

Lingua Franca and Information Technology in Foreign Language Acquisition: Competitive Advantages of Multilingual Instruction

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Abstract—The paper describes digital strategies helping to boost the competitiveness of Russian as a foreign language. The authors argue that it is impossible to deny the universal popularity of the English language. Knowledge of English is important to learners of Russian as a foreign language since it functions as a social language facilitating their transition to multilingualism. Thus, to improve the competitiveness of Russian courses, it is beneficial to supplement them with instructions in English and modern online tools with English interfaces. The paper offers two scenarios of in-class activities for beginner and intermediate-to-advanced learners of Russian, featuring key strategies utilized for students from Kazakhstan and the People's Republic of China. The authors argue that the described activities are also useful for students from other countries. The scenarios are included in the common framework of the “Working for a Russian Digital Company” business game and enhance the competitive advantages of Russian studies programs expanding the limits of teaching language and culture in the field of online technologies and Java programming basics.

Index Terms—English for special purposes, Russian as a foreign language, learning a lingua franca, online tools, business game

I. INTRODUCTION

Learning foreign languages is an important part of educational programs, and global education trends embrace learning foreign languages at different levels, from the preschool stage to the post-graduate level. Globally, English is unrivaled as a foreign language because it offers various advantages in professional and personal life. However, the choice of a second foreign language can be hard. In this paper, we argue that learning a second foreign language should

