Defining the Accessibility of a Literary Text: Contemporary Russian Literature in a CEFR B2 Russian as a Foreign Language Classroom

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1. Introduction

In the last three and a half decades, a considerable number of publications in foreign-language methodology have addressed the use of literary texts (LTs) in foreign-language classrooms. While at the beginning of the twentieth century learning a foreign language still meant a close study of canonical LTs for linguistic and humanistic purposes following the grammar-translation method (Kramsch and Kramsch 2000; Iatsenko 2017b), by the middle of the century, literature was replaced by more-functional models of learning (Carter 2007). The 1980s opened new perspectives on the didactic role of L2 literary reading, which are commonly associated with the confluence of ideas from two theoretical frameworks: reader-response theory and communicative language teaching (Gilroy and Parkinson 1997). The reader-response theory challenged formalist text-oriented positions, drawing attention to the reader's active role in co-creating the text's meaning. From a language-learning standpoint, this approach revealed the potential of LTs to produce multiple interpretations and naturally lead to classroom discussions (ibid.). The communicative teaching method recognized the authenticity of LTs and their ability, if carefully selected, to provide not only topics of personal interest but also illustrations of language use and opportunities for language learners to develop vocabulary, reading skills, and critical thinking ability (Kramsch and Kramsch 2000, 567). This reassertion of the didactic benefits of literary reading in foreign-language classrooms led to new research and an increasing number of

methodological proposals in the fields of both English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and Russian as a Foreign Language (RFL).[1]

2. Background

According to Volkov (2014), current approaches to the use of LTs in RFL classrooms combine UTILITARIAN components, aimed at developing learners' lexical and grammatical competence, broadening their background knowledge, and improving their receptive and productive skills, with NONUTILITARIAN components, the goal of which is to assist learners in penetrating the target culture and the author's world. The texts selected to accomplish these objectives range from nineteenth-century Russian classics to contemporary prose and poetry by, among others, Ulitskaia, Petrushevskaia, Pelevin, Prigov, Tolstaia, and Rubina. Studies show that contemporary Russian literature attracts RFL learners' particular attention (Kulibina 2001; Filimonova 2004; Kuz'minova and Ruzhitskii 2014; Iatsenko 2015a, 2015b, 2017a; Vorozhtsova and Ursegova 2015) because of its ability to reflect contemporary Russian society. As argued by Iatsenko (2015a), today's RFL students are interested in the lives of their Russian counterparts, including their lifestyles, ways of thinking, and relationships with other people, and this is precisely what contemporary Russian authors often portray in their works. Moreover, since the comprehension of any kind of text depends on the understanding of the situation that it illustrates (Kulibina 2001, 62),

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[1] Among Russian-language publications of the last few years, several works deserve a special mention: Kuz'minova and Ruzhitskii (2014) and Ruzhitskii's (2013) two-volume anthology of contemporary Russian literature that provides RFL learners with a system of detailed and well-designed glosses; Balandina et al.'s (2013), Ganina et al.'s (2013), Zhgareva et al.'s (2013) three-volume anthology built around a group of 19th- and 20th-century LTs at three levels of RFL competence; Iatsenko's (2006) original collection of selected short stories from the 1990s; and Tolstukhina et al.'s (2011) glossed volume of contemporary LTs. Moreover, valuable insights into the ongoing debate on the role of LTs in RFL instruction can be found in the annual editions of *Russkaia literatura v inostrannoi auditorii* (Arkad'eva 2011, 2012, 2015; Tolstukhina 2013, 2014, 2017), published by Herzen State Pedagogical University in St. Petersburg. Following a more applied strand of research, Natalia Kulibina's interactive online course (https://ac.pushkininstitute.ru/course1.php), launched by the Pushkin State Russian Language Institute, provides RFL instructors with hands-on examples of reading lessons based on LTs of various epochs. The theoretical method employed by the scholar is illustrated in Kulibina (1999, 2000, 2001).

foreign-language learner–readers are more likely to understand contemporary literary works[2] (85). An additional motivation for using contemporary literary works in the classroom is that they are generally written in modern Russian, the object of study for RFL learners (85).

And yet, when contemporary Russian LTs are introduced into an RFL classroom, a number of thorny methodological issues arise. On the linguistic level, these texts are often characterized by complex narrative forms, lexes, styles, and expressive devices (Filimonova 2004); from a cultural point of view, they frequently abound with Sovietisms, slang, and intertextual references.[3] According to Filimonova, literary works by contemporary Russian authors such as Ven. Erofeev, Vik. Erofeev, Pietsukh, Pelevin, Sokolov, and Tolstaia are appropriate in advanced RFL classrooms but are hardly suitable for lower-level learners (2004, 19). In fact, many didactic methods utilizing unabridged contemporary Russian LTs are addressed to advanced learners or students specializing in philology (e.g., Iatsenko 2006; Tolstukhina et al. 2011; Ruzhitskii 2013; Kuz'minova and Ruzhitskii 2014). The relatively few methods designed specifically for intermediate levels and based on unabridged texts can be found in the *Biblioteka Zlatousta* series (e.g., Pelevin 2003; Ulitskaia 2012; Makanin 2014), in Comer's (2008) edition of *A day without Lying*, in Blech (2007) and in Nemez and Miliuk (2017). Another group of recent publications explores the didactic potential of literary works by some of the "newest" names of contemporary Russian-language literature, such as Prilepin, Knizhnik, and Grishkovets (e.g., Iatsenko 2015a; Vorob'eva and Krizhovetskaia 2015). Focusing on the cultural and humanistic potential of these writings, these studies provide valuable insights into the themes and motifs of present-day Russian literature, but they do not report on the degree of their LINGUISTIC accessibility to RFL learners, nor do they relate the analyzed texts to any specific level of RFL competence.

