



МЕТОДИКА ПРЕПОДАВАНИЯ РУССКОГО ЯЗЫКА
КАК РОДНОГО, НЕРОДНОГО, ИНОСТРАННОГО
METHODS OF TEACHING RUSSIAN AS A NATIVE,
NON-NATIVE, FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Research article

**Russian nonverbal communication in teaching
representatives of different cultures**

Radif R. Zamaletdinov¹, Galina S. Kalinina²✉,
Gulshat Kh. Zinnatullina³

¹Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University, *Kazan, Russian Federation*

²Naberezhnye Chelny Institute (branch) of Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University,
Naberezhnye Chelny, Russian Federation

³Kazan National Research Technical University named after A.N. Tupolev, *Kazan, Russian Federation*

✉ gskalinina@mail.ru

Abstract. The study studies Russian gestures in teaching Russian as a foreign language. Gesture communication is an important nonverbal interaction in various cultures and languages. The relevance of the study stems from the importance of nonverbal communication in teaching Russian to foreigners, the need to identify specific Russian gestures, their semantics, and cultural peculiarities and to analyze how these gestures correlate with verbal communication means in Russian culture. The aim of the study is to provide a scientific description of the specific gesture communication within Russian speech etiquette, including its meaning and contextual application and the corresponding difficulties for foreign students learning Russian. The research material is data from a 2023–2024 online survey in Google Forms. The questionnaire was aimed at studying perception and interpretation of Russian gestures by international students. The first block of the questionnaire is an open question “What is difficult for you when interpreting Russian gestures?”. It gave qualitative data on individual problems in understanding nonverbal components of Russian communication. The second block contains a series of visual tasks with pictures of Russian gestures typical for different communication intensions and variants of their semantic interpretation. The students must choose the correct or the most relevant answer. The complex approach helped to collect declarative information on difficulties and practical results on the ability to correctly identify Russian gestures in intercultural communication. The research methods include theoretical analysis for gesture definitions and approaches to their studying; quantitative content analysis for classification

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and statistical estimation of the collected data on Russian, Tatar, and Arab gesture communication; linguistic observation of the real gestures used by the representatives of different cultures. The students were regularly observed in classroom and at cultural events at Kazan universities for six years (2019–2024). This gave a comprehensive and representative data on using gestures in intercultural communication. The locations made it possible to analyze gesture activity in different cultural contexts. Universal and specific means of nonverbal communication have been determined, and specific gestures used in Russian, Arab, and Tatar cultures and their corresponding situations are discussed. Significant differences in gestures of Tatar and Arab students learning Russian have been identified; precise and controlled gestures prevail in formal situations, whereas informal situations reveal greater gestural diversity, including expressive and emotional aspects. The findings are useful for teaching Russian as a foreign language, in intercultural communication courses, and in adapting foreign specialists to work in Russia.

Keywords: universal gestures, specific gestures, Russian culture, Arab culture, Tatar culture, educational system

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Introduction

The outstanding philologist Roman Jakobson presents the human communication structure in speech act components which includes such elements as the addressee, the addresser, the topic (information), the method of information transmission, and the channel; the method can be verbal or non-verbal. The phenomenology of gesture is certainly non-verbal; gesture is a means of transmitting information and a semiotic sign to some extent. “Language is constructed in such a way that any thought the speaker may wish to convey, however original or whimsical his idea or fantasy is, language is fully capable of fulfilling any task he sets for it”, said E. Sapir (Sapir, 2003: 145), emphasizing the universal ability of any language to denote objects of the surrounding reality. However, formal methods of nomination, both verbal and non-verbal ones, are not identical across different languages and cultures. Undoubtedly, gestures and speech etiquette are segmental concepts which overlap only partially since they include elements which are not directly related to one another (Gabdreeva, 2018: 397). However, we are focusing on gestures within the speech etiquette system.