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be based on English proficiency facilitating language acquisition. The value of English as a facilitating tool is not limited to the language system only. It offers access to important online tools and software mediating the process of second foreign language acquisition. The paper discusses teaching Russian as a foreign language to Kazakh and Chinese foreign students. However, the described basic teaching principles and electronic technologies also apply to learners of Russian from all over the world. Our primary hypothesis is that in the modern world where more and more people speak English, it is possible to use the knowledge of English to acquire the command of other foreign languages. Unlike many linguists, we do not support the idea of the exclusive use of the target language in the classroom, especially at the beginner stage. We firmly believe that beginners in Russian need a common language of instruction smoothing their introduction to Russian as a language with complex grammar. Our secondary hypothesis emphasizes the value of English in the context of modern electronic technologies (Smirnov & Ibatova, 2019). Since many online tools and software programs are traditionally designed for English speakers, it is necessary and possible to adopt these instruments for teaching and learning other foreign languages, utilizing initial English wordnets and corpus-oriented technologies, as well as major programming languages. We proceed from the interdisciplinary approach where English is used for specific purposes. In our case, these specific purposes do not include the fields of production and services only. The purposes, namely, are the specific needs and goals of foreign language acquisition when studying Russian as a second foreign language. Our focus on Kazakh and Chinese students is related to the long history of Kazakh-Chinese-Russian collaboration. The People's Republic of China (PRC) has been the strategic partner of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan, and Russia for centuries. Kazakh-Russian-Chinese cooperation recently has witnessed numerous milestone events: the arrangement of regular summits of the countries and government leaders, the signing of the Agreement on the Neighborhood, Friendship, and Cooperation, strategic partnership development, the design of SCO and BRICS architectures, and thematic cultural cross-years. These facts stress the importance of successful interaction between the three countries. According to the results of 2018-2022, the trade turnover among the countries exceeded a record high of \$150 billion. The cooperation between the countries is centered around the mechanism of interregional interaction in the Volga-Yangzi format, covering the regions of the Volga Federal District and the upper and middle regions of the Yangzi River, as well as large regions of Kazakhstan. Much is done for the development of the Chinese project "One Belt, One Road" in Kazakhstan (Muratshina, 2017). However, it is not an exaggeration to say that recently the collaboration has been more political than economic. As one Chinese student put it on his Internet blog, his aspiration towards studying Russian as a foreign language was not consistent because his vision of the Russian-Chinese relationships was 政热权经冷 ("hot politics, cold economics"). This expression was derived from the stratagem Chinese authorities generally apply to the Japanese-Chinese relationship (政冷经热, "cold politics, hot economics") (Zhidaobaidu.com, 2019b). Nevertheless, Kazakh-Russian-Chinese cooperation in the field of education is flourishing. According to official statistics, 300 universities in China teach Russian as a foreign language. About 200 Kazakh universities offer Russian courses. 30,000 students in China study Russian annually. Russian is very popular in Kazakhstan as well. In northeastern China (Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning provinces), as well as in the Xinjiang Uygur and Intra-Mongol autonomous regions, Chinese authorities create special zones for teaching Russian in schools. However, the number of Chinese and Kazakh students willing to study Russian is declining. On the one hand, this can be explained by the fact that more and more Chinese and Kazakh students choose English as their main foreign language. On the other hand, Russian grammar appears hard for beginners. Traditionally both Russian and English are popular in Kazakhstan and China. For example, Chinese bloggers often ask their audience the question 俄语好学吗和英语哪个难? ("Which language is more difficult to learn, English or Russian?"). The majority of answers reflect the idea that 学习这两门外语都可以, 但还是要根据自己的工作和生活环境需求来出发, 看哪门外语更适合自己去学习 ("It is possible to learn both languages but you should choose the one which you need more for your work and life") (Zhidaobaidu.com, 2019a). Traditionally, Chinese, Kazakh, and Eastern families, in general, appreciate spending money on children's education since "family investment in children's education exhibits dual characteristics of instrumental rationality and emotional expression" (Lin, 2019, p. 25). The world outside of China and Kazakhstan can attract this money by offering considerable competitive advantages. Is it possible for Russian universities to demonstrate such advantages? Proceeding from the idea of a foreign language for life and work creates favorable conditions for learning Russian, as well as English. Our central research questions are as follows. How is it possible to make learning Russian as a foreign language a better option for a bigger number of Chinese and Kazakh students? Can Russian universities benefit from the popularity of English among Chinese and Kazakh students? If yes, in which way? To what extent can English be integrated into the framework of Russian classes? The central research idea is that combining learning Russian with new computer technologies and offering courses where Russian is supplemented with English, IT tools, and even basic programming can boost the interest of Chinese and Kazakh students in Russian universities. For Chinese and Kazakh parents paying for this powerful educational combination can result in the "right emotions received after proper investment" (Lin, 2019, p. 22).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of English in global university environments is often associated with academic writing. Ädel and Erman (2012) stress the positive impact of recurrent English word combinations for non-native speakers of English. Biber et al. (2002) outline the role of English in speaking and writing in a university environment. Canagarajah (2002) describes the principles of modern geopolitics in the academic world where English enjoys the most privileged position. There is a growing body of literature concerning the differences in academic writing in English among non-native speakers of English. The interplay of Chinese and English in the academic world is discussed in the paper by Flowerdew and Li (2009). The authors conclude that “Chinese will most likely retain its dominant position as the language of research and publication for Chinese HSS scholars, but that international publication in English will nevertheless increase” (Flowerdew & Li, p. 6). Hu and Cao (2011), describing abstracts in Chinese and English, state that “abstracts published in English-medium journals featured markedly more hedges than those published in Chinese-medium journals and that abstracts of empirical research articles used significantly more boosters than those of non-empirical academic articles” (p. 2796). Hirano (2009) when analyzing introductions to science articles in Brazilian Portuguese and English points out that “introductions in Brazilian Portuguese tend to follow a different pattern from that of the model, whereas the introductions in English follow it closely” (p. 244). Moreno et al. (2012) point out several problems relevant for Spanish researchers when writing for English-medium journals. Sheldon (2011) considers the difference in rhetorical styles of introductions in English written by Castilian Spanish native speakers. Another important field of English application is teaching English to engineers and other technical specialists (Ibatova et al., 2017). P’Rayan (2011) describes the impacts of teaching English at a department of engineering. Pandey and Pandey (2014) stress the role of English in better employment chances. Belcher et al. (2004, 2006, 2013) specify a great future potential of English not only in the professional field but also for everyday life activities. The literature review of teaching Russian as a foreign language, in our opinion, begins with the description of papers devoted to corpus-based technologies, featuring Russian as a source language. Many research fields are based on the technologies of the Russian National Corpus (RNC). Babych et al. (2007) specify the role of RNC for translation. Grishina (2007) outlines the technologies of text navigators in spoken Russian. Lashevskaja and Plungian (2007) describe the methods of morphological annotations for the RNC. Lashevskaja and Rakhilina (2007) highlight the cases of learning basic language structures with the help of the RNC. Sitchinava (2012) specifies the benefits of parallel corpora for learners of Russian as a foreign language. The paper outlines key research technologies and tools offering more than rote memorization for students learning Russian as a foreign language. These technologies can successfully combine perfecting existing English skills and acquiring new levels of proficiency in Russian. Electronic corpora of Russian and search engines are not the only developments for learners of Russian as a foreign language. The paper by Al-Kaisi et al. (2021) describes the didactic potential of the Alice voice assistant chatbot (the Yandex company technology) in learning Russian. The authors describe “diverse purposes of learning Russian as a foreign language” and offer five scenarios of oral interaction with the voice assistant. Coming back to the role of English in university environments, we find it critical to stress that English must be viewed not only in reference to academic writing. English is ubiquitous and serves as an *academic* lingua franca in various research fields. In this paper, we argue that English is a *learning* lingua franca. In their research, Bolton and Kuteeva (2012) offer an overview of English usage at a Swedish university. We firmly believe that their ideas can be implemented in the majority of world universities to boost their competitive advantages in the global educational market. Stressing the ubiquity of English, Pérez-Llantada (2012) presents English as “more an opportunity than a threat” (p. 208). In this paper, we attempt to prove that the combination of English as a learning lingua franca with Russian as a second foreign language can benefit both.

