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COMPREHENSIVE AND INCLUSIVE: The Salad Bar Approach

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Not since the Russia of 1917, the Revolution, the Civil War, NEP and the First Five Year Plan have things been as exciting for students of Russian as they have been in the past five years, since the rise and fall of Mikhail Gorbachev, *перестройка* and *гласность*. Our profession has gone from the despair of Afghanistan and the retreat from the initiatives of the Nixon—Kissinger era into the darkness of the Evil Empire theory of Ronald Reagan. Then a breakthrough, a new revolution, the rise of nationalism, a press unleashed, a literature and intellectual life let free to roam, and economic chaos. And yet as all of this has gone on, as our student body has changed dramatically, the world has grown smaller by satellite TV and communications and the flow of information travels at the speed of light over optical fibers, the two most popular textbooks of Russian in a recent survey were *Русский язык для всех*, a product of the 1970s, and Mischa Fayer's *Basic Russian* dating back to the 1950s. Most teachers of Russian still rely on some offshoot of the audio-lingual method, the absolute rage of the 1960s, where students listen to tapes or prepare dialogues and texts out of class, then repeat those drills to a teacher. In class the teacher explains the next grammar section, corrects the written homework (little more than a check of grammatical mastery of last night's categories) and distributes a set of homemade handouts with the next class's assignment. "We've come a long way baby?" Not in the teaching of Russian we ain't!!

Everything is changing, our institutions are being shaken by one of the cyclical economic crises which beset education--but even for those with a memory of the mid-1970s this one seems a little harsher, a little worse. Smith College is laying off 100 people. Yale and Harvard have cutbacks. Who of us will be next? Our students have changed and will change even more in the next decade. The majority of traditional college bound students will be replaced by students of all ages, including many thirty+ year learners trying to retool in the changed workplace, with major representation of minority or under-represented groups. Just to pause for a second, consider how the teaching of Russian with English as a base may have to be recast in a mold in which the first language is Spanish or Korean or another one unknown. Actually, not all colleges will have a large minority or non-traditional student body--but then again not all the colleges of today will have any students at all. Our profession is under attack, intellectually and financially. If we are to survive, we will have to learn to adapt, to recognize the new exciting circumstances which confront us, and implement a curriculum which permits us to respond effectively to those new challenges and opportunities.

To define that curriculum we must do three things. We must first take stock of where we are and what we are doing, ultimately arriving at the question of why we continue to operate in the mold of the 1960s or before. Second, we must define the target audience, assess its potential and identify its goals. Finally, we must inventory the available resources, include some of those still to come, and combine them in such a way as to provide a curriculum which is comprehensive and effective, going far beyond the mediocre results, as judged by others, that our students achieve today.

We teach the way we do because it permits most of us to remain within the confines of a comfort zone. This comfort zone has elements of the reward system, or a least a recognition of what behavior is not rewarded, and it requires the minimum effort on our part to sustain our current activity. Before we criticize this comfort zone too harshly, remember that it is eminently practical and pragmatic, and it endures because it works. What is the reality of Russian language teaching today? In major graduate schools, much of the language teaching is relegated to second or third class citizens--instructors/lecturers (mostly non-tenured), and graduate students--cheap labor with little or no teaching credentials to their name. In the second echelon, colleges with two or more faculty members, the senior members are likely to teach advanced (and smaller) classes, literary seminars, culture etc. The junior members, or the leave replacements, or the assistants, or part-time people will do much of

the basic language instruction. Finally in one person departments the poor soul does it all. These folk could give new meaning to Gogol's *Мертвые души*.

In this system, you know that people who teach (or even better, who write) on literature and linguistics can get tenure, can be promoted, can apply and receive research and travel funds (to come to San Francisco for example--or Miami), can be appointed to important national committees, demand honoraria for consulting and lecturing, and spend considerably fewer hours in the classroom than the person teaching a first year intensive course.

