

Learning English Proper Names: A Case Study on the Challenge Faced by Russian-Speaking English Language Learners

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Abstract

Anthroponyms, as a rule, are not given enough attention in the process of teaching English. As a result of the author's practical experience in teaching English to Russian-speaking students, a number of learning difficulties faced by students have been identified. The research aims to determine which linguistic aspect deserves special attention in the mastering of anthroponyms. To achieve this, quantitative testing was conducted using a multiple-choice test on Google Forms to collect data and median measures to analyse the results. The results revealed the need to teach extralinguistic properties (name gendering and diminutives), while grammatical and phonetic properties of proper names did not prove to be very problematic, which is related to the presence of phonetics and grammar as separate subjects on the syllabus.

1. Introduction

According to A. Room (1996), the proper names of human beings, both individual and collective, are named anthroponyms. Such proper names receive undeservedly little attention in the process of teaching English and the culture of English-speaking countries. Studying anthroponyms in a language one is learning is crucial for several reasons. First, names carry cultural significance, providing insights into traditions, history, and societal values. By understanding these names, learners can gain a deeper appreciation of the culture associated with the language. Recognizing and correctly pronouncing names enhances interactions with native speakers, demonstrating respect and fostering better relationships. Additionally, names play a vital role in contextual clarity. They frequently appear in texts, literature, and media, often referencing historical or cultural figures. Understanding these references can enrich the learning experience and improve comprehension. Names are also closely tied to identity, enabling learners to connect with individuals on a more personal level. This connection can deepen the overall engagement with the language. Finally, understanding the popularity and usage of certain names can provide insights into demographic trends and social dynamics, enriching the learner's perspective. Therefore, anthroponyms enhance the language learning experience by deepening the understanding of both the language itself and its speakers.

Ignoring anthroponyms, or paying insufficient attention to them as the focus of exercises in English textbooks, is largely due to one of the linguistic approaches, which is that proper names have no lexical meaning of their own (O. S. Akhmanova, L. A. Bulakhovsky, A. A. Reformatsky, J. S. Mill, V. Brøndal etc.). Nevertheless, according to a number of other scholars, proper names have a lexical meaning (A. V. Superanskaya, M. Breal, A. A. Zhivoglyadov, F. I. Buslaev etc.). Nevertheless, proper names can cause a number of difficulties when communicating in a foreign language and that is why they deserve special attention in academic context. Relatively

few scholars address the issue, though it is investigated in the research done by S. V. Plotnikova (2014), Z. F. Yusupova (2023), G. F. Kovalev (2017), K. V. Svyatina (2015), etc.

2. The Background of the Present Study

Based on hands-on teaching experience and the the author's previous study "Linguocultural specifics of the acquisition of precedent names" (2023), a number of difficulties that Russian-speaking students encounter when dealing with proper names were identified. There are 9 of them in total and the present study focuses on the last 4 difficulties.

1. Differences in the traditions of naming

In the Russian-speaking naming tradition, a person is given a personal name, patronymic and surname, while the English-speaking tradition is characterised by the presence of a middle name rather than a patronymic. Such a name is most often given in honour of relatives. For example, the son of a person named *John William Smith* may be named *Thomas John Smith*. A person may also have a middle name, for example *Arthur Neville Chamberlain*. For ease of spelling, middle names are often shortened to a single letter, and in some cases a person who does not have a middle name as such may use some letter when filling out documents to distinguish themselves from their namesakes when there are such. The presence of a second personal name or double surname, as well as homonymy of first and last names (*Arnold, Thomas*, etc.), is mostly characteristic of the English language, though it can rarely be encountered in Russian. For a Russian-speaking learner of English, it may be difficult to identify first and last names in such names as, for example, *William Thomas*, where the arrangement of words is significant for correct interpretation, since the surname is usually the second element. However, this is still a guideline rather than a rule, because it is not peculiar to bibliographic lists.

2. A figurative use of names

For successful communication in a foreign language it is necessary to understand whether an anthroponym is used in a nominative function or is a carrier of personal characteristics that symbolises a pattern of behavior or has a connotative character reflecting the speaker's attitude to another person. Also, many proper names can acquire stable associative links in the mass consciousness of representatives of the original linguoculture. For example, R. Wince, having surveyed 1100 respondents, established connections of proper names with personal qualities and appearance of a person, e.g. *Andrew* – sincere but immature; *Dennis* – clumsy; *Maureen* – passionate and rude; *Nancy* – sarcastic. Some associations may not be complimentary and carry pejorative meaning. Also in certain historical periods, names and surnames are associated with representatives of different social strata. Such associations are not connected with etymological meanings among native speakers and are hardly realised by representatives of other linguocultures.

