

FIFTY YEARS OF TEACHING RUSSIAN: WHAT HAS GOTTEN BETTER?

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Анотация. *В 21-ом веке мы все окружены новой информационной технологией, но в чем на самом деле разница для учащихся и преподавателей РКИ? Успех наших учащихся определяется некоторыми элементами: увеличение количества часов в непосредственном контакте с языком; эффективное применение новой технологии с целью практики тех навыков, которые нашим учащимся нужны; аутентичные материалы, письменные, аудиальные и визуальные. Мы только "преподаем" (но это не подарок), они сами учатся под нашим руководством. Да, инновации, новые технологии, более доступные и эффективные ресурсы, все помогают, но в конце концов нужен высококвалифицированный преподаватель, который применяет современные методы и технологии. Задача наша - поддерживать наших студентов, будущее поколение, и их желание владеть русским языком как средством понимания между людьми.*

In the 21st century we are all surrounded by new information technology, laptops, tablets, smartphones and new means of communication. But what is actually the difference for students and teachers of Russian as a Second Language?

In the summer of 1967, we with a group of 150-and American students came to Leningrad at the end of June, the peak of the White Nights, as the city was preparing for the 50 Anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution. All the former palaces were in a uniquely beautiful condition, although there were still visible traces of the Great Patriotic War and the blockade of Leningrad. The White Nights opened our eyes, gave us confidence and sense of security to walk along the avenues, the parks, the islands, the waterfront. But the main thing here was the intensity and richness of the language program. After three-yearsof Russian study in high school and two years of intensive courses (8-10 hours per week) at George town University, we started a six-week intensive training program in Russia.

The curriculum consisted of two double classes, four hours in the morning, five times a week and sometimes on Saturday. Some were theoretical, but there were also practical classes on phonetics, grammar, conversation, in classrooms, and in the language laboratory. After lunch there were lectures, excursions to museums, visits to places of interest, farms, factories, meetings with war veterans, old Bolsheviks, with artists of the theater. In the evening we attended performances of ballet, opera, theater, met with young people in cafes, in the House of Friendship. On weekends we had excursions to Peters of on the Hydrofoil, to Novgorod and Pushkino. After a six-week intensive language program there was a three-week excursion program across the country, to Yerevan, Moscow and Kiev.

Today Middlebury College has programs for our students in Moscow, Yaroslavl and Irkutsk. But they are not as saturated or as concentrated as the Leningrad summer almost 50 years ago. For different reasons: economic, cultural, and others, as well as the psychology of today's students, they have more "free time." Some will spend this time with acquaintances, with their hostess

families, in circles and clubs, using social media. But the amount of time that is spent in direct contact with the Russian language hardly equals that of fifty years ago.

Yet we know that the amount of time on task is the primary element of success on the road to mastering Russian or any second language. The times we listen, read, speak and write in the language are all decisive factors in learning Russian. It's an age old wisdom. "Before learning how to do something, we learn by doing it" (Aristotle). Or as Russians say: повторение мать учения.

There are examples of highly successful programs with sometimes impressive proficiency results. These are the so-called "Flagship" programs. But they require an intensive summer, followed by an intensive academic year, then a summer spent abroad, two more years of academic programs at home and a capstone year long program in a Russian speaking country. These successful model programs increase the number of hours when the student really deals with language. The number of contact hours approaches or exceeds the standard practice at the Foreign Service Institute for diplomatic corps and the Defense Language Institute for military personnel (approximately forty four weeks and 1100 hours of study) (Thompson). But the number of academic students who can devote that amount of time to the almost exclusive study of a language and its culture is severely limited. And to some extent it denies the mandate of a liberal arts education that requires breadth as well as depth.

Even so to what extent has changed our approach over the last half century? Despite great strides in the field of information technology, actually the teaching of the language has changed little. Fortwenty-five years, I have read lectures on modern technology and its place in the educational process (cf. Beyer). There is no doubt that this development allows us to be more fair and democratic to our student audience. Everyone today has access to the full library of Russian texts and classics and modern. We no longer wait for the printing and delivery of newspapers when you can simultaneously with colleagues in Moscow read, listen or watch the latest news.

If you look at some of the innovations of the last decade, in particular the Internet, it primarily is an invaluable collection of authentic materials. In the beginning it was primarily text, but over time a growing number of audio and visual materials appeared such that now we have instant access to almost any text or song or film and video clip on our computer, laptop, tablet, and today on the Smartphone. This means that my lesson material does not depend on what I myself possess or bring. A student who encounters a new word requiring a dictionary has a mobile phone with an Anglo-Russian dictionary translator. If there is mention in the classroom of the first Russian cosmonaut or satellite, you can become instantly familiar with the event, on Wikipedia, photos, even video clips from Baikonur. While access to authentic materials has already been achieved, these authentic texts need authentic tasks. The communicative approach over the past thirty years has made and makes us now identify opportunities for students to use language in context. And the ways in which the younger generation communicates, via social networks, Skype, Facetime, Livemocha, all may play a role in finding new friends for extra practice.

