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## **From Blended Learning to Emergency Remote and Online Teaching: Successes, Challenges, and Prospects of a Russian Language Program before and during the Pandemic**

OLGA KLIMOVA

### **1. Introduction**

In the Spring of 2020, many programs faced the challenge of having to quickly switch to a remote format as a result of the global pandemic. Emergency remote teaching (ERT), as defined by Mohammed et al., is “a sudden interim shift of instructional delivery to an online delivery mode as result of an immense catastrophe, in contrast to the online courses which are initially planned and designed to be delivered virtually” (2020, 72). A number of instructors and teaching specialists have reported that they faced numerous problems and roadblocks while redesigning their curricula for ERT (Lederman 2020; Green, Burrow, and Carvalho 2020). These challenges included a lack of time for preparation and grading and a difficulty in motivating students, who were also experiencing a significant amount of stress related to the abrupt shift to online teaching and the global health and economic crisis (Aguilera-Hermida 2020; Mohammed et al. 2020). Many instructors did not have sufficient background in the technology that would allow them to design effective online course activities and assessments, nor did they have the methodological knowledge and supporting pedagogies and resources to successfully redesign course tasks (Lederman 2020; Marshall, Shannon, and Love 2020; Mohammed et al. 2020; Russell 2020), which led to frustration and emotional distress among educators, and other negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, sadness, and loneliness (MacIntyre, Gregersen, and Mercer 2020, 12).

A number of articles have been published on ERT over the past year (Connolly and Hall 2020; Dubreil 2020; Gacs, Goertler, and Spasova 2020; Ferri, Grifoni, and Guzzo 2020; Karakaya 2020; MacIntyre, Gregersen, and Mercer 2020). Many of them analyze pre-pandemic models of curriculum design and explore ways of improving the process of course design in the future. Instructional design, one of the most important tasks of any instructor, has received insufficient attention in pedagogical literature (e.g., Goodyear 2015; Bennett, Agostinho, and Lockyer 2017). According to

Bennett, Agostinho, and Lockyer, the current research in higher education teaching “tends to include design as a minor component, with a greater emphasis on conceptions of and approaches to teaching, particularly face-to-face teaching, which is conceptualized as acts of lecturing, tutoring or assessing student work” (2017, 126). The global switch to ERT and subsequent online and hyflex learning models has drawn the attention of educators and college administrators to the lack of focus on and training in curricular design, especially in the post-secondary setting.

Despite the stressful environment created by the COVID-19 pandemic and the uncertainty regarding the duration of the lockdown, the Russian language program at the University of Pittsburgh (Pitt) was able to switch to ERT and later to an online delivery relatively effortlessly due to the previously implemented hybrid, or blended structure of its first- and second-year Russian language courses.<sup>1</sup> The blended model can be especially productive in a language classroom with the goals of developing language proficiency in all modes—speaking, listening, reading, and writing—as some of these skills (reading, listening, and writing) can be practiced asynchronously with feedback from the instructor, while other skills (speaking and listening) can be polished during face-to-face classes or synchronous sessions through videoconferencing platforms. This instructional model can offer more customized, student-driven, and student-centered language practices and assessments and provide language instructors and language programs with more flexibility, consistency, and preparedness for future unpredictable situations. It may also benefit the language programs that need to repurpose blended learning activities while switching to a new textbook, for using them as stand-alone learning modules, or for including them in special thematic language courses. Finally, the blended language curriculum can be a training model for instructors and students in online language learning and teaching, thus, eliminating stress and emotional discomfort that might be associated with online instructions. The effectiveness of the blended language curriculum at Pitt during the pandemic may serve as an example of a curriculum model that can be optimal in different situations.

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<sup>1</sup> In the online education literature, the terms “blended” and “hybrid” are often used interchangeably (Gecer and Dag, 2012; O’Byrne and Pytash 2015; Ali 2018). At Pitt, the blended courses, with a mixture of synchronous face-to-face class meetings and asynchronous, independent assignments that are completed by students usually through the university learning management system, are referred to in the course catalog as “hybrid.” I will use “blended” and “hybrid” interchangeably.

