Raise Your Hand: Online Language and Culture Instruction, Inclusivity, and Critical Pedagogy

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1. Introduction
The effects of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in the U.S., in addition to the devastating impact on health and human lives, were felt immediately across all educational institutions. From preschool to graduate programs, the majority of face-to-face classes shifted to online virtual instruction, both synchronous and asynchronous, forcing teachers and learners alike to accept and adjust to new modalities of communication and interaction via videoconferencing apps. While for the last two decades, U.S. world language programs, including Russian, have been at the leading edge of innovation and implementation of digital technologies in the service of instruction (Meskill and Anthony 2005; Meskill and Anthony 2015; Russell and Murphy 2020; Spasova and Walsh 2020), the sudden and unplanned shift to an entirely virtual mode of instruction left many instructors – and learners – struggling to cope with unfamiliar (to some) technologies and unsatisfactory (to most) substitutes to the face-to-face interaction that has been a distinguishing feature of the world language classroom since the beginnings of the communicative competence movement of the 1980s.

Concurrent with COVID-19, the spring and summer of 2020 also witnessed a profound and widespread support of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the U.S. and abroad, stemming in large part from the killing of George Floyd and other Black and Latinx men and women by members of various police forces.¹ This watershed moment in the U.S. experience has precipitated an ongoing national discussion and reckoning regarding the systemic racism in the nation and its institutions. For many educators, virtual classrooms in spring 2020 often became settings for asking “difficult questions” and having “uncomfortable conversations”

¹ Polls conducted in the first half of June 2020 by four polling organizations (Pew, National Opinion Research Center, Kaiser, and Civis Analysis) indicated that between 15 and 26 million people in the US participated in Black Lives Matter protests, making it one of the largest social/political happenings in the nation’s history (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel, 2020).
inherent to confronting issues of inequity and systemic racism. For teachers managing the novel structure of virtual classrooms, even if course content is very familiar, attending to issues of diversity and intersectionality poses a challenge. This essay, therefore, suggests ways and means of creating and supporting ecologies of equity and inclusivity within online delivery of Russian language and culture courses on videoconferencing applications such as Zoom.² It will also argue that applications of critical pedagogy principles are the most effective means of achieving both desired course proficiency outcomes, as well as creating ecologies of social justice in the easily masked³ and, therefore, potentially non-inclusive, environments of online instruction.

2. Critical Pedagogy, Equity, and Online Instruction

The transition of world language classes to virtual delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic created opportunities for increased attention to issues of teaching practices, as well as to related issues of equity. The discussion of EQUITY in connection to synchronous online instruction falls into two relevant categories. The first is what Dahlwan (2020) calls “digital equity,” or equal access to digital devices, Internet, and a reliable wi-fi network for both learners and instructors, all sine qua non for effective online delivery of courses. This category of equity in access to material goods and services is not insignificant. Since the availability of Internet service and related hardware map closely to socio-economic status and race/ethnicity, the two are inextricably intertwined (Population Reference Bureau 2020). Individual instructors are not, of course, able to solve all issues of equal access in

² Classroom or instructional “ecology” is used throughout this work to refer to the environment and climate created in a teaching and learning space that engage, encourage, and support individuals and groups that have not had equal access to or representation in the learning process. The term was popularized in the 1990s in research on the inclusion of students with learning disabilities in the classroom (Speece and Keogh 1996; Vaughn and Schumm 1996), but was appropriated in the 2010s and 2020s in response to broader issues of equity, including race, ethnicity, and social justice in education (Anderson, Boyle, and Deppeler 2014; Kozleski 2020).

³ “Masking” refers to the practice of altering one’s personality or identity to conform to a particular environment (De Gere 2008). The term was most commonly applied to persons with autism or other personality disorders to describe their efforts to mask their conditions; however, virtual online environments, especially videoconferencing apps, provide users of any marginalized group with the functionality to mask their difference, including gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or age (Wiszniewski and Coyne 2009).