If we pay attention to the different approaches, each decade offers a new method in the hope that students are engaged more with the living language. The grammar-translation approach of the 1950s, or the audiovisual or communicative approaches of the 1960's, were always accompanied

by the latest modern technology: language laboratory, audio and video cassettes, and slides. The proficiency based skills approach that emerged in the 1980s and is still widely in use today accesses mp3 players and the personal computer. The current method or approach is characterized by the so-called an inverted (Mazur Group), or mixed lesson. That is when the teacher uses time in the classroom not for traditional lectures, but writes and records the lectures in advance, so that students view them as preparation for classes. This approach is a huge success in the United States and is very popular among the younger generation, which actually prefers visuals text. However, the main difference is in the form, not in the content. There have always been adequate textbooks, authoritative books and lectures. Previously, students have read at home, listened and repeated in the language laboratory, now they watch.

Another modern trend, the so-called student centered approach focuses on the idea of who learns, replacing the notion of someone who teaches. But for language teachers, especially in a country where it is spoken, skills, true competency, are always important, perhaps more important than theoretical knowledge. Of course it is desirable to know (знать) theoretically verbs of motion, but more important is to know how (уметь) to get from here to the city center. While one can imagine the acquisition of knowledge without skills, it is unlikely to have the ability to speak without knowledge of vocabulary and grammar rules.

I do not want to fail to recognize, but rather just want to emphasize that we language teachers have been acting upon the same principles, even before they were codified or named. As mentioned above, the U.S. Defense Language Institute found that for American, English language media, the time required to master Russian to the advanced level is 1100 hours. Atypical American college Russian meets three times, three hours per week, so for thirty weeks of the academic year it equals 150 hours of study. Intensive programs, frequently summer courses in the language environment (the so-called immersion program) work better, and their success is due to the increase in contact time. Good results that are obtained in an inverted class are partly because of the additional hours spent in the performance, i.e. students review the material on video outside of the classroom. But this is only replacing what has been the traditional homework, i.e. text reading, learning vocabulary, written assignments, or work with a computer. Students are simply not aware of all these modern activities as a part of the whole, which creates a "course." Many of us have also long used an extra evening for movies, sang Russian songs in chorus, performed Russian plays, or arranged special dinners for "Russian table," where students together with teachers have dinner and converse.

In Middlebury, we dedicated a whole year to examining the improvement of teaching and learning, with a particular emphasis on information technology resources (Task Force). The most important of our findings was the common desire of the students to the concept of "being engaged in the heart of the educational process." Perhaps one of the significant changes in the paradigms of higher education is a growing realization that "learning" and "students" are at the heart of our business. In English it is called proceeding from "the sage on the stage" to "the guide on the side." We were surprised by the fact that each subject, each discipline, each department has its own goals and traditions that determine or dictate the style of any teacher, at the same time when

many opposed the lectures without discussion, others believed that lectures and active participation should be completely separate activities. Some preferred Power Point and video; others strictly forbade laptops and tablets at their lessons. Almost all, however, recognized the need to ensure that students should be actively involved in their own education. This participation should be a permanent and independent with the full support of the educational process. How this is achieved, can be more art than science, requiring talented, gifted, effective teachers who themselves may change their course, method and approach, even activities, depending on the needs and abilities of the pupils.

The more I have watched and participated in the ongoing discussions regarding the education of students, I am increasingly convinced that much that we welcome today as new, is simply something old in a new format. As in today's "inverted or mixed class," the best methods are designed to increase time on task and time in contact with the language. Good teachers find time for interactive communication between students both inside and outside the classroom. And yes, of course, it is important that we are familiar with the latest technologies and use them accordingly, rather than ignore or reject the progress and changes. Since we can use an ever increasing variety attractive materials in our teaching, our job is to be the leader and show the students how they can more effectively apply these new technologies in their own language acquisition.

In conclusion, the success of our students is determined by several elements. First, an increase in the number of hours in direct contact with the language. Second, the effective application of new technologies in order to practice the skills that our students need. Third, authentic materials: written, audio and visual. Finally, we must not forget that we can only "teach" (преподавать), but it is not a "gift" (подарок), nor do we "give" them the ability to understand and speak Russian. They are studying with us and under our supervision or leadership. The English word "educate" from educare [Latin]ducere meaning "to lead" is perhaps a better description. Yes, innovation, new technologies, more accessible and effective resources, all help. But at the end of the day our students need a highly qualified instructor who uses modern methods and technologies. Our task is to support our students, our own future, this future generation and their desire to master the Russian language as a means of mutual understanding among peoples.

I am a person of the 1960s. Then our primary motivation was the conviction that that the way out of the Cold War was only possible by finding a common language (общий язык) with the citizens of Russia and the Russian speaking population of the USSR. Today this common language is just as necessary for us teachers and our students again.

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