinese03R07E).*

### **Meso-language environment**

The mesolanguage environment for an international student consists of the place of study, the University as a set of language carriers of material culture (inscriptions, signs on the campus, announcements, educational materials) and people who are the participants in language interaction at the University (teachers, staff and students of SPbPU).

The University language environment requires more language immersion than the city environment, due to the active exchange of information. However, stressful situations are less common here. The description of potentially dangerous consequences of language problems here is not directly related to study but to organizational issues,



such as paperwork and red tape (visa, migration card, dormitory, etc.). For example, one student almost missed the deadline for visa processing. There are also problems with not understanding the schedule. So, the student got into the wrong class or at the wrong time at the beginning of his study.

Although the problem of understanding during the lectures and active working at seminars is mentioned quite often, they write comments facing it only at the beginning of their studies. Then everything has returned to normal. Now they follow a lecturer and participate in seminars:

*It was very difficult for me in the classroom, although I studied Russian in China. I could not learn all the information in class. After classes, I analyzed everything and asked my classmates what they were talking about. But after a while, I got used to it. I have already started speaking in class and adding comments to presentations (02Chinese05R05R).*

The rapid pace of presentation of the new material and the process of intra-University communication caused a great number of problems. Students emphasize that they need time to comprehend what was said:

*One research supervisor always shouts when he talks to me, but I can hear quite well and understand slowly (68Chinese00R).*

Another example is a situation when a teacher of university foundation program, changed the way of teaching, focusing on the middle level of the group:

*We have been studying at the University foundation program for two weeks, but my Russian has not improved at all. It was very annoying because the teacher was teaching too fast. I had never studied Russian before, so I did not understand anything she said in class. I saw that the teacher also noticed that, and began to explain the material more carefully. It was moving. So we try to learn well, and we will continue to work hard as well (50Chinese06R05E).*

Expressing your own thoughts, including the process of translation from the native language, remembering grammatical structures and choosing correct words also takes time. In addition, there is a fear of saying the wrong thing, which makes it hard to learn it in general.

*We, international students, have a language barrier/phobia, fear of speaking with mistakes. So we think and repeat the speech for ourselves before saying something (10Turkmen08R03E).*

One of the supporting factors in learning is fellow students. Students with the same native language sit down together and try to help each other. Scientists have noted in research the desire of international students to switch to their language as soon as supervision or evaluation ends (Murphy & Potvin, 2017). International students point out in their essays that local students tend to be caring and provide support in educational matters:



*When I first went to a class at my University, I found out that people from other countries do not know Chinese. Fortunately, someone who knows the Chinese language, came after a while. When the teacher came, he just gave us a lecture, but my level of Russian was not very good. When the teacher asked us to take notes, I had not had time to write down many words. At this time, I was watching my Chinese groupmate, who was next to the teacher. I did not write. At the end of the lesson, a Russian groupmate enthusiastically asked me if I had done it, and then shared his notes with me (50Chinese06R05E).*

However, students feel a sense of shame and anxiety because they cannot participate in group tasks on an equal basis with all other students in the group:

*I felt myself completely helpless when I was working in one team with my Russian groupmates, completing together tasks, because they knew how to do them correctly following the requirements of the teacher but I did not know how to do anything, and this made me feel ashamed. For example, after splitting us up for group work, my part of the task always does not match the task. To do it correctly, every time I need the help of my Russian classmates (40Chinese04R05E).*

Students note that they need to do a lot of translation work to understand the materials that are studied in the classroom and to sort out the scientific, professional texts of the coursebook. At home students analyze other notes of their groupmates, photos they took from the blackboard, etc. In some cases, students try to find the appropriate educational material in their native language but do not always succeed. Unable to cope with a flood of new information in the classroom, international students often ask local groupmates to explain what was discussed and borrow notes. However, the handwritten notes turn out to be a new challenge:

*A Russian student sometimes lent me his notebooks. I find it hard to understand what it says. The handwritten text looks like an encrypted curse (03Chinese05R06R).*

One Chinese student considered learning English as an inconvenience. He associated English with reading handwritten texts. He claims that he confuses the handwritten letters of Russian and English (52Chinese03R05E).

Only three students reported confusion in reading Russian and English letters. There is also a problem of teaching English in Russian at the University.

When communicating with people around them, students highlight a lack of understanding of jokes, local cultural realities (for example, customs, holidays, etc.). For example, a Chinese student was offended by the saying "No fluff, no feather". This is a traditional Russian idiom, which wishes good luck before the exam (\*English equivalent: Break a leg!).

Although we have already mentioned that modern technologies often help in solving language problems (primarily, online translators and various applications), it turns out that a technogenic virtual environment is also fraught with some difficulties. An online translator does not always help you communicate. Students indicate



translation errors and lack of translation flexibility, both for everyday communication and for study:

*It told us: "Keep in touch". And we did not understand the meaning of this saying. At that moment we realized that after the translation via the online app, we still were not able to understand anything. Then I looked up the Russian dictionary, looked carefully at the meaning of each word, and finally found out that we could leave the classroom (44Chinese05R05E).*

However, when it comes to professional terms, even Russian-Chinese dictionaries do not help.

### **Micro-language environment**

The micro-language environment is represented by the closest possible circle of students' communication, which they choose for themselves, as well as objects of material language culture, which they surround themselves with. The personal language environment is often dominated by the native language. Students who come from the same country tend to communicate with each other and try to stay in dormitories together. This sense of community was especially typical of the students coming from China, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan (Anosova & Dashkina, 2020).