But if you have the good misfortune to want to teach language, you will probably rely on the textbook and the supplementary materials already there. It is so much easier to take what has been done, and frankly it is asking a little too much to demand extra classroom hours, plus the innumerable hours outside of class checking the homeworks, other assignments and the written quizzes and tests, and then to ask for creative materials preparation or innovative lesson plans using authentic materials for tomorrow and tomorrow. Anyone remember *Осенний марафон*? Few if any of these activities actually enhance one's possibility for promotion and tenure. In fact, the sad reality is that they may be stealing valuable time from traditional research and "scholarly" activity. There is, of course, the seven-year itch factor: after a certain period of time disgusted with Ivan and Masha, or Zyuzya and Lenin, some opt for a new textbook. But after a year of implementing and supplementing it's the same old game.

And how should we know any better? We either learned from our teachers, in the 1960s or 1970s , some were (un)fortunate enough to have experience with Soviet teachers. It's a nice place to visit, but has anyone seen really effective, up-to-date classroom management techniques or models of methodology to emulate in the Soviet Union? Some of us have had a methodology class or two as grad students, and some had none. Most colleges don't pay their faculty to become better (or even acceptable) teachers. You're supposed to have it in you? Strange how many professional singers take lessons, how many actors continue to learn. Only teachers, especially at the college or university level, appear at first glance to be unwilling to learn how to do what we are paid for doing. It is ironic that one of the more successful experiments, the Rassias method, succeeded in part because it freed up some professors from the chore of teaching the students.

Methods come and go. Some never really get started in Russian, such as Total Physical Response. Other ideas are not so much methods as philosophies, "total immersion," "proficiency based approaches," "audio lingual," and the newest fad "content-based instruction." As social scientists have pointed out, we have very little data on the results of comparing one method against another. In fact the best known study of foreign language competency in colleges was done over twenty years ago. The Carroll report showed that most of our students in today's terminology could best be expected to reach the Intermediate Level on the ACTFL scale, until some significant overseas immersion experience, at which point they could return as Advanced or Level 2 on the Foreign Service Scale. Of course, what we leave unsaid, is that this level of language proficiency is good for little more than getting around and accomplishing limited job specific tasks. It's not nice to say that it is good for nothing--but it's not much more. Thus we find ourselves in the 1990s with a profession little aware of some of the exciting findings in the science of cognition, and even less aware of learning styles of a multi-cultural diverse student audience. We have also as a profession failed to recognize and understand the benefits of a right brain dominant, visual rather than verbal society.

Who are our new students? They are bright, they are eager, they are intense and incredibly gifted. The non-traditional student is older, but brings new urgency to the study of languages. The lawyer who will be working in Moscow, the radio or TV correspondent covering the Kremlin, representatives of business and MBA's desiring to deal with their Russian counterparts in Russian not just English. But as we know, the further away from age twelve or thirteen, as Chomsky has pointed out, the more difficult for them to retain some aspects of language on the first, or second, or third pass. I imagine their brains as something of the balloons and dart game at old time carnivals. It was so much easier to break a balloon with your dart when the board was full. With fewer balloons, there are fewer good spaces, and so you may need to throw more darts to hit a winner. But they also bring non-linguistic backgrounds, a broad context of life and how things, from newspapers to television, from literary devices to Madison Avenue ads work. They are, for the most part, highly effective communicators, orally and verbally,

and they have immense knowledge of the specific fields in which they will be working. The other group, with its diverse multiplicity of cultures and learning styles, brings new challenges and new opportunities, but we will not have the luxury of losing them in our basic courses. Many will have English as second language, and we must turn the disadvantage of our courses based solely on contrastive analyses of Russian and English to an advantage in which their communicative skills and coping devices are brought forth and help advance their knowledge and abilities in Russian. In-class and out-of-class activities may have to be reorganized to insure that the points we are making are actually getting through. Finally, we must appreciate the fact that language learning can and should be for everyone. But it hasn't been and it wasn't when we learned. In fact, successful language learners, the ultimate language teachers, are a rather self-selected group of those of us who could memorize lots of words, spell them and write them correctly, absorb verb charts and declensional paradigms. My kids think I'm a little "nerdy" and they're right from the point of view of the larger society. What is desperately needed is a methodology rich enough for everyone, satisfying the wants of all. A tall order indeed.