⁴ 2018 U.S. Census data referenced in the 2020 PRB study cited above show that lack of computer, high-speed Internet access, or both was nearly twice as high for Black and Latinx families and nearly three times as high for American Indian families as for whites; when income was factored in, the disparity in access among the groups remained the same.
terms of equipment or Internet service; they can, however, work to ensure that learners who do not have the resources needed to participate fully in online classes have alternatives available to them, such as telephonic access to the audio portion of classes, text messaging for short-answer responses in class, and/or use of postal services to submit and return written work. Unfortunately, it is not always possible to accommodate all learners who do not have means or access to technology in courses that are inherently technology-based. This situation is and remains a serious impediment to equitable applications of technology-based instruction, including virtual online classes.

The second category of equity in the teaching of world languages – or any subject matter – is that of social justice. Reagan and Osborn (2021) contend that social justice and critical pedagogy have become the most “significant change in the teaching of world languages in the last twenty years” (211), noting in particular ACTFL’s volume, Words and Actions: Teaching Languages through the Lens of Social Justice (Glynn, et al. 2020), and its impact on subsequent discourse on critical pedagogy in language teaching. Bell (2016) offers a useful frame for discussing social justice as both a goal and outcome:

The goal of social justice is full and equitable participation of people from all social identity groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. The process for attaining the goal of social justice should also be democratic and participatory, respectful of human diversity and group differences, and inclusive and affirming of human agency and capacity for working collaboratively with others to create change. (3)

To be sure, the inclusivity and intersectionality Bell describes lie at the heart of efforts to decolonize our courses, syllabi, and curricula – especially given the circumstances of the COVID-related shift in delivery of instruction, since it offers us all the opportunity to reexamine, reimagine, and revise any or all parts of our programs.

For the language and culture course, “decolonizing the syllabus” goes beyond the addition and incorporation of diverse identities as characters in the textbook, though that is a good place to begin. Decolonization of world language education entails, as Kramsch (2018) argues, “engaging in the difficult two-way bilingual dialogue necessary to decenter Anglo-American theory and open it up to different epistemological perspectives” (68). Within the framework of “neo-colonial globalism” and “global competence,” decolonizing the world language and culture syllabus, for example, entails the inclusion of opportunities and objectives that require learners to “engage in dialogue with speakers from other educational
cultures on their own terms, and the willingness to enter the slow and
difficult process of linguistic and cultural translation” (69). While the
Teaching of Russian in the U.S. is not a direct postcolonial intervention in
the way that, for example, teaching English in the Philippines is, I would
argue that the colonial experiences of both the United States and Russia
have created postcolonial environments of diverse and intersectional
populations in both countries that demand bilingual dialogue and exposure
to varied human perspectives, as Kramsch suggests. For virtual courses
in the age of COVID, digital access to the greater Russophone world can
provide the means to implement these “difficult dialogues” in our courses
by bringing together on one screen diverse identities from both countries;
but our syllabi and the materials they engage must also be directed toward
engendering this kind of dialogue.

3. Materials, Methods, and Inclusivity
Crucial to the success of any language classroom – whether face-to-face
or virtual – are the materials used to present the language and culture to
the learner. The “bells and whistles” effect of using digital technology that
couraged many of us to incorporate technology into our classrooms in
the 1990s does not apply to the digital natives of Gen Z, born with digital
devices in their hands. Thus, if technology by itself can no longer ignite
and maintain learner interest, the content of our classes becomes even more
important to the success of the course. The choice, form, and presentation
of content, in our move toward equity, diversity, and inclusivity in our
courses, is more salient than ever, requiring instructors to examine critically
the materials they will use in online instruction.

As McNeil (2016) recommends in regard to the development of
successful online courses, “Materials and instructional methods need to be
continually re-examined and adjusted to ensure that they are helping
students meet the desired learning outcomes as well as meeting the
students’ own needs” (10). Using this recommendation as a starting point,
instructors can apply critical pedagogy priorities to examine “students’
own needs” through the intersectional lenses of equity and inclusivity.
This process begins with the central “text” of the course, be it a traditional
print or digital textbook, an instructor-generated collection of materials, a
dedicated website of digital materials, or whatever the primary source of
instruction is for the course.

