

S. G. Ter-Minasova

The Teacher and the Student: the War and Peace of Languages and Cultures

Olga Sergeevna Akhmanova — an epoch, an era, the pivot, the engineer of my heart and soul, the creator of a school of linguistics, a school of ELT, a school of life.

She was a very strict, sometimes cruel, teacher, no mistake, no slip of the pen, of the tongue, no faux pas was ever pardoned or forgotten. So we practically stopped making them for ever.

However, we knew that she was even stricter and crueler to herself, all her life, intellect, behaviour were oriented to giving an example, to being a paragon, showing us how to work, how to think, how to live. Interestingly, oddly, paradoxically it did work.

In other — more modern — words, Olga Sergeevna created her own “Akhmanova culture” and we, her disciples, are products of this culture. It is thanks to this that we have managed to successfully go through all the cataclysms, catastrophes, horrors, pains, and sacrifices of re-vo-lu-tions (meaning, of course, both: a complete circular movement and a violent change of a system of government, and also values, thinking, behaviour, language and culture).

We are ready for anything. As they used to say in Eton College in the 19th century: “We are not afraid of prison, we went through Eton”.

Now — the topic: “The Teacher and the Student: the War and Peace of Languages and Cultures”.

I was bold (or cheeky?) enough to use Leo Tolstoy’s collocation for two reasons:

1. I tried to avoid “Dialogues and conflicts” which is now an “in-phrase”, which, consequently, is overused and trite, banal, hackneyed (choose the right word).
2. I meant it as a jocular working title, playing upon the name of the famous novel. However, the metaphor became pivotal for the research, although the War of Languages and Cultures does not mean that they fight with one another. “The war” in this case is a war of language and culture fought for protecting the nation and its identity. In other words, language and culture are seen not just as barriers separating peoples but as shields, or dragons guarding their kingdom from all intruders (including language learners and teachers, interpreters, translators, spies, etc.).

The conflict between generations caused by the “generation gap” is traditionally called “the conflict of fathers and sons”. I would like to draw your attention to “the conflict of teachers and students” which is now a most seri-

ous educational problem. It is a universal problem but, as usual, it is Russia which suffers from it more than others (we like to be ahead of the whole planet, both in the good and in the “not-so-good”) for most objective reasons.

The problem in Russia is not just a “fathers and sons” conflict, it is not a generation — time — gap, it is a war of different and opposing (!) cultures because Russian teachers and Russian students were born and have grown up in completely different countries with different ideologies, regimes, cultures, and different variants of the Russian language.

The teacher was born in the Soviet Union, the student — in a post-Soviet Russia, two very different societies which results in an evitable conflict of cultures, for many, many years; actually — alas! — for the rest of the teachers’ work or lives.

What is the Teacher like nowadays?

1. Underpaid (if they teach in a state institution and overloaded — esp. when they teach ESP).

В начале жизни школу помню я;
Там нас, детей беспечных, было много;
Неровная и резвая семья;
Смирная, одетая убого,
Но видом величавая жена
Над школою надзор хранила строго.*

A. C. Пушкин

Just a couple of lines giving detailed information about the status of teacher in Russia in the 19th and 20th century: financially poor but realizing her authority in the society. Nowadays, being poor it is difficult to feel authoritative though with older generation of teachers it still works, because in the Soviet times the gap between the rich and the poor was almost non-existent. The norm was to be poor while to be rich was shameful and suspicious, so the authority of teachers did not depend on their financial status.

2. The modern teacher is less educated theoretically and more pragmatic.

The financial situation is favourable for teachers of English, but private and / or additional teaching eats up most of their time, talent and efforts.

* Болдинские произведения, 1830 г.—
Болдино; Саранск, 2007. С. 49.

3. Teachers of foreign languages have some, although still scanty — opportunities to visit countries of the languages they teach.

However, in elite educational institutions students leave teachers far behind in the sphere.

The ever-growing prevalence of paid system in many ways leads to a degradation both of the system and of the teacher's status.

As their salary and therefore life depends, to a great extent, on students' money, teachers become quite permissive to both lack of knowledge and misbehaviour and live by the principle of the society of consumerism: "The client is always right".

According to the information given by the contemporary Russian press, the average age of a Russian teacher is 45–50 years.

Every sixth of them is a working pensioner. They have very many duties and very few (next to none) rights.

There are 1,5 million teachers in the country.

Their number have decreased by 100,000 people for the last 10 years.

The number of students have decreased by 8 million. The peak was in 1997 (22.2 million student and 1.6 million teachers).

86% of teachers are women.

(in France women teachers are 57%,

in UK — 53%,

in Germany — 46%,

in Japan — 32%).

39,3% work in the country,

About one third — work in big cities,

Almost half of them — work in small towns.

85% — graduates from Universities, mostly — Teacher training ones.

The Student

What is the Student like nowadays?

More knowledgeable, or rather better informed, well-equipped with all the treasures of the Internet. More confident, much less inhibited than his / her predecessor — the Soviet student (now — the Teacher).

He / She travels freely around the country and the world. Modern students see themselves as citizens of the world.

They are concerned about problems of globalization and ecology.