Etiquette is a set of behavioral rules evaluated according to accepted standards at a given historical moment for a particular social or professional environment. The question of gesture admissibility in various etiquette situations has been repeatedly raised, but remains open (Kalinina, Gabdreeva, 2020: 293). Situations with specific regular rules are referred to as etiquette situations. They are the sphere of etiquette signs with certain etiquette rules (Kreidlin, 2009: 160).

Verbal communication is the first and main type of communication, but the second type without verbal signs is also significant (Akishina, Formanovskaya, 1975: 83). Nonverbal behavior has been studied by Russian and foreign researchers (A.A. Akishina, M.S. Andrianov, L.S. Bove, E.M. Vereshagin, N.V. Gabdreeva, S.A. Grigoryeva, N.V. Grigoriev, I.N. Gorelov, G.E. Kreidlin, V.G. Kostomarov, V.A. Labunskaya, V.P. Morozov, M. Nepp, F. Pettit, etc.).

According to V.P. Morozov, the concept of “nonverbal communication” became an independent scientific field relatively recently, in the 1950s, although its foundations can be traced back to earlier studies (Morozov, 2011: 18–20). This concept is associated with semiotics and the theory of sign systems, and in a linguistic context, it has equivalents “paralinguistic”, or “extralinguistic communication” (Kalinina, 2022b: 56).

V.A. Labunskaya calls nonverbal communication an interaction which uses nonverbal behavior and communication as the main means of transmitting information, organizing interaction, and forming impressions of one’s partner (Labunskaya, 1988: 113). According to L.S. Bove and other researchers, nonverbal communication uses nonverbal signals (Bove, Arnes, 1995: 354). G.E. Kreidlin & N.V. Gabdreeva emphasize the gesture language importance when getting to know another culture (Kreidlin, 2018: 7). For instance, G.E. Kreidlin recommended including common for a given culture gestures in guidebooks and phrasebooks, and N.V. Gabdreeva explored the role of gestures in teaching Russian to foreign students (Gabdreeva, Halimaimaiti, 2024: 26).

Knowledge on peculiarities of nonverbal communication can significantly improve the interaction with representatives of other cultures, reduce misunderstandings and contribute to successful communication, especially in an intercultural context (Gorelov, 2009: 78).

The aim of the research is to identify the specifics of gesture communication, particularly Russian gestures, in teaching Russian as a foreign language and to analyze foreign students’ difficulties in interpreting and using these gestures.

Methods and materials

The main scientific methods used in the research are theoretical analysis, content analysis, and linguistic observation. The authors analyze the results of an online survey conducted between 2023 and 2024 on the Google Forms platform. More than 800 first- and second-year students from Kazan universities participated in the experiment, their Russian language proficiency levels ranging from A2 to C1. The sample consisted of 60% men and 40% women, with participants’ ages ranging

from 18 to 26 years. The survey data reflect the Russian gestures perception and interpretation by foreign students.

The first section of the questionnaire was an open question “What difficulties do you encounter when interpreting Russian gestures?”. It helped collect qualitative data on the subjective problems the participants encounter when understanding the Russian communication nonverbal components. The second task was matching. Participants looked at pictures depicting gestures used either in a complex or independently and identified their meanings, such as threat (showing a fist, shaking the index finger), disappointment or dissatisfaction with the interlocutor’s behavior (shaking the head from side to side), negation (shaking the head), confusion (shrugging shoulders), surprise (spreading arms to the sides), or indicating a mistake (tapping the forehead with a fist). The results among preparatory faculty students and first-year students from distant abroad demonstrated a tendency toward zero accuracy in choosing correct correlations.