The current study intends to address the notion of the "accessibility" of an LT when used for foreign-language teaching

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[2] Kulibina argues that peers living in different countries have much in common. This is why people from modern Germany, Poland, or Vietnam can more easily imagine the lives of their Russian counterparts than those of their ancestors who lived at the beginning of the nineteenth century and owned serfs or were peasants themselves (2001, 85).

[3] For discussions of intertextuality in contemporary Russian prose, see Iatsenko (1997, 2001) and Urzha and Skvortsova (2016a).

purposes. The author argues that up to now this methodological issue has been commonly associated with the broad question of "criteria for LT selection" and has not been conceptualized in more-specific terms. For instance, while many researchers have recognized that "the text should not be too much above the students' normal reading proficiency" (Collie and Slater 1987, 6), that sometimes linguistically simple texts "pose considerable problems in literary terms" (Brumfit 1986, 189), and that texts dense in cultural allusion will generate a further layer of difficulty (Carter 1986, 222), the actual strategies for measuring and predicting the degree of overall accessibility of a given LT to foreign-language (FL) learners remain under-researched. The aim of the study is to illustrate a model of textual analysis that can assist language instructors in the process of assessing the accessibility and didactic potential of a given literary text[4] and exemplify it using a literary work by well-known, present-day Russian author Evgenii Grishkovets. The analysis is accompanied by a number of methodological recommendations for the effective use of the selected work in an RFL CEFR[5] B2 classroom. In examining an LT through the lens of FL instruction, this study intends to contribute to the ongoing debate concerning the criteria for selecting texts in integrated language-literature curricula (Bernhardt 1995; Byrnes and Kord 2002; Kern 2002; Barrette, Paesani, and Vinall 2010). The proposed model can be applied to other Russian LTs in classrooms at any level, as well as to LTs in other languages. From a syllabus-broadening perspective, the article intends to examine the possibility and benefits of enriching the current RFL B2 reading materials with excerpts from a novel by one of the most significant figures of current Russian literature.

3. Selecting the author

As mentioned previously, the "newest" (*новейшая*) Russian literature texts present an array of difficulties for RFL learner–readers. It is not an exaggeration to assert that numerous examples of well-established literary currents such as modernism, postmodernism, and ironic avant-gardism in contemporary Russian literature greatly challenge even educated native speakers of Russian. Furthermore, works by many popular authors of more "traditional" prose, such as Prilepin, Bykov, and

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[4] The model is applicable only to LTs written in prose.
[5] Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Sanaev, among others, are rarely less challenging, especially for learners at intermediate levels. Therefore, when selecting a present-day Russian LT for an RFL classroom, the language instructor should consider not so much its literary merit or prestige (Avlova 2005; Potiomkina 2015) but the global narrative style and literary "vocation" of its author.[6] This idea will be demonstrated through a brief presentation of the work of Evgenii Grishkovets.

Evgenii Grishkovets (born 1967) is a contemporary Russian playwright and author who has to date produced six plays, four novels, three short-story collections, and six collections of short prose that were initially published on the web. Grishkovets has won a number of prestigious literary awards and has been included in several anthologies of contemporary Russian literature.[7] In 2009, an excerpt from one of his novels appeared in a collection of twenty-first-century LTs produced for RFL learners.[8] Critics (e.g., Abasheva 2006; Gorbunova 2008; Mogil'nitskaia 2016a, 2016b) have highlighted one of the main qualities of Grishkovets's style: its formal simplicity and extreme closeness to colloquial speech, which renders his works "interesting from both literary and linguistic perspectives"[9] (Mogil'nitskaia 2016b, 139) and suggests their potential suitability for RFL learning contexts.

Having started his literary career in the first years of the twenty-first century, Grishkovets belongs to the second period of the "newest" (*новейшая*), or post-Soviet (*постсоветская*), Russian literature (Iatsenko 2015b). In contrast to the writers of the 1990s, whose virulent and explosive writing embodied the turbulent mood of the epoch of the "great split," authors writing at the beginning of the new century left the Soviet past behind and returned to representing broad humanistic values through the lens of their intimate thoughts and feelings (Iatsenko 2015b, 2017a). This new generation of authors[10] abandoned the deliberate

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[6] According to Widdowson, "It is not necessary (and indeed may be undesirable) to select works on the grounds of aesthetic excellence or because they are representative of different schools and periods: the criteria for selection are pedagogic rather than aesthetic or historical" (1975, 81).

[7] See Chuprinin (2009), Davydova and Sushilina (2007), and Gromova (2005).

[8] Kuz'minova and Ruzhitskii (2014).

[9] In this study, translations from Russian into English are the author's.

[10] Apart from E. Grishkovets, Iatsenko names, among others, Gelasimov, Senchin, and Shargunov.

attempts to shock, the sense of play, and the intentional complexity of literary techniques typical of the previous decade, instead reviving the use of realistic writing (Iatsenko 2017a). This critical discourse is highly pertinent to Grishkovets's prose, defined by Abasheva as devoid of any kind of "complex cultural allusions [or] eccentric narrative experiments" (2006, 210), and is particularly enlightening if applied to his novel *Реки*, which will be analyzed in the following sections of the article.

