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Developing Russian Oral Skills in the Online Environment

ELENA DOLUDENKO

1. Introduction
The COVID-19 pandemic forced universities all over the world to switch to remote learning over the course of a few days. Unlike planned online classes, the classes that were shifted to a remote mode were not designed ahead of time but could instead be considered emergency remote teaching and learning. These classes did not necessarily include activities that could be easily transferred to an online mode. Students who suddenly faced a new modality had to navigate not only new ways of using technology, but also learn how to be more autonomous in their learning and be more in charge of their learning process.

The switch to remote learning brought up drawbacks that have been discussed in the literature before, such as the absence of face-to-face interaction and increased self-regulation (Gilbert 2000). In a language class, face-to-face interaction is essential for developing and practicing oral skills because to speak a language effectively, students need to acquire how to use the language in different social contexts (Kang 2002). Without regular class meetings, it can be more difficult to provide students with opportunities for oral practice. This article presents various activities and techniques used in online beginning Russian classes during the spring and summer semesters of 2020. The goals of these activities were to continue developing students’ oral skills in an effective way both during synchronous meetings via Zoom and when students worked asynchronously.

2. Speaking activities online
2.1. Individual recordings
One way to keep students speaking every day is to ask them to record short audio responses to questions posted on their learning management system (LMS). The LMS Canvas, for example, allows students to upload recordings or record themselves directly on the assignment page.

In the spring of 2020, the University of Missouri switched to a remote mode, and the university administration asked instructors to keep online synchronous meetings to a minimum. Following the switch, instead of five in-person classes per week, my first-year Russian class only
met synchronously twice a week by Zoom. On the other three class days, students studied and practiced the material on their own from my pre-recorded lectures and the textbook. As a part of their independent work, students were instructed to record themselves responding to a prompt related to a topic they studied on their own: this task was used to practice a grammatical point or new vocabulary covered during that week. These recordings were similar to pair work, but instead of hearing a question from a partner, students read the prompt in Russian in the assignment. In response, students recorded themselves speaking for at least a minute two or three times a week.

This assignment is similar to the audiotaped journals described in Dantas-Whitney’s study (2002), where 18 students recorded themselves over the course of ten weeks. The participants were asked to reflect on the topics studied in class and analyze them through personal experience. Eleven students agreed to participate in a group interview after the course to discuss how they perceived this assignment. Based on the information from the individual and group interview recordings, the author concluded that the audiotaped journals provided students with additional oral practice and thus prepared them for giving speeches in other contexts, allowed them to work on their pronunciation and receive private feedback from the instructor, and gave them opportunities for self-evaluation.

During the spring of 2020, first year students were assigned two or three weekly recordings, which were graded for completion. The recordings ranged between 11 and 180 seconds each. Students were not given instructions about the length of their recordings, but they were asked to answer all questions in the assignment. Such practice is especially beneficial for those students who are too shy to speak up in class. In these individual recordings, they did not have to worry about how other students view them and they could speak freely. Students were asked to answer questions in the task, describe a picture, or think aloud what they would say in certain situations (see an example of a speaking prompt in Appendix A). As an instructor, I could provide individualized oral or written feedback to all students, which is more difficult to do in a face-to-face classroom. This feedback was available only to the student, and other students in my class could not hear the corrections, unlike in the classroom where anyone could be “put on the spot.” Since the response was recorded I could listen to it several times, unlike in a classroom where a student says a phrase just once, and something that needs to be corrected can just be forgotten by the end of their answer.
In response to their videos, I recorded feedback, including my comments on pronunciation, and sent it to the students through the LMS. As research shows, individualized feedback on recordings helps to develop oral proficiency and progress towards student’s goals (Kim 2014), and students appreciate instructor feedback and encouragement (Lee 2016). The delayed feedback in asynchronous classes, as opposed to the immediate feedback common in face-to-face classes, provides more time and opportunities for cognitive engagement (Lee 2016). Thus, individual recordings promote student-centered learning, shift the focus to each learner’s needs, and encourage students to speak Russian regularly.

2.2. Paired recordings
Another type of recording that students were asked to complete for the class was a paired recording in Zoom, which were graded for completion only. Instead of attending their regular language lab hour, once a week during the remote learning period students met with a partner via Zoom and completed the conversation tasks from a handout provided to them on Canvas. This task provided an additional activity for students to work on their oral skills with another student, to review the vocabulary and grammar of the week, and to practice them in meaningful communicative tasks.