For most secondary and post-secondary Russian language courses
in the U.S. the textbook remains the principal source of instruction, as
more and more publishers make the move from print to e-format texts accessible on digital devices. For many learners of Russian, some of whom have never been outside their home state, much less traveled abroad, the material contained in the world language textbook is the primary source of linguistic, cultural, and visual information about the country(ies) where the language is spoken. Too often, however, textbooks default to a Disneyfied presentation of a hegemonic, white-dominant, heteronormative world that neither fully nor accurately represents the demographics of the relevant country(ies). Macedo (2018), for example, provides compelling evidence of textbooks that “never dive more deeply into certain contexts, often leaving inconvenient facts out so that students come away with less than a fully nuanced comprehension” (21). In particular, writing of the erasure of people’s histories in our textbooks, he points out how “the erasure of dangerous historical memories constitutes not only a historical malpractice but is also part of the blueprint of dominant ideologies” (17). Not only do these myopic views of target landscapes fail to represent fully the diversity of their own resident populations, but they also inhibit non-binary and/or ethnic and racially diverse students from enrolling in our domestic courses, as they cannot see themselves as relevant or integral within the other culture. With small world language programs under the persistent threat of cancellation due to falling enrollments, it would behoove us all to make our course materials representative and inclusive of the greater student population at our institutions in order to make our courses more relevant and attractive to diverse audiences.

In the case of teaching Russian, textbooks and ancillary materials produced both in Russia and in the U.S. overwhelmingly portray Russia and the learner of Russian through a hegemonic lens of a white male-dominated, heteronormative, and affluent society (Azimova and Johnston 2012; Stauffer 2020). In reality, both Russia and the U.S. – including student populations -- comprise highly diverse and intersectional populations, as both the subject and object of the study of contemporary Russian language and culture. Significantly, the title of the preeminent publication for the dissemination of Russian abroad during the Soviet period, Русский язык для всех / Russian for Everybody [Emphasis mine. TJG] belied the fact that Soviet ethnic populations, non-binary identities, and non-urban social groups were not represented in the text; it further ignored, beyond the frame of the learner’s source language, any kind of diversity or intersectionality in its audience. The post-Soviet narrative forwarded in current publications does little better, often failing to “reject the
homogeneity that has been widely accepted as the cultural norm in both Russia and the United States” (Stauffer 2020, 297). Some of the more recent U.S. textbook publications, including the online program «Между нами» / Between You and Me (deBenedette, et al., 2017), «Панорама» / Panorama (Rifkin, et al., 2019), and the forthcoming revised edition of Russian Stage One: Live from Russia! (Davidson, et al., n/d), make substantial strides toward a more comprehensive representation of the diversity of Russia, as well as attending to the increasingly intersectional learner/audience of these materials in U.S. Russian language programs. «Между нами», for example, represents ethnic diversity in its cast characters studying Russian, including Amanda Li and Tony Morales; «Панорама» includes a discussion of the gay rights movement in Russia based on authentic readings; and Russian: Stage One includes characters in blended families and of different ethnic backgrounds.

The matrix in Figure 1 graphically illustrates the interrelationships of the categories that are in play for instructors seeking to decolonize their courses through the choice of textbooks and ancillary materials used in their virtual (or face-to-face) classes. The four categories shown indicate segments of identity to consider when reviewing a text, whether in print, audio, video, or digital form, for inclusion in a syllabus. Each of the four categories -- gender, race/ethnicity, sexual identity, and economic position -- can intersect one with the other. The goal of the instructor reviewing a text for possible adoption is to identify materials that present a broad diversity of identities in order to represent an accurate and inclusive portrait of the region(s) in which the language is used, and to provide a diverse array of learners to be able to identify and see themselves in the target culture in a productive way.

Figure 1: Considerations for decolonizing language texts
For the instructor of Russian in a virtual format, attention to issues of diversity and inclusivity in materials and methods is of paramount importance. This decolonization of world language materials and, consequently, of courses themselves, is particularly relevant in the virtual classroom. On the computer screen of the virtual classroom, instructors are no longer able to experience and respond to the energy – positive or negative – emanating from the learners. From the other side of a laptop screen, instructors cannot hear the murmur of learners’ approbation of a pop culture reference, nor their groan at the introduction of yet another case ending. The online classroom, on its surface, appears to the instructor as a reimagined set from “Hollywood Squares,” with twenty five learners’ faces, if they choose to turn on their video cameras, with names attributed to each image, voices muted unless called on: in short, not the most welcoming or hospitable learning environment. Thus, engaging, current, and inclusive materials can go far to help ensure that learners remain involved and active during every online session.