4. Assessing the text

4.1. Structural aspects

For obvious reasons of convenience, prose is frequently introduced into FL classrooms in the form of extracts from longer works. However, as underscored by Cook, the proposed excerpts should have a low frequency of cohesive ties with the preceding text and "should, where possible, be introductory rather than continuing or conclusive" (1986, 164). Cook specifies that texts in which the mood is created internally are preferable to those in which the mood is created "by conjunction with the preceding text." He also recommends selecting extracts that "do not encourage the student to create *false texture* by making interpretations which, though viable within the extract, are demonstrably false in context" (164). Therefore, while assessing the text, the teacher should carefully consider its formal structure and internal composition.

For instance, a quick look at the composition of Grishkovets's *Реки* (2005) shows that the novel consists of fifty-nine sections, the shortest of which contains sixty words and the longest 1,785. Some of the sections initiate new topics, while others continue themes introduced earlier in the novel. Bearing Cook's recommendations in mind, *Реки* offers multiple possibilities for use in RFL learning contexts, as its relatively autonomous thematic sections can be introduced in an RFL classroom with minimal background information about the plot and protagonists of the story. Moreover, the brevity of some sections, which in Brumfit's terms constitutes "a crucial pedagogical factor" (1986, 189) in text selection, facilitates their use in a language classroom, especially if composed of B2 students who are not accustomed to processing extended reading passages.

4.2. Conceptual accessibility

Defined by Carter and Long as a "warning against overload" (1991, 143), the conceptual accessibility of an LT is another crucial aspect of its didactic value. In practical terms, this implies that the subject matter, themes, and narrative form of the selected work should not present significant comprehension challenges, which could result in cognitive overload. In contemporary Russian literature, examples of conceptually demanding writings can be found, for instance, in the so-called "alternative" prose of the last decades, characterized by a reduced presence of plot line, subjective representation of narrative time and space, absence of an explicitly stated writer's position, and polystylism (Iatsenko 2006, 5).

Far from the formal and thematic complexities of "alternative" prose and commonly associated with the genre of "middle-literature,"[11] Grishkovets's *Реки* is a first-person autobiographical narrative that portrays the author's relationship with his hometown, Kemerovo, in Western Siberia and with his homeland in general. Despite the fact that its geographical and cultural setting is unfamiliar to RFL learners, *Реки* introduces a number of universally comprehensible and highly evocative subjects, such as emotional rapport with one's birthplace, the force of childhood memories that can surface under unexpected circumstances, and the relationship with one's origins embodied by the figures of parents and grandparents. Grishkovets touches upon some seemingly trivial and yet profoundly philosophical human matters with which readers can identify, regardless of their own cultural background.[12] Therefore, on a conceptual level, the text of *Реки* can be defined as accessible and

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[11] For a definition of Russian "middle-literature," see Chuprinin (2007, 161–62) and Kuz'minova and Ruzhitskii (2014, 5).

[12] Grishkovets himself formulates his literary vocation in the following way: "I am interested in what life in general is made up of. As a man consists to 90 percent of water, so life consists of things like waking up, eating, shopping, travelling, talking on the phone, speaking with relatives and friends. And for serious events, for moments of choice, for global concerns, even love there is as much space as there is for calcium and other elements in the human organism. But from all this one must choose only the universal details, and cut short one's own individual and exotic adventures and describe instead universal experiences, and choose from a huge variety of events only what can be clear to a large group of people, from a child up to people who are older than me" (qtd. in Beumers and Lipovetsky 2009, 183).

engaging, offering the language instructor an array of occasions for emotionally stimulating classroom readings and discussions.

There is, however, a further matter to consider when assessing the conceptual accessibility of Grishkovets's novel. It is written in the form of SKAZ, or oral narrative, in which events are reported by a clearly perceptible narrative voice. Broadly present in Russian literature of the last two centuries,[13] in Grishkovets this narrative voice becomes explicitly autobiographical and can be associated with what D. A. Prigov defined in 1984 as the "new sincerity" in Russian literature, or its return to the "lyrical-confessional discourse" (qtd. in Nemchenko 2017, 760). In the framework of the present investigation, it is important to note that this quality of Grishkovets's autobiographical prose makes his writings descriptive rather than "factual" and plot-based, thus jeopardizing their accessibility to FL readers. In fact, as has been stressed in the literature (Swaffar et al. 1991, 190), readings chosen for FL classrooms should have a clear story line and present discernible plot points that readers can hold on to. While the descriptive nature of some of *Реки*'s sections can indeed hinder its accessibility to FL learners to a certain extent, one of the main reasons for introducing LTs in FL classrooms is to develop sensitivity to narrative styles and to "foster acquisition of those kinds of sense-making procedures particularly but not exclusively relevant for the interpretation of literary discourse" (Brumfit and Carter 1986, 21), both of which are processes that *Реки* encourages. With the right guidance and stimuli from the language instructor, B2 learner–readers of Russian might come close to understanding both the meanings of the chosen section and the writer's narrative style. For instance, prior to the reading session, the language instructor can promote learners' top-down processing by providing a brief explication of the narrative form of SKAZ and its main qualities. This will make learners aware of the narrative strategies implemented by the author and allow them to approach the text with certain expectations regarding its style and structure.[14] Another useful activity would consist of preparing (or, better, asking students to prepare) a brief presentation on Grishkovets and his literary works. In addition to increasing learners'

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[13] For a detailed analysis of SKAZ, see Mushchenko et al. (1978).

[14] For instance, the learners will be aided in noticing and understanding elements of Grishkovets's style, such as unfinished sentences, repetitions, and direct appellations to the reader.

motivation to approach the text, this task will provide them with basic background information about the narrator, therefore augmenting the text's conceptual accessibility. The language educator can also draw learners' attention to the central thematic nuclei of the narration, stimulate visualization through relative visual prompts and group discussions, and, above all, encourage learners to see themselves in Grishkovets's existential reflections.

