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Introduction to the Special Edition

Developing Level-3 Skills in a Multilingual Environment: The Russian Overseas Flagship Second Decade

This special edition of Russian Language Journal presents a compendium of closely related new studies on the teaching of Russian to US undergraduate students within the multicultural and multi-ethnic Russophone environment of Kazakhstan; the focus of instruction across these studies is the Advanced to Superior levels. Most of the contributors to this volume are members of the Flagship core faculty. The present issue also includes a new report on the state of US Russian-language enrollments, updating the first comprehensive national survey of Russian K–12 enrollments, which appeared in 2009 in volume 59 of Russian Language Journal.

Since the inception of the Russian Overseas Flagship in 2004, more than 200 US students have completed the Program, and close to 90 percent of them have achieved Level 3 ratings both on the Test of Russian as a Foreign Language (TORFL/TPKI/1) and the Interagency Language Roundtable [ILR] scales in speaking, reading, and listening comprehension, and often in writing as well. In September 2014, following a strong and productive first decade of collaboration with the Philological Faculty of St. Petersburg State University, the Russian Overseas Flagship, which is administered by American Councils for International Education, was moved to Al-Farabi Kazakh National University in Almaty, Kazakhstan, where it has continued its work to the present time.

The opening section in the issue, “Language and Language Policy,” addresses both the academic challenges and the educational opportunities created by relocating the Flagship Program to a Russian-speaking Eurasian nation that is demographically, culturally, and politically distinct from the Program’s original home. Sam Eisen discusses these challenges from the point of view of the scholarship on this complex, multi-cultural region, considering the cultural and political dynamics of present-day Kazakhstan as well as the growing need within the US
federal workforce for a new generation of high-functioning, bilingual and culturally sophisticated professionals who have first-hand knowledge of major world regions.

Within any overseas environment for multilingual language training, the functioning of the target language (L2) across domains, its legal status and level of prestige, and its overall stylistic differentiation will all play a critical role in that nation’s effectiveness as a site for immersion learning. For this issue of RLJ, Suleimenova’s foundational scholarship on the language situation in Kazakhstan is brought fully to bear on her timely examination of the current state of Kazakh-Russian bilingualism. The findings presented here will inform our understanding of the present status of Russian in Kazakhstan while bringing new corpus-based data to the perennial question among linguists that concerns the existence of a distinct regional variant of Russian in Central Asia.

In the academic context of Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, where instruction is offered in Russian and Kazakh, adoption of the tried-and-tested St. Petersburg Russian Flagship curricular model proceeded relatively smoothly. Adaptation of the Flagship model to the multicultural environment of Kazakhstan, however, became an early priority for the Flagship Program, as was the teaching of introductory Kazakh language. Yekshembeyeva’s programmatic article opens the group of pedagogically oriented papers and provides a helpful framework for the focused curricular discussions that follow, each reflecting a different component of the Flagship strategy for integrating the skills at ILR Level 3, which include cultural and intercultural skills as well as the traditional four skills. The author emphasizes the importance of student critical thinking in this process and of explicit target-language discussions of embedded cultural differences across the broad range of texts, practices, and behaviors that Flagship students encounter during the year-long Program. Pshenina incorporates student reflection as well as a means of aiding students in their integration of the linguistic, socio-pragmatic, and intercultural skills required to meet both the formal and informal communication requirements for studying and living in Kazakhstan. Her approach to Superior-level speaking and reading is thematic and functional, following the established Russian Flagship curricular model, which moves learners from surface-level comprehension (situations) to understanding the underlying cultural layers of
meaning, to application of the full set of skills, to communication at the abstract level.

Central to all overseas Flagship Programs is the development of professional-level speaking skills—an array of communicative competencies with corresponding levels of structural and lexical precision, control of register, and rhetoric. Abaeva examines the actual interlanguage production of Flagship students at the ILR 2+/3 (CEFR B2–C1) threshold levels and offers examples of the pedagogical interventions that have served the program for modeling and remediation purposes. Like her colleagues, the author stresses the value of providing students with speech models that assist them in understanding the logic and contexts that inform the relevant native-speaker inferences (e.g., related to choice of verbal aspect, voice, or word selection).