4. New Ecologies of Inclusive Instruction
Innovations in digital materials and media available for online instruction have in recent years made their application in world classes more feasible and desirable. Blake (2012), for example, cites the ways that “the proper use of technology can increase student access through anytime anywhere learning and the sharing of faculty among different institutions” (18). Indeed, in world language instruction, this functionality of being able to connect with native speakers/peers in their home countries held great potential for both instructor and learner.

For many of us, the teaching of Russian language and culture has been relegated to videoconferencing apps, such as Zoom, Skype, Google Meet, Slack, Adobe Connect, or Microsoft Teams. Though designed initially for business purposes as means of communication within internal corporate communication networks (Daly and Hansell 1999), all of these apps can be utilized for educational purposes as well, and offer particular functionality for language teaching and learning. Fischer (2021) affirms this position, stating: “Apps can help world language learners negotiate meaning with native speakers,” and goes on to indicate that they can “help learners achieve higher levels of proficiency in their own language and perform higher-level cognitive tasks” (162).

Indeed, beyond the potential benefits in proficiency gains that videoconferencing apps can support, perhaps the most significant impact afforded in the virtual online learning environment are the many and
varied opportunities to engage native speakers as interlocutors in virtual classroom discourse. These individuals may be recruited from partner institutions in Russia or other Russian-speaking regions with which the home institution already has relations, or via the instructor’s personal in-country contacts. This inclusion of peer native speakers in the online discourse without question provides learners – and instructors! – with authentic, contemporary, and age-appropriate language modeling in the given context of the course syllabus. Even at the early stages of instruction, these exchanges can be meaningful: a Kazakh partner living in Moscow reveals that Russian is not his native language; a Russian student says that he lives with his single parent; a female student in Yekaterinburg introduces you to her girlfriend. But beyond the substantial potential for positively impacting learners’ language and cultural proficiency gains, this interaction has tremendous potential for forwarding an ecology of inclusivity and equity.

By carefully recruiting and selecting diverse native speakers as partners in the course, individuals who represent ethnic, gender, and economic intersectionality, the kinds of interactions that can occur between the two cohorts transcend the “speaking partner” modality and produce the conditions for translanguaging, or the movement between two languages in diverse contexts that allows for natural scaffolding of instruction (García 2009), and intercultural communication in the service of critical pedagogy. Interactions among learners and native speakers of diverse backgrounds, identities, and cultures can quickly move our learners from the “one-classroom-one-language-pedagogical straightjacket” (Lin 2013, 540) and toward what Pennycock (2021) describes as “resourceful speakers” (174), able to function comfortably when encountering the linguistic diversity that accompanies all diversity. The intercourse between these speakers requires both sides to derive meaning through the context of each other’s culture and identity, following closely the recommendations of the Five Cs of the World Readiness Standards for Learning Russian (Garza, Merrill, and Shuffelton 2020). These resourceful speakers are not only able to reach designated proficiency benchmarks in these courses, but they also more readily attain intercultural competence through interaction with diverse perspectives (Garza 2016).

For most proficiency-based classrooms, the teacher-centered model is anathema to the learners’ development of autonomous interaction in the language; and yet, the starting point for a Zoom, or other videoconferencing, meeting is a “host” of a session who has full control over what the “participants” see, hear, and can do. Fortunately, these apps
also include a number of functionalities that can make the session much more proficiency-oriented, student-centered, and inclusive. Learners can, of course, “raise their hands” virtually on Zoom, indicating not only a question or comment, but also an indication of participation. Further, the Breakout Rooms function in Zoom offers instructors and learners a virtual alternative to pair/group work in class, and further allows for autonomous interaction in the language that promotes inclusivity and equity among the participants.