It is worth noting that in Russian and English associative links are often traced in relation to professional affiliation. Thus, *Галя (Galya)* is a cashier, *Мария Ивановна (Maria Ivanovna)* is a primary school teacher. Such nominative determinism is being actively investigated in English, too.

3. Placeholder names

Placeholder names, often used in examples, serve as stand-ins for real people, allowing for easier communication without needing specific identities. In English, common placeholder names include *John Doe* for males and *Jane Doe* for females. These names are frequently used in legal contexts, medical discussions, and hypothetical scenarios to represent an average or generic person. "Tom, Dick, and Harry" can mean everyone or anyone depending on the context. In Russian, similar placeholder names are used, such as *Иван Иванович Иванов (Ivan Ivanovich Ivanov)*, a funny-sounding name *Вася Пупкин (Vasya Pupkin)* for males and *Мария Ивановна (Maria Ivanovna)* for females.

Both languages utilize placeholders to facilitate discussions, emphasize anonymity, generalise and create relatable examples. A foreign language learner is supposed to understand such "empty references".

4. Precedent character

Knowledge of precedent situations or texts related to an anthroponym is especially important for correct interpretation and understanding of English humour, fiction, cinema and other media content. It is necessary to single out precedent names as a separate layer of linguoculturally significant units. According to D. B. Gudkov (1999), precedent names identify an individual name with a widely known text or with a situation known to native speakers and thus being precedent.

Having studied a number of precedent names, the conclusion was made that they have a number of characteristics that can potentially complicate their understanding by a non-native speaker of English. Thus, the mentioned characteristics include: 1) compactness; 2) instability and novelty; 3) connotative character; 4) changeability of the concept over time; 5) uniqueness; 6) contextuality.

Since precedent names represent situations, phenomena and behavioural attitudes in a compact form, a foreign language learner faces the task of decoding their meanings that are often not presented in a convenient dictionary or encyclopaedic form and assume complex background knowledge. Such names presuppose a background history of the bearer and a certain pattern of behaviour, often along with features of appearance. Depending on the period of functioning in the linguistic space, precedent names are characterised by their novelty

or stability. While established and widely known precedent names are easier to look up, new precedent names may be at the stage of consolidation of connotations that can go out of use in a relatively short period of time, which complicates their correct understanding at a certain point in time. Novelty, consisting in the emergence of new connotations of a well-known proper name, is particularly difficult for a person who is not immersed in a foreign language culture on a regular basis.

Also, precedent names have a connotative character which manifests itself in the expression of emotional or evaluative connotations. Thus, by calling someone a 'Hitler', the speaker clearly implies negative connotations of wickedness. In this case, understanding the nature and meaning of a precedent name is not particularly difficult and consists in mastering globally available background knowledge. Nevertheless, there are precedent names that are not represented at the intercultural level, and their nature and usage are familiar mainly to the representatives of only a limited linguistic community.

The connection between a concept and lexemes expressing it can undergo significant changes over time. The same concept can be expressed by different proper names in different time periods and the other way round, the same proper name can acquire a new association due to various extralinguistic factors. It complicates the unambiguous and unmistakable understanding of linguocultural phenomena. For example, the concept of a womaniser can be expressed by such names as *Don Juan*, *Lovelace* and *Casanova*, as well as by some newer names at a certain point in time whose bearers are characterised by the same pattern of behaviour. For example, the actor *Leonardo DiCaprio* is perceived in popular culture as a man who frequently changes partners, with the only subtlety that they should not be older than 25 years. Thus, a number of names can be used interchangeably, though it is worth taking into account their distinctive features.

In terms of their prevalence, precedent names can be both universal and unique. In this case, the universality of precedent names is relative and is expressed in the fact that many precedent names are known in the intercultural space, for example, *Romeo* and *Juliet*, *Terminator* and others. The most common sources of such precedent names are works of literature, historical facts or events. Nevertheless, often foreign-language precedent names characteristic of another culture are absent in the native language of a language learner. Language, being inseparable from the social context, reflects socio-political and racial-ethnic aspects of interaction between individuals, which is also an important prerequisite for the emergence and use of culturally specific precedent names. It should be noted that a person learning English as a foreign language is supposed to subtly understand whether a proper noun refers to a specific person with or without any implication or connotation.