It is also important to keep in mind that beginning learners prefer tasks with guided questions, but these tasks should be connected to real-life language for the greatest learning effect (Lee 2016). Thus, the handouts for this type of activity included contextualized drilling activities, asking and answering questions, describing pictures, and acting out situations. For example, students discussed their hometowns and described them using a provided word bank, thus ensuring that they used a variety of endings (see an example in Appendix B). For these types of activities in handouts where a word bank was given to students, the answers were provided at the end of the handout, so students could check themselves. For more creative tasks, I provided written or oral feedback on their vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Similar to individual recordings, I could provide individualized feedback to students, which is something logistically impossible to do in a classroom where several pairs are completing the same activity simultaneously. Students’ recordings lasted from 20 minutes to an hour. The hour-long recordings were problematic as it took more time to provide feedback to such recordings. A possible solution would be to create a specific rubric for completing the assignment, take off points for switching into English, and to ask the students to edit the recording
and cut out non-relevant parts (See Appendix C for a sample rubric). Since these were times when everyone was self-isolating, for some students, this activity was the only time they had a conversation with someone outside their family, as some of them mentioned in the recordings. Even though I asked students to be respectful of my and each other’s time, I did not take points off for the length or the use of English. Despite the fact that students sometimes switched to English, this activity allowed them to learn more about each other and create a sense of online community.

2.3. Individual work on pronunciation

Working on pronunciation is usually not a priority for language instructors teaching with the communicative method (Morley 1991; Elliot 1997; Loewen and Isbell 2017). When there are many students in the classroom, any work on repeating words and work on pronunciation is usually done in chorus. Students cannot hear just themselves, and an instructor hears everyone at the same time. I believe synchronous sessions via Zoom allow more possibilities for working on pronunciation than a regular classroom. During the Zoom session, students can turn off the microphones and repeat after the recording. Thus, they do not hear other students and do not get distracted. They can also work by themselves in Breakout Rooms where they are not distracted by other students and can receive feedback from the instructor as the instructor moves from room to room.

For beginning learners of Russian, I created a series of materials about Russian phonetics and uploaded them onto a Google site - https://sites.google.com/view/russianphonetics. The site includes sections for Russian stress and vowel reduction, voiced and voiceless consonants, palatalized and non-palatalized consonants, and intonation. For each section of the site, there is a written explanation in English, recordings of the sounds or sentences, and quizzes that help students check their understanding of the concept. Students can play the recordings and repeat the words or phrases to work on their pronunciation (see an example in Appendix D).

During the summer of 2020, in another of my classes, the first-year intensive Russian class at Arizona State University, students met five times a week synchronously in Zoom. When we were covering the topic of Russian phonetics, students worked with the above-mentioned site in individual Breakout Rooms, listening to and repeating the recordings. Before students joined the Breakout Room, they received instructions about which part of the website to work on and what was expected of them. I could join a Breakout Room at any time and provide feedback on their pronunciation.
The students were asked to keep practicing repeating after the recording until I would call everyone back to the main session.

Short quizzes on the Google pronunciation site allowed me to monitor their progress because the results were updated in real time, so I could see how many students completed which exercises without checking with each student in the Breakout Room. The quizzes included multiple choice questions about pronunciation, and if there were many wrong answers, I could explain the problematic material again and provide additional practice immediately after the activity when students returned to the main session. These activities can also be used during in-person classes when students work with the website on their phones or computers using headphones, and I can monitor their progress on my computer and listen to students’ pronunciation and provide immediate feedback.

2.4. Breakout Rooms

Breakout Rooms in Zoom allow students to work in pairs or in small groups, thus imitating paired work during a regular in-person class. To ensure that students understood each Breakout Room assignment, I provided them with a handout (posted on Canvas or Google Docs) that outlined their activities for the class. The list included contextualized drilling activities (similar to the ones described in Section 2.2), practice questions, descriptions of students’ surroundings, and roleplays.

For one of the activities, I created a shared Google Doc file where I listed different topics and assigned different colors to each pair of students to use for typing while working in this Google Doc in Breakout Rooms. For example, for one task, students working in pairs were asked to brainstorm possible questions for a potential roommate in the following categories: studies, hobbies, eating habits, and daily activities. Students had to formulate and type two questions for each category using their assigned color (each pair typed eight questions total). Students could not repeat a question if another group had already typed it in the file, so they had to think of a new question. Since all students were typing in the same document, I could see what everyone was doing at the same time without visiting specific Breakout Rooms. I could also correct mistakes within the same document or provide hints on how to correct something. The next part of the task was to discuss all questions from all categories, working with the partner in the Breakout Room. This task was a suitable review of the material at the end of the chapter and allowed students to ask each other a variety of questions and answer them. This task also prepared them
to participate in oral interviews or oral exams at the end of the chapter or the semester. The entire activity took about 30 minutes.

The main drawback of Breakout Rooms is the instructor’s inability to be present in all rooms at once. In the classroom, an instructor can walk around and overhear multiple conversations and provide immediate feedback. In Breakout Rooms, one pair may need additional time and feedback from the instructor, thus, the instructor might not have an opportunity to visit another Breakout Room. A possible solution is to ask students to record their work in the Breakout Room (e.g., record their roleplays) and submit it for feedback. Another possible drawback is an unstable internet connection that might inhibit conversations between students or prevent a student from joining a Breakout Room at all.

2.5. Final video project
A video project is a type of a project where students demonstrate their communication skills using digital media and technology (Ecke 2019). Video projects in a classroom provide students with opportunities to display their speaking, organizing, and critical thinking skills (Meyer and Forester 2015). In an online class, it can be used as a substitute for an in-person final presentation. Since the popularity of short videos is only increasing (YouTube, TikTok), incorporating them in the language class allows students to work on something familiar to them. Students can create a movie about something of interest to them and can demonstrate their Russian speaking skills through the narration and description that accompany their movie.