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## 2. An Overview of the Blended Russian Language Curriculum at Pitt

The initiative to transform the Russian language curriculum at the Elementary and Intermediate levels came originally as a request from the Pitt administration in 2017 to provide language instruction to a wider and more diverse student audience and to accommodate the schedules of students from engineering, business, nursing, computer sciences, and other professional programs and schools. Many students in other areas of the university (particularly STEM majors) were unable, for scheduling reasons, to enroll in a five-credit course not required by their major. Therefore, the Pitt administration requested that language programs reduce the number of course meetings and credits in their courses. For first- and second-year Russian courses, the number of weekly face-to-face meetings decreased from five to three (from 250 minutes to 150 minutes), and an asynchronous day including reading, listening, and speaking activities was added (the number of credits awarded for the course went from five to four).<sup>2</sup> One goal of the proposed hybrid curriculum was also to preserve instructional rigor and to maintain previously established proficiency goals despite the decrease of in-class instructional hours.

The program started with re-designing Intermediate Russian 1 and 2 in 2018-2019, since these particular courses had already incorporated instructional technology such as Kahoot, Flipgrid, VoiceThread, Quizlet, Edpuzzle, and PlayPosit. These modified language courses utilized a flipped learning model to maximize time on task during class sessions and the principles of backward design with the national proficiency standards (World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages) and performance descriptors (The ACTFL Performance Descriptors for Language Learners) from ACTFL as the driving principles behind course development.

The language instructors who were redesigning the course received professional development preparation by attending and presenting in several panels on online teaching and teaching with instructional technology at national conferences. The redesign team also received training in computer-assisted language teaching to address the problem of insufficient knowledge and design skills common among teachers who want to design online or blended language courses (Goodyear 2015; Bennett, Agostinho, and Lockyer 2017). With financial support from the dean's office, the Russian program was able to hire undergraduate research

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to fitting more easily into student schedules, the four-credit Elementary and Intermediate Russian are more affordable than the previous five-credit versions.

assistants and experienced consultants in the field of online language pedagogy to assist with this project.<sup>3</sup>

Based on the consultants' recommendations, we assigned a specific day (Thursday) for the asynchronous online portion/component of the blended first-year and second-year Russian courses. Because the asynchronous section served as a summative assessment for the chapter, it required more time and effort from students to complete. For that reason, they had four days to finish their work for this part of the course, while regular homework assignments needed to be completed by the beginning of the next class (with two days on average required for the completion). The asynchronous online component of these Russian blended courses followed the general topics and the proficiency level of the assigned textbook for each level but was based on authentic language and cultural materials.

For the asynchronous listening and reading activities before COVID (and during ERT in Spring 2020 and remote learning in Fall 2020 and Spring 2021), students were required to check weather forecasts, watch TV programs, read business cards and daily horoscopes, select food from a menu, book apartments through Airbnb, navigate lost and found websites, and complete other tasks. The activities and assessments in this self-paced, independent mode of instruction incorporated web-based materials such as infographics, statistics, surveys, blogs, vlogs, forums, social media, online news, and websites for restaurants, universities, stores, theaters, activity clubs, and hospitals. The same online unit tests at the end of each learning module (5-6 tests per semester), used before and during the pandemic as summative assessments, mirrored the activities and the authentic tasks from in-class/Zoom meetings and the asynchronous section of the course, thus, providing instructors with comparable information on how successfully students reached their learning outcomes. Thus, the four blended Russian language courses – Elementary Russian 1 and 2 and Intermediate Russian 1 and 2 – were already prepared by the time the pandemic was announced in Pennsylvania in March 2020 as the curriculum structure had been already completely developed, tested, and polished.

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<sup>3</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to Shannon Donnally Spasova, Anna Szawara, Edie Furniss, Dagny Felker, and Marika Oljjar for their support and assistance with this curriculum redesign project. This curriculum redesign project was possible thanks to a generous Curriculum Innovation Grant awarded by the Dean of Arts and Sciences at the University of Pittsburgh.

