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Maximizing Target Language Use Outside the Classroom: the Advanced-Level Student of Russian as Digital Consumer

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Abstract

The article examines recent trends in digital and social media consumption among domestic foreign language students and Russian Overseas Flagship students, analyzing a number of approaches for seeding Russian-language material within students' everyday extracurricular digital practices. The goal of the project has been to encourage language learners to strengthen their own skills at identifying Russian media sources of personal or professional interest and incorporating habits of media consumption into their language-learning experience. The recommendations provided are informed by the results of a survey distributed among American students of Russian in Kazakhstan during the period from 2017 to 2019. The survey asked about the students' extracurricular use of Russian-language digital media within an extended, immersive study abroad environment.

Keywords: study abroad, digital technology, immersion learning, advanced-level

1. Introduction

The Russian Overseas Flagship program, which was implemented fifteen years ago to meet the critical need for foreign language capacity in the United States, strives to create an immersive environment for advanced students of the Russian language. This immersive experience extends outside the classroom and into the wider community as students reside with local host families who commit not only to speak Russian with the students but also to integrate them into their family and cultural traditions (Davidson and Lekic 2010). Additionally, students sign a language pledge obligating them to speak Russian with their peers at all times. This dense layering of linguistic and cultural input is designed not only to engage the students' language learning faculties but to allow them to make a veritable transformation as they gradually re-code an entire universe of objects, practices and views into Russian while transitioning to professional-level

Russian and Level 3 on the ILR scale (Davidson, Lekic, and Garas, 2020).

Increasingly, however, it seems that this holistic approach requires further expansion into an area that is becoming ever more relevant: the area of social and digital media. As students make language gain across competencies, they require further professional guidance in choosing a wide range of media to add to their arsenal of authentic Russian-language sources. Students are encouraged to read a variety of Russian authors, to listen to a variety of Russian musical genres, and to watch a variety of Russian-language films. All of these methods are proven to help students gain the necessary skills and experience to excel in Russian and to develop the cultural skills necessary for advancing toward advanced-level competencies (Level 3 and above on the ILR scale; Kinginger 2011). These methods, indeed, may be enough for students in American Russian as a Foreign Language (RFL) classrooms to reach Level 2 proficiency after four years of college Russian with attendant experience in studying the language in an immersive summer or semester study abroad program. However, the approach will require adjustments as the technological revolution increasingly affects the media consumption habits of young people.

What the foreign language classroom increasingly seems to miss is the palpable shift toward social media platforms as a source of entertainment, news, information, influence, and even language. Traditional classrooms (domestic and overseas) will also be well served to consider aggressively appropriating the subtler trends that are fueling this revolution in entertainment and media consumption — the digital and technological shift that has allowed students to be connected and “plugged in” at all times.

Indeed, even those students who maintain a strict homework and study ethic may not fully realize how a lifestyle pegged to modern patterns of media and entertainment consumption in English is constraining their ability to learn a foreign language, even in the most immersive study abroad environments. In this study I propose that, instead of attempting to reform or recalibrate students’ patterns of information, media, and cultural consumption, it is incumbent upon the language teaching community to build the tools that these students need to integrate target-language use into these incontrovertible generational trends.

This article discusses the trends described above and the challenges

that they create for optimal immersion American students studying in an immersive learning environment in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The article discusses the ways in which students use language when “off-task;” that is, when outside of the classroom, the host-family environment, or other situations that have traditionally dictated adherence to the language pledge,¹ and it also provides recommendations on ways in which educators might creatively encourage the use of digital media as an “off-task” language learning platform. These suggestions and conclusions are informed by three years of observation of students in the immersive conditions of the Russian Overseas Flagship program and are aided by the results of a survey conducted over the same period.

2. Technology and language teaching: context of the present study

Language pedagogues and specialists in instructional technology, inspired by changes in the field begun by Anthony Papalia’s (1976) influential book *Learner-Centered Language Teaching*, have long since commented on the necessity to bring technology into the classroom and better integrate the digital revolution into curricula. Some, like Greg Kessler, have focused on the opportunities presented by advances in CALL (computer-assisted language learning) for both teachers and students to seek real-time feedback from native speakers and also to take advantage of the spike in readily available authentic content in social media. In a recent article, Kessler speaks of a “participatory culture” spawned by the spread of social media (now used by more than three billion people worldwide) that “presents foreign language teachers with limitless opportunities to create for learners meaningful, authentic language practice experiences that situate learning in truly compelling contexts” (2018, 207). Kessler goes on to address the quickly multiplying variety of learning contexts, which, he notes, allows students to access authentic language practice but which, at the same time, fosters “its own set of social expectations and practices that create new opportunities for learners to explore notions of genre, register, and culturally specific and appropriate interactions” (2018, 208).