69% think that the knowledge of foreign languages is a must, especially for working abroad.

They know their rights. It seems that they have more rights than duties, they have a much greater choice.

The advantages of the modern Student are obvious but, as usual, overcoming one extreme leads invariably to another one.

Our drawbacks and faults come directly from our merits.

As a result of freedom, choice, realization of their rights

today's students complain about their teachers easily and quickly, do not pardon their mistakes, often feel and behave superior to teachers.

The students' feeling of freedom and self-importance often leads to coming to school overdressed or underdressed, as the case may be, to bringing drinks or even food to class, to chewing chewing-gum in class.

Their attitude to wealth, to money-making contradicts not only their teachers' one but the traditions of Russian culture: their goal of education is making as much money as possible.

The good old question "Why did you enter this university?" was answered by two students in a new, honest but unexpected way: "We want to earn a lot of money and buy an island".

I'm afraid, the picture of students' and teachers' culture is not very rosy or optimistic.

What about the mirror of life and culture, that is the language of the young.

Their slang is characterised by the same features as general Russian, only they are stronger and more vivid:

1) a flood of borrowings from other languages — almost exclusively — English;

2) substandard, low style lexis.

Interestingly, many borrowings are also substandard.

The borrowings come from all language levels: wow, oops, shoozy, etc.

In a recent issue of "Lingua", our students' newspaper, I could hardly understand the following samples, of "the Russian language".

— ...*Может быть, ты мечтаешь о теплом хэшбрауне?*

— *Удивил ThefirstMC, не только уверенно зажигающий аккорды на „Фернандесе“, но и читающий реп на испанском.*

— *Клаббинг. Музыка, дрипкс, снова музыка, лица, люди, дрыгающиеся в порыве единого „шоуинг оффа“.*

— *Я порядком устала от вопросов некоторых моих знакомых „А ччо? А кто поет? ОПС? А скинь мне! По почте, нет... по аське!“ „Sorry“ затерялась где-то в огромном плей-листе моего айпода...*

— *А у меня мидтерм завтра!*

Borrowings from western culture: patronymics are not used, especially in the sphere of business. "Ты" prevails over "Вы" because it is more "democratic".

Hasty, unqualified translations of films and books distort both languages but Russian suffers more.

As a result, communication between "fathers and sons", teachers and students becomes more and more difficult.

To sum up.

The teacher is still underpaid and overworked. Most of them still treat students in a “totalitarian” way by commands and orders, the main principle being “I am a general, boss, zar, I know all, you are a private, subordinate, slave, you know nothing (you as “ты”).

Changes in the status of teacher:

- 1) a loss of authority because of a conflict, a war of cultures and languages, and
- 2) the habit — or inertia — of the past when the position and authority of the teacher were very high. This comes from a very new situation: a financial dependence on the paid student.

The student is still full of young enthusiasm, a strive for innovations, a thirst for knowledge and for exciting sensations.

The changes or the new features: the student feels like the citizen of the world, he / she is much more free in his deeds, words, ideas than the teacher (and the former Soviet student, i.e. again the teacher), shatters the norms of language and culture which is natural and — alas! — progressive.

The new student is pragmatic, openly ambitious, obsessed with the wish to become rich (= successful). Correspondingly, the student does not respect losers (“loozers”) (= underpaid teachers), hence — a loss of the teacher’s prestige, a conflict of cultures.

The process goes on in the rest of the world but in Russia it is deeper and better seen.

Now one of the two eternal questions of Russian intelligentsia: What is to be done?

A difficult question.

A clichéd phrase “the young are our future”. Let us emphasize: the young are our future. It is our world, students are our children, and it is us, adults, their teachers who have created the world where they grow up, study and learn. We are responsible for this.

What is to be done.

1. We must reform ourselves. It is time to realize how much our society has changed.

2. We must learn to respect our students without emphasizing our superiority (often non-existent). We keep talking about “tolerance to other cultures”. Let us be tolerant to our children and their culture.

Our children are growing up in a situation radically different from ours, a situation of “another extreme” when the idea of freedom was ousted by anarchy, when the word “patriotism” turned into a political term with negative connotations, when all previous values and ideals were destroyed (gone) surprisingly quickly and easily, and instead there came a flood of cultural and linguistic borrowings — mostly bad things because the evil is much more active than the good. Our students, our children are products of the wild chaos of “the transitional period”. (transition where to?)

3. On the other hand, let us keep good things from our past.

We should not — once again — give up “the old world”, and “destroy it to the base”. Let us teach our students all the wise, good, culturally proper ideas and things that we used to have in our old life, what came to us — though the centuries — from the treasury of Russian culture.

Let us follow the idea of an English genius, William Wordsworth: “What we have loved others will love and we will teach them how”.

Olga Akhmanova used to teach us: A teacher — like a doctor or a priest — cannot refuse the one who asks for help, the person who wants to learn.

The Young are Our Future.

We, teachers, are responsible for the future of Russia. Our mission is to overcome the intranational conflict of cultures, to ensure a friendly atmosphere in class, a contact with student, to work out a new culture of education, having kept the good from our old system, and accepting the new, caused by the new requirements of new times.

Mission possible!