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### **3. Language Assessment through Digital Portfolios before and during the Pandemic**

In the blended language courses at Pitt, a portfolio-based assessment approach was implemented in response to student interests, needs, and their personal and professional goals. In both first-year and second-year Russian courses, digital portfolios (created by students in Google Sites, Wix, Weebly, or Google Docs) that included students' digital projects and their recorded asynchronous activities with their self-reflections continued to be used as the final assessment of students' proficiency in Spring 2020. During the academic year 2020-2021, our students also used the same instructions and resources for their digital portfolios as the cohort of students from the previous years. All student activity from the asynchronous section of the curriculum is included in the portfolios (listening and reading comprehension activities, Flipgrid videos, and four digital projects). A selection of in-class activities for interpersonal communication (through online interactive whiteboards and other web-based tools) and homework social media posts (presentational and interpersonal writing) is also included.

The description of each Russian language course includes the range of proficiency goals—Novice Low through Intermediate Low for first-year students and Intermediate Low through Intermediate Mid for second-year students. In their digital portfolios, our students reflected in English on their own progress toward these established proficiency goals and on their ability to create with language and to negotiate the meaning in Russian referencing the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, the ACTFL World-Readiness Standards for Language Learning, and the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements. They collected evidence of their proficiency, organized them into sections, wrote short descriptions, and chose the specific World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages (5Cs – Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities) that were relevant to the particular pieces of evidence, added can-do-statements, and included self-evaluation, by choosing whether they were “approaching,” “meeting,” or “exceeding” the specific proficiency goals set for their level. These digital portfolios were used for their annual program assessments to complement

annual OPI testing.<sup>4</sup> As a portfolio-based assessment in Elementary and Intermediate Russian involved the use of digital tools from the beginning of the curriculum redesign process in 2018, during the ERT period and in the 2020-2021 academic year, the Russian program was able to continue utilizing the same assessment techniques with no modifications.

#### **4. The Transition from Blended Language Learning to ERT to Online Teaching**

When the pandemic began, Pitt's blended Russian courses already had pre-designed course shells in the learning management system (LMS)<sup>5</sup> with learning modules, online quizzes through Kahoot, online vocabulary flashcards through Quizlet, tests, listening and reading comprehension homework activities, and audio assignments through Flipgrid. These modules had been revised several times over the course of two years from 2018 to 2020 and were easily transformed to a completely remote mode, utilizing the hybrid curriculum framework (with 3 face-to-face credits and 1 asynchronous credit). During ERT in Spring 2020 and remote teaching in Fall 2020 and Spring 2021, we followed this class structure using Zoom for the three synchronous meetings with the instructor. The pre-pandemic surveys and official student evaluations in Fall 2018, Spring 2019, Fall 2019, and Spring 2020, suggested that the curriculum redesign team limit the platforms for blended learning courses to ones that were more user friendly. The same instructional technology was utilized in our Russian language classes during ERT and online teaching.

In addition to moving the blended curriculum structure and the learning modules into a new LMS (Canvas) in Spring 2020 (for Elementary) and Fall 2020 (for Intermediate), all instructions, examples of students' previous work, and links to digital tools for homework assessments, projects, and digital portfolios were used from the pre-COVID blended language curriculum.

Before the pandemic, in-class content and learning activities were presented through interactive PowerPoint slides. The use of the slides

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<sup>4</sup> Annual program assessment includes OPIs for all four levels of Russian and has been used for reporting submitted to the Dean of Arts and Sciences. However, in Spring 2020, the annual report to the Dean's office was cancelled in recognition of the negative effect of the pandemic on students' mental and emotional health as well as on their performance. The digital portfolios included examples of students' proficiency-based assessments and progress between August 2019 and April 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Pitt switched from Blackboard to Canvas in Fall 2020. However, Elementary Russian was allowed to use Canvas in Spring 2020 as an "early course adopter."