¹ *The Language Pledge* is a key facet of the Russian Overseas Flagship program. Before departure for the overseas location, students must sign a document committing them to speak only Russian with classmates and teachers. This pledge also pledges students to only use Russian-language material in the presence of other students. Students of the Russian Flagship self-report a high rate of adherence and generally cite *The Language Pledge* as an important part of their language gain while overseas.

Much of the growing body of literature on the topic of language and technology has focused on integrating technology into the classroom and on measuring the effectiveness of different types of technology and their applicability for integration into teaching practice. The present study, however, focuses on the potential effectiveness of digital and social media outside of the classroom, and on the prospects for success in promoting the use of such technologies in students' extracurricular language-learning practices. Other relevant studies have focused on the concept of "flipped classrooms," that is, the increasing reliance on technology to help create the conditions for mastery of a foreign language through homework and extracurricular technology-based activities (Wang and Qi 2018). Another body of research has attempted to identify innovative pedagogies that rely on students' own skills in identifying and integrating social media into their own lives. These studies, however, have largely taken as their case studies English-language media and have largely assumed that ESL students will be well versed and proactive in searching out digital and social media target language sources. Such assumptions are well founded and consider the dominance and accessibility of English-language resources on the internet.

Until the advent of the Flagship program, the development of strategies in the field of Russian for the seamless integration of students' extra-curricular digital and social media habits (especially at ILR Levels 2 and above) have lacked an adequate proving ground. This article aims to help readers think more expansively about not only how to identify and exploit useful Russian-language materials in digital and social media but how to effectively promote students' extracurricular engagement with authentic Russian-language materials outside of the classroom, which is one of the keys to advanced and superior foreign language mastery.

3. Results of the survey

The survey that collected data on students' online media preferences was conducted over the course of two years among a pool of active Russian Flagship program students in their final overseas (Capstone) year. The survey included seventeen students, who completed the survey once, three months into their first semester of the program. According to the survey, the students largely interfaced with technology in English. Indeed, the average time for nonacademic technology use (e.g., entertainment

and social media) totaled over two hours per day. Of these two hours, an average of 60% took place in English (with some outliers reporting 0–5% of total time spent in the target language). While it was noted that target-language engagement of social media sources was observed to increase over the course of the nine-month in-country academic year, some students still felt a sense of “lost opportunity” for further target-language and cultural engagement.

This means that, in a program designed to minimize the use of English and maximize the use of Russian in ways that will help students gain professional language skills, an important nexus between language and professional development still needs to be fleshed out more fully. Indeed, in the new digital media age, gaining skills in social and other online media is key to any modern definition of language competency.² Students who are otherwise gaining professional and social skills that equip them to compete in an international marketplace are not being consistently challenged to develop similar skills in the digital sphere.

The survey queried students’ choice of digital and social media platforms and asked students to rank their preferred informational genres. In response to a question featuring some of the most well-known digital and social media platforms in the West (YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr), students indicated the strongest preference for two of these: Facebook (with over 70% of students indicating that they used this source on a regular basis) and YouTube (with over 50% of students indicating frequent use). Students who preferred other platforms were invited to indicate these in a fifth column, although only five of the surveyed students did so, resulting in the addition of four platforms to the list: Instagram, Reddit, Apple News, and Telegram.

When asked to name their preferred informational genres, nearly 50% of students named “politics and current events,” while a combined 30% named “cultural news” as their preferred informational genre. In response to a slight variation on this question that did not consider ranking order, a majority of students ranked “cultural news” as a genre that they considered important and included in their media-consumption profile. A breakdown of the ranked-choice order of

² See the position statement “The Role of Technology” for ACTFL. Retrieved from <https://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/CAEP/AppendixM-ACTFLStatementRoleOfTechnology.pdf>

“information priorities” saw seven of the seventeen students rate the importance of cultural information as 5 on a 5-point scale. A further six students assigned cultural information a value of 4 points on the same scale. Thus, culturally relevant information was accorded the highest priority among the five ranked genres (sports, science and technology, politics and current events, tabloid, and culture).

