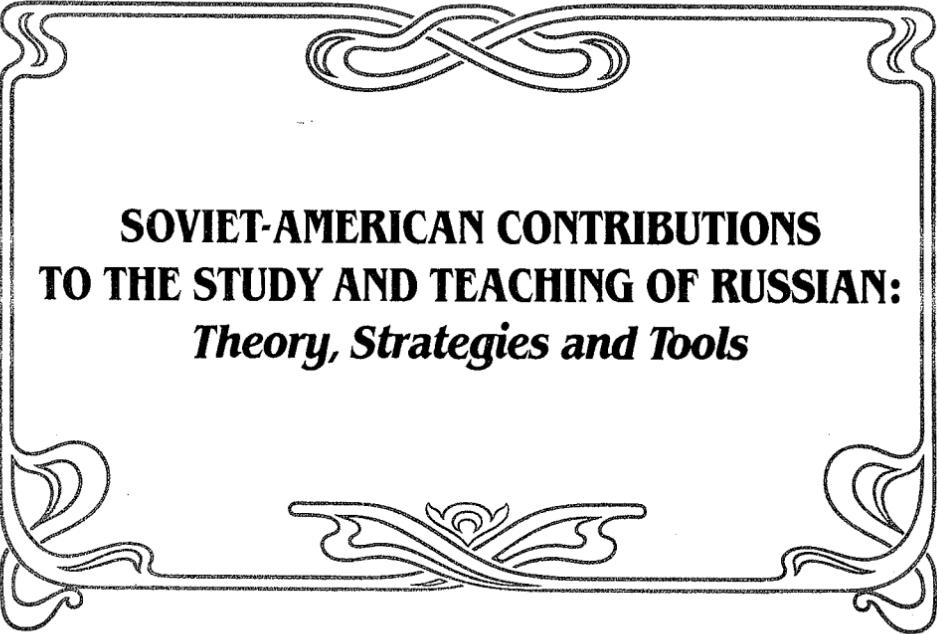


RUSSIAN LANGUAGE JOURNAL

Русский язык



**SOVIET-AMERICAN CONTRIBUTIONS
TO THE STUDY AND TEACHING OF RUSSIAN:**
Theory, Strategies and Tools

Edited by

Richard D. Brecht, University of Maryland

Dan E. Davidson, Bryn Mawr College

and

Munir Sendich, Michigan State University

Fall 1982 Volume XXXVI Number 125

B. PEDAGOGICAL MATERIALS

Thomas R. Beyer, Jr.*

RUSSIAN FOR EVERYBODY IN NINE WEEKS

In the past ten years there has been an increasing awareness and acceptance of *Russian for Everybody* in basic (first year) Russian language courses. Hardly a meeting of American Russian language specialists goes by without a methodological section which devotes most, when not all, of its discussion to this work. What has continued to amaze me at these discussions are the frequent comments that the work contains too much material to be covered in a single academic year. When I have objected and noted that the textbook is ideally designed for one year of study, I have been met with the oft-voiced criticisms that Middlebury, its program and its students are the exception and not the norm. While I have no desire to dispute the claim that Middlebury is indeed fortunate in its students and faculty, I do feel that the assertion needs closer examination.

I believe that a convincing case can be made that any institution with dedicated, competent instructors and with serious students can and should be willing to give *Russian for Everybody* a try. As an illustration of the progress that can be made with the textbook I will focus not on the regular academic year course at Middlebury but rather on the Nine Week Intensive Basic course at our Russian School. Surely what can be adequately treated in nine weeks deserves consideration as a textbook which might well serve the more leisurely pace of an entire academic year. While most of my comments refer to the new *Russian for Everybody: Version for Americans* which is now expected to be available in the Fall of 1985, I have also used the combination of *Russkij jazyk dlja vsej* with the supplementary texts written by Robert Baker. (These materials are still available from Heinle and Heinle, Inc., 51 Sleeper Street, Boston, MA 02210.)

The intensive course meets four hours per day, five days per week over nine weeks. After the first day of orientation and a beginning lecture on the Rus-

*Thomas R. Beyer, Jr. is an Associate Professor of Russian, Department of Russian, Middlebury College, Middlebury, Vermont.

sian sound system both students and instructors settle into a pattern which remains largely unchanged for the remainder of the course. Students are separated into groups of 8-12 for the first three hours of practical work in the morning and then all come together for a single grammar lecture during the fourth hour.