III. METHODS

Our methods comprise two scenarios of classes implementing English for social instruction when teaching Russian as a foreign language. The scenarios are built around software applications and their utilization for successful usage of both Russian and English. The theme of the scenarios is integrated into a group of classes given in the form of the “Working for a Russian Digital Company” business game. Employers in such companies must have a fluent command of both Russian and English. Game players (66 Chinese and 66 Kazakhstan learners) received tasks and connected with online tools and applications for studying Russian as a foreign language. We offered two scenarios of the game for beginner and intermediate-to-advanced learners.

A. Scenario 1

The scenario of learning Russian with the help of English and online tools for **beginner learners** of Russian as a foreign language. We start the game with the application of the RNC where apart from the core corpus of the Russian language, Chinese students have an opportunity to use a parallel Russian-Chinese corpus (Russian National Corpus, 2021), and for Kazakh students, there is a parallel Russian-English corpus for conducting research in various fields of Russian and English. It is important to note that other parallel corpora are also available (Armenian, Bashkir, Belarusian, Bulgarian, Buryat, Spanish, Italian, Chinese, Latvian, Lithuanian, German, Polish, Ukrainian, French, Finnish, Czech, Swedish, Estonian). The RNC with all its subcollections was developed by Russian programmers and has several memorable features. The interface of search requests can be used in both English and Russian. Besides a linear structure,

the corpus offers a KWIC format of search results. This tool is suitable for beginner learners of Russian as a foreign language. However, at a more advanced stage, it can also be applied to search for additional synonyms and contexts.

In-class activities included the following tasks. **Task 1.** Using the corpus, search for the Russian word “язык”. Based on the context and parallel sentence translation, guess the meaning of the word. Pay attention to the fact that in Russian, there is also the word “контекст” which phonetically resembles the English word “context”. Guess the meanings of Russian words “антоним” (sounds similar to the English word “antonym”) and “синоним” (sounds similar to the English word “synonym”). **Task 2.** Search for more contexts to the Russian word “язык”. Is the English interface of the RNC helpful or distracting?

Using an example, we provide the search results for the Russian word “язык” (“language”) generated based on the RNC.



Figure 1. The Search Fragment for the Russian Word “язык” in the RNC

B. Scenario 2

Task 1. Look at the interface of Java Development Environment (JDE). Guess the meanings of Russian words “класс” (sounds similar to the English word “class”), “метод” (sounds similar to the English word “method”), “аргумент” (sounds similar to the English word “argument”), “система” (sounds similar to the English word “system”). **Task 2.** After the teacher’s instructions, students are asked to develop and run a small Java code with the class “System”. The code must contain a line in English and its translation into Russian.