4. A map forward

While language teachers have adapted their methods to include a wider variety of media in their teaching, keeping up with the changing technology and media landscape has yet to become a consistent theme in the literature on the Russian-language classroom, and especially in the literature on the study abroad classroom. As the responses to the survey indicate, students are spending a significant portion of their non-classroom time consuming various digital media. (The results do not include time spent engaging with traditional media such as television and radio, although these are easily convertible into digital formats and students may be watching traditional media forms in a digital context). A deeper dive into each of the predominant media available on the Runet (the term for the universe of Russian-language content on the internet) might yield more useable results for those seeking to create tailored strategies in foreign language classrooms. However, these generalizable results show that students’ media tastes will, under the right circumstances, allow them to use simple strategies to increase their time spent engaging with the target language without drastically altering their viewing patterns or even their content preferences.

5. Facebook and YouTube

Despite students’ perhaps somewhat surprising preference for these media giants, the two platforms possess some fundamental differences: Facebook is marketed as an “app [that] helps you connect with friends, family and communities of people who share your interests.”³ YouTube advertises itself as a place to “share and build community through our stories” and that prioritizes “freedom of expression.”⁴ Facebook is organized around the presentation of the self through user pages that

³ Retrieved from <https://about.fb.com/technologies/facebook-app/>

⁴ Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/about/>

allow participants to present a variety of personalized media, including photographs, gifs, videos, memes, narrative posts, and illustrations. YouTube is a digital content service that only allows video content and user-generated feedback in the form of positive and negative pegging (the “thumbs-up and thumbs-down” system) and written commentary nested under these videos. However, at their cores, both platforms depend upon both users to generate content and computer-generated algorithms to drive viewership of this content, a charmed circle that means that both companies spend very little on content creation and farm profits from advertisement (unlike content-creative companies such as Netflix).

Since both Facebook and YouTube are gaining a dominant presence among Russia’s universe of web users (according to statistics from 2018, daily active users in Russia for YouTube are over fourteen million and, for Facebook, over five million),⁵ students can significantly increase the percentage of time that they spend viewing Russian content without switching digital platforms. Indeed, a series of easily manageable content controls embedded in both YouTube and Facebook allows students to effectively increase the amount of Russian content (and reduce the amount of English content) that these platforms offer the students.

5.1. Facebook for Russian users

By following a few simple guidelines, students can manipulate the Facebook news feed to create Russian-language preferences for news and posts, thus prioritizing Russian-language content and creating the conditions for a digital “language pledge.” Besides the controversial algorithms that Facebook uses to market to its users and suggest content, it also offers a set of user-centric controls that allows users to rank their own preferences for information. This, combined with the ability to choose the interface language, means that students can design an almost completely Russian-language experience on the Facebook platform. Facebook allows students to follow media and entertainment content with one click. Once a student adds these pages to the account’s list of preferred content, Facebook will automatically channel updates to the user’s news feed, the page that streams user posts from the Facebook

⁵ “Facebook raskryla ezhdnevniuu auditoriu v Rossii,” Sostav, Nov 21 2019, Retrieved from <https://www.sostav.ru/publication/facebook-raskryla-ezhdnevnyu-auditoriyu-v-rossii-34499.html>.

member's select community of friends and preferred ("liked" or "followed") content providers ("Facebook Feed Shifting" 2018). While the news feed uses an algorithm to predict user preferences based on a variety of factors, including geography, the user can train Facebook to populate the news feed, the first page that the user sees when accessing the website, by manually selecting those feeds that he or she would like to see first.⁶

Students who make a commitment to prioritizing Russian-language content online can be encouraged to make an initial selection of Russian-language media that they would like to read or watch and then to take the extra steps (described later) to virtually banish English-language media from the news feed that, through the illusion of digital selectivity, overwhelmingly informs students' patterns of information consumption.⁷

Students should keep in mind that the more Russian-language content that is chosen and then manually prioritized, the more the Facebook algorithm will automatically populate the user's digital spaces with Russian-language content. Teachers or mentors might even consider making an initial attempt to "Russianize" media feeds on social and digital-media platforms a group exercise.

5.2. YouTube for Russian users

Through even more straightforward measures, students can prioritize Russian-language content on their YouTube accounts by clicking on the "subscribe" button, thus privileging content from particular Russian-language sources, including reputable news organizations, official and non-official channels, and a range of Russian media celebrities.

6. Some strategies for increasing students' use of Russian in the new media age: an example

While students have been equipped with the necessary tools for finding resources in areas of "traditional" media, like film, music, television,

⁶ Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/help/520348825116417>.