Here is an example of a typical day. At 8:00 a.m. I appear at my first section of the day. This group constitutes something of a "homeroom" in that I am with them every day for the first hour, and I am responsible for grading their oral performance as well as written assignments. First, I distribute corrected and graded homeworks from the previous lesson. I then address questions or problems on the homework for the current lesson which is due that morning. Finally, after answering any questions on the new material in the next lesson, I turn to the series of oral drills which the students had prepared in the language laboratory the preceding day. These drills, which are a part of the package of materials prepared by Robert Baker, contain a variety of transformation and modified substitution drills. The purpose of this first hour then is to activate the grammatical and lexical items of the new lesson. During this same hour, when time permits, I employ some of the "rapid response" exercises popularized at Dartmouth as a means of reviewing grammatical categories. These can be particularly helpful in learning conjugational paradigms of verbs, the singular and plurals of nouns, etc.

At 8:55 I leave for my second session of the morning with a different group of first year students. During this next hour (or about until 9:45) the students read the *tekst* from the new lesson. They will then reply to several questions based on the passage. Unlike many other systems no memorization is involved. Indeed, the most attractive part of the materials prepared by Robert Baker consists of these questions and answers which are practiced in the language laboratory before coming to class. The student is placed in a more natural language environment, i.e., the role of replying to specific questions. We have found that the method has astonishing results for listening comprehension and spoken language capabilities. A student need only provide a grammatically correct response to the questions which are grouped into three categories. In the first category the student is provided in the question with all necessary lexical information which he must supply in his answer. The questions call for a "da" or "net" plus either a short or complete response. For example, in Lesson 23, the first question is "V kakoj kvartire živet Viktor Tarasovič Akop'jan, v 23-j?" The student answers "V 23-j" or with the fuller "Viktor Tarasovič Akop'jan živet v kvartire № 23." There are forty-five of these questions in the first series. The second set of questions repeats the material in an alternative form, which covers again the basic vocabulary and grammar of the text. Now the student is asked "Viktor Tarasovič živet v 23-j kvartire ili 24-j kvartire?" To which he replies: "Viktor Tarasovič živet v 23-j kvartire." There are nineteen of these sentences. Finally there is a series of thirty-five questions which omits the needed vocabulary and simply asks: "Gde živet Viktor Tarasovič?"

the answer to which even you must know by now.

Ideally the students should be well enough prepared so that the instructor need only spot-check their ability to comprehend and respond to the questions. If students have listened to the tape and this whole series of questions and answers at least three times, they have heard or repeated every new vocabulary item almost thirty times. One can, of course, spend a great amount of time on this section, but I find that in forty-five minutes I can check a student's control by selecting a few from each of the first two series and then covering completely the final set of questions. At the same time these questions serve as a point of departure for real life (relevant) questions directed toward the students. In the chapter under consideration I asked individuals about their nationalities and about their own foreign language competency and that of their parents. At about 9:45 there is a well-deserved fifteen-minute coffee break.

From 10:00 to 10:55 I work with a third group of first year students. During this time we concentrate on supplementary materials, familiar to many of you as the booklets for drills, speaking and reading. In the new version for Americans the drills have been integrated into the text and the reading passages and speaking exercises have been combined.

From 11:00 to 11:55 I introduce in a grammar lecture the new lexical items with special attention paid to problems of translation and the grammatical material of the Lesson 24 which is to be mastered for the next day.

After a lunch spent speaking Russian with their instructors, the students are expected first to prepare the written homework for the new lesson. By re-reading the lesson and recalling the day's drills the students should have reached a good level of mastery on this material. We also recommend that they focus their attention solely on old information before turning to the new. This written assignment of approximately two pages of substitution drills and translations should take no longer than two hours. Then, the students are expected to familiarize themselves with the next day's new material by reading the grammatical explanations and examining the Russian text and accompanying sentences before they set off for the language lab. There they are expected to spend a minimum of from two to four hours listening to and actively participating in the transformation drills, text, and questions and answers on the tape. Many students try to spread out this work before and after dinner. Finally, sometime before midnight they still have time to review old vocabulary or practice new paradigms before going to bed.