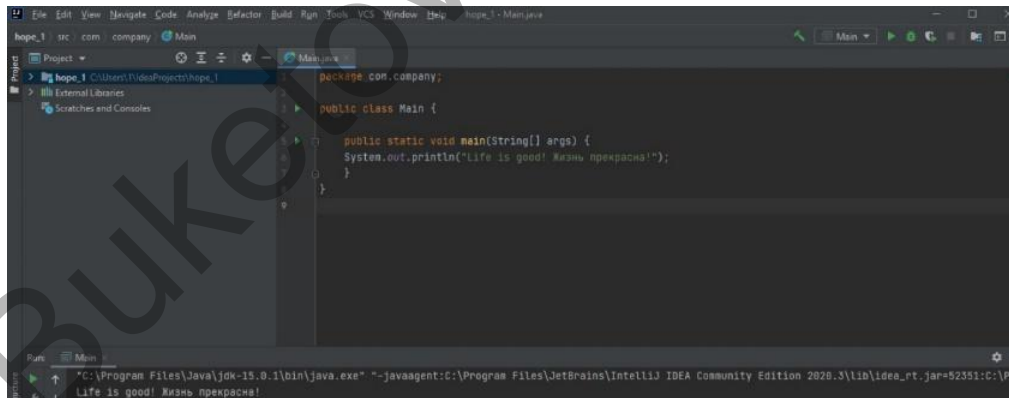


Figure 2. A Java Code with Lines in English and Russian for Beginner Students of Russian as a Foreign Language

IV. RESULTS

The teachers asked the students to share their opinions about the programs at each stage. The opinions of beginners utilizing the RNC are submitted in Table 1. The core idea is that the mixture of IT, English, and Russian produces a cumulative positive effect, conducive to the development of three competencies.

TABLE 1

CHINESE STUDENTS' ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONNAIRE DESCRIBING THEIR OPINIONS ON THE SCENARIOS OF THE BUSINESS GAME (RNC STAGE)

Student 1.	I like new technology. Why not combine it with learning Russian? It is a fun and motivating way to learn new things. English was not a distraction but a good help that facilitated my introduction to Russian. I lacked social Russian, however, I am just a beginner in it.
Student 2.	English was a great help. I am scared of learning Russian in a completely Russian environment. New technologies are also very inspiring. Learning new technologies in English and Russian gave me important research ideas.
Student 3.	I like the idea of combining three subjects: English, Russian, and online tools. It was not stressful. It was fun.
Student 4.	We are short of time today. I would like to acquire several competencies on the go: computing, English, and Russian. I want to go on this way. I do not think that Russian only is good for me. It is stressful and frustrating to study only Russian.
Student 5.	I plan to learn many subjects in a minimum time. Computer technologies, English, and Russian. It is more exciting than Russian only.
Student 6.	I liked the course and I hope to go on with it in the future. A synergy of three subjects is great and time-saving.
Student 7.	Using English to learn Russian made me more confident in my Russian. I am just searching for my lifetime subject. I am not sure whether I need Russian or not. However, now with this set of new technologies, it is less scary for me to study Russian. I know that the Russian National Corpus is always on hand. I can use it 24/7. It will give me enough food for thought in my further development.
Student 8.	English helped me a lot in my first steps in Russian. If it had not been for English, I would not have learned how to use Russian with a limited vocabulary. Online tools are inspiring and interesting.
Student 9.	English is great when also learning other things. New technologies are also important and helpful.
Student 10.	I like new things and unexpected mixtures. English+Russian+online technologies are perfect for me.
Student 11.	I have learned several online tools and I am happy to use them both in English and Russian.

A separate survey was conducted for combining basic Java programming with English and Russian language instruction (Table 2). Here the participants pointed out an increased level of anxiety, combined with better career opportunities.

TABLE 2

CHINESE STUDENTS' ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONNAIRE DESCRIBING THEIR OPINIONS ON THE SCENARIOS OF THE BUSINESS GAME (JAVA PROGRAMMING STAGE)