The most vivid example of all the features stated above is the name *Karen* that has acquired negative connotations and has a pejorative character according to the Encyclopedia of African American society (2005). The name denotes an excessively demanding and scandalous white woman, a representative of the American middle class, who will not miss an opportunity to call the manager and sue someone. Thus, *Karen* is a precedent name, as it implies a certain scenario and behavioural style.

The name is a manifestation of socio-political and racial-ethnic prerequisites, it is important to note that she is characterised by manifestations of racism, as she enjoys 'white privilege' in resolving conflicts. In this regard, it is important to note that *Karen's* racial identity is not accidental, as the connotations of the name originated in the African American environment. In addition to the personality traits that characterise a precedent name, distinctive external features are often noted. Returning to *Karen*, her appearance suggests a blonde bob.

Precedent names are often criticised due to their pejorative nature, and in this particular case referring to someone as *Karen* is criticised for being sexist and racist. This aspect is particularly important for a foreign language learner, because in addition to the connotation of the name, the social context must be taken into account when using it. As mentioned earlier, precedent names are characterised by changeability. In this case, close in meaning to the name *Karen* in the XIX century was the name *Miss Ann* that was used in the African-American community to denote a European-American woman who shows arrogance towards others [3, p. 551]. In some cases, the name was also used to characterise an arrogant black woman who behaves 'like a white woman'. Nevertheless, unlike the name *Karen*, *Miss Ann* was not so widespread among different strata of the population and was used mainly by African Americans. Along with *Miss Ann*, the name *Becky* should also be noted as a common name in the early 1990s, however, unlike *Karen*, a middle-aged white woman, *Becky* is typically a young white girl who unintentionally enjoys her 'white privilege' and represents a 'basic', stereotypical, socially secure and trend following girl.

5. Charactonyms

Discourse can also influence the interpretation of proper names. Thus, in literary and artistic discourse, the choice of names for characters can be motivated by the need to create additional meanings. In addition to actually existing proper names, the author can create a charactonym. In this regard, in order to understand the implicit meaning of a name in a work of fiction, a foreign language learner needs a significant vocabulary along with extensive knowledge of foreign language culture.

6. Translation

The problem field of anthroponyms translation deserves special attention, within the framework of which various methods are applied: transcribing, transliteration, transposition. In this case, the problem concerns to a

greater extent the training of professional translators, but may cause difficulties in understanding the traditional translation of the names of English kings: *Charles III – Карл III (Carl)*, *James I – Яков I* ('Yakov' is similar to Jacob rather than James).

The following points 7-10 are what our present study is focused on:

7. Pronunciation

At the phonetic level, some anthroponyms are characterised by variation, e.g. *Liza* ['laɪzə], ['li:zə]; *Anthony* ['æntəni] in British English and ['ænθəni] in American English. One name can also have several spelling variants even with the same pronunciation: *Sean, Shawn, Shaun* - [ʃə:n]. Foreign names in English texts are problematic for pronunciation, as the choice arises whether one should adapt a name from a 'third' language to the English phonetic system (taking into account the chosen regional variant), or pronounce it following the phonetic rules of the original language. The second way, however, requires a good command of one more language.

8. Morphological structure

English names, as well as Russian ones, are actively subject to derivation, representing shortenings and diminutive forms. The main problem in learning English anthroponyms is the presence of not only a large number of derivatives with different spelling, but also the presence of derivatives the origin of which is 'unexpected' and not obvious for a native Russian speaker, for example: *Richard – Dick, William – Bill* and others. In English, a person is often officially assigned one form of a name while its derivative or diminutive form is used as a first name to refer to a person, e.g. *Jim (James) Carrey, Bill (William) Clinton*.

9. Grammar

As there are no articles in Russian, their use with proper names in English can present some difficulties, e.g.: *a Mr. Smith is waiting for you downstairs; Mr. Smith is waiting for you downstairs; she is not the Jane I used to know*.

10. Name gendering

Differentiating names by their gender is also a difficulty. Even though names with double gender reference are characteristic of both Russian and English, there are no interlingual links that would make the identification of a name bearer's gender intuitive

Considering all the difficulties above, it can be concluded that anthroponyms are an important element in face-to-face intercultural communication and in the process of language proficiency development

3. Methodology

In order to find out the most challenging difficulties faced by Russian-speaking English learners while mastering anthroponyms, a study was conducted in 2 parts: 1) data collection through a multiple-choice test using Google Forms; 2) analysis of the collected data.

