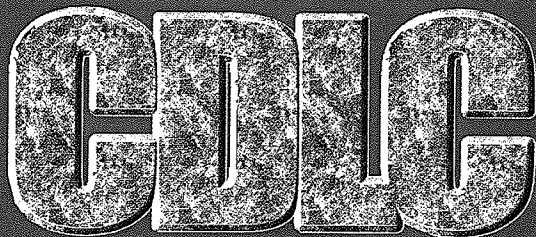


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On the Way to Level 4 in Russian

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Russian and the other Slavic languages, even though Indo-European, share a complexity of syntax and morphology, as well as a more foreign vocabulary than the Romance or Germanic languages. Thus, students whose native language is English normally require a substantially greater amount of time to reach even the ILR Level 3 (General Professional Proficiency). With the disappearance of many high school Russian language programs in the past decade, most students begin their study of Russian in college. Some might begin anew their study after a year or more of high school, but few ever reach the ACTFL Superior (Level 3). ACTFL, in its latest revision of the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines: Speaking*, in an admission of realistic expectations among its primary audience has chosen once again not to provide for a speaking level of Distinguished (ILR 4). "Due to the language levels most often attained by adult learners, the ACTFL Guidelines do not include descriptions of the highest ILR [3+, 4, 4+, 5 TRB] levels. The reasons for this are primarily related to time on task—there is simply not enough time in the college curriculum to devote to language acquisition. Student proficiency is also, I contend, the result of what students are taught to do in traditional settings. ILR Level 3+ in speaking calls for this: "Is often able to use the language to satisfy professional needs in a wide range of sophisticated and demanding tasks." At Level 4, one is "able to use the language fluently and accurately on all levels normally pertinent to professional needs. The individual's language usage and ability to function are fully successful. Speaks effortlessly and smoothly and is able to use the language with a high degree of effectiveness, reliability, and precision for all representational purposes within the range of personal and professional experience and scope of responsibilities." If one follows the axiom that students learn to

do what they practice doing, then it is easy to understand why students are incapable of making formal presentations (speeches) with sophisticated content. The simple truth is that in most college level Russian language and other content courses taught in the language such activities are rarely, if ever, practiced. In "conversation classes" students converse; for the most part they exchange short utterances with an interlocutor, usually the instructor. Rarely are they permitted time to formulate a significant intellectual position, present it, and defend it when challenged. Similarly, in reading or writing, the exercises rarely call for the sophisticated comprehension and analysis required to achieve the language (and intellectual) requirements of the ILR upper levels.

Faced with a group of students returning from a year of study in Russia, I wanted to explore the possibility of enhancing their basic language competency with skills necessary for this sophisticated interaction. In addition, the material should be topical, intellectually challenging and rewarding and permit students to use language at a level of discourse more closely approaching their native English abilities. I began with a group of students privileged in the American setting. All had begun their study of Russian at Middlebury College as first-year students completing thirty weeks (two thirteen-week semesters plus a four-week winter term) of six hours (five days) per week; a second-year intermediate course of six hours (five days) per week; an intensive summer of study at the Russian School for nine weeks of four hours per day supplemented by a language pledge requiring students to use Russian exclusively and refrain from English for the entire time; and then finally a full semester or academic year in Russia at one of Middlebury's schools abroad in Moscow, Yaroslavl, or Irkutsk.