The reasons why students are learning Russian have also changed. Most do not want to go to graduate school in Russian language, linguistics or literature. Most want to make a lot of money. This may mean going to law school, or business school or medical school or graduate school in Russian studies. While we're on the subject we should reintroduce the 19th century version of "Boots are better than Pushkin." Nowadays we can probably argue the "Pushkin or *Правда*" issue. Should our seniors be reading *Правда*, or should we send them back to Pushkin? As a matter of fact, no educated Soviet ever reads *Правда* unless she knows lots of Pushkin by heart. Why should our students be any different? What we cannot tolerate, because they will leave our classrooms, are students who can only read Pushkin and couldn't buy a *Правда* for their boss. The most rapid growth in Russian programs in our country has come in the Area Studies programs. Students want to study Russian history, economics, geography and political science and not just literature. In fact, even programs in the former Soviet Union have recognized the changing scene in learners of Russian. As recently as five years ago almost all American students in the Soviet Union took some special program for foreigners with a heavy emphasis on verbs of motion, the obligatory discussion of *учить, изучать и т.д.* There was little if any chance for integration into Soviet classrooms and no one thought of the skills necessary for American students to sit alongside Soviet students. The American Collegiate Consortium and other programs have changed those terms of study dramatically. What of the one student enrolled at the University of Voronezh or Novosibirsk or Irkutsk? They are faced with a new and real set of language needs, and quite frankly we in the profession have been slow to catch on and haven't caught up yet.

So what? We need a comprehensive and effective method. How do we achieve it given the stagnation or lethargy of today's circumstances? Economics, for one, will drive us out of the comfort zone in an effort to attract students and retain them. Some of the competition is unwanted and unexpected. Open any airline journal and see the ads for Berlitz or others. They charge lots of money, but promise results. We may have to do the same. Comprehensive, it will take into consideration all four skills. Authentic tasks, texts, and authentic tests. Anything less will be unacceptable. It will also be comprehensive in scope. A salad bar, if you like, where all the nutrients are available. Subtly arranged, plates and lettuce, before the other goodies, with sauces and toppings at the end of the line. Everyone can make his or her own salad, but the actual freedom will be partially an illusion since we, the teachers, will stock it. But it must be a full salad bar, for all the customers.

It must also be effective. It will be a package of materials. The refusal to prepare materials, provide a text, and establish a model curriculum, is perhaps the greatest fault of the proficiency advocates. Theoretically, it is difficult to argue with their premise, that each curriculum must meet individualized needs and should consequently be arrived at only at the end of a lengthy self-evaluation study followed by planning implementation and trial and error monitoring. That's the theory. The sorry fact is that few have undertaken the challenge. Not everyone has the time, talent or inclination to reinvent the wheel or the first year text. We are text driven; let's recognize that and make the text rich, a composite of authentic texts, audio and video resources, computer materials, etc. Let's use existing technology to the fullest, from walkmen to on-line computer aids: electronic dictionaries, spell checkers, grammar checkers, drill and practice, computer designed exams and corrections, electronic access to rich library data bases and bibliographic materials.

Let us take a peak at the Salad Bar and the main trappings. The staple of instruction will remain an intensive two to three year commitment to language study. These classes will have access to the new "text" consisting of basic vocabularies and grammar explanations. But there will also be ample supplementary materials, printed and/or electronic, which let each student customize the learning experience by expanding upon the base. Thus when the topic of nationalities or languages is introduced, the text may offer three or four sample items, but each student will be responsible for assembling his/her own autobiographical vocabulary along with any prerequisite grammar needed for the task of speaking about oneself. Listening exercises on audio tape and video tape, some from live broadcasts, others from feature films, and still others specially scripted to illustrate this topic, will be available for student use outside of class. Reading passages taken from Soviet journals, newspapers, ads and literary works will be offered along with on-line Hypermedia annotation to these texts. Here again each student will be responsible for choosing some, not all of the material, for comprehension. The instructor will become a facilitator, especially in listening and reading, by providing guidance, pre-reading and pre-listening advice and examples and monitoring success on a one to one basis. The majority of class time will be spent on those activities which can not be done in isolation--speaking, communicating not only with the instructor but in small group activities where peer tutoring occurs as a natural part of the learning process. Writing, traditionally used primarily to monitor spelling competence and correct manipulation of grammatical forms, will acquire new tasks. For spelling and grammar, students will have access to their own built-in processors with instant feedback, the possibility for self exams, and regularly scheduled control activities, all computer controlled, corrected and reported to the instructor. The actual writing assignments will mirror reality, beginning with primitive lists of things to do and say, notes for oral presentations, and notes from lectures gradually increasing to paragraph length descriptions, letters, personal diaries. These written materials will need personal attention by the instructor, who will not so much correct, as encourage revision to achieve clarity and accuracy.