Make no mistake! This is a very demanding schedule which requires discipline and perseverance. While it is demanding, students seem to adjust to it without major difficulties. Out of a class of sixty students in First-Year Russian this past summer, only four failed to complete the course of studies, and of that number only one left for purely academic reasons, i.e., the demands of the program. There are, however, a variety of characteristics which seem to appear almost exclusively in the summer, and their appearance seems to be directly related to the pace of such an intensive course.

One difficulty which surfaces in a very small number of students requires great patience, understanding and a willing commitment of time. In a group of sixty there are likely to be two or three who seem totally incapable of maintaining the pace of the course. After one has discounted laziness or improper study habits, one has to recognize the possibility of basic language learning disability. Thus acute problems in reading and writing which rarely appear among individuals admitted to college, but well-known to teachers in elementary schools, seem to reappear in my intensive course. It seems that the defense or compensatory mechanisms developed by the individuals to permit them to deal with English with reasonable competency fall apart under the stress of an intensive language course. In addition to extra tutorial assistance, these students need to be prodded to re-discover or uncover and then to utilize their own adaptive techniques to the Russian language. Moreover, they must be assured that their written performance is neither the sole nor even major criterion for measuring their language ability and performance.

Another common problem is a sort of mini-inferiority complex which seems to surface—a strange case of insecurity compounded by disillusionment and a questioning of one's own abilities. Lesson 23, for example, has approximately fifty new vocabulary items. Before the students have a chance to really master these words they have another fifty from Lesson 24 to look forward to that very evening. Good students seem particularly affected, but all seem to suffer from an inability to gauge their own progress. Many are students who would never think of coming to class unprepared in the regular college semester. Here they never seem able to be fully prepared for any lesson.

This is really a two-pronged problem, and it calls for an attack on both fronts. The linguistic problem, vocabulary acquisition and retention, can be somewhat resolved by an efficient utilization of time, constant repetition of old items, mnemonic devices, games, anecdotes, etc. Indeed, all of the resources of a good teacher should be called into play to aid the students in remembering material which has been covered. The second half of the problem is one of perception rather than of reality. A student's progress and comprehension seem to lag behind by approximately a week. While we cannot take time out to wait until everyone catches up, we can on a selective basis return to lessons covered over a week ago. Since language is cumulative, the students get to see less complex or more "familiar" structures. This recognition of "old friends" can serve as a positive re-inforcement and confidence builder, especially if the instructor recalls for the students their own apparent inability of a week ago, which have now been replaced by practical language capabilities.

A final question is one of establishing and maintaining a pace which is demanding but not impossible. Much depends, of course, upon the initial impression and the regular follow-ups required to sustain the student's own motivation. No student willingly sacrifices his time and money for a summer of exclusive study of Russian without some motivation. The difference lies in differing expectations (theirs vs. ours) of their capacity for work and their

abilities to assimilate material. One obvious danger, as it is in any course, is that student and instructor motivation and performance will peak somewhere around two-thirds of the way into the course.

Solutions to this problem are admittedly open to discussion. It seems obvious that within a highly structured program one needs as much variety as possible. I have found it advisable to rotate faculty members among groups rather than to have one faculty member with a group for three hours a day. The instructor must always be willing to cover the assigned materials, but should also be ever ready to expand upon it or complement it with individually prepared material, be it games, skits, or more traditional classroom devices, such as dictations. I personally have a reputation at Middlebury as a serious, no-nonsense instructor. Some note, others complain, that I am a proponent of negative re-inforcement, a polite way of calling me a "tyrant," "dictator," "drill sergeant," etc. The truth is that I will do and have done almost anything to insure that a student learns as much Russian as he or she can. If that requires me to dance on tables, shout and cajole, beg or plead—so be it. If it means visiting the language labs at 10:00 to cheer up some students or offer a word of encouragement—I am prepared to do that too. What I will not tolerate is mediocrity—a half-hearted effort by me, my instructors or my students. I will not lie to my students, nor will I waste their time and mine with busy work. If you want your students to give 100% effort, then you must be willing to demand the same and more from yourself.

To claim that your students can not learn the basics of Russian in nine weeks is to admit that you are not willing to teach them that much in that short period. Our own statistics on the MLA MA series (designed for students with two years of College Russian) indicate that by using the methods described above the vast majority of your students will make progress which at one time was assumed to be possible only after two years of Russian at the College level. *Russian for Everybody*, with the supporting materials, makes for an ideal introduction to Russian.