Breakout Rooms in Zoom can be randomly assigned by the instructor, which is useful for a quick, brief spontaneous practice session that emerges organically in the flow of a given session. But Breakout Rooms can also be designated ahead of time by the instructor for a planned, scripted assignment. It is in these contexts that Freirean notions of critical pedagogy from his Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1998) most come to bear on the learning process in the Breakout Rooms. Freire pointed out that repressive educational establishments, in order to maintain the status quo, basic skills, such as those most affecting language education – reading, writing, reporting –eschewed critical thinking, reflection on meaning, and interpretation of that meaning into one's own culture, focusing instead on group recitation, memorization, and repetition (77). Breakout Room activities that allow learners to engage critically with the language/culture material, to reflect on its relevance and significance in their own culture, and then express that interpretation to others is exactly what critical pedagogy in world language education entails.

Thus, a Breakout Room activity that asks learners to order food from a Russian menu may elicit a role play between students acting out a server and a patron in a café. But a more open-ended prompt that provides learners with the URL of a Google Map of a part of a Russian city and the information, “You and your friends are in the city of X and you’re hungry. You have 1780 rubles among you. Arrange an affordable lunch” will provide learners the raw data needed to negotiate and construct their own meaning with language that they collectively have. Because learners are in the “sanctum” of the Breakout Room as themselves, they are more willing to perform their own identities and personalities, making the interaction more authentic and relevant. Chandler’s (2016) study of learners’ session journals revealed “how spending time in a Breakout Room could embolden students to speak up about concerns and queries that they might otherwise keep quiet about” (20). By providing virtual spaces in the videoconferencing environment that encourage creative and personal use
of language, instructors can move toward more inclusive and equitable language classes.

Other functionalities of Zoom can also facilitate proficiency-based and inclusive, representative instruction. The Polling and Chat features have great utility during the Zoom class session. The Polling feature, on its surface, seems somewhat stilted, allowing only yes-no or multiple-choice questions. But even this simple application can be made more inclusive and open-ended by the simple addition of “Other” and/or “None of the above” to the list of responses to a query. Thus, binary or fixed sets of responses to questions are transformed into prompts for more engaging and extended discourse. For example, the simple poll question: “What language do you speak at home? A) English B) Spanish” becomes a source for a more extended discussion when the response reads: “A) English B) Spanish C) Other.”

Polling can also serve in the aid of lowering affective factors of anxiety, fear, hesitancy, etc. by using it as a warm-up activity before, during, and after sessions. Especially during the COVID lockdown and period of isolation, asking our groups of learners “How are you?” “How are you doing?” and “Are you all right?” went far – and continues to do so – in reassuring learners and reaffirming the virtual online class as a safe and welcoming space. In a similar way, Polling can be used during instructor or learner presentations to check participants’ comprehension or to sample learners’ responses to shape the content of the presentation. For example, as a pair of learners present a talk about Russian music, they might, in the course of the talk, poll the other participants about their musical preferences to determine what the presenters will then focus their comments on.

The Chat feature of most videoconferencing apps, including Zoom, allows all participants to enter written remarks and comments to others in the session. The instructor can determine whether these comments must be directed to the entire group, or if participants can also send private messages to any individual in the group. Chat supports non-Latinate scripts, including Cyrillic, so users can incorporate this feature into presentations, lectures, and other tasks as a means of eliciting written learner input. Like the Breakout Rooms and Polling features, Chat can be strategically used in the service of promoting equity and inclusivity by providing an additional modality of participation, especially for learners who are reticent to speak, but who are willing to express themselves in written form, or for whom putting their thoughts in writing serves as a precursor to oral communication.
Masked interactions/participation can occur when learners in the Zoom session “disappear” from the class interaction, either by not using the camera to show themselves “live” in class, or by un-naming themselves on the screen and/or using a visual avatar in lieu of their live videocam image. Some individuals will “mask” to receive attendance credit for the day, but not actually attend or participate in the session; others may want to mask their personal domestic situation/environment because of embarrassment or privacy concerns. This latter occurrence of masking disproportionately affects minorities (especially Latinx) student populations in videoconferencing environments (Esquivel, et al., 2020). The on-screen environment of Zoom provides numerous opportunities for masking and, for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), non-binary, and other intersectional learners, the ease of “disappearing” from the screen is too tempting. Instructors, already taxed by simultaneously attending to the connectivity, volume, polling, presenting, screensharing, and interacting in Zoom sessions, may not even realize that this or that learner has disappeared from the screen. In the current moment of online instruction, social justice, and critical pedagogy, however, we must strive to ensure that all learners are attended to during Zoom sessions, that all learners have the opportunity to participate, that all learners are included. It is time to reappropriate «для всех» to mean “for everybody” in Russian language classes.