4.3. Cultural accessibility

The need for culture-specific background knowledge in order to penetrate the meaning of an LT has been extensively addressed in the literature (e.g., Vereshchagin and Kostomarov 1973; Vinogradov 1978; Vlakhov and Florin 1980; Kramsch 1985; Knutson 1993; Garbovskii 2004). In Kramsch's terms, as NONINTENDED readers of LTs written in their target language, foreign-language learners "have the difficult task of understanding intentions and beliefs that are not necessarily part of their representation of the world" (1985, 357). Together with the culture-specific intentions and beliefs cited by Kramsch, other gaps in learners' background knowledge are commonly associated with REALIA[15] and intertextual references. Finally, a more elusive, but nevertheless fundamental, group of culture-specific items, broadly present in LTs and, in particular, in contemporary Russian LTs, are MNEMAS (мнемы). Ruzhitskii defines MNEMAS as textual elements related to "a complex of associations of different types—visual, tactile, kinetic, gustative, etc., stored in the collective memory of members of a certain national culture"[16] (2014, 62). By integrating these elements into the text, the writer aims to provoke strong and immediate reactions in the reader's mind, enabled by their collective memory. Foreign-language readers who find themselves unable to catch and interpret these signals will inevitably be subject to a more impoverished perception of the LT as well as a lack of appreciation for it.

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[15] Vlakhov and Florin (1980) define REALIA as culture-specific lexical items related to a certain ethnic group or nation; they can include, among others, denominations of food, clothes, dwellings, currency, and units of measurement, as well as names of social and political institutions, endemic animals and plants, and items related to art, religion, and human activities. REALIA have also been termed CULTUREMES (Katan 2009; Nord 1997), CULTURAL TERMS (Newmark 1991), and CULTURE-SPECIFIC CONCEPTS (Baker 1995).

[16] In Ruzhitskii's classification, REALIA are a subgroup of MNEMAS.

Therefore, to maximize the benefit of literary reading in a given FL classroom and capitalize on its didactic potential from a cultural perspective, the instructor should identify ALL of the above-mentioned culture-specific elements in the selected LT and carefully assess how accessible they are to the learners.[17]

In the case of *Реки*, the language educator's attention should first focus on the REALIA in the text, which are mostly represented by geographic and ethnographic terms, including, among others, *девятиэтажка*; *пучка*, *саранка*, *пескарь*, *шапка-ушанка*, *бидон*. Some of these examples are regional in nature, while others are employed nationwide. Other instances of REALIA include the names of famous Russian works of art and books, such as *Три богатыря*, *Утро в сосновом бору*, *Угрюм-река*, *Последний из Удэге*, and *Кавсказский пленник*, as well as references to several historical personalities, such as Yermak and Alexander Nevskii.

MNEMAS are represented in the text by words, word strings, and entire passages aimed at creating contact between the author and the reader by appealing to shared cultural memories. For instance, such items as *деревня*, *сибиряк*, *хулиган третьего "Б" класса*, *черные пахучие семечки*, and *типовая пятиэтажка* are highly evocative for a native Russian reader, whose perception of the text will be deepened and enriched by the recollections of direct experience with the described objects and situations. The two following passages, the first one describing Indian summer in Siberia and the second one a trip to the countryside, are also likely to appeal to native Russian readers, who share similar experiences.

> Наступает холодная ясная ночь с картой звездного неба над городом. А утро приходит с синевой и длинными студеными тенями от домов, за границей которых ослепительное солнце моментально высушивает асфальт и греет лица прохожих. Но тени в такие дни долго лежат во дворах городских

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[17] In this respect, language instructors must rely on their awareness of the learners' culture-specific knowledge, as the current national standards for Russian as a foreign language, devised for all levels of RFL competence, do not include the cultural (*страноведческий*) component (Strel'chuk 2013).

многоэтажек, и во дворах холодно, и пар идет изо рта. (Grishkovets 2005, 174)

Как раз был такой ясный день моей последней осени, прожитой в Сибири, когда я видел медведя. Мы поехали хорошей компактной компанией на шашлыки. Очень хотелось последний раз перед зимой посидеть у костра, побродить у реки, покидать в нее камешки. (175)

Russian readers will likely identify with these passages and, drawing on their own memories, clearly imagine the cold, shaded courts tucked between the rows of Soviet and post-Soviet tower blocks and the last autumn picnic with *шашлыки*. These details not only enable the reader to visualize the described scenes but also evoke a host of sensory memories of similar episodes. In reference to Grishkovets's writings, Nemchenko explains this process as PARRHESIA, by which the reader "goes through the procedure of recognizing the utterances as truth. The audience recognizes the morning routine from childhood, the trip to school, the way we hold a toothbrush in a train washroom" (2017, 762). For a native reader, this process of self-identification with such passages leads to the "joy of recognition" and "complete trust in the author" (ibid.), but for an RFL reader, narrative practices like these significantly decrease the text's accessibility. In fact, the lack of the relative cultural schemata will prevent foreign learners from activating the top-down processing necessary for understanding these parts of the text;[18] they will thus perceive them only incompletely and have a poorer appreciation for them, as described previously. However, if approached judiciously, MNEMAS can create valuable didactic opportunities and significantly increase learners' knowledge and "feel" of the target culture.

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[18] Basing his argument on a series of empirical studies, Nassaji observes that "L2 readers in general possess to a much lesser degree that kind of socioculturally appropriate background knowledge shared between L1 writers and readers. This then would push them to rely more on the textual linguistic data and their L2 linguistic competence to extract meaning from text than L1 readers do" (2007, 98).

