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Make Me Talk: A Bichronous Russian Language Course for Beginners

OLGA GARABRANDT, IRINA SIX

1. Introduction

Even before the pandemic, the Russian faculty at the University of Kansas (KU) had considered creating an online Russian language program. The goal was to make courses of all levels accessible for a wider audience of learners, such as non-traditional students, students in distance learning programs, and high-school students. It was the COVID-19 pandemic, however, that spurred the urgent development of online courses.

During the summer of 2020, a team of three people, Dr. Irina Six, the Russian Program Coordinator, and two graduate students, Olga Garabrandt and Chul Hyun Hwang, with the technical support of the university’s Center for Online and Distance Learning, designed an online bichronous beginning Russian course which means that it integrates asynchronous components with synchronous sessions (Martin, Polly, and Ritzhaupt 2020). Before launching the work on the bichronous course, the course developers had already completed substantial background preparation, such as surveying the student population to identify the limitations of the existing in-person instruction and considering tactics to overcome the main challenges of asynchronous teaching. Some of the challenges of online instruction include a lack of interpersonal communication, online fatigue, and limited opportunities for speaking.

The course developers chose to create the new course on the Blackboard learning management system, utilizing the free web-based textbook Mezhdu nami by DeBenedette, Comer, Smyslova, and Perkins (www.mezhdunami.org), pioneered at KU in 2009. Grounded in processing instruction theory (VanPatten 1996; Comer and deBenedette 2011), this open-access interactive textbook provides explicit explanations of Russian grammar and offers structured input activities that engage learners in a gradual process of mapping forms to meanings. Other advantages of this textbook for using it in asynchronous teaching are the abundance of both reading and auditory input, the online format, and the variety of resources to choose the tasks from. In addition to the main online component, Mezhdu nami includes Classroom Activities and Homework Assignments workbooks, and it provides curricular support (classroom handouts, PowerPoint presentations, transcripts of audio recordings, lesson plans, sample tests, etc.). Additionally, the Mezhdu nami website includes downloadable files.
with vocabulary lists for each chapter and an online dictionary with a search bar. The first semester course covers the first four units of the textbook.

The development of the bichronous language course was a new experience for all members of the team. Driven by the desire to provide students with high-quality remote instruction that enables learners to work independently, the course development team set the goal of creating an attractive product that would eliminate the risk of COVID exposure, and in the long run, open the study of Russian language to audiences outside the university. The course development process included formulating the course vision, deciding on the course structure, and selecting the technology tools and methods for their user-friendly implementation at the beginner level.

Through the asynchronous components, the new bichronous course allows learners to work at their own pace and adjust their focus based on their individual needs and interests (Chen, Liu, and Wong 2007; Sazonova and Ivanova 2020). The course does not require the immediate guidance of an instructor or any communication with peers during four asynchronous weekdays, but it includes intensive interpersonal interaction in the target language during a synchronous group summary meeting on the fifth weekday. Outside of conducting the synchronous session, the instructor’s work in this bichronous course involves daily grading, recording video messages to students, making minor adjustments to the coursework, and being available to students during office hours and by email.

This article will describe the key course design principles, best practices for teaching it, and the key outcomes of implementing a bichronous course at KU.

2. Course Development Principles

One of the primary goals of the bichronous course development was to ensure that the instruction is at least of the same quality as in the face-to-face classes. Remote students are expected to learn the same amount of material and take the same tests as students in traditional classrooms. The development of students’ speaking skills was of special concern because it is an expected weak spot in fully asynchronous courses (Wang and Chen 2009; Perveen 2016; Sazonova and Ivanova 2020). The course creators had to ensure that bichronous students do not fall behind in speaking. Another critical need was the adoption of appropriate teacher-student communication channels that would enable the instructor to guide, monitor, and encourage learner progress. Finally, the course developers aimed at designing ways of keeping students motivated by stimulating peer-to-peer interaction and introducing them to Russian culture.

Summarizing the information gained from multiple training sessions, student feedback, and personal experience in online language
teaching, the team formulated five key guiding principles that were applied throughout the course development process. Adherence to these principles listed below has proven to be a significant factor in the successful implementation of the course.

(1) **Manageability.** A frequent complaint of remote students is their struggle to keep up with the course material due to the overwhelming amount of work they need to do on their own (Khoirin and Azimah 2020, 133). Therefore, the bichronous course activities must be maximally efficient and manageable, yet, at the same time, the course must align with the number of credit hours and keep up with the language program standards. When it comes to adapting the textbook and modifying face-to-face teaching practices, the asynchronous format requires instructors to select and create materials in such a way as to ensure the efficiency of each daily activity to avoid overwhelming the students with online work.

