

‘SPIRITUAL’ OR ‘ESPIONAGE’ CENTRE: HOW TO DEVELOP PRAGMA-DISCURSIVE COMPETENCE READING A NEWSPAPER TEXT

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Abstract

Reading and understanding media texts is one of the aspects of second language teaching and learning which needs special attention. Understanding the media text is a complex process, as the purpose of the media nowadays has shifted from giving information to persuasion and manipulation (e.g. Fairclough 2001, van Dijk 2006, Weiss & Wodak 2007, Klushina 2014, Zaripov 2014, Ivanova 2016, Ozyumenko 2017, Ozyumenko & Larina 2017). As a result, to determine the author's intention it is not enough to possess linguistic competence, which includes the knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. To be able to see the implicit meaning of the text, second language learners need to develop pragmatic and discursive competences, to be aware of strategies and techniques of persuasion and manipulation, which are numerous and diverse, and to discern how they work in the text. To prove this, an experiment was conducted among 60 ESL students of the RUDN University, aimed at assessing their pragmatic competence and searching for some methods and techniques for working with the newspaper text in the language classroom. Implementing the Constructivist approach to language teaching and learning (Driscoll 2000, Nomnian 2002, Kurteš et al 2017), I encouraged the students to conduct a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2001, van Dijk 2006, 2009, Weiss & Wodak 2007) of the article *Russian 'spiritual centre' set to open in the heart of Paris* (published by The Guardian, 19.10.2016). The study argues that to develop pragmatic and discursive competences, work should be concentrated around thorough semantic, pragmatic and discursive analysis of the media text, supervised by the teacher, who encourages students to construct new knowledge through critical thinking. Such a pedagogical approach may contribute to educating independent, thoughtful and open-minded learners, capable of resisting the manipulative impact of mass media on public opinion.

Keywords: second language acquisition, media text, pragma-discursive competence, implicit meaning, manipulation, public opinion

1 INTRODUCTION

It is widely assumed that learning a foreign language is a multifaceted process, the purpose of which is to attain mastery over the skills of using the target language (e.g. Van Essen 1997: 8). Reading competence is one of several educationally relevant competence domains. The ability to understand written texts is an important precondition for further developing personal knowledge and personal skills, and a prerequisite for participating in social and cultural life. Diverse areas of knowledge are made accessible through reading. The range of reading occasions is very wide, and reading fulfills many different functions (cf. Groeben & Hurrelmann 2004). Besides literary-aesthetic types of reading, they include reading to expand knowledge, which is crucial to further education and lifelong learning, as well as reading to form values and attitudes.

To develop pragmatic and discursive competence, it is crucial to keep in mind that texts not only convey information and facts, but they also transfer ideas, moral concepts, and cultural values, and as a result they form readers' worldview and ideology. By systematically considering different text functions and focusing on

the competent handling of written texts in different and typical everyday situations, it is possible to operationalize reading competence as a comprehensive ability construct.

The development of reading skills involves working with different authentic texts including media texts (Ozyumenko, Larina 2018). Reading and understanding the language of media is one of the aspects of second language learning which needs special attention. Understanding political discourse is a complex process which needs an integrated approach to its analysis (Chilton 2004, Ponton 2016) especially nowadays when the media has become an important political force, influencing the minds of the masses (Fowler 1991). We can observe that almost any information transmitted by media is generally subordinated to specific social and political goals, which are not always seen on the surface. Nowadays, we are witnessing an increasingly destructive role of the media which escalate political conflicts between nations, create negative stereotypes of opponents and even demonize them (e.g. Ivanova 2016, Ozyumenko & Larina 2017, forthcoming).

Due to the fact that persuasive and manipulative functions of media are prevailing over the informative function (e.g. Fairclough 2001, van Dijk 2006, Richardson 2007, Weiss & Wodak 2007, Kopytowska 2010, Klushina 2014, Zaripov 2014, Ivanova 2016, Ozyumenko 2017, 2019; Ozyumenko & Larina 2017, Larina et al. 2019), second language learners need to be able to see implications in the text, and be aware of manipulative strategies which are numerous and diverse.