Student 1.	Learning the basics of Java makes me more hardworking. Using English and Russian during this learning process is challenging but inspiring. It offers new research fields.
Student 2.	Java is an interesting area of my future work. For this work, I also need Russian and English. I am practicing everything here and I like it.
Student 3.	When I have problems writing Java code, I keep trying to fix bugs myself. When I am at a complete loss, I ask teachers to help in Russian or English. Thus, I practice two foreign languages. This is a good value for money.
Student 4.	When I have problems writing Java code, I look for help from my teacher. I practice both English and Russian in this case.
Student 5.	When I have problems writing Java code, I get anxious. This is a perfect simulation of my anxiety in real life. In this state of anxiety, I need foreign languages, namely English or Russian, to sort out things when I am abroad. By performing Java tasks I have learned how to control my anxiety and ask for help in Russian. It is a perfect survival practice.
Student 6.	I can understand the content of the basic varieties of Java code and I feel joy and a burst of energy. Working with Java in English and Russian helped me develop my research skills.
Student 7.	Java is one of the most popular programming languages in the world. It is useful to learn its basics and be prepared for a new promising career. On top of that, I speak English and Russian.
Student 8.	Java is everywhere in modern life and I have learned how it works, using English and Russian. A promising path.
Student 9.	Java enriched my arsenal of research tools.
Student 10.	Java is perfect for Android applications and I plan to use it for linguistics applications in the future.
Student 11.	I plan to go outside China and I want to have a job in Java programming. The program taught me the fundamentals of Java in a simple way. English and Russian were important.

While discussing the RNC stage (Table 1), many intermediate and advanced students pointed out the acquisition of a more natural manner of speaking Russian. They visualized themselves in a business environment doing business with Russian clients. The control experiment featured first-year beginner students of Russian from China and Kazakhstan. The experiment was conducted during two academic semesters in 2022. The students were even distributed into two groups: experimental and control, with 56 students in each group. The students' age ranged from 18 to 20. We assessed their lexical skills only. Both groups used the same instructional Russian textbooks. The experimental group was given English instructions supplemented with online tools with an English interface within the scenario of the "Working for a Russian Digital Company" business game. The control group received only instructions in Russian. The participants in both groups were absolute beginners in Russian; their English corresponded to the B2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). After the course, we tested their ability to translate Russian words and expressions, describing various topics. The results of the tests were marked in accordance with Russian standard grades from 2 to 5 (2 – unsatisfactory (20+ memorized Russian words and expressions), 3 – satisfactory (30+ memorized

Russian words and expressions), 4 – good (40+ memorized Russian words and expressions), 5 – excellent (50+ memorized Russian words and expressions). We collected the grades of the control and experimental groups and calculated the arithmetic mean for each of the five topics for memorizing words and expressions in Russian (Table 3).

TABLE 3
RESULTS OF THE TESTS

Number of memorized Russian terms and phrases related to the topics	Arithmetic mean in the control group (sample 2)	Arithmetic mean in the experimental group (sample 1)
Family	4.1	4.8
Household chores	3.7	4.4
Professions	3.8	4.8
Weather	4.2	4.6
Hobbies	3.6	3.9
University life	4.2	4.4
Economics	3.3	3.5
Geography	3.2	3.8
Sightseeing	3.5	3.7
Hospitals	3.5	4.0
Russian arts and culture	4.2	4.5

Q empirical = 8 > Q critical = 6. Results in the experimental group can be considered higher than the results in the control group.

V. DISCUSSION

The proposed methodology is effective because it receives favorable reactions from students and demonstrates better final assessment results. It encompasses both the beginner and the intermediate-to-advanced levels. English successfully performs the function of a lingua franca, facilitating the initial steps in learning Russian and contributing to research fields at the advanced level.

Regarding the degree of successful English integration into teaching Russian, it should be noted that a teacher can use English to instruct students when they do not know certain words and phrases, and their use is justified by the situation. Russian teachers can also resort to dubbing their most difficult-to-understand statements in English. Of critical importance is the use of English as the basis of students' mental activity to encourage them to speak only Russian. Russian teachers can also apply English to explain the most difficult material, interpret important computer realities, solve complex psychological and in-class teaching problems, and assist students in preparing independent statements in Russian. It is evident that students use English only when they lack the necessary language means in Russian. English as a learning lingua franca is of much help and is applicable for those students who cannot integrate into the process of learning Russian fast enough. Undoubtedly, such students should be given a chance to learn Russian gradually, at their own pace without being stigmatized.

