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INNOVATIVE TECHNIQUES OF RUSSIAN INSTRUCTION  
IN THE UNITED STATES 1970-74

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# INNOVATIVE TECHNIQUES OF RUSSIAN INSTRUCTION IN THE UNITED STATES 1970-74

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## Introduction

This paper is an excerpt from a longer study commissioned by the Center for Applied Linguistics, Arlington, Virginia. The study, entitled "The State of the Art of Russian Instruction in the U.S.A.: First and Second Year College Level," was in turn the third section of several commissioned recently by the Center to survey "The State of the Art of Russian Instruction in the U.S.A." An abstract of this Section III is included by way of introduction to the present paper.

This paper surveys the state of the first two years of college level Russian instruction during the early 1970's. Data was gathered via a survey of recent literature and a questionnaire returned by 52% of all U.S. programs.

Most U.S. students of Russian begin and end their study in the first two years of college work for a total contact time of ca. 350 hours. By contrast, Soviet students may have over 600 hours contact time with a foreign language when they begin college-level work. Despite the importance of efficiently using this short time, the profession has paid scant attention to this level judging by the criteria of dissertations, articles, and professional preparation. However, recent signs indicate increased interest.

During the first year of instruction, more than a third of the programs use an eclectic approach, one third report an audio-lingual approach, and less than a third describe their technique as the more traditional grammar-translation approach. Texts used reflect this preference. Second year instructors favor grammar-translation texts supplemented by readers.

Innovations include 1) computer-based and computer-assisted instruction, 2) speech delay, 3) individualized approach, 4) decoding courses, and 5) the Lipson technique.

In describing needs of this area, respondents listed the following as most pressing: 1) extensive reading material with controlled vocabulary and inherent interest, 2) integration of culture, 3) better beginning texts, 4) listening comprehension materials. The NDEA centers could profitably take greater leadership in improving instruction at this level.

## Innovative Programs, Techniques

As noted in the preceding section, unorthodoxy is the new orthodoxy: eclecticism is in vogue, and it seems a fertile ground for creativity. Several innovative techniques have been mentioned recently in the literature: 1) computer-based and computer-assisted instruction (CBI and CAI), 2) individualized programs, 3) speech delay, 4) decoding courses, and

5) the Lipson technique. These seem at first glance to have little in common, but closer inspection reveals some common factors: 1) all develop a high level of student involvement; 2) all but speech delay encourage student initiative and expression of individuality, long recognized in psychological literature as motivating factors; 3) the Lipson technique, speech delay, and decoding courses emphasize focus on the content as well as the form of the sentence, an aspect recently advocated by Birkmaier;<sup>20</sup> 4) all but the Lipson technique involve limitations in oral work.

## CAI-CBI

Computer-assisted instruction (CAI), in which the computer serves as an adjunct to regular class work, has recently been reviewed by George Kalbous<sup>21</sup> and Edward Purcell.<sup>22</sup> Negative aspects of CAI include 1) the fact that expenses for nine months could run over \$5,000 for computer time and one terminal,<sup>23</sup> 2) non-marked, non-standard Cyrillic keyboards and 3) the present limitation to practice of written skills only. Nevertheless, Kalbous notes CAI's value in vocabulary and grammar drills: the machine can explain a student's errors to him while he is doing his exercises and can tailor exercises to his needs. Kalbous also notes the computer's value in materials preparation: the machine can easily help the instructor control vocabulary use in exercises and can record and analyze student errors for both student and instructor's benefit. CAI was reported by two programs responding to our survey: University of Southern California and Gallaudet College (for the deaf) in Washington, D.C.

Computer-based instruction (CBI) denotes reliance on the computer to do the bulk of the instruction. Sophisticated, successful programs teaching translation by computer at the University of Illinois have been described by Constance Curtin et al.,<sup>24</sup> as has a branching CBI program at Stanford.<sup>25</sup>

## Speech Delay

Speech delay is a technique in which beginning classwork omits speaking practice in favor of meaningful (content-centered) listening and writing practice. Visual aids and active student response are also key elements. Homework may include reading and writing practice at early stages. The value of delaying speech and developing listening comprehension was convincingly presented over a decade ago by James Asher,<sup>26</sup> but only recently has the principle been applied to another technique than Asher's Total Physical Response Method. Valerian Postovsky reports impressive empirical evidence of the method's superiority in developing a base for all four skills: speaking skills were surprisingly enhanced in Defense Language Institute<sup>27</sup> subjects who began with a six weeks speech delay. Donald Dragt has reported favorably on its use at Michigan State,<sup>28</sup> and Frank Ingram has reviewed literature on the area.<sup>29</sup> Daugherty's transformational-based "structure" course at the University of Colorado also deemphasizes active oral skills,<sup>30</sup> but does not emphasize listening comprehension as much as the above programs do. In addition, the University of Rochester (N.Y.) and Idaho State University report courses stressing passive skills and thus may be considered variants of the speech delay movement.

### Individualized Instruction

Despite massive interest in individualization in other languages, Russian instructors have been extremely hesitant to experiment with it. Based on the premise that speed is a crucial variable in instructional success, individualized programs allow each student to proceed at his own rate through a given set of instructional materials. Teachers are viewed as course organizers, reference individuals, and evaluators. Little convincing empirical evidence has been presented to indicate self-pacing techniques' superiority in foreign language instruction, especially at the college level, where students have some control over total course load, and are usually tolerant of, if not dependent on the instructor's pressure to maintain speed through course material. Patterson reports tentative but generally favorable results with an individualized college Russian program at the University of California at Davis. Staffing and materials preparation were a problem, student progress through material was less than normal, but motivation was increased and attrition rates reduced.<sup>31</sup>

James Connell describes a less structured but apparently highly successful individualization scheme for a small college program.<sup>32</sup> M. Keith Meyers gives a rather full description of an individualized Russian program at Earlham College (Richmond, Indiana), but reports no conclusions from it.<sup>33</sup>

In an empirical study conducted at Purdue University, William Buffington found significant advantages for the self-paced mode in advanced students' learning and recall of Russian vocabulary, and he convincingly argues for further study of self-pacing and self-evaluation.<sup>34</sup>

### Decoding Courses

Beginning courses which focus on the single skill of reading technical Russian-- frequently called "decoding" courses, since merely understanding a written text is usually the goal of such classes--are hardly new, but recently have been the object of renewed interest as part of a general trend to limit class focus for achievement of a useful skill.

The CBI course at Illinois is a decoding course and has been described above. A more conventional program at Brigham Young University has recently been described<sup>35</sup> and apparently shares some common points with a Pennsylvania State course described over a decade ago:<sup>36</sup> drastic limitations on required vocabulary together with increased emphasis on word derivation, deducing dictionary forms, and understanding participles and other deverbal forms. Students are allowed to begin reading in their own fields as soon as possible with individualized aid from the instructor.

### The Lipson Technique

Six of our respondents listed their methods as "Lipson technique." This method is characterized by 1) class dynamics emphasizing role-playing, whimsy, creativity, and humorous recombination of carefully controlled elements; 2) visual symbols to avoid translation; 3) a strong oral emphasis

as a basis for later reading; 4) inductive presentation of grammar rules which are then explicitly set forth; 5) a careful presentation of the single-stem verb system.<sup>37</sup> A published version of the Lipson technique is now available.<sup>38</sup>

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