⁷ A recent study of information consumption on digital platforms "quantified the extent to which individuals encounter comparatively more or less diverse content while interacting via Facebook's algorithmically ranked News Feed" and found that users were less likely to be exposed to "ideological discordant content." in Bakshy, E., S. Messing, and L. A. Adamic. "Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on Facebook." *Science*. 348: 1130–1132. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aaa1160>.

and art, etc. they oftentimes lack the necessary tools to take advantage of the evolving network of new media that has been built up around existing media content like scaffolding. Far from fearing the negative and unbound influence that new media sources may have on language or cultural perceptions, Russian-language educators might attempt, instead, to discover the role that new media can play for students who might otherwise be isolated from the authentic cultural debates that are playing out in their age group within the Russian-speaking world (Migiro 2018).

According to statistics from 2016, Russia counted over forty-seven million YouTube users, making it, in terms of raw numbers, one of the top three countries in the world for YouTube use (Timofeeva 2019). A look at the most popular Russian-language videos includes various examples of popular social media content recognizable across languages. Results for cumulative views for Russian-language videos in 2019 showed that children's videos occupied many of the top spots, but that Russian-language influencers and bloggers also ranked highly, with blogger and new-media star Yuri Dud occupying second place for his quasi-documentary about the anniversary of the Beslan tragedy, a highly sensitive political topic (Timofeeva 2019).

Social media content assumes many forms, with some of the prime content coming directly from traditional media outlets that choose to post their programming to social media sites such as YouTube. This strategy is capable of expanding the reach of traditional media to younger demographics who eschew television and increasingly form their viewing habits around digital content (Etling et al. 2011). And while the Russian media industry is now quickly catching up with the West by establishing a string of pay-based viewing services, many popular programs are readily available on such social media sites as YouTube and *Rutube* (the Russian answer to the Western industry leader).

However, one medium stands out for its concentrated development in the Russian market: the video blog (MacFarquhar 2014). Besides the increasingly popular genre of video blogs that prioritizes the creation of new content, including: *Parfenon* (Parfyonov), *Esche ne Pozner* (Solodnikov), *Vdud'* (Dud'), there is another vein of new media, once confined to rather off-key video blogs; the *exposé* genre. This genre of new media content has become increasingly popular with the rise of the Kremlin-directed state

media and the resultant stream of propagandistic content. *Exposé*-themed video blogs use video clips and excerpts from state media, or even from user-created content on social-media platforms like YouTube, to expose stories or reports deemed to be false or misleading. Prominent examples of this genre are *Kamikadze_d* - “*Kremlebot ne proidiot*” (Ivanov), *Fake News – Razoblachenie Propagandy* (TV Dozhd’ - Korostelev), and *Bad Comedian* (Bazhenov).

Additionally, one Evgeny Bazhenov (“Bad Comedian”) might serve as a case in point for the power of the blogosphere to both educate and contextualize the experience of watching modern Russian cinema for students in a classroom with other Russian-language learners. Bazhenov is well-known for eviscerating modern Russian cinema, and he often couches his film criticism in the context of the Russian state-controlled film industry and its supposed wastefulness and ideological calcification. He often juxtaposes Soviet cinema, which he views as artistically superior, with modern Russian cinema, which, he proposes, uses many of the same themes to underwhelming effect. Bazhenov has inserted himself into a wider debate about Russian cinema and has become a frequent target of both Russian movie directors and *Minkul’t* (the Russian Ministry of Culture), coincidentally the largest single client for new Russian-made films. Whether or not students agree with Bazhenov, his content can help students both gain insight into Soviet film and feel connected to the contemporary cultural debate within Russia. Including Bazhenov’s social media content in a curriculum, or encouraging students to watch clips outside of class, might allow students to feel more invested in any debate about the role of film in Putin’s Russia. Bazhenov could form a useful background to classroom activities centered on film and the cultural values that film projects onto its audiences.

7. The problem of language quality

This short article has asked Russian-language educators to think about ways that they can promote language mastery among advanced RFL students can be advanced through encouraging students to employ simple and effective strategies for prioritizing Russian-language material in their digital and social media consumption. Given that this study has focused on extracurricular and somewhat passive practices involving viewership

and listening habits, solutions for the classroom have not been widely strategized here. Any such answer, however, will involve theorizing each language teacher's and each program's own stance toward the use of authentic material and the potential for integrating blended methods into the language classroom.