Solutions for treating MNEMAS in RFL learning contexts are currently unaddressed in the literature,[19] which makes it difficult to discuss the question extensively. In the framework of the present study, it is important to first make students aware of these culture-specific elements by directing their attention to the relative sentences or passages.[20] Second, the language instructor can ask students to design associative fields for the discovered MNEMAS or reflect on the elements of collective memory evoked by the author in a given episode. Another activity might include having students think of other forms of expression, such as films or images, that depict the analyzed MNEMAS.[21] Naturally enough, considering the high level of cultural specificity of such textual elements, the role of the language instructor in modeling these activities and his or her personal expertise in the target culture will be central.

The aim of an analysis of culture-specific elements such as the one conducted in the previous paragraphs is both to assess an LT's accessibility to a given category of learners and to reveal the text's potential to broaden learners' intellectual horizons and knowledge of the target culture. In the case of *Реки*, another cultural trait of the text to consider is its regional component. In fact, it is clear that, together with the narrator, the second "protagonist" of the novel is Siberia itself. Nearly all episodes of the novel develop against the backdrop of this geographical space, and even those set elsewhere are intended to depict Siberia indirectly by comparing it to other regions outside and inside Russia. While reading the novel, RFL learners can increase their grasp on the target culture and, more specifically, on one regional variant of that culture. Depending on the extract chosen for classroom reading, learners can discover a particular aspect of Siberia: geography, climate, cities, the character and mentality of its inhabitants, citizens' occupations, and so on. From a visit to a Siberian coal mine to the descriptions of Lake Baikal, the taiga, and an accidental encounter with a Siberian bear, the novel's scenes are highly varied and culturally instructive.

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[19] Ruzhitskii argues that "mnema can become a didactic unit of a particular type" [*может явиться единицей обучения особого типа*] (2014, 66) but does not suggest any specific teaching techniques.

[20] Similar activities can also be employed with REALIA.

[21] See, for example, the famous episode of the last autumn picnic with *шашлыки* in "*Москва слезам не верит.*"

The analysis presented up to this point has suggested four levels on which to assess the accessibility of an LT: global narrative, structural, conceptual, and cultural. An examination of the procedures used to analyze a literary work by E. Grishkovets shows that this LT can be viewed as generally accessible for B2 learner–readers of Russian, although some of its qualities, such as its descriptive narrative style and the frequent use of MNEMAS, may hinder its accessibility. The remainder of this paper addresses the problem of linguistic accessibility of an LT and proposes a theoretical model for its assessment. As an example, the model will be applied to the opening section of *Реки*, which contains 575 words.[22]

4.4. Linguistic accessibility

The principle of linguistic accessibility is viewed as a fundamental criterion for the selection of LTs (e.g., Brumfit 1986; Littlewood 1986; Carter and Long 1991; Filimonova 2004; Korotyshev 2014). In Littlewood's terms, "It's fruitless to expect pupils to appreciate literary works for which they are not linguistically ready" (1986, 180). Therefore, it is important to measure the structural complexity of a text from an FL teaching perspective. The present paper refers to two national guidelines: *Государственный стандарт по русскому языку как иностранному* (further *ГС*) and *Лексический минимум по русскому языку как иностранному* (further *ЛМ*).[23] Related to the levels of the Test of Russian as a foreign language (ТРКИ), these documents currently constitute the main reference sources for editors of RFL teaching materials (Brygina and Zorina 2010; Andriushina et al. 2013; Afanas'eva et al. 2016). An LT's linguistic accessibility to a given category of learners can be assessed by relating its lexis and morphosyntactical structures to the requirements presented in the *ГС* and *ЛМ* of the relative RFL level. In terms of lexis, the

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[22] The choice of this particular section is based on Cook's (1986) methodological recommendations described in the preceding paragraphs. The full text of the analyzed section can be found in the Appendix.

[23] These references are preferred to indices of readability for two reasons: they are addressed specifically to RFL learners, and the text's linguistic accessibility to a given group of RFL learners is deduced using a multilevel system of parameters (accessibility on lexical, morphological, and syntactical levels) rather than through statistical readability formulas based on quantitative variables such as word and sentence length.

frequency dictionary based on the Russian national corpus (Liashevskaia and Sharov 2009)[24] also serves as another reference source.

A. Lexical analysis

According to the word lists contained in *ЛМ II* (Andriushina 2015), 527 words[25] of the 575 composing the opening section of *Реки* fall within the RFL B2 competence level. The level of lexical readability of the text for the given category of students therefore corresponds to approximately 91.5 percent.[26]   In analyzing this section from a lexical point of view, it is also important to note that it does not contain any archaic or stylistically marked vocabulary. The only neologism present in the text is *спасительно-нежный* and the only historical term is *сталинский*. A reference to the frequency dictionary based on the Russian national corpus (Liashevskaia and Sharov 2009) shows that 404 words of the text are among the first one thousand of the most frequently used lemmas in the Russian language, followed by 41 other words for which the frequency indices are between one thousand and two thousand. Combining the collected data, it is evident that the opening section of *Реки* can be considered accessible to RFL B2 learners in terms of lexis. As regards the potential didactic benefits, by reading the selected excerpt, B2 learners of Russian will be able to use their knowledge of basic vocabulary and also encounter new lexis relevant for their stage of linguistic development.

        Carter (1998) distinguishes between core and non-core vocabulary items. Core items are neutral words that function as universal substitutes

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[24] The accessibility of the text is therefore measured here through a close analysis of its structures; such factors as the learners' L1 literacy, background knowledge, interest in the subject matter, and reading skills are not considered.