The second stage of the experiment involved observing the nonverbal behavior of non-native speakers/native speakers of the Tatar language and culture and analyzing their gestures. This was conducted at universities in Kazan (Kazan Federal University and Kazan Technical University) at preparatory and main faculties in 2019–2024. The study covered both formal (lectures, presentations) and informal interaction (student meetings, events). 900 students took part in the experiment, 300 Russian-speaking, 300 Tatar-speaking, and 300 Arabic-speaking students aged between 18 and 25. This minimized the influence of age on the results. The observation was unstructured when all visible gestures were recorded without pre-assigned tasks or situational when predetermined situations were created to provoke gestures under controlled conditions. Additionally, attention was focused on identifying specific Tatar and Arabic means of nonverbal communication. As a result, the frequency of gestures and the context of their use were fixed.

Results

The study emphasizes the importance of gestural communication in teaching Russian, intercultural interaction, and the necessity of considering cultural differences for effective communication.

The observation revealed the Russian nonverbal communication features, which, according to R.O. Jakobson’s communicative act structure, also serve as an information channel. Russian gestural speech is diverse and expresses a wide range of emotions, from happiness to dissatisfaction. In Arab culture, gestures are emotional and play an important role in establishing communication and conveying respect or aggression. The Tatar culture also has its unique gestures, which often combine elements of both Russian and Arab communication and reflect the historical interaction between these cultures. Many gestures and facial expressions among Tatars coincide with Russian ones but are less explicit.

In teaching Russian as a foreign language, gestural communication is a methodological problem because there are few descriptions of the ways of its semantizing in scientific literature and textbooks.

The following difficulties encountered by foreign students in using nonverbal communication when learning Russian were identified: for 23% of students, difficulties are due to cultural differences; 15% noted “complete misunderstanding of the context”; 41% believe that difficulties occur because they are afraid of making mistakes due to the risk of being misunderstood or condemned by native speakers; 21% point to a lack of practice in using gestures in real-life situations. Most of the participants, mainly students from far abroad, at the initial stages of learning showed complete unawareness of the Russian gesturing semantics.

The obtained results demonstrate the importance of studying Russian gestural culture alongside with traditional verbal forms of communication.

Discussion

Gesture communication is an important aspect of nonverbal interaction that varies significantly depending on cultural and ethnic contexts. This article characterizes the use of Russian gestural communication by Tatar and Arab students in Russian as a foreign language (RFL) teaching system. The differences in cultural contexts lead to difficulties in understanding and interpreting Russian gestures (Annushkin et al., 2023: 468). So we analyzed the Tatar and Arab specific gestures with their unique meanings and characteristics (Gabdreeva, Ageeva, Abdullin, 2023: 395). Due to historical peculiarities, native Tatar speakers experience fewer difficulties in interpreting Russian gestures. Modern Tatar culture is a synthesis of European and traditional Islamic culture. That is why there are both similarities with Arab culture because of the same religion of Islam and with Eurasian, particularly Russian, communication culture (Khisamova, 2010: 15).

Regarding native Tatar speakers, the term “Russian as a foreign language” is approximate; it is better to speak of “non-native speakers” rather than “foreigners”. Nevertheless, Tatars have features in using gestures which require teacher’s attention. We base on research by both Russian scholars (N.I. Smirnova, N.I. Formanovskaya, Yu.E. Prokhorov) and international researchers (P. Soper, A. Pease) on gestural communication, especially those considering various approaches and classifications (Formanovskaya, 2002: 41–42; Pease, 2007: 78; Hall, 1995: 125). The classification of gestures helps better understand their functions and meaning in communication. Accompanying gestures which accompany speech can point out important information but lose their meaning outside of context (Kostomarov, Prokhorov, Chernyavskaya, 2008: 352). Communicative gestures which convey messages independently play an important role in interpersonal communication. Modal gestures expressing evaluation help understand the emotional state of the interlocutor (Akishina, Kano, 2022: 12).

Regular students' mistakes allowed us to systematize the considered gestures according to the following parameters:

1. Universal gestures in Russian, Tatar, and Arab speech etiquette, that facilitate communication.
 2. Gestures similar in form but different in semantics in Russian, Tatar, and Arab speech etiquette, that hinder interaction.
 3. Specific gestures in Russian, Tatar, or Arab speech etiquette (Kalinina, 2022a: 1250), that complicate communication and require explanation.
- Let us consider some of these in detail.