The purpose of this article is to provide an example of how to develop pragmatic competence when reading a newspaper text and encourage students to engage in critical thinking, which is necessary to see the implicit meaning of the text. It shows that thorough discursive analysis, combined with the constructivist approach to second language teaching and learning [Driscoll 2000, Kurteš et al. 2017, Nomnian 2002 and others], contributes to improving pragmatic and discursive competences and educating independent, thoughtful, and open-minded learners.

2 DATA AND METHODOLOGY

To assess the level of pragma-discursive competence of the students and their ability to see and understand the implicit meaning of a text, I conducted an experiment among 60 law students of B2 level of English of the RUDN University. The students were given the article *Russian 'spiritual centre' set to open in the heart of Paris*, published in *The Guardian* (19.10.2016), which contained information about the opening of a Russian religious and cultural centre in Paris, and was illustrated by an attractive picture. Describing the positive event in general terms, it nevertheless contained numerous subtle multimodal details which showed that the main goal of the author was to form a negative opinion of the construction of the Russian centre and Russia as a whole. The choice of the article was determined by two main reasons: (1) it deals with an interesting topic, i.e. the relations between France and Russia and (2), it was published in a quality British newspaper.

The work with the text and analysis of its interpretation involved 3 stages. To simplify and facilitate the discussion, the article of 538 words was divided into 15 numbered paragraphs, as is shown in Appendix 1.

Stage 1

The students were asked to read the article and fill in the multiple choice questionnaire with three open ended questions (see Appendix 2):

1. Does the text inform about a positive or negative event?
2. What is the author's attitude to this event – positive, negative or neutral?
3. Which paragraph contains the key information testifying to the author's position?

Stage 2.

The discussion of the results of the questionnaire was followed by a critical discourse analysis organised by the teacher, who drew the students' attention to lexical, structural, and other details of the text which were overlooked by them in the first analysis, as well as to contextual features (the questions for discussion are shown in Appendix 3).

Stage 3. The students were asked to fill in questionnaire 2, to see if their opinion has changed. The questionnaire (see Appendix 4) contained the same 3 questions from questionnaire 1, which were followed by 2 new questions aimed at highlighting the goal of the paper. The students were asked to choose if the main goal of the author was to (a) "give information", (b) "influence public opinion" or (c) "other".

The next section will give the main results of the study.

3 DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Questionnaire 1 and its Results

As has already been said, the first goal of the study was to assess the level of pragmatic competence of the students and their ability to see the inherent meaning of the text. The results of Questionnaire 1 showed that after the first reading 65% of the students evaluated the fact of building the Russian church in Paris as a positive event (1), 30% of them found it negative (2) and 5% characterised the event as neutral (3):

(1) "I think this is a positive event because building of this Orthodox cathedral promotes better relations and understanding between the two countries".

(2) "It is terrible that Russia bought some territory in the centre of Paris to build the church as the French could build something more interesting and relating to their culture".

(3) "It describes just a usual thing".

Concerning the author's attitude to the event there was no consensus either, as 30% characterised it as positive, 35% as negative and 35% found it difficult to evaluate (4-5).

(4) "There is no clearly expressed opinion of the author's attitude".

(5) "It is not possible to understand the author's attitude because it has both positive and negative expressions".

The answers to the last question were mostly inconsistent and contradictory. On the whole, the results show that most of the students read the text superficially, catching only the surface information.

3.2 Discussion of the Newspaper Article

During the discussion which followed the first reading and filling in Questionnaire 1, the students were given more detailed questions which helped them to conduct lexical, pragmatic, and discursive analysis, both qualitative and quantitative. They concern the evaluative lexis used in the text, the structure of the text, punctuation, functions of inverted commas, and presupposition in some sentences as well as the discussion of political and cultural context.

The goal of the discussion was to enable the students to undertake the linguistic and pragma-discursive analysis of the text at a deeper level, and to encourage them to engage in critical thinking.

Under the guidance of the teacher, they were to highlight the strategies used by the author of the article, who skilfully combined positive and negative facts in order to form in readers' minds, not only a negative opinion of the Orthodox cathedral but a negative view of Russia as a whole. The analysis showed that the expression of a negative attitude while describing a positive event permeates the whole text, starting with the heading and ending with the last sentence.