One final benefit of conducting classes virtually via videoconferencing apps: the ability to record every class session and securely store the recordings in the Cloud. Recording class sessions on Zoom not only provide access to the material covered and interactions performed to students who might have missed class, or to those who wish to review and practice a class that they had attended, but it also offers instructors a valuable tool for helping them to create and maintain an ecology of equity and inclusivity during their online sessions. Instructors should periodically review their teaching and interaction with, between, and among the learners in the class by watching recordings of their classes – by themselves or with a peer instructor to offer an objective perspective – to assess their performance in terms of language pedagogy and critical pedagogy. Fortunately, incidents of overt racism and hate speech are relatively rare in classroom interactions; however, unintentional micro-biases, micro-invalidations, and micro-aggressions in a classroom setting may go unnoticed at the moment they occur and their deleterious effect on individuals in the class, not to mention the negative impact such actions can have on the entire cohort of learners. Careful, critical review of
recorded Zoom classes can help reveal not only these occurrences during classroom interaction, but also provide instructors with insight into what the circumstances are in which these micro-racisms can occur and then take steps to intervene and disrupt them before they become systemic in the class. These reviews and subsequent remediation must, of course, be conducted according to local institutional and federal (e.g., FERPA) regulations, especially in protecting individual learners’ identities and privacy.

5. In Lieu of a Conclusion: A Beginning
The COVID-19 pandemic and consequent shift of Pre K-16 courses to virtual online delivery has been a sea change for instructors and learners alike. Moving instruction onto new platforms of technology not by choice, but by necessity, has strained the resilience and energies on both sides of the computer screen. And, in the midst of this seismic social and pedagogical event, we find ourselves at a time of moral and ethical reckoning that poses one of the most basic of questions: Who are we as a nation? As teachers, we are bearing the massive responsibility of stewarding the next generations in their education. And yet we are aware that not everyone is afforded the same opportunities or access to receive that education. So we, as teachers of Russian language and culture, might ask, “What can I possibly do to have an impact on this grave situation of such massive scale? I’m just one Russian teacher.” In answer to this question, I offer the two following views.

First, movements toward equity and social justice do not necessarily require macro actions. Revolution is not the only way to precipitate change. Sometimes, even small actions, small changes, can have large impacts. Brown (2017), in her work Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds, posits a simple but persuasive argument: Small-scale solutions impact the whole system. Therefore, similar principles can be employed on all scales (33). In other words, making small changes, such as modifying a syllabus, selecting a different textbook, or being attentive to include all learners in every session, will positively affect the entire course. Any one of these small changes can, as time and energy permit, be used as a model for another, perhaps larger, change that will have a proportionally larger impact on the course, and so on. All of us can make a difference in some way in every course at every institution. Taken as a whole, these small changes make a significant impact on the status quo.

Second, Freire’s complex and complicated notion of Conscientização, usually translated as “critical consciousness” or “conscientization,” calls
for exposing the political and social inequities and contradictions that inhabit one’s worldview, and, perhaps more importantly, for acting against them to attain social justice (1998, 35-37). This outcome is the ultimate goal of critical pedagogy and our endeavors to achieve diversity, equity, and inclusivity in education. It is the goal that we, as human beings, should all set for ourselves as global citizens. Such an accomplishment in our Russian courses would certainly transform them: from the materials we utilize, to the ways we engage learners in activities in class; from our own interactions with learners in and out of class, to the ways and means of assessing their progress. These are not insubstantial changes; any one of them requires additional time, creativity, and effort. But the end product of such efforts would certainly outweigh this expenditure, because equity and social justice in our society should not be negotiable.

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