Previous research suggests that video projects are beneficial for students in different ways. In their study, McNutty and Lazarevic (2012) observed that students who were asked to work on video projects for their language classes were highly motivated to complete them and improved their pronunciation and presentation skills. In addition, McNutty and Lazarevic claim that when students know that they will be seen by their peers, they invest more time and effort in their presentations. In Gaunt’s study (2002), students were motivated to create their videos and thus became more involved in their learning process. Ecke (2019) claims that video projects are student-centered and allow for student autonomy, authentic language use, and a video that can be shared with classmates and people outside of the class.

For the final project in my first-year class in Spring 2020, students were asked to make a 3–5-minute video about their life in quarantine (See the detailed instructions in Appendix E). As it was something that students
were experiencing at that moment, they all made very creative movies that showcased their Russian skills. Students were then asked to upload their videos to Canvas and watch each other’s videos before the synchronous Zoom session. Then, during the Zoom class meeting, students asked questions of their classmates based on the videos that they had watched. Thus, students were engaged in meaningful conversations, asking clarifying questions and negotiating for meaning while practicing their speaking skills. These videos and the question-and-answer sessions helped to foster an online student community because students authentically learned more about each other and their hometowns from the videos.

3. Challenges and drawbacks
Using these activities to develop students’ oral skills in a remote modality creates certain challenges for instructors. One of the issues is the failure of technology when students’ or instructors’ internet connection is unstable, and instructors cannot hear or provide feedback to students during synchronous sessions. Students through private conversations and in Zoom meetings expressed their lack of motivation and fatigue from online learning. As a result, students did not turn in all recordings assigned to them, or they easily became distracted during the paired recordings or their work in Breakout Rooms.

For instructors, the creation of materials and grading of recordings requires additional time, especially if the instructor provides individualized feedback to all students or if students submit longer recordings. Rubrics with specific instructions and time limits should help instructors to keep the amount of work manageable.

4. Conclusion
This article described activities that were used to help students work on their oral skills during emergency remote teaching caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. A balance of individual and paired work focused on learners’ self-awareness allowed for a more learner-centered experience. Regular individual and paired recordings helped students to continue speaking Russian regularly even when they did not meet in person. Students received individualized feedback on their pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary during their individual work in Breakout Rooms and on their recordings. Using Google Sites and Google Docs allowed the instructor to monitor student progress in real time during synchronous sessions while students were working on activities in Breakout Rooms. The instructor could provide immediate feedback to multiple students and address
students’ questions. Through these activities and instructor feedback, beginning Russian learners continued developing their Russian oral skills in synchronous and asynchronous learning environments.

Appendices

Appendix A. Example of a recording task

Figure 1. Screenshot of a recording assignment.

Appendix B. Example of a paired recording prompt

6. **Take turns telling each other about your hometowns using the words from the table:**

   **Remember to use genitive plural after words for many, few, and negation.**

   e.g. В Колумбии много хороших библиотек.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>У меня в городе</th>
<th>много</th>
<th>нет</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>В моём городе</td>
<td>мало</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (name of the city)</td>
<td>несколько</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>В центре города</td>
<td>нет</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>На улице</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>дорогое рестораны</td>
<td>недорогие кафе</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>хорошие парки</td>
<td>красивые здания</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>небольшие здания</td>
<td>широкие улицы</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>узкие улицы</td>
<td>молодые люди</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>удобные автобусы</td>
<td>ста́рые церкви</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>новые памятники</td>
<td>дешёвые магазины</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>большие мосты</td>
<td>ста́рые дворцы</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ужа́сные общежития</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Screenshot of a paired recording task.
Appendix C. Sample rubric for a paired recording task

Sample rubric:

- All exercises are completed – 5 pts
- Students checked their answers at the end of the handout – 5 pts
- Students did not switch into English – 5 pts
- Students edited the recording cutting off any irrelevant conversations – 5 pts

Total: 20 points.

Appendix D. Example of a paired recording prompt

Figure 3. Screenshot of the Google site with tasks on pronunciation.
Appendix E. Instructions for the Final Video Project.

Final Project

Due: May 5, 2020 by 11am Points: 100

For the final project this semester, record a short movie about your life in quarantine. Your movie should be 3-5 minutes long and include material covered in the class.

Then you should upload it in the discussion on Canvas by 11:00 am on May 5. On May 5, watch each others’ presentations and come up with 2 questions for each presentation. We will meet on May 6 and May 7 in Zoom to discuss presentations. You will ask your questions to your classmates, and they will ask their questions to you.

Your movie will be graded based on the following:
- Content coverage (the movie has a plot, you address different topics, the movie is 3-5 minutes long) - 20%
- Range of used vocabulary - 25%
- Language control - 25%
- Pronunciation - 10%
- Delivery/creativity - 10%
- Ability to ask and answer questions (in class) - 10%

Total: 100%

Figure 4. Screenshot of the Final video project assignment

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References