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with pop-up answers, displayed in class immediately after students had given their responses, was beneficial for students' understanding of new vocabulary or grammatical concepts as they received immediate feedback. Students also had access to these slides through the LMS and, therefore, could review the interactive slides and check the answers. The same slides were used during ERT and online teaching in 2020-2021, with added interactivity through the Zoom annotation function, Breakout Rooms, reaction buttons, and the chat box during synchronous online sessions.

Prior to March 2020, in addition to interactive PowerPoint slides, instructors also utilized digital tools such as interactive online whiteboards (Padlet and Miro), interactive quizzes through Kahoot, or interactive web-based video-assignments through PlayPosit or Edpuzzle, for in-class communicative and task-based activities. The in-class "authentic" tasks included booking an appointment with a doctor, ordering groceries online, shopping online for clothes, selecting restaurants, using dating websites, etc. These instructional strategies continued to be effective during ERT in March-April 2020 and were used and expanded in online teaching in Fall 2020 and Spring 2021.

Enabling homework submission was among the challenges that the Russian program faced during the pandemic. For the Elementary Russian course, we have used the textbook *Beginner's Russian*, which includes an online workbook with self-graded assessments for vocabulary and grammar as well as reading and listening comprehension activities. The completion of self-check exercises online with immediate corrective feedback benefits students by permitting them to repeat these activities as many times as they need and allows instructors to redirect time spent on grading to the development of interactive proficiency-based activities and other supplementary materials and tutorials.

While the Elementary Russian web-based workbook was effective for all formats, a problem arose with homework assignments for Intermediate Russian. The students in this course had been completing their homework exercises in paper workbooks with occasional web-based assessments through the supplementary online website for our textbook, *Vputi*. A paper workbook required the instructors to grade each assignment manually.<sup>6</sup> ERT revealed the challenges of checking and grading handwritten homework regularly, and for that reason, we had to abandon the paper workbook entirely for the 2020-2021 academic year.

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<sup>6</sup> The students also received the answer keys to the workbook exercises and had to complete self-corrections in a different color pen before showing the workbook to the instructor in class.



## 5. Student Surveys and Feedback

During the pre-COVID curriculum redesigning process, we relied on regular feedback and evaluations from students. Student-centered curricular design, according to Bennett, Agostinho, and Lockyer, takes into consideration “student needs and prior knowledge as a starting point for design, involve[s] students in the design process if possible, and result[s] in an adaptable design” (2017, 127). In the blended language classes, the learners’ feedback and critique can be used not only for choosing the authentic content based on their interests and backgrounds, but also for selecting assessments and user-friendly digital tools that require less preparation and less special technology training.

We collected student feedback on language learning and the use of instructional technology from all four levels of Russian through several online surveys (in 2018, 2019, and 2020). In the midterm survey, conducted in October 2018, our students evaluated their experiences with the new blended instructional model, and their feedback overall was positive. In the March 2019 survey, despite an overall positive assessment of their technological competence, 43% (out of 41 participants) of students indicated that they might need some or a lot of assistance with image editing tools, 42% expressed some need for additional training and guided instructions for screen capturing tools, and 39% required assistance with video editing tools. Based on this feedback, we provided students with several choices, and, for some of their projects, they could choose either to use a video editing app, to record a PowerPoint presentation with their voiceover narration, or to prepare a presentation through Zoom while sharing their screen.

Students suggested improvements to the navigation of online modules and the organization of digitally created activities and assessments, and since then, we have added a list of weekly tasks in the beginning of each module with specific deadlines, recorded a video tutorial on how to navigate the Canvas site, combined some links to activities, assessments, and supporting materials and resources into one document or one page, and integrated Flipgrid speaking activities directly into Canvas. Additionally, students requested more individualized, immediate feedback on their asynchronous and homework assessments, which can be improved in the future by increasing the number of self-check exercises and by providing them with more personalized feedback from the instructors and/or undergraduate teaching assistants (TAs).