Sapronova and Yekshembeyeva describe the use of a pedagogy based on a functional communicative grammar in their report on the activization of prefixation and of primary and secondary imperfectives in the Flagship students’ speech production. The authors’ choice of specific structural material for activization and, in some cases, for explicit analysis, reflects the performance standards and level-specific guidelines of Level 3 TORFL, augmented by data from student self-monitoring activities. Akberdi reports on the results of her assessment of a set of pre-reading activities that help students identify and recognize syntagmas, as part of an advanced reading-comprehension course. Her study indicates encouraging results for the use of this model to support content prediction, increase reading speed, and improve overall reading-comprehension.

At the professional level, target language (L2) functional skills ranging from persuasion to negotiation to high-visibility public presentations may be required at any time in the workplace. In response to the need for preparing capstone students to speak about and present their work in a range of academic and professional settings, a new two-semester conference-course in public speaking was introduced in 2018, culminating in an individual video-recorded public presentation. As the instructor in charge of the two-semester sequence, Sansyzbaeva reports on the new course’s impact on the development of students’ writing and speaking skills and, in particular, its impact on their progress in learning to present their professional or academic work at length in public
settings. Her study stresses the importance for the students to acquire the linguistic, cultural, and rhetorical norms of professional discourse in their respective fields of study. The phonetics and intonational skills of the professional-level L2 speaker also strongly influence the efficiency and clarity of communications and, ultimately, the speaker’s ability to develop listener/audience rapport. Riabova approaches phonetics instruction as an integrative, cross-skill activity, rather than as a process that takes place in isolation from all other skills. Her study reports on articulatory-phonetics training and “real-life” self-monitoring skills in Russian at the capstone level.

The development of intercultural competencies at the professional level has received increased attention in recent years within the curricular and cocurricular components of the Overseas Flagships. Ibrayeva’s well-illustrated overview of the Intercultural Communications course she offers to Flagship students is a good example of this important curricular direction within the field. Drawing on existing Kazakh, Russian, and Western work in intercultural studies, she provides readers with a glimpse of her advanced-level course on contemporary Russian speech etiquette and current norms of intercultural communication in Kazakhstan and Russia, and a broader examination of region-specific linguistic and cultural behaviors. Concurrently, the Flagship Capstone Program has also introduced a series of “cultural roundtables,” hosted by the US resident director, that are designed to support student intercultural development through cooperative learning, case studies, reflection and perspective-taking activities, and role-plays based on actual cross-cultural situations encountered by students during their overseas residences.

The integration of target-language digital resources into the learning environment is a high-value goal for most world language teachers, but within the overseas context this integration is critical for the success of the immersion experience for the present generation of students. Groce, writes from the vantage point of a teacher, experienced Flagship resident director and program alumnus, as he reports the results of a survey on the challenges that digital integration presents for study abroad students. The solution the author offers is fully supported by his

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1 The cultural roundtables are a part of the Flagship Cultural Initiative (FCI), made possible by a grant by NSEP to the University of Maryland, College Park, in cooperation with the University of Wisconsin–Madison, Portland State University, and the American Councils. It will be reported on at a later date.
own experience in the field: change the participants’ media consumption habits by helping them identify Russian media sources to replace their English counterparts.

This special issue concludes with Davidson and Garas’s presentation of results and their analysis of the most recent survey of Russian language enrollments, K–12 and K–16 in the US. While a continuing slow downward trend within higher education enrollments has been previously reported, the K–12 data presented here paint a more interesting picture for Russian and clearly warrant broader discussion in the field. Of further interest is the observation that in many locations where investments in Russian have taken place (e.g., in programs such as National Security Language Initiative for Youth [NSLI-Y] or Flagship), whether at the K–12 level or in higher education, the enrollment dynamic remains positive. As the contributions presented here make clear, the study of Russian—including in Russian study abroad programs—is evolving, as is the profile of the traditional Russian-learner and range of future career opportunities for Russian speakers. It is the responsibility of the field to ensure that our research, curricula, and professional support for our faculties remain responsive to those changing needs.

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