Universal gestures in Russian, Tatar, and Arab speech etiquette that do not cause difficulties in RFL learning

1. Handshake (fig. 1).

Handshake is the most widespread component of nonverbal communication for greetings or farewells. It is a universal tool of nonverbal interaction, though it may have certain culturally specific features.

2. Gesture 'a request to calm down'. The hand is positioned palm down, with a slow up-and-down motion (fig. 2).

In Tatar communication, the unity of voice and body is significant. Tatars usually speak in a quiet, calm voice. However, contentious moments or misunderstanding may cause a pause and a specific gesture, raising the hand with the back of the palm toward the speaker or audience, which are used as a signal to calm down and consider the speaker's argument. At the same time, the voice tone may change, become lower, and the intonation and speech rate may slow down. This is directly connected to the Islamic worldview, which encourages speaking in a calm, moderate voice, while stepping away from unproductive argument is considered virtuous (Lee, 2020: 26). Loud conversation accompanied by laughter or noise is reviled by the elders.

3. Moving the eyebrows down (frowning) (fig. 3). This gesture expresses dissatisfaction, thoughtfulness, or doubt. It shows that a person is dissatisfied with a situation or is experiencing negative emotions. It can also express doubt or disbelief in the truthfulness of what is said. In some cases, it may convey concentration, for example, among students at an RFL lesson.



Fig. 1. Handshake gesture

Source: based on research materials [Kalinina, 2022].

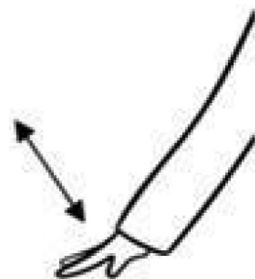


Fig. 2. Gesture of calming

Source: based on research materials [Kalinina, 2022].



Fig. 3. Gesture of displeasure

Source: based on research materials [Kalinina, 2022].



Fig. 4. Good luck gesture

Source: based on research materials [Kalinina, 2022]



Fig. 5. Pause gesture

Source: based on research materials [Kalinina, 2022].

Among the Tatars, this gesture is often associated with Islamic traditions and symbolizes humility and devotion. In Arab culture, this gesture is used for greeting between men and women.



Fig. 6. Gesture to remember information

Source: based on research materials [Kalinina, 2022].

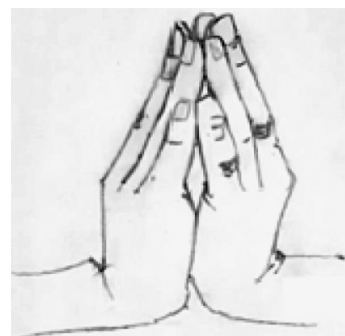


Fig. 7. Gesture of greeting, gratitude, apology

Source: based on research materials [Kalinina, 2022].

4. Gesture expressing a wish for good luck (fig. 4).

This gesture has a positive meaning and conveys support, often accompanied with sincere smile and kind words. It is frequent among students before exams or performances.

5. Raised hand, bent at the elbow, with the palm facing parallel to the interlocutor (fig. 5).

The gesture is used to attract attention and stop a conversation. The speaker emphasizes that the conversation is unpleasant and they wish to end it.

Universal gestures in Russian, Tatar, and Arab speech etiquette with different semantics, which may cause some difficulties among students learning Russian as a foreign language because they are interpreted according to their individual cultural characteristics:

1. Touching the forehead with the palm (fig. 6).

In Russian and Tatar cultures, this gesture denotes forgetfulness and can express bewilderment or disappointment, but it is less frequent in Tatar culture. In contrast, in Arab culture, it indicates that the interlocutor is speaking nonsense, the gesture shows the need to think about the problem.