[25] The following words are not part of the lexical minimum established for the B2 level of RFL competence: *непостижимо, удушливо, понятийный, механизм, собственно, стрекотать, кузнечик, звенеть, горизонт, знойный* (repeated twice), *руина, значимость, осведомленнотсть, увлекать, грот, гробница, спасительно-нежный, запыхавшийся, разгоряченный, забегать* (repeated twice), *подъезд, сталинский, постройка, выскочив, раскаленный, врываться, типовой, доставлять, непостижимый, наполнен, по-настоящему, след*, and *подобный*. The following word strings are also considered unfamiliar to B2 students, since they are not present in *ЛМ II*: *с небольшим, к тому же, на самом деле, при этом*, and *до сих пор*.

[26] For Avlova, a text is "readable" if 70 to 80 percent of its language is comprehensible to learners during the first slow reading (2005, 114). The same threshold (from 70 to 80 percent) is set by Matron (2002, 61).

for their non-core equivalents, which carry nuances and extra meanings (e.g., the core adjective COLD compared to its non-core synonym FREEZING). Smith observes that "attempting fiction, where the aesthetic quality of the writing is a central component, provides an excellent setting for non-core vocabulary study. It encourages both raising cognitive awareness of non-core vocabulary and provides reasons for using it. Where the emotional impact (rather than simple semantic message) becomes important, so does the nuance in word choice" (2013, 14). The first section of *Реки* contains several cases of core vocabulary items and their non-core equivalents: *жаркий – знойный, раскаленный; маленький – тесный; входить – врываться*. Teachers using this excerpt in the classroom should consider stressing the non-core, or "expressive," vocabulary in the text, allowing B2 learners who are moving toward higher levels of RFL proficiency to increase their language awareness by becoming sensitive to the emotive-expressive undertones of the words.

Another methodological recommendation consists of grouping unfamiliar vocabulary thematically. As argued by Kalyuga and Kalyuga, "The presentation of vocabulary in chunks united by the same metaphorical themes can create a mental link and enhance learning by reducing a potential cognitive overload and the associated learning burden" (2008, 255). For instance, when learners are examining the first section of *Реки*, the language teacher might bring their attention to the semantic field HEAT represented in the text by several words, such as *жара, жаркий, знойный, раскаленный, разгоряченный*. Similarly, the verbs of motion (*входить, заходить, приезжать, уезжать, проезжать, бежать, забегать, врываться*) can be united under one thematic umbrella and presented to learners in groups, such as groups of synonyms or antonyms. It is important to mention that when introducing these and other vocabulary items in an RFL B2 classroom, language instructors should encourage students to draw on their prior knowledge and "available knowledge structures" (251). For instance, learners can search for familiar roots in words such as *прохладный, разгоряченный, рассматривать*, and *любознательный* or prefixal morphemes in *заходить, забегать, проезжать*, and *врываться*.[27]

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[27] Additional illustrations of this methodological procedure can be found in Ingram (1984).

In analyzing Grishkovets's prose on a lexical level, it is impossible to ignore his predilection for lexical repetitions, which in the first section of his novel amount to thirty-five items and include words and word strings. These repetitions have various functions: they establish logical sequences by linking propositions and paragraphs, they specify and amplify the meaning of the repeated item, and they guide readers' attention to central semantic nuclei (Mogil'nitskaia 2016a). From an RFL perspective, repetitions can be viewed as comprehension facilitators, augmenting textual redundancy and logical connections. Combined with PARCELLING (*парцелляция*), which will be discussed in the following section, lexical reiterations lighten and shorten the periods of text and bring the text closer to the patterns of oral colloquial speech.

Overall, the lexical analysis of *Реки* has revealed that more than 70 percent of the lexical items contained in the first section of the novel are among the most frequently used lemmas of contemporary Russian language. The analysis has also shown that a high percentage of words (91.5 percent) should be familiar to RFL B2 learners, which makes this section accessible for them. Additionally, the frequent lexical repetitions in the excerpt and throughout the whole novel might further improve its readability and help learner–readers access its meanings more easily.[28] Finally, together with core lexical items, the selected text includes several non-core words, which can be useful for increasing learners' sense of the target language and expanding their vocabulary, thus assisting in overcoming what is, in Comer's terms, the "greatest limitation that intermediate-level readers face" (2016, 25).

B. Morphosyntactical analysis

To evaluate the excerpt's accessibility on the grammatical level, its structures have been measured against the system of criteria offered by *ГС II* (Ivanova et al. 1999, 14–17). In some cases (e.g., case government), *ЛМ II* (Andriushina 2015) has been used. The analysis shows that the principal grammatical components of the text meet the standards for RFL B2 competence:

1. All functions of cases and relative word forms

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[28] To further increase the text's accessibility, it is useful to help learners understand WHY the text contains so many repetitions by directing their attention to the main qualities of SKAZ, as described above.

2. All classes of pronouns

3. All forms and degrees of adjectives

4. All forms of verbs

5. Six out of ten forms of participles[29] and the only form of gerund contained in the text.

Therefore, in terms of word forms contained in the text, the first section of *Реки* can be defined as accessible to B2 students. In designing an RFL lesson based on this text, language instructors might direct learners' attention to unfamiliar morphological forms, thus reinforcing Russian morphology while offering opportunities to discover and practice new language uses. This methodological approach is in line with recommendations by Paesani, who defines literature as "comprehensible, meaning-bearing input" wherein students can observe grammar structures and make hypotheses about their meanings (2005, 15).