After the discussion of the headline and its evaluative ambiguity, which is caused by the inverted commas (6) the attention of the students was drawn to the caption which follows the title (7). Here again, we can observe that the positive information given at the beginning of the sentence is reduced by the second part of the sentence particularly by the words *marred* and *disputes*.

(6) Russian 'spiritual centre' set to open in the heart of Paris.

(7) The Construction of the controversial 4,800 sq metre complex has been marred by architectural, financial and political disputes.

The students were asked to see if there were any other words in the article with negative evaluation (connotation). Their attention was drawn to the words "pastiche", "mediocre," "utterly inappropriate" enclosed in inverted commas for a different reason, as they were used by then-Paris mayor, Bertrand Delanoë.

(8) Then-Paris mayor, Bertrand Delanoë, described the plans drawn up by architect Manuel Núñez Yanowsky – featuring five golden onion domes, white limestone, and glass – as "pastiche", "mediocre," and "utterly inappropriate for the site".

Special attention was paid to the pragmatic analysis of the text and to the role of presupposition in constructing a negative image, which nowadays is frequently observed in media texts (e.g. Wilson 1990;

Kopytowska 2010a; Bade et al. 2015). The students were asked to think of presupposition in some sentences, e.g. what the fact of surrounding the building by the country's counter-espionage services with jamming devices (9) presupposes, or why the short statement of the time of the beginning of the construction is followed by detailed reasons for the deteriorating ties between Moscow and the west (10):

(9) French media reports say that country's counter-espionage services have surrounded the building with jamming devices to prevent the Russians from using it for electronic surveillance.

(10) Construction began in 2014 against a backdrop of deteriorating ties between Moscow and the west over Russia's actions in east Ukraine, where it occupied and annexed Crimea and has lent support to armed separatists who continue to control parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

The students were asked if they found the information about the situation in Ukraine as well as the mentioning of the continuing war in Syria relevant in a text which informs about the opening of the Orthodox cathedral, and what it presupposes.

They were also given the task of looking at the punctuation marks and counting how many times inverted commas were used in the text, and what their function was. Having paid attention to the fact that the expression 'spiritual centre' in the title of the article is enclosed by inverted commas, they understood the implicature of the author, who might have wanted to convey the idea that the so called 'spiritual centre' in reality might have other than religious purposes.

Besides the title, the first sentence of the article also contains inverted commas:

(11) A vast Russian "spiritual and cultural centre" crowned by a golden-domed Orthodox cathedral – widely seen as a grand expression of Moscow's quest to project an image of itself as a powerful, religious country – is set to open in Paris.

The article ends with neutral information telling readers who, instead of Putin, is going to attend the opening ceremony, but again this is followed by a negative attitude, implicitly expressed by putting "symbol of friendship" in inverted commas:

(12) The Russian culture minister, Vladimir Medinsky, is set to attend this week's opening ceremony for the centre, which officials have described as a "symbol of friendship" between Russia and France.

Thus, the attentive reader can appreciate the author's implicature: A vast Russian "spiritual and cultural centre" crowned by a golden-domed Orthodox cathedral has been actually designed to be not a spiritual but an espionage centre, and cannot be viewed, as officials say, as a "symbol of friendship" between Russia and France.

3.3 Questionnaire 2 and its Results

The discussion was followed by another questionnaire which aimed to find out if the students' opinions had changed. The results of questionnaire 2 were compiled after thorough lexical, pragmatic and discourse analysis of the text organised by the teacher, which showed that most of the students (95%) have decided on the attitude of the author to the construction of the Russian religious and cultural centre. Now, 90% of them came to the conclusion that the attitude of the author of the article to the fact of building the Orthodox cathedral was negative, while in questionnaire 1, 35% of the students judged it as positive.