2. Palms pressed together at chest level, as in prayer (fig. 7).

In Russian culture, this gesture has a broad semantics; it can express gratitude, a request, or an apology. It is typical for situations when a person experiences strong emotions, such as fear of the unknown or joy.

Specific gestures in Russian, Arab, and Tatar speech etiquette

The national specificity of a gesture can cause significant difficulties in its perception and interpretation by students learning RFL. At the same time, the peculiarities of Tatar and Arab gestures may be incomprehensible to Russian speakers.

G. Kreidlin points out that “in nonverbal communication, a communicative failure, mutual misunderstanding and rejection, even repulsion and conflict often occur due to the fact that a somatic object is used to nonverbally express a certain meaning or perform a specific movement, which from another culture perspective is undesirable” (Kreidlin, 2018: 10).

1. Handshake followed by a quick touch to the heart (fig. 8).

This is a common Arab greeting expressing the value of the interlocutor’s presence. Additionally, this gesture can signify gratitude.

2. Cheek-to-cheek or nose-to-nose touch, or kiss on the cheek (fig. 9).

This is a common greeting for representatives of Arab culture symbolizing friendly relations, closeness, and respect.



Fig. 8. Greeting gesture (Arabic culture)

Source: based on research materials [Kalinina, 2022].



Fig. 9. Gestures expressing politeness, respect and importance when greeting

Source: based on research materials [Kalinina, 2022].

3. Greeting with both hands as a sign of special respect (fig. 10).

In the modern world, a handshake is a universal sign of goodwill among many peoples, and Tatars are no exception. A handshake helps establish a trusting relationship between interlocutors. It is frequent at official meetings and in diplomacy. However, unlike Western European etiquette rules where shaking hands with both hands is extremely rare, Tatars prefer handshakes using both hands.

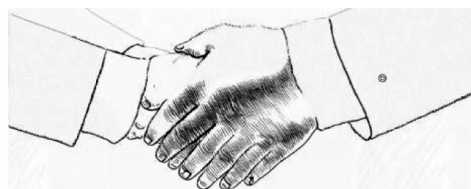


Fig. 10. Greeting gesture (Tatar culture)

Source: made by R.R. Zamaletdinov, G.S. Kalinina, G.K. Zinnatullina.



Fig. 11. Gesture of patting on the shoulder or back (Tatar culture)

Source: made by R.R. Zamaletdinov, G.S. Kalinina, G.K. Zinnatullina.

used for giving advice or encouraging the interlocutor. In Russian culture, this gesture is appropriate only when used by an elder toward someone younger; otherwise, it is perceived as too familiar.

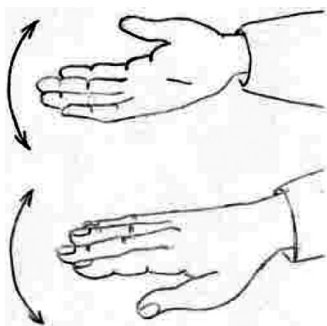


Fig. 12. Gesture of misunderstanding

Source: based on research materials [Kalinina, 2022].

not express grief or mourning among Tatars. White is the color of sorrow. This also distinguishes religious Tatar women, who prefer to wear hijabs of any color except black. In contrast, Arab culture views black as a universal and elegant color. In some cases, black clothing may indicate high social status, especially if it is made from quality fabrics and adorned with sophisticated details.

8. The Tatars use universally recognized facial expressions for happiness, sadness, anger, surprise, and fear, though these expressions are generally less exaggerated than in Russian culture. Overall, restraint in expressing emotions is a distinguishing characteristic of Tatar culture.

4. Patting the shoulder or back (fig. 11).

Touch or maintaining distance (haptics) depends on the situation and the age of the speakers. At formal meetings or communication between people who are not well acquainted, a certain distance is maintained, especially if it is interaction between people of different genders or ages). However, physical contact is quite common in interaction with older people. This involves gentle touches to the forearm or soft pats on the back. This frequent gesture among Tatars is perceived as an expression of unspoken feelings of the speaker and is often

5. Sudden turning of the palm upward (fig. 12).

This gesture means “why” or “how”. It vividly expresses disbelief and is often used by Arabs in informal conversation or when discussing something strange.