Already in the second or third semester, students of Russian language will begin to take courses in history, political science, geography, the arts, literature and any number of other disciplines where part of the content will be in Russian. This may include research materials and assignments, outside readings, monitoring Soviet TV, viewing Russian language films. Close cooperation between language teachers and area studies people will insure that there is a natural integration of language skills across disciplinary lines. Early on, students will be confronted with sophisticated linguistic materials, where not the text, but the task is modified to the ability level of each individual. This content-based instruction will recognize that language and content ideally complement one another and that the learning of one enhances the mastery of other.

All activities will be goal oriented--toward preparing a student to communicate with native Russians, and to use the language with the full range of functions of the native speaker, including a sensitivity to cultural differences in the communicative process. For all sorts of programmatic reasons some students will read better than others. Some may have stronger listening skills. But in all cases the choices will be the students' own. It is not for us to teach a student which parts of *Правда* or Pushkin he must read. Rather we have to provide him/her with the language tools which permit a reading of Pushkin, or a viewing of *Борис Годунов*, or a political discussion of Pushkin on TV.

While many students will have an undergraduate experience in Russia, even those without such opportunities will be prepared to read in Russian a variety of texts with excellent comprehension (Advanced level) in their specific area of expertise. The major goal of the undergraduate curriculum will be to achieve the Advanced Level (2) proficiency for all four skills--listening, reading, speaking and writing--with one proviso: namely, that the domain or scope of this language proficiency be individual specific, recognizing the language needs relevant to his or her own situation.

Most of all, the new curriculum will be inclusive. Russian has always been something exotic, even a little exclusive, in its appeal to most undergraduates. Unfortunately it has also been exclusory, letting too many capable students fall by the wayside after one semester, or one or two years of study. We must include all students, and all learning styles in our classes. We must make them feel welcome; we must offer them ways to succeed; we must create an environment in which they all can learn. Our methods must also become all-inclusive. The two major developments in language learning of the last decade,

proficiency and the application of new technologies such as video and computers, have often seemed at odds with one another. We can no longer afford the isolation of a single method, or text, or model of instruction. We and our students must have access to any and all of the aids to learning Russian. Not everyone will feel comfortable with all of the means, but we must strive to please all of the people all of the time with some of the ways. Variety is essential, be it readings from classical literature or contemporary politics, full length movies reproducing the magic of Tolstoy or TV documentaries of today. Computers should be a readily available tool, nothing more and nothing less, to make the most efficient use of the time that students will spend on their tasks.

None of this will work unless we as a profession resolve to include one another in the drawing up of the framework for the next century. Language teachers must again reach out to their colleagues in literature. Instructors in the other disciplines will need a greater knowledge of language learning, better linguistic competence and higher language proficiency. Language teachers must recognize the value of content relevant to their students and envision new ways of including those materials into the "language" courses. The technologists, computer specialists, must include all of us in their plans and in their projects. The proficiency people must simplify their vocabulary, explain the essence of their science to the rest of us, and provide their own valuable expertise to assist in our curriculum design. Those of us with programs in the former Soviet Union must assess what our students need to know and do, and how well they are succeeding. Then they must communicate that knowledge to all of us. At the college level, we must make sincere efforts to share with our colleagues at the high school level. We must reach out to our colleagues in the Soviet Union and other nations, but we can also reach out in America to the government schools and professional schools in an effort to better coordinate our all too limited resources.

For those of you who agree that the next few years offer a window of opportunity, I suggest we get back into the kitchen and begin preparing the menu for this Salad Bar approach to the Russian undergraduate curriculum.