The test was conducted among 33 1st and 2nd year students of the Faculty of Foreign Languages of Brest State A. S. Pushkin University (Belarus). The students (majoring in English) who took part in the study had been chosen based on the English language level varying between B1 and B2. The ages of the respondents varied from 17 to 19.

First, a test consisting of 53 multiple-choice tasks was developed in order to determine the students' level of knowledge in the areas of pronunciation, name gendering, morphological structure (diminutives and shortenings) and grammar rules applied to anthroponyms. The test was available online on Google Forms and the respondents had been provided with the link to it. The multiple-choice tasks were organised into 3 blocks. The 2nd block combines name gendering and diminutives/shortenings because of their extralinguistic nature of acquisition, i.e. a student cannot apply any strict rules to determining one's gender or full name without having learnt this information by heart.

Anthroponyms were selected based on their high frequency of use in English and potential difficulty of mastering (taking into account the background of the present study). The first block consisted of 20 phonetic tasks, 10 of which were aimed at choosing the correct transcriptions of the anthroponyms, and 10 others – at choosing the spellings corresponding to the transcriptions. The next two blocks were devoted to extralinguistic peculiarities such as name gendering (15 tasks) and the use of shortenings/diminutives (8 tasks). The last block consisting of 10 tasks was concerned with grammatical peculiarities of anthroponyms. Based on the presented sentences, the students had to choose the appropriate articles before the names. The examples of the tasks are as follows:

- Block 1 (20 tasks): Choose the right transcription for the name *Louise*: ['lju:ɪs]/ [lju:'i:z]/ [lu:'i:z]; Choose the spelling corresponding to the transcription ['tɪməθi]: *Timoty/ Timothy/ Timothie*.
- Block 2 (name gendering – 15 tasks): *Alex* is a...: male name/ female name/ both.
- (full names – 8 tasks): Choose all the full names which *Jo* refers to: *Joanne/ Joseph/ Jessica/ Judith*.
- Block 3 (10 tasks): Choose the appropriate article 'Now she was more like _ *Julia* of their first years of marriage': a, an/ the/ no article.

The next step was aimed at: 1) establishing the quantitative correlation of correct and incorrect answers students gave in each block in percentage points; 2) identifying which aspect of language deserves special attention in proper names teaching by finding the median value.

Having made all the necessary calculations of the test results, it was found out that the average level of correct answers in the phonetic block was 50.6%, in the grammatical block – 54.3%, and in the part of name gendering and diminutives – 61.7%.

Next, median measures were utilized to establish the equality of students' results. In the phonetic and grammatical blocks, the number of correct and incorrect answers is approximately equal among the respondents, as the median was 50% with the average of 50.6% in the phonetic section and 53.1% with the average of 54.3% in the grammatical section, respectively. However, the respondents had difficulties in the block related to name gendering of anthroponyms: in this section the median was 53% compared to the average of 61.7%. Based on this, the number of students who got more incorrect answers in their test results exceeds the number of students who got more correct answers. It means that there are differences between students' individual levels of knowledge: while some students are really good at name gendering and know the full names corresponding to diminutives, the others still have to improve their knowledge greatly. In fact, it requires individual proper names mastering. The most effective teaching methods in this respect present a promising line of research in English teaching methodology.

4. Conclusion

Though the levels of phonetic and grammatical knowledge are equal, there is a gap between the students' average level of correct answers and the median value with regard to the knowledge of correct name gendering and the use of diminutives and shortenings. Grammatical and phonetic properties of proper names did not turn out to be very problematic, which is related to the presence of phonetics and grammar as subjects on the syllabus. Anthroponyms, in their turn, are scattered all over the studied material in various subjects.

Since the correlation of an anthroponym with gender is one of the significant difficulties for a learner of a foreign language and culture, there is a need to pay more attention to the study of extra-linguistic peculiarities of the functioning of proper names in the learning process.

These difficulties have unique peculiarities in different language groups and are considered in our study from the point of view of a native speaker of Russian. In this regard, developing reference books on proper names for academic purposes seems to be a promising direction of in-depth language teaching. Taking into account the native language of learners can potentially make this practice even more effective.

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Conflict of Interest

We declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of the paper.

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