6. Biting the tip of the tongue with teeth (fig. 13).

This gesture is used by Arabic native speakers when they feel anger because of the information received from their interlocutor. It may indicate disagreement or internal contradictions.

7. Tatar environment also has unique aspects related to appearance conveying messages (artefact signs). Unlike Russian tradition, black clothing does



Fig. 13. Gesture of anger
Source: based on research materials [Kalinina, 2022].

Conclusion

The research demonstrates significant differences in using gestures among Russian, Tatar, and Arab students. Specifically, Russian participants more frequently used accentuating gestures to emphasize speech, Tatar students used more adaptive gestures associated with emotional state, while Arab students preferred deictic gestures to point at objects or show directions.

It is also worth noting that in formal situations (for example, at the lesson), precise and controlled gestures predominated, whereas in informal contexts, there was observed a greater variety of gestures, including expressive and emotional movements.

The results of this study are useful for teaching intercultural communication and Russian as a foreign language.

Further research could explore how gestures depend on the age of participants (for example, compare younger and older generations) and which cultural norms influence these changes. This would open new horizons for deeper exploration of the topic and enhance our understanding of the role gestures play in modern intercultural communication.

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Bio notes:

Radif R. Zamaletdinov, Doctor of Philology, Corresponding Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Director of the Institute of Philology and Intercultural Communication, Institute of Philology and Intercultural Communication, Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University, 18 Kremlevskaya St, Kazan, 420008, Russian Federation. *Research interests*: the theory and methodology of teaching the Tatar and Russian languages, bilingual and multicultural education, cultural linguistics and cognitive linguistics. ORCID: 0000-0002-2692-1698. SPIN-code: 4027-8784. Author ID: 324793. E-mail: Radif.Zamaletdinov@kpfu.ru

Galina S. Kalinina, Candidate of Philology, Associate Professor at the Department of Foreign Languages, Naberezhnye Chelny Institute (branch) of Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University, 68/19 (1/18) Prospect Mira, Naberezhnye Chelny, 423812, Russian Federation. *Research interests*: intercultural communication, Russian and Arabic speech etiquette, verbal behavior of Arabophones, Russian as a foreign language, and the specifics of verbal and nonverbal communication. SPIN-code: 6228-8121. Author ID: 1058925. E-mail: gskalinina@mail.ru

Gulshat Kh. Zinnatullina, Candidate of Philology, Associate Professor at the Department of Foreign Languages, Kazan National Research Technical University named after A.N. Tupolev, 10 K. Marx St., Kazan, 420111, Russian Federation. *Research interests*: poetic onomastics and comparative linguistics. E-mail: gulshatzin@bk.ru

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Научная статья

Русская невербальная коммуникация в системе обучения представителей разных культур

Р.Р. Замалетдинов¹ , Г.С. Калинина²  , Г.Х. Зиннатуллина³ 

¹Казанский (Приволжский) федеральный университет, *Казань, Российская Федерация*

²Набережночелнинский институт (филиал) Казанского (Приволжского) федерального университета, *Набережные Челны, Российская Федерация*