On the syntactic level, the excerpt is composed of forty-eight sentences, eight of which are incomplete, sixteen simple, three compound, eighteen complex, and three compound-complex. All coordinating conjunctions of the compound sentences are part of the grammatical minimum at the B2 level (Ivanova et al. 1999, 17), as are the subordinating conjunctions introducing subordinating clauses (Andriushina 2015). The high percentage of complex and compound-complex sentences of significant length and, in a number of cases, containing multiple dependent clauses and participle and gerund phrases might decrease the excerpt's syntactic readability for B2 learners. However, comprehension might be facilitated by the presence of simple sentences and such syntactic phenomena as parcelling.

Vannikov defines parcelling as a "mode of representing a syntactic structure of speech within which it gets embodied not in a single but in several intonational-semantic speech units, i.e., phrases" (1960, 44). The first section of *Реки* contains different instances and functions of parcelling. First, parcelling specifies and develops the meaning of the following phrase: "А я уехал из Сибири. Уехал далеко и, наверное, без сожаления"; "В нем была история. История, не состоящая из фактов и следов, оставленных этими фактами." Second, parcelling modifies

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[29] According to *ГС II* (Ivanova et al. 1999, 17), active participles are not part of the RFL B2 competence.

the theme-topic relationship by dislocating the informational center of the phrase, for example, "Уехал и теперь уже не пойму. Никогда." Finally, parcelling contributes to the creation of a dynamic colloquial style by increasing the expressivity of the phrase and simplifying its syntax (Mogil'nitskaia 2016b, 140–42). In fact, the text presents several cases of parcellated complex sentences, in which the dependent clause is separated by a period: "Я только однажды видел медведя в зоопарке. […] Хотя я родился и первые свои тридцать с небольшим лет прожил в Сибири"; "Почему вспоминается кинотеатр? Типовой кинотеатр, которых так много." From an RFL perspective, the syntactic simplification produced by parcelling can be viewed as an aid to reading comprehension that can increase the text's accessibility to foreign-language learners.

Overall, the syntactic analysis reveals that 50 percent of the sentences composing the first section of *Реки* are simple or incomplete sentences. The text is also rich in parcelling, which decreases the level of syntactic complexity. However, since the excerpt contains a high number of compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences with multiple dependent clauses and participle and gerund phrases, its syntax might cause comprehension difficulties for RFL B2 learners. As a solution, language teachers can highlight and discuss the most structurally complex sentences and illustrate strategies for decoding and analyzing them. As argued by Barnett, "Work on intensive reading of short passages and an emphasis on decoding of intricate or perplexing syntax can teach students how to handle similar situations without help" (1989, 112). Furthermore, since such syntactic devices as parcelling are increasingly used not only in contemporary Russian literature and everyday speech but also in the press,[30] advertisements, and other oral and written genres, it is advisable to direct the learners' attention to their use and functions.

C. Stylistic analysis

As mentioned previously, Grishkovets attempts to "get as close as possible to lively colloquial speech" (Mogil'nitskaia 2016b, 139) in his prose. On a lexical level, the indicators of colloquiality are identified as the use of (1) frequently employed words, (2) abundant lexical repetitions,

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[30] See, for example, Bogoiavlenskaia (2013, 2017) and Tsumarev (2003).

(3) colloquialisms (e.g., *далеко-далеко*, *редко-редко*), and (4) conversational particles (e.g., *ну*, *же*, *вообще*, *-то*). On the syntactic level, colloquiality is expressed through the use of (1) parcelling, (2) direct appellations to the reader, (3) compound sentences with a sequence of coordinating conjunctions, (4) unfinished sentences, (5) double punctuation, and (6) intonational pauses signaled by ellipses and aimed at creating the effect of spontaneous and unconstrained speech. The following examples from the excerpt illustrate these features:

> Не пойму, потому что не знаю какого-то понятийного механизма, а самое главное—не знаю, что, собственно, мне нужно понять. Что?!"; "Отчего, когда я где-то далеко-далеко от города, где я родился и вырос, и даже далеко от Родины, захожу в какую-нибудь, я не знаю. . . Представляете, жара, самый конец июля"; "У вас уже белеет в глазах, но вдруг гид увлекает вас и всех остальных дальше, и вы входите в какой-то грот или гробницу, и на вас падает темная прохлада, кажущаяся даже какой-то влажной, но влажной не в плохом, а в спасительно-нежном смысле."

As demonstrated, the colloquiality of Grishkovets's style is expressed in his prose through a wide range of devices, which language instructors can use to develop learners' awareness of registers and stylistic varieties of modern Russian. For instance, teachers can guide students' attention to the most evident expressions of colloquiality contained in a given excerpt and discuss activities for their use. Another activity could consist of asking students to read the text aloud, as if they were delivering a theatrical monologue. This would push the learners to notice and try to reproduce the intonational patterns of the text and allow them to better sense the oral nature of SKAZ.[31] Overall, by reading the text of *Реки*, RFL learners will encounter numerous contextualized illustrations of modern colloquial Russian language, which is particularly valuable if the instruction occurs outside the community of native speakers.