In both pre-COVID surveys in 2018-2019 and final student evaluations in April 2020, students suggested incorporating more diverse

cultural content in the classroom and we included some new content and assessments with a focus on cultural, ethnic, social, economic, and gender diversity in Russophone cultures. Students also requested more exposure to peers, possibly through a pen pal program, or other interactive language experiences with native speakers. We were able to include some virtual synchronous and asynchronous interactions with young native speakers from different parts of the Russian-speaking world through Zoom and Flipgrid. In addition to introducing students to the diversity of the Russian-speaking world through in-class activities and reading and listening comprehension homework assignments, the focus of students' individual digital projects has also been shifted to the discovery of the diversity of Russophone countries and different regions of the Russian Federation. During the 2020-2021 academic year, students created video essays, slide presentations, interactive posters, interactive maps, children's books, and other cultural products dedicated to Russia's regional cultures and to post-Soviet cultures, thus expanding their intercultural competence. We were able to meet our students' needs by adding language content and activities related to diversity, equity, and inclusion during the pandemic because we did not need to spend much time on developing online modules and designing online assessments from scratch but instead had an opportunity to repurpose our pre-pandemic blended language curriculum.

## **6. Conclusion: Benefits and Future Implications of the Use of Blended Learning in a Language Classroom**

For any successful online curriculum, course design is a key component that requires a significant amount of time and effort (Moore, Schmidt-Crawford, and Valai, 2019), and, for the language curriculum redesign project at Pitt, it took more than two years of careful planning, choosing and testing the appropriate instructional technology, and developing special learning activities and assessments. As demonstrated in the Elementary and Intermediate Russian language classes, some benefits of the blended learning model have become even more evident during the switch to ERT and remote instruction—already designed learning modules with asynchronous learning activities for listening, reading, speaking, and writing, web-based, self-graded homework assignments, and a web-based assessment system have freed instructor time for developing other activities and diminished the stress level related to a rapid switch to online teaching.

Despite some challenges and an extra effort that the instructors had to make to build an online community and to engage students in active

online learning during the pandemic, the blended Russian courses at Pitt have presented a number of benefits for professional development as well. In world language teaching in particular, the switch to emergency remote instruction has revealed that instructors have not been receiving adequate online language training that would combine “language pedagogy, pedagogy for educational technology, and online pedagogy” (Russell 2020, 339). However, the instructors at Pitt, who were teaching Elementary and Intermediate Russian in Spring 2020, spent less time adjusting to the new environment as they were already trained in hybrid language teaching and were well familiar with the online structure of the course, the learning modules in the LMS, the technology-based assessments, and instructional technology in a language classroom in general. As the popularity of online language teaching grows every year both in secondary and post-secondary educational systems, developing and integrating blended modules into language classes can serve as training for future language educators, thus, preparing them for both face-to-face and online teaching.

During the pandemic and remote learning, many students in other language programs were overwhelmed with the need to switch to online or hyflex language learning models and the use of new, unfamiliar technology, however, the students from Pitt’s Russian program were already familiar with digital course tools (chosen during the curriculum development stage in 2018-2020), which did not require a steep learning curve.

The switch to online teaching during the pandemic has also incentivized the Russian program instructors and TAs to create more interactive activities that helped to engage students more actively in the learning process and to build a stronger online community of language learners. Various activities and games, developed through Edji, Worldwall, and Miro, will be used in the blended language curriculum when the classes move back to the face-to-face format. They can also be repurposed and reused in Intermediate Russian 1 and 2 in the 2020-2021 academic year while adapting a new textbook.<sup>7</sup> A number of instructional activities and strategies, developed or polished in Fall 2020 and Spring 2021, can now be used for the blended language curriculum that would make the transformation of regular classes into blended smoother, thus “making class time more active and student-centered and [...] making the entire learning experience more flexible” (Spasova and Welsh 2020, 406). As teaching during the pandemic has shown, a well-designed blended language course,

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<sup>7</sup> The Russian program is switching from *V puti* to a new textbook, *Russian: From Novice High to Intermediate* by Anna S. Kudyma, which has a web-based interactive workbook.

exemplified in first year and second year Russian courses at Pitt, can offer numerous opportunities for students' independent practice, guided instruction, and time on task with a high level of flexibility and an ability to be quickly rearranged and modified in accordance with circumstances.

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