On the other hand, it was quite surprising to see that some of them had changed their attitude to the fact of construction of the Orthodox cathedral in Paris from positive to negative, and had adopted the author's position or the position he wanted to impose. If, before the discussion, 65% of students evaluated the event positively and 30% negatively, after the discussion these figures were 55% and 40% correspondingly. Thus, in this experiment the teacher actually helped the author to achieve his goal, and persuade the readers that the 'spiritual centre' is actually an 'espionage centre' and its building in Paris cannot be evaluated positively, despite the fact that, as the paper says, it comprises "an auditorium and foyer, offices and apartments; a French-Russian primary school for 150 pupils; and a cultural centre, including a bookshop, exhibition spaces and a coffee shop". All these things, from a logical point of view, might not only be beneficial for 200,000 followers of Russian Orthodoxy in France but for the citizens of Paris in general. Making the readers take white for black, the journalist creates and generates in readers' mind a negative stereotype of Russia as a powerful, aggressive, and dangerous state.

More than half of the students (56%) believed that the goal of the publication was not to give information but to influence public opinion. This fact shows that the detailed analysis of the text gives the students a better

understanding of the text and its function.

The question concerning the main goal of the author gave us results which we did not expect either. While 45% of the students chose the answer (b) "influence public opinion", the same amount of students believed that the author gave objective information.

At the end of the discussion, the students were asked to think of the title of the article, which the author would have given if he had not been able to use inverted commas. Having discussed various suggestions, they chose headline (13) as the most relevant to what the author intended to convey to the readers:

(13) Russian espionage centre set to open in the heart of Paris.

The findings show that teaching critical thinking is not a simple thing and it should be regular in the focus of language teacher's attention. According to the results obtained, it looks like it is easier to manipulate readers rather than develop their pragma-discursive competence and ability to see the inherent meaning of the text and the goal of its author. The results also show the importance of the knowledge of context. As Ponton (2019) rightly states, "A basic knowledge of context is clearly necessary if we are to understand what the speaker (in our case the writer) is talking about at all, and will help us to appreciate nuances in allusions to features of the real-world context" (Ponton 2019: 30). The lack of knowledge of political and cultural context might have caused the students' difficulties in understanding the discussed text.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The aim of the paper was to show that the development of pragma-discursive competence of second language learners needs special attention, and this goal could be achieved through reading and analysing a media text. The objective of the media nowadays has shifted from giving information to persuasion and manipulation. Therefore, to understand a newspaper text, and to be able to determine the author's intention, it is not enough to possess linguistic competence. To see the implication in the text, second language learners need to be able to implement thorough semantic, pragmatic, discursive and contextual analysis, thus, to develop pragma-discursive competence.

To prove this, I have conducted an experiment aimed at evaluating the pragmatic competence of the students, which revealed that most of them perceive the text based on its semantic meaning, catching only surface information. Further discussion was needed to grasp the deeper layer of the meaning.

The study argues that to develop pragma-discursive competence, work should be concentrated on comprehensive analysis of the media text supervised by the teacher, who promotes students to construct new knowledge through critical thinking. Such a pedagogical approach may contribute to educating independent, thoughtful and open-minded learners capable of resisting the manipulative impact of mass media on public opinion (Ozyumenko, Larina 2018).

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APPENDIX 1: Text for reading and discussion

Russian 'spiritual centre' set to open in the heart of Paris

Construction of controversial 4,800 sq metre complex has been marred by architectural, financial and political disputes