(2) **Consistency.** In asynchronous teaching, consistency makes expectations clear and promotes discipline (Drucker and Fleischhauer 2021). Uniformity in daily and weekly work enables users to move through the course efficiently once they have an established routine. Hence, the course had to be designed in such a way that the structure of the weekly activities remains uniform. All the elements of the course, such as the ratio between synchronous and asynchronous learning, the types of tasks, the nature of non-graded and graded assignments, as well as their sequencing need to remain uniform and predictable from day to day with only the content changing. The principle of uniformity and consistency in online tasks and assignments decreases the time and effort that students need to put forth in order to organize their own learning.

(3) **Focus on speaking.** Creating classroom environments where students easily develop their speaking abilities is a challenge in any language course, and even more so with asynchronous delivery. The asynchronous format of instruction can have advantages for teaching reading, listening, and writing, but shows limitations when it comes to the development of speaking abilities (Wang and Chen 2009; Perveen 2016; Sazonova and Ivanova 2020). Therefore, course developers needed to devote special attention to speaking when designing the course which has a large asynchronous component. Asynchronous instruction allows students to work on presentational speaking and pronunciation. However, authentic interpersonal speaking involves unscripted interaction, negotiation of meaning, and real-time adjustments (Cutshall 2012), which can only be achieved in the synchronous mode of instruction.

(4) **Focus on communication.** A common reason for a decrease in student motivation in asynchronous courses is the lack of interpersonal connection and a sense of community (Bernard et al., 2009). In asynchronous instruction, students cannot receive immediate answers to questions that
arise while they are studying alone, for instance, when they need to clarify the information about grammar that they did not understand. Therefore, shifting language instruction from face-to-face to the bichronous mode required the setting up of new communication arrangements between instructor and students, as well as among peers.

(5) Focus on culture. The desire to engage with the target culture is another component which plays a major role in student motivation to study the language (Celik and Yildiz 2019). The remote mode of instruction, as well as the recent rapid growth of culturally relevant content online due to the pandemic allow for rich and diverse online cultural experiences. Therefore, the new bichronous course takes full advantage of this resource. Cultural encounters were designed to stimulate students’ cognitive and emotional involvement in the course and to organize online peer-to-peer interaction through discussion boards. Additionally, culture-related tasks provide students with a much needed break after the cognitively demanding independent work on the acquisition of language structures.

The five above-mentioned principles guided the course developers in the choice of course structure, techniques, tasks, and tools throughout the process of bichronous course building and implementation.

3. Course Structure
The curriculum of the bichronous Russian course follows the schedule of KU face-to-face five-credit Russian language classes that meet daily. It also reflects the requirements of the KU Russian program, which include student participation in cultural encounters. The course is 14 weeks long. The weekly schedule of the bichronous course incorporates the following three components:

(1) Asynchronous days (Monday – Thursday). Students reported that each daily module takes between ninety minutes and three hours to complete.

(2) Summary day (Friday). A 50-minute synchronous group session with the instructor.

(3) “Russian weekend.” Weekend work involves online cultural encounters and participation in the Blackboard discussion board forum.

Figure 1 shows the beginning page of an asynchronous daily learning module on Blackboard.
Figure 1. Sample view of an asynchronous workday

Prior to the Friday synchronous meeting, students access the list of the language topics that they need to review. Before the meeting, they download the handout which lists the meeting activities and serves as a guide for the synchronous oral work.

The learning modules of the asynchronous days target all language skills, except for interpersonal speaking, and they are strictly uniform in daily tasks and sequence. Each asynchronous day consists of the following components:

Each day begins with a set of learning goals that are displayed on the first page of the module. Students watch a short video from their instructor that draws their attention to the possible challenges in the daily input. They also read the “A Little about the Language” section on the textbook website and complete the related assignments.

3.2. Engagement with the input.
Students are asked to read and listen to the Mezhdu nami input dialogues, and to repeat after the speakers. Following that, they complete the comprehension activities in the section in the online Mezhdu nami lesson titled “Did You Understand Everything?”

3.3. Blackboard practice assignments
The course included four to six online Blackboard practice assignments that provided automated feedback (correct/incorrect), but did not count toward the overall course grade. These assignments were multiple-choice, matching, and short answer exercises. Most of them were digitized from the Mezhdu nami Classroom Activities and Homework Book, however, some were created specifically for the course. For example, the course developers
designed quizzes that help students review a few topics at a time at the end of the week or of a chapter.

