

Cross-Cultural Connections: Using Russian Proverbs to Engage Students in the Business Classroom

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Abstract. This paper suggests the use of Russian proverbs related to money to engage Russian-speaking students in the business classroom. Russian proverbs enhance teaching by appealing to Russian students' cultural background, by presenting ideas in a concise and memorable way, and by creating a friendlier classroom environment. Russian proverbs also assist English-speaking instructors to break down language barriers and to develop a close relationship with students. The use of Russian proverbs benefits non-Russian speaking students by promoting cultural and language diversity in the business classroom as well. The paper proposes 61 Russian proverbs to explain 33 financial concepts and 4 general learning concepts. A short description of each financial concept is accompanied with phonetic and literal translation of related Russian proverbs and an equivalent English proverb. Teaching strategies for incorporating Russian proverbs in the classroom are presented as well.

Keywords: international business, financial education, Russian proverbs, English proverbs, international students, Russian students, cross-cultural competency, multilingualism.

The education of people should begin with proverbs and end with thoughts.

(Seneca, philosopher, 4 BC–65 AD)

1. Introduction

The internationalization of business education has been accompanied by a large growth in the number of international joint degree and faculty exchange programs, which significantly expanded the opportunities for business professors to teach international students both domestically and abroad. Although lecturing to international students offers valuable instructional experience (e.g., Harris, George, Granger, & Dick 2011), it also imposes unique challenges, such as language barriers and a lack of students' understanding of common metaphors (Littlemore 2001) and examples (Festervand & Kyle 2001). Teaching

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international students can be especially daunting for finance instructors, as business students often view finance courses as challenging and the hardest in their program (Balachandran & Skully 2004). The quantitative and abstract nature of financial concepts contributes to the students' perception of finance as a difficult course (Krishnan, Bathala, Bhattacharya, & Ritchey 1999).

To address problems associated with teaching international students, business education literature advises the incorporation of the students' culture into the classroom. For example, to enhance the teaching effectiveness of foreign professors in China, Ho (2010) suggests using examples from Chinese companies, referring to Chinese products, and learning and using the Chinese language in class. Based on his own teaching experience, Peterson (2009) recommends greeting students with phrases of the host country language on the first day of class and then regularly sharing personal experiences about discovering the host culture throughout the course. Given the importance of proverbs in the culture of many nations and their ability to capture the essence of complex ideas in a succinct and memorable form, Biktimirov and Feng (2006) and Biktimirov (2009, 2012) propose the use of Chinese, Spanish, and French proverbs to illustrate financial concepts to Chinese-, Spanish-, and French-speaking students, respectively. The authors argue that proverbs borrowed from the cultural background of students help foreign professors break down language barriers, offer contexts that resonate with students' previous experience, and create a friendlier classroom environment.

Another significant challenge facing the international business education is the task to create the classroom environment that reflects the realities of international organizations. As cultural and language diversity has been growing in the workplace, the notion that only one *lingua franca* should be used in the multilingual business environment has been overthrown (Yanaprasart 2015). Therefore, to prepare students to succeed in their future careers, both cross-cultural competence (Swanson, Kowalski, & Jaya 2006) and multilingualism should be promoted in the business classroom (Cohen, Kassis-Henderson, & Lecomte 2015).

This paper suggests the use of Russian proverbs related to money to engage Russian-speaking business students. By providing a clear and simple frame of reference for abstract and theoretical financial concepts, the use of proverbs can be especially beneficial in a finance classroom. The proposed Russian proverbs can be used not only at a university in Russia, but also at any educational institution throughout the world that has Russian-speaking students. Moreover, by promoting cultural and linguistic diversity, the educational benefits of the introduction of Russian proverbs will be even more pronounced in the classroom that does not use Russian as the main language of instruction. This paper contributes to both the literature on the international business education (e.g., Ho 2010, Mughan & Kyvik 2010) and the literature on using proverbs as a teaching tool (e.g., Gichure 2006, Witte & Daly 2014).