The problems that lurk below the surface when advising students about resources are in effect here, as well. Any time that students are exposed to authentic language resources, and especially if such resources are unfiltered and untested by students' instructors, then it will be difficult to gauge the range of factors that may hinder students' ability to comprehend and integrate the materials into their language profile. Indeed, the dizzying pace with which materials are replicated across the internet, and the concurrent easing of access to this endless variety, mean that students may have a hard time making valuation judgements about the quality of the information (including the quality of the language). On the other hand, if and when students' Russian-language consumption habits become entrenched, instructors may have a hard time directing students' interest toward more traditional forms of media that have heretofore formed the backbone of most RFL curricula: movies, documentaries, and print media.

In an age of "digital noise" and shortened attention spans attuned more to the length of a 280-character "tweet" or a "video meme," such tendencies may be unavoidable. The suggestions herein are made with the assumption that students' online habits are already entrenched, and that the RFL community must begin to play catch-up to help students create strategies for increasing opportunities for Russian-language gain in an increasingly crowded and English-language-dominated information and entertainment market (Puspita and Rohedi 2018).

Conclusions

We need to rethink how we go about conceptualizing and enforcing the traditional language pledge that has anchored intensive study abroad programming:

"Language immersion is a key component of the Overseas Flagship Program's philosophy and design; it is also an essential source of participants' linguistic growth and development. In order to create and preserve an immersion environment, all participants

are required to uphold the Flagship language pledge, which requires them to communicate in the target language at all times.” (Overseas Russian Flagship Language Pledge).

Instead of thinking about social media and the blogosphere as private space to be excluded from the public behaviors that the language pledge is designed to help regulate, we need to recognize that it is, instead, a new form of public behavior that if not claimed for foreign language learning, will push language increasingly to the background of the intensive domestic RFL classroom and the study abroad experience (ACTFL 2012).

Even though many social critics are focused on the moral conundrum presented by aggressive algorithm-based marketing campaigns, students can, with no feeling of guilt about the invasiveness of social media, take control of social-media algorithms to prioritize language-specific content. If students are proactive about choosing Russian in their social media lives, then the algorithms will begin to actually funnel content for them, and AI can be taught to provide a nearly endless stream of Russian-language choices for viewing and reading on their ‘news streams’...meaning that the job of finding Russian-language alternatives to their English-language downtime will be made that much easier (Barnhart 2019). The goal of such strategies as I have recommended is to increase students’ exposure to authentic language material, and also to maximize the amount of Russian that students encounter, both passively and actively, in the course of consuming entertainment and information. Staking a place for Russian in the practices of the “everyday” can in some ways, lead to the sorts of empowering effects that de Certeau charted in his own intellectual strategy for the reappropriation of mass culture in *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

As the survey demonstrated, students participating in immersive overseas language programs are, even in conditions of maximal exposure to the target language, finding that English-language habits are hard to control in the domains that have not received relatively less attention from language teachers and trainers. But as the survey also makes clear, advanced Russian-language learners can also successfully shift to Russian-dominant digital media with appropriate programmatic support and instructor counseling. For that reason, from the earliest stages of instruction, the RFL community would be well advised to intensify its efforts to embrace the Russian digital and social media spheres., thus

helping to preserve student connections and comfort levels with authentic Russian sources that are central to the work of the Flagship program and the goal of achieving eventual professional-level proficiency in the language.

Appendix: Survey Questions

Студентов просят оценить общее количество времени, проведенное за русскоязычными СМИ.

1. Сколько часов в день вы отдаете СМИ и соцсетям (вне академической программы)?
2. Сколько примерно процентов вашего времени, проведенного за СМИ и соцсетями, вы отдаете русскоязычным источникам?
3. Информация из каких источников вызывает ваш интерес?
 - культурная
 - научно-техническая
 - политическая
 - светская хроника
 - отдых/путешествия
 - спорт
4. В какой форме вы предпочитаете читать книги?
 - в бумажном варианте
 - в электронном виде
5. Используете ли вы следующие соцсети как источник новостей и другой информации?
 - Facebook
 - Twitter
 - Tumblr
 - Youtube
 - Другое (укажите)
6. Есть ли отличия в ваших приоритетах, относительно сфер информации?
 - Информация, связанная с политикой, для меня является важной
7. Есть ли отличия в ваших приоритетах, относительно сфер информации?
 - Информацией, связанная со светской хроникой, для меня является важной

8. Есть ли отличия в ваших приоритетах, относительно сфер информации?

- Информация, связанная со спортом, для меня является важной

9. Есть ли отличия в ваших приоритетах, относительно сфер информации?

- Информация, связанная с культурой, для меня является важной

10. Какие новости для вас являются приоритетными?

- культурные
- научно-технические
- политические
- светская хроника
- отдых/путешествия
- спорт

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