3.4. Graded assignments
Three graded assignments are due by the end of each day: a review quiz (graded automatically), a writing assignment, and an oral assignment (both uploaded and graded manually). The course developers initially considered using the VoiceThread online recording tool for oral assignments, however, the recordings submitted through VoiceThread do not appear in the Blackboard “Needs Grading” page, which causes unnecessary complications to the grading process. For this reason, the daily oral assignments are submitted as uploaded audio files.

4. Best practices
The bichronous course titled “Elementary Russian I” was offered at KU in the Fall semester of 2020. In the Spring of 2021, it was offered again, in addition to its second part Elementary Russian II. The bichronous section has replaced one of the three face-to-face sections that were offered at KU before the pandemic. This section summarizes the practices and activities that have worked well in teaching the bichronous Beginner Russian course.

In the daily video recording, the instructor highlights the key grammar, vocabulary, and/or pronunciation topics focusing on the issues that might present a potential problem for students in the absence of an immediate opportunity to ask questions or receive the instructor’s feedback. The length of the videos ranges from two to eight minutes. The videos provide another channel for communicating the material to students in addition to the book, which only has written grammar explanations. The videos are meant to be reused; however, instructors could create their own videos to meet the needs of the current group or to address the observed mistakes. The platform Kaltura Capture has been a useful tool for recording and embedding videos, as it supports simultaneous recording of the screen and the web camera view, and allows for an instructor to lecture with the use of PowerPoint presentations.

4.2. Balancing input and output.
The texts in Mezhdú nami are designed as reading and auditory input predominantly in the form of dialogues between the characters. However, the text-related exercises are mostly limited to answering comprehension questions in English. Furthermore, the tasks in Classroom Activities seldom call for recycling the text phrases. One of the concerns observed during
previous teaching with *Mezhdyu nami* in the KU Russian program was students’ struggle to recall many of the details from the storyline, which suggested insufficient engagement with the input and comprehension.

Consequently, an important feature which the course developers agreed on was to design asynchronous activities that focus students’ attention on the original input texts. The daily writing and oral assignments uploads may include: (1) reading a few lines from the input texts aloud, (2) recording Russian equivalents of the provided English sentences with the input text lexica, (3) answering questions about the input text in the target language, (4) recording short monologues or dialogues using the input texts as a model, (5) writing or recording short texts about the characters using words and expressions from the input texts, (6) recording their own stories using elements of the input texts as a model.

Concentrating on the original input in individual asynchronous work has helped students to retain active vocabulary and improve their asynchronous and synchronous output, which is one of the course’s priorities.

4.3. Balancing non-graded practice and graded assignments.
One of the problems that the course developers faced was the limitations of the Blackboard gradebook. Since every time a graded assignment is created in Blackboard, it automatically creates a column in the gradebook, the course developers soon found the course gradebook filled with a large number of columns, making it difficult to manage. To simplify the gradebook display, the practice tasks were designed to give only automated feedback (correct/incorrect), while the daily review quiz and two daily uploads would be graded.

4.4. Pronunciation practice.
Due to a lack of training in Russian phonetics, students’ struggle to read and speak with the correct pronunciation was one of the shortcomings of previous face-to-face classes. The bichronous course presented an opportunity to address pronunciation in a structured way, which had not been done previously in KU Russian classes.

To address the need of teaching pronunciation asynchronously, specific instructional materials were created for the new curriculum. They included video explanations recorded via Kaltura Capture or at the university’s Media Production Studio designed to be:

a. contextualized (embedded in the textbook content)
b. awareness-raising (presented as instructor commentary on the Russian sounds, sound combinations, vowel reduction, stress patterns, and phrasal intonation that native English speakers typically find difficult).
After listening to the instructional video recordings, students complete non-graded assignments in which they may be asked to listen, repeat after the speaker, or complete a dictation. Then students complete an oral assignment in which they use the target phonetic features for different tasks that require reading and speaking in Russian, while paying attention to the pronunciation. In the subsequent daily oral assignments, students are expected to follow the pronunciation rules they already know. The consistent attention to phonetics in the course tasks, coupled with regular instructor feedback through the learning management system and during synchronous interaction has helped to avoid the fossilization of incorrect pronunciation. Overall, designing the new course has provided the opportunity to incorporate phonetics in the course structure, without the pronunciation work being rushed or sporadic.

4.5. Unlimited corrections and resubmission
Allowing unlimited corrections and resubmissions of graded assignments appears to be beneficial for students and appreciated by them. When grading assignments, rather than correcting students’ errors, the instructor usually marks them and indicates directions for improvement in the written feedback. Students have an opportunity to resubmit the corrected version of the assignments for full credit. This way, students work on the problem on their own rather than simply receiving the correct answers. Additionally, this practice may ease students’ language learning anxiety.