As far as the description of the learning process is concerned, it is critical to understand that English as a classroom language used in Russian classes can be implemented to serve various educational and methodological tasks: introduction, consolidation, and activation of Russian material, as well as final control. English applies, to a reasonable degree, to a large variety of subject-content of educational materials, ranging from text and oral topic presentations to the discussion of basic software operational rules (Ziyadin et al., 2018). It adds to the clarity of material presentation, minimizes uncertainty and frustration, and compensates for the inadequacy of some Russian teaching materials.

Concerning the role of online tools, it is important to stress that they can be introduced at any time during the lesson while studying the topic. Using software can open, continue, or complete the topic. Electronic strategies create the sense of an actual business process (for example, in a Russian software developing company), which requires a fluent command of both Russian and English. Online tools create a focus on key learning targets: the formation of skills and abilities characteristic of Russian speech activities (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) for the successful completion of electronic activities. Software also stimulates the achievement of complex objectives of language lessons: teaching to communicate in Russian as a foreign language and teaching cognitive activities using Russian.

Corpus-based and wordnet technologies are beneficial for scholars and students who study Russian as a foreign language and intend to take the official Test of Russian as a Foreign Language (TORFL). They can be useful for psycholinguistic experts, developers of games and emotion detectors, and image-making professionals. Teaching Java with Russian/English coded lines can be a starting point for the development of programming skills. These skills can be further extended in other programming activities. The additional value of corpus-based and wordnet activities lies within the domain of journalism and Russian studies in the age of digitalization in modern Russia and its main aspects. These activities are also important for the development of communicative styles and presentation skills (Kotlyarova & Chuvashova, 2021).

Classroom-based annotation exercises prove beneficial in enhancing comprehension of proficient Russian speech, as they facilitate the examination of gender-specific nonverbal cues and their corresponding lexical references, as presented in the data set. Such insights contribute to the development of pedagogical strategies for teaching Russian, a prominent official language within the BRICS nations (Zavyalova & Akhmetshin, 2018).

The data acquired from annotation exercises facilitate the observation of distinct patterns in gender-specific gestures associated with verbal communication. Notable patterns identified include enumeration, signposting, emotional sequencing, joke hedging, appeals to interlocutors, spatial referencing, and self-assertion. Additionally, the dataset encompasses information on the durations of gesture rest periods, which can be further quantified and incorporated into textual analysis.

Subsequent research may investigate the following questions: Do rest periods for gestures differ in length preceding the communication of significant information? How do gesture rest periods vary between male and female native Russian speakers? Moreover, the examination of gestures can be extended to include voice pitch analysis.

It would be valuable to explore the temporal distribution of gestures during speech, such as whether speakers evenly allocate gestures throughout their discourse or concentrate them towards the conclusion of their statements. Furthermore, a promising area of study involves examining gender differences in speakers' gestures that signal specific communicative intentions, such as requests, negations, and confirmations.

VI. CONCLUSION

The paper describes several findings. It is critical to understand the popularity of English in the global higher education market. Fluent command of English offers several significant advantages, which is a strong incentive. For languages other than English, it is possible to compete for the place of the second/third foreign language, which can be beneficial for business localization. Students are not certain whether they need a second/third foreign language, and a combination of language skills and electronic technologies can become a competitive advantage affecting their final decision.

Besides English, modern students are interested in computer technologies, which enable them to find linguistic contexts and even become programmers. These two factors must be considered when designing a university program featuring a national language. Russian offers enormous possibilities in this respect owing to a well-developed application infrastructure, electronic corpora networks, and programming languages optimized for it.

The popularity of English can help attract more learners of Russian since it is possible to use it as a lingua franca facilitating the introduction to basic Russian. Online tools also boost interest in Russian since they modernize the learning process and offer more modes for repetition and memorization.

The present study is limited to the development of Russian lexical skills. However, we are confident that it is possible to facilitate learning Russian grammar using Russian National Corpus. We also described basic patterns of Russian body language, the knowledge of which makes the speech of Russian non-native speakers more natural and emotional.

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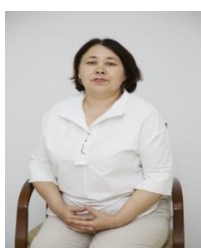
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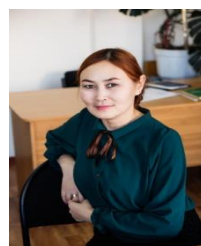
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