After classes international students also stay in groups and at least maintain Internet communication for joint learning tasks. Language difficulties in regards to being roommates were noted by those who lived together in a dormitory or rent an apartment with other international students whose native language was different. However, their proven stories about mutual assistance and support in the student environment are more important than language barriers:

*I wanted to make my lunch, but I did not know how to make soup. I asked the girls for help to show how to make chicken soup. And my neighbours from China helped a lot (12Turkmen)*

The penetration of the local language into the personal environment has a positive effect on language practice. A study Gibbs et al. (2020) confirms that a large number of connections with compatriots had inverse relationships with both psychological adjustment and sociocultural adaptation. And local friends increase sociocultural adjustment. Researchers (Kudo & Simkin, 2003) point out that one of the significant factors in forming friendships is self-disclosure based on language skills, while international students tend to be nervous and silent when talking to native speakers. With a low level of language skills, it is difficult for students to make local friends.

*I came to Russia. I wanted to be a part of local life. Last year I had many opportunities to make friends with Russians. But, I could hardly speak Russian. I only used gestures and translations due to having language problems. So, unfortunately, it was hard to make a friend (37Chinese03R04E).*

Analyzing the essays, considering them as a part of our research, we also found out pieces of evidence of the facts, which Chinese students in Britain identified as the most difficult issues (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006). Four of them indicate the problem



of understanding of humour due to its ambiguity, which is common among Russian students. According to one of the students, this problem creates obstacles in friendship: "I can not laugh together with my Russian groupmates during the break, but they often gather to eat and have fun" (63chinese04R).

However, in our analysis, we found that language is not an insurmountable barrier to friendship:

*Later I had a Russian friend. At first, communication was uncomfortable. They do not speak the official language, and I often do not understand colloquial phrases. I have already begun to understand many oral expressions. For example, what does the word "Cheo?" mean? Pronunciation is already clear, and I can follow the conversation even on the phone. I am happy now* (53Chinese04R08E)

Some of the older students came to Russia to study for a master degree. Some of them tried to build relationships with local girls. Sometimes it was accompanied by even greater language difficulties than with just making friends:

*I like Russian girls. They are beautiful. But dating outside of University causes unexpected difficulties. For example, I thought we had love dating in clubs, bars, but it turned out that I just need to pay money for her* (65chinese03R)

The material items acquired gradually bring the Russian language into the personal space of students. However, the greatest challenge for many students was the keyboard (there are six mentions in Chinese essays):

*At the beginning of training, it is difficult to remember the order of letters on the keyboard. Every time I want to type a text, I need to search for a letter by letter. Entering words is very slow* (04Chinese06R06E)

Another student writes that such slow text input can be annoying when they chat on a social network with groupmates.

The personal space also includes English, as students meet a different kind of English texts on products sold in Russia and on the Internet (primarily, in site addresses, emails, etc.)

One specific feature of Russian Internet communication is the possible replacement of the use of the "smile" symbol, which means a smile, with a single or several consecutive closing brackets. These brackets puzzle international students:

*The first time I saw a few parentheses at the end of a sentence, I did not understand what happened, did it mean that the speaker was wrong? Later I learned that a bracket adds friendliness and courtesy* (03Chinese05R06E).

## CONCLUSION

Although researchers traditionally consider that life in the country, where the language is spoken, is valuable in all respects (Krundysheva & Gubareva, 2020), the language itself is a great challenge. This research reveals the peculiarities of the



challenge for international students in Russia. We found out the following pattern: in the Russian environment with a low level of proficiency in Russian and English, stress for an international student is high. The higher the level of language, the less stress. As a result, ways to overcome difficulties become more effective.

We see that the urban language environment turns out to be a complicated world with which the students have to interact solving various tasks. Some students, who come to Russia to learn Russian, initially have a low language level. Thus, moving around the city, shopping in stores, and even more so calling a taxi, going to a doctor, ordering services – these are the tasks of really high complexity for them. They try to avoid the macro environment from the very beginning of their study at the University, by closing themselves in communication with their compatriots. As a rule, they begin to voluntarily interact with the external environment only when they begin to gradually acquire the necessary language skills. However, there is always a forced interaction with the mega-environment that requires a quick solution. Language problems are usually resolved with the help of people around them, using English and/or technical means, and in extreme cases, some of them may be addressed to compatriots.

At the University there is the average level of the language environment for a student. Problems related to the language rarely require a quick solution there, but they form the background of student life. Constant incomplete understanding of educational material requires a lot of additional independent work. At the same time peer support has been developed both from local students and within language groups. Students often use online translators and dictionaries there, but using only that kind of support is not enough for the educational process at University when students study authentic professional materials.

Initially, the student micro-language environment is mostly native. However, the Russian language gradually penetrates there both through different physical objects and via interpersonal communication. One of the first and most difficult objects is the Russian keyboard, which requires Chinese students to master for a long time. Making friends is also difficult because of language problems. But when it happens that international students make new friends among local students, it is seen as a great advantage.

The study of students' language problems at several levels makes it possible to conclude the need to take appropriate measures at the University to reduce the number and level of problems related to language. Taking them into account gives us an opportunity to put an appropriate emphasis on the University foundation programs for international students, as well as to make the welcome course more effective.

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