4.6. Synchronous summary day for interpersonal speaking
Mezhdu nami Classroom Activities has an abundance of pair work activities and communicative tasks to develop speaking; however, they are meant for face-to-face settings. Even though some Mezhdu nami activities were adapted for the synchronous summary days, for the most part, the tasks and exercises were created anew to fit the remote mode of communication and to provide maximum opportunity to practice interpersonal interaction for largely asynchronous learners. Furthermore, the specifics of the bichronous delivery called for adjusting the role of the instructor to organizing or facilitating carefully scaffolded speaking activities, which are provided to students in the Friday handout. Based on the grammar and vocabulary of the week, the speaking tasks incorporate structured pair work activities that begin with the easiest ones and proceed to those that require more independent speaking from the participants, enabling them to stay in the target language for most of the session. In some cases, videoconferencing can provide an extra personalized communicative resource for students because they are communicating about things that are in their homes. The example in Figure 2 shows this kind of personalized prompt.
Person 1 shows something around them (rooms, furniture, food, clothes):
- Вот мои окна.

Person 2 makes a comment:
- Твои окна такие большие!

Figure 2. Sample synchronous activity.

The synchronous meeting begins with a warm-up in which students ask one another a simple question in Russian, such as, “How are you?”，“What kind of music do you like?” or “What are you doing tonight?” Next, students split into Breakout Rooms to continue working on the interactive tasks following the provided guidelines. The instructor circulates among the Breakout Rooms to give feedback or correct errors if needed. In activities organized in this way, peer-to-peer feedback is encouraged and often occurs naturally: students help each other recall the needed Russian vocabulary and grammar. As a rule, one of the speaking activities is a roleplay, which the pairs prepare and perform at the end of the session, when everyone returns to the main video conference room. Students are welcome to stay after the end of the session to ask questions or to talk to the instructor. They are usually happy to take advantage of this opportunity and initiate a few minutes of discussion about Russian language and culture. According to the course instructor, students have been able to complete the speaking tasks without much difficulty and stayed in the target language most of the time with little or no help from the instructor. In the course evaluations, the students indicated their gratitude for the opportunity to meet synchronously once a week and interact with their peers.

4.7. Academic integrity policies
The synchronous beginning Russian course has strongly benefited from the word lists available on the Mezhdu nami website at the end of each unit and the Mezhdu nami online dictionary. First, these resources diminish students’ temptation to use external resources such as Google Translate to complete their assignments. Second, to ensure academic integrity and the fairness of grading, the course developers adopted a policy which does not allow using any words and expressions borrowed from resources other than the textbook. Instead, students are encouraged to download the vocabulary lists from each textbook unit and use the search bar in the Mezhdu nami online dictionary. This rule is included in the syllabus, with a warning that the grade for students’ work will be reduced if the use of external sources is detected. Adopting this policy has helped in discouraging students from violating academic integrity. It has kept students’ focus on
the target vocabulary and stimulated vocabulary learning and retention in the absence of traditional closed-book vocabulary quizzes.

Another policy of the asynchronous course requires students to write the graded written assignments and tests by hand only, rather than submitting typed documents, to keep students from copying and pasting text.

4.8. “Russian weekends”
The “Russian weekend” asynchronous work consists of three steps. First, students explore the assigned cultural material, for example, they virtually visit a museum, watch a movie, explore Russian cooking on assigned websites, or independently research a certain cultural topic. For example, during one of their “Russian Weekends,” students choose three museums to explore on the website museumstudiesabroad.org/region/russia. Afterwards, they post a response in English to a prompt question in the Blackboard discussion forum, commenting on the cultural material and their interpretation of it. As a final step, students read their peers’ posts and respond to at least two of them, or more for extra credit. Presented in this way, the weekend assignments, while not involving the language directly, play an important role in putting the language in its cultural context for beginner learners and serve as a way for the group to be in touch.

Each of the practical ideas presented above reflect the course concept and principles developed prior to course design and make up for the limitations observed in asynchronous language teaching, such as lack of interaction, intensive online course load, and confusion in the use of new technology (Lin and Gao 2020).

5. Assessment
The bichronous format allows for a variety of regular formative and summative assessments. The following components are used in the KU Russian bichronous course assessment.