At the end of this textual analysis, it is important to note that the present investigation has addressed only those narrative, structural,

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[31] This activity could also be accompanied by listening to the audio version of the book, which was recorded by the author himself.

conceptual, cultural, and linguistic features that are present in the selected novel. For instance, this study has concentrated on the description and didactic qualities of MNEMAS rather than intertextual references and has not focused on the problem of archaic lexis or linguistic deviations, which were absent from the analyzed excerpt but are broadly present in other literary works by contemporary and classical authors. The rationale of this limitation lies in the intention of the article to illustrate a certain methodological procedure using a concrete example of a contemporary Russian LT; therefore, rather than presenting an exhaustive list of possible didactically relevant textual occurrences, it offers a specific way of identifying and assessing them.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this study has been to address the question of accessibility of an LT used for FL teaching purposes. The article has advanced a multilevel model of textual analysis aimed at assessing the accessibility and didactic potential of a given literary work to a specific category of FL learners. The model has been exemplified using a twenty-first-century Russian LT, and its efficacy in an RFL B2 classroom has been tested. Based on the presented textual analysis, language instructors can both measure the LT's accessibililty and assess its didactic potential on each of the suggested textual levels: global narrative, structural, conceptual, cultural, and linguistic.

By focusing on the question of accessibility, this study brings attention to the difficulties associated with literary reading in FL classrooms, which often stem from the teacher's underestimation of the structural complexity of an LT (Schulz 1981). In this respect, the multicomponent linguistic analysis presented in the last part of the study can assist teachers in assessing a text's difficulty level prior to introducing it into an FL classroom.[32] Overall, the study argues for a SYSTEMIC approach to the assessment of an LT's accessibility, which consists of an organized and theory-grounded perusal of its linguistic and extralinguistic features on all levels at which they function.

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[32] Naturally enough, in real-life learning settings, teachers' familiarity with their students' abilities will provide more accurate predictions regarding the linguistic accessibility of an LT than just the application of a set of national learning standards.

From a syllabus-building point of view, the study confirms the possibility of enriching RFL learning materials with carefully selected excerpts from unabridged present-day Russian literary works starting from the B2 level of RFL competence. In particular, a number of linguistic and thematic features of Evgenii Grishkovets's prose suggest its successful employment in RFL classrooms, an observation that calls for further methodological investigations.

Acknowledgements

Appendix

Я только однажды видел медведя не в зоопарке. Только один раз в жизни. Хотя я родился и первые свои тридцать с небольшим лет прожил в Сибири. В Сибири, где когда-то родился и умер мой прадед, где родился и умер мой дед, где родился мой отец. А я уехал из Сибири. Уехал далеко и, наверное, без сожаления.

Я родился и вырос в городе, который не могу ощущать ни как большой, ни как маленький. Я не могу понять его размеров. Когда-то он казался мне непостижимо большим, а когда я бежал из него, он был удушливо тесен. А теперь, когда я приезжаю, ре..е..дко – редко, приезжаю в мой родной город, я уже не понимаю, какой он. Он большой или маленький для тех, кто живет в нем. А я-то уехал. Уехал и теперь уже не пойму. Никогда.

Не пойму потому, что не знаю какого-то понятийного механизма, а самое главное – не знаю, что, собственно, мне нужно понять. Что?!

Отчего, когда я где-то далеко-далеко от города, где я родился и вырос, и даже далеко от Родины, захожу в какую-нибудь, я не знаю… Представляете, жара, самый конец июля. Юг. И даже не наш юг, а вообще Юг. В сухой траве стрекочут кузнечики, и все звенит от неподвижной жары. В небе ни облачка, горизонт совсем белый и знойный, а вы при этом осматриваете какую-то достопри-мечательность, какую-то важную для всех руину. Гид подробно

описывает историческую значимость того места, где вы находитесь, а кто-то из группы таких же, как вы, *любознательных людей*, одетых в светлые шорты, задает какие-то уточняющие вопросы, чтобы показать свою осведомленность. У вас уже белеет в глазах, но вдруг гид увлекает вас и всех остальных дальше, и вы входите в какой-то *грот или гробницу*, и на вас падает темная прохлада, кажущаяся даже какой-то влажной, но влажной не в плохом, а в спасительно-нежном смысле…

Почему в этот момент вспоминается то, как я, запыхавшийся и разгоряченный игрой, забегал с летнего, знойного и пыльного двора в подъезд моего дома?.. Моего дома… там, в том городе, откуда я уехал. И мне уже не важно, что говорит гид, и не важно, что я где-то в таком месте, про которое читали все еще в школьных учебниках истории. Прохлада, и все…

Прохлада такая же, как в старой, еще сталинской постройки библиотеке или кассовом зале кинотеатра, куда я забегал с друзьями, выскочив из раскаленного автобуса. Мы бежали через жаркую площадь перед кинотеатром и врывались в прохладный кассовый зал…

Почему вспоминается кинотеатр? Типовой кинотеатр, которых так много, которые есть в каждом областном или даже в районном центре. Я даже не понимаю, красивый этот кинотеатр или нет, то есть для меня непостижимы архитектурные достоинства этого кинотеатра. Но радость, которую доставлял мне когда-то сам вид этого здания… Мне нравилось даже просто проезжать мимо него на автобусе, рассматривать афиши, слушать, как водитель объявляет остановку: «Следующая остановка – кинотеатр (такой-то)».

Мой город – не старый город. Он и не может быть старым. Он же сибирский город. К тому же мой город моложе других сибирских городов. Но странно, он всегда был наполнен для меня достаточной, а на самом деле гораздо более чем достаточной, исторической глубиной. В нем была история. История, не состоящая из фактов и следов, оставленных этими фактами, а живая, по-настоящему интересная мне лично история.

Мой дед рассказывал мне… До сих пор не пойму и не пойму никогда, зачем он это делал… Зачем он рассказывал мне одиннадцати, двенадцати, ну максимум тринадцатилетнему

человеку… Вообще что-то рассказывал. Когда я смотрю на *двенадцати-тринадцатилетних людей, у меня не возникает желания рассказать что-то, подобное тому, что мне рассказывал мой дед. А он рассказывал…* (Grishkovets 2005, 5-8)

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