The Guardian, 19.10.2016

- (1) A vast Russian “spiritual and cultural centre” crowned by a golden-domed Orthodox cathedral – widely seen as a grand expression of Moscow’s quest to project an image of itself as a powerful, religious country – is set to open in Paris.
- (2) The 4,800 sq metre complex-features the newly-built Holy Trinity Cathedral capped with five gilded domes; a parish centre comprising an auditorium and foyer, offices and apartments; a French-Russian primary school for 150 pupils; and a cultural centre, including a bookshop, exhibition spaces and a coffee shop.
- (3) Vladimir Putin was due to attend the unveiling, highlighting the centre’s symbolic importance, until the Russian leader last week cancelled his planned visit amid a row with France and other western powers over the continuing war in Syria.
- (4) The construction project has also been marred by architectural, financial and political disputes. French officials have expressed concern that the building is a stone’s throw from a sensitive government compound. As well as housing France’s supreme magistrates council, the neighbouring Palais de l’Alma contains the Élysée Palace’s postal service and the private apartments of senior presidential advisers.
- (5) French media reports say that country’s counter-espionage services have surrounded the building with jamming devices to prevent the Russians from using it for electronic surveillance.
- (6) The purchase of the plot was first proposed in 2007 by the head of the Russian Orthodox church at the time, the late Patriarch Aleksii II, as part of a Russian campaign to gain control of churches and graves dating from tsarist times and reassert control over the Russian diaspora, including in France, where there are an estimated 200,000 followers of Russian Orthodoxy.
- (7) Former French president Nicolas Sarkozy reportedly intervened personally to ensure that Russia could buy and develop the plot near the Eiffel Tower and Alexandre III bridge.
- (8) In 2010, the then Russian president, Dmitry Medvedev, signed the deal on behalf of Russia to purchase the prized property by the banks of the Seine river – a Unesco-protected site – for €73m (£65m). Reports said other countries seeking to buy the plot included Saudi Arabia and Canada.
- (9) But an initial request to build the Russian Orthodox Spiritual and Cultural Centre, filed in January 2012, was met with opposition in the French capital.
- (10) Then-Paris mayor, Bertrand Delanoë, described the plans drawn up by architect Manuel Núñez Yanowsky – featuring five golden onion domes, white limestone, and glass – as “pastiche”, “mediocre,” and “utterly inappropriate for the site”.
- (11) After François Hollande succeeded Sarkozy as France’s head of state in 2012, French heritage officials issued further criticisms, before Russia withdrew its first application for a building permit.
- (12) The project was then redesigned under the supervision of architect Jean-Michel Wilmotte, and a building permit was issued in December 2013.
- (13) Construction began in 2014 against a backdrop of deteriorating ties between Moscow and the west over Russia’s actions in east Ukraine, where it occupied and annexed Crimea and has lent support to armed separatists who continue to control parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.
- (14) The cost of the construction work, by French company Bouygues, has been estimated at around €100m.
- (15) The Russian culture minister, Vladimir Medinsky, is set to attend this week’s opening ceremony for the centre, which officials have described as a “symbol of friendship” between Russia and France.

APPENDIX 2: Questionnaire 1

Read the article "Russian 'spiritual centre' set to open in the heart of Paris” and answer the questions. Choose the answer or give your own.

1. Does the text inform about a positive or a negative event?
 - a) Positive _____
 - b) Negative _____
 - c) _____
2. What is the author's attitude to this event?
 - d) Positive _____
 - e) Negative _____
 - f) _____
3. Which paragraph(s) contain(s) the key information testifying to the author's position (give the number) .

APPENDIX 3: Questions for discussion

- 1) What is the news item judging by the headline?
- 2) What does the caption say?
- 3) Which pieces of information are positive?
- 4) Are there any words in the article with negative evaluation?
- 5) What caused the concern of French officials?
- 6) Why are they worried about the location of the Russian cathedral?
- 7) Why are they concerned by the fact that the Russian cathedral is close to a government compound and is neighboring the private apartments of senior presidential advisers?
- 8) Can you see any other negative insets? In which paragraphs?
- 9) Why the short statement of the time of the beginning of the construction is followed by the detailed reasons of deteriorating ties between Moscow and the West?
- 10) Do you find the insets about the war in Syria and Ukrainian conflict relevant in the text about the opening the Russian religious and cultural centre?
- 11) Why does the author write about Syria and Ukraine here?
- 12) What does the fact of surrounding the building by the country's counter-espionage services with jamming devices presuppose?
- 13) Which paragraph contains the key information testifying to the author's position?
- 14) How does the attitude of the author reveal in the text?
- 15) How many times are inverted commas used by the author?
- 16) What does the author mean by using the inverted commas? What information does he want to send to the reader?
- 17) What implicit idea hides under inverted commas?
- 18) How would the author title the article if he had not used the inverted commas?

APPENDIX 4. Questionnaire 2

Mark your answer after the discussion. Choose the answer or give your own.

1. Does the text inform about a positive or a negative event?
 - a) Positive _____
 - b) Negative _____
 - c) _____

2. What is the author's attitude to this event?
 - a) Positive _____
 - b) Negative _____
 - c) _____
3. Which paragraph(s) contains the key information testifying to the author's position (give the number).

4. What is the main goal of the author of the paper?
 - a) To give objective information
 - b) To influence public opinion
 - c) _____
5. How would the author entitle the article if he had not used the inverted commas?