5.1. Daily assessment
The daily review quizzes were created specifically for this bichronous course with SoftChalk, a content authoring software that is easily integrated into most learning management systems, including Blackboard, and allows for user-friendly online assessment. Each quiz includes seven to ten automatically graded multiple choice or matching questions that check students’ comprehension of the input text and the language features of the day. Together with the daily graded assignments, they help to ensure that students have not fallen behind on the important material and serve as a review of the day’s key information.
5.2. **Weekly assessment**
Since students learn the new material independently, the weekly synchronous sessions provide an opportunity for regular informal assessment by the instructor. The synchronous meetings serve as an indication of the extent to which students are able to use the material learned asynchronously in a synchronous and spontaneous setting. Overall, the Friday speaking activities indicate to the instructor the level of attainment of the weekly learning goals.

5.3. **Chapter tests and final exam**
Along with the bichronous course, in the Fall of 2020 the KU Slavic department offered face-to-face and hybrid (combination of face-to-face and Zoom) Beginner Russian classes. All these classes had the same chapter tests and final exams which served as a point of comparison. The tests are borrowed from face-to-face classes from previous years at KU; however due to the pandemic situation they are offered as open-book tests in all three sections. For the final exam, in addition to the written part, students also submit an oral portion that requires them to tell the stories of the textbook characters and talk about themselves.

Overall, the bichronous course offers the opportunity for close monitoring of the students’ daily and weekly performance as well as a multi-level evaluation of student progress throughout the semester.

6. **Students’ Feedback**
In Fall 2020, the number of KU students who enrolled in the Beginner Russian course and completed it without failure or withdrawal was higher in the online bichronous course (15 students) than in the hybrid (10 students) or fully face-to-face class (10 students). Students in all classes used the same textbook, and their results on the final exams were similar: the number of students who received a grade not lower than B- in their final exams were similar in the bichronous (69%) and face-to-face/hybrid classes (71%). This is consistent with studies that reveal no significant differences in learning outcomes in traditional and e-learning modes of delivery (Hrastinski 2008).

In general, according to students’ evaluations, most of the students in all three groups found their course work as challenging as they expected. Some students in the bichronous class (20%) perceived their workload to be less challenging than they expected. Meanwhile, 22% of students in the traditionally taught classes reported that the course was more challenging than they expected.

For the majority of students in the bichronous section, the time spent on coursework did not exceed 15 hours per week on average, whereas about 20% of students in the traditionally taught classes reported spending
more than 16 hours on the course per week, suggesting that bichronous course might be less stressful and more manageable to students.

Students indicated in the course evaluation their appreciation of the consistency in the bichronous course structure. They reported that the well-organized syllabus and daily learning modules were very helpful in their learning. They noted the usefulness and convenience of the consistent daily oral and written assignments. The students reported that the frequent feedback provided by the instructor on grammar, spelling, and pronunciation had enhanced their coursework. Finally, in their feedback, the students pointed out the usefulness of the explanations provided in the instructor’s “Start of the day” videos.

The students explicitly expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to explore culture. The weekly tasks kept the discussion board live and abundant in opinions and student interactions. The students appreciated the chance to focus on cultural aspects that were most interesting to them. For example, one student frequently brought up folklore, another one focused on music, while a third looked at the tasks throughout the course from a political angle in their cultural discussions. In their evaluations, the students described the cultural activities as one of their favorite types of activities in the course, calling them interesting and enjoyable.

7. Outcomes
The effectiveness of the bichronous course, as well as the specific principles and practices described in this article are yet to be confirmed with more precise data. Nevertheless, some preliminary observations of student performance in the beginning Russian course look promising and beneficial for both students and departments.

Firstly, the bichronous format has increased the overall enrollment and student retention. First-year enrollment in the KU Russian program grew to 40 students in Fall 2020 (more than a 20% increase from the previous year) and retention was solid. Also, possibly affected by the COVID situation, only 40% of students from classes with traditional (face-to-face and hybrid) delivery in Fall 2020 continued with learning Russian in Spring of 2021, whereas in the bichronous group 80% of students enrolled in the next Russian class of the same learning format. Secondly, the bichronous format has enabled offering Russian to a wider audience. After the bichronous course was developed and successfully taught in Fall 2020, the KU Slavic department received a U.S. Russia Foundation grant for $120,000 to build a pipeline for the study of Russian in Kansas high schools by funding instructors and outreach events. Currently, the department is planning to offer the course to military personnel who can benefit from bichronous delivery. In addition, the department is developing a second-
year Russian bichronous course aiming to build a complete online Russian language program.

Overall, regardless of the initial uncertainty about the efficiency of online language learning, the implementation of the bichronous course has been successful, and it has shown students’ willingness to study using the new methods of learning a foreign language.

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