³Казанский национальный исследовательский технический университет им. А.Н. Туполева, *Казань, Российская Федерация*

 gskalinina@mail.ru

Аннотация. Изучена специфика русских жестов в контексте преподавания русского языка как иностранного. Жестовая коммуникация представляет собой важный аспект невербального общения, играющий значительную роль в различных культурах и языках. Актуальность исследования обусловлена важностью невербальной составляющей при обучении иностранцев русскому языку, в частности выявлением специфических жестов, их семантики и культурных особенностей, а также анализом того, как эти жесты соотносятся с вербальными средствами общения в русской культуре. Цель исследования — научное описание специфики использования жестовой коммуникации в контексте русского речевого этикета, значения и контекста применения, а также выявление проблем, с которыми сталкиваются иностранные учащиеся в процессе обучения русскому языку. В качестве материала исследования использовали данные онлайн-опроса, реализованного в период 2023–2024 гг. на платформе Google Forms. Анкетирование было направлено на изучение особенностей восприятия и интерпретации русских жестов иностранными студентами. Методами исследования являются теоретический анализ, количественный контент-анализ, а также лингвистическое наблюдение за коммуникативным поведением студентов русской, татарской и арабской культурных групп, которое осуществлялось в учебных аудиториях и во время культурных мероприятий казанских вузов и проводилось регулярно в течение шести лет (с 2019 по 2024 г.). Выявлена объемная и репрезентативная выборка данных о практических особенностях жестов в межкультурном общении в условиях русскоязычной среды. Определены универсальные и специфические средства невербальной коммуникации и рассмотрены примеры конкретных жестов, используемых представителями русской, арабской и татарской культур в процессе общения в вузах РФ. Доказаны существенные различия в использовании жестов татарскими и арабскими студентами при изучении русского языка как иностранного: в формальных условиях преобладают точные и контролируемые жесты, тогда как в неформальной обстановке наблюдается большее разнообразие жестикуляции, включая экспрессивные и эмоциональные движения. Полученные результаты могут быть применены в преподавании русского языка как иностранного, в курсах межкультурной коммуникации и адаптации иностранных специалистов к работе в российских условиях.

Ключевые слова: универсальные жесты, специфические жесты, русская культура, арабская культура, татарская культура, система обучения, русский язык как иностранный

Вклад авторов: Замалетдинов Р.Р. — участие в разработке концепции исследования, теоретическая проработка вопросов речевого этикета и невербальной коммуникации в русской культуре, окончательное утверждение версии для публикации; Калинина Г.С. — теоретическая проработка вопросов речевого этикета и невербальной коммуникации в арабской культуре, написание текста статьи, редактирование текста, перевод и адаптация материала на английский язык; Зиннатуллина Г.Х. — анализ лингвокультурных особенностей невербального поведения в татарской культуре, интерпретация результатов эксперимента, подготовка списка литературы.

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Сведения об авторах:

Замалетдинов Радиф Рифкатович, доктор филологических наук, член-корреспондент РАН, директор института филологии и межкультурной коммуникации, Казанский (Приволжский) федеральный университет, Российская Федерация, 420008, Казань, ул. Кремлевская, д. 18. *Сфера научных интересов*: теория и методика обучения татарскому и русскому языкам, билингвальное и поликультурное образования, лингвокультурология и когнитивная лингвистика. ORCID: 0000-0002-2692-1698. SPIN-код: 4027-8784. Author ID: 324793. E-mail: Radif.Zamaletdinov@kpfu.ru

Калинина Галина Сергеевна, кандидат филологических наук, доцент кафедры иностранных языков, Набережночелнинский институт (филиал) Казанского (Приволжского) федерального университета, Российская Федерация, 423812, Набережные Челны, пр-т Мира, д. 68/19 (1/18). *Сфера научных интересов*: межкультурная коммуникация, русский и арабский речевой этикет, речевое поведение арабофонов, русский язык как иностранный, особенности вербальной и невербальной коммуникации. SPIN-код: 6228-8121, Author ID: 1058925. E-mail: gskalinina@mail.ru

Зиннатуллина Гульшат Хабировна, кандидат филологических наук, доцент кафедры иностранного языка, Казанский национально-исследовательский технический университет им. А.Н. Туполева, Российская Федерация, 420111, Казань, ул. К. Маркса, д. 10. *Сфера научных интересов*: поэтическая ономастика, сравнительное языкознание. E-mail: gulshatzin@bk.ru