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**Review: Mezhdu nami**

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*Между нами* marks a new and quite remarkable approach to the teaching and learning of Russian. In place of the typical print textbook series is an online text that also incorporates some aspects of more traditional Russian language textbooks. Indeed, this is perhaps the first time that a Russian language textbook for the North American market has provided students with an entry point that is nearly entirely in an online format. As the authors state, “*Между нами* is a free, web-based textbook that provides a comprehensive introduction to Russian language and culture. It is organized around the experiences of four American students, each spending the academic year in a different Russian city. Their interactions with host families, roommates, fellow students and teachers create a universe of contextualized information that motivates the use of the target language in the classroom.”

Already adopted by a number of North American universities and schools, *Между нами* is an online textbook for elementary-level Russian. The “book” contains nine units plus an epilogue, all of which are thematically organized and follow a storyline. From a menu at the top of the page, one can navigate to any unit relatively easily. Once one selects a unit, a drop-down menu opens, offering links to the goals for that lesson. Underneath the goals, numbered subsections (sort of like mini-chapters;
for example, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, etc.) are listed for each unit. These subsections contain the content for the unit, such as readings, dialogues, multiple-choice comprehension checks, and grammar explanations. Finally, below the subsections one can find the unit’s vocabulary list in PDF form.

One can manipulate content within a given subsection by consulting a mini-menu on the left side of the screen. For most units one sees the following categories: Текст (texts and dialogues), Вы всё поняли? (multiple-choice comprehension checks), and Немного о языке (grammar and vocabulary explanation). In Unit 1, there is also a section introducing students to reading Russian words (Читаем по-русски). Also, near the top of each page one sees another menu, which contains links to the website’s vocabulary (Словарь); audio files for each unit (Аудио+); charts for noun case usage, declension, conjugation, prepositions в and на, and spelling rules (Таблицы); and a list of all grammatical topics in each unit (Где найти).

Navigating all these features takes some getting used to. In some ways it almost seems as though there are too many options, though young users will likely be quicker to figure things out than their older teachers. Another observation is that the black-and-white drawings of the characters featured in the dialogues and readings are not always attractive renderings. In fact, many younger students find them to be “awkward,” “weird,” or even “a bit scary.” Perhaps the drawings seem even less impressive when compared to the excellent color photographs found elsewhere on the website. (The color photos of Russian foods in Unit 7, for example, are outstanding and really give students a good idea of what these foods look like.)

These concerns are minor, though, and do not detract from the contributions this publication makes to the field. The featured dialogues and readings are quite good. They are level-appropriate and complement and highlight the grammar, vocabulary, and themes featured. The dialogues and readings can also be listened to via high-quality Soundcloud audio files, as can many of the words and structures found in the Немного о языке sections of each unit. Grammar is treated in a straightforward fashion, allowing motivated, independent students to learn much on their own; however, teacher guidance and explanations might prove helpful, as in any setting, particularly with younger (pre-college) learners. Fortunately, in addition to the “Getting Started” and
“Contents” sections found on the main page, the authors have included a section called “For Teachers,” which includes lots of helpful hints on how to use the materials. The authors provide the instructor with assistance under headings such as “Program Components,” “Student Outcomes,” “Methodological Approach,” and “Course Planning.” There is also an electronic teacher’s supplement available upon request.

Nearly all K–16 students depend on information that is easily and quickly accessible. At the same time, it is incumbent on educators to assist students in accessing information that is truthful and accurate. This is where the authors’ approach to their new series really shows their understanding of how our students will actually choose to find and digest information that is helpful to their learning. In addition to the Между нами web-based materials, there are also PDFs of workbooks that accompany the online series, which students can print out or purchase (and this is highly recommended). The Работа в аудитории/Classroom Activities books come in two (relatively thin) volumes, one to accompany Units 1–5 and the other to accompany Units 6–9. These are intended for classroom instruction and contain a variety of useful activities, including—but not limited to—listening exercises, matching tasks, cloze exercises, fact-checking tasks, identification activities, verb-conjugation challenges, and grammatical case fill-ins. What is more, given that today’s young learners are often loath to haul heavy textbooks to and from class, there are two separate volumes devoted to Домашние задания/Homework Assignments, which can be left at home. These are similar to the “Classroom Activities” books and allow for additional practice, repetition, revision, and eventually a better understanding of how Russian works.

The most prominent strength of the Между нами series is its devotion to practice; that is a need identified by the authors as often unmet by more typical print textbook series. Many textbooks offer much to recommend them, and we are fortunate in our field to have some very strong series. However, the authors of Между нами understand that students require much more practice and opportunity for repetition and revision than most typical texts provide. Results of field-testing and the experiences of schools and universities currently using the text indicate that nearly all students enjoy using the workbooks, and students
appreciate the fact that the workbook exercises reach a wide variety of learning styles and needs.

Both the “Classroom Activities” and the “Homework Assignments” books have plenty of very practical activities. Additionally, the “Homework Assignments” book offers helpful “Strategy Tips”—principally at the beginning of larger essay assignments—which feature ideas on how to use the language, why one should not rely on Internet translations, and so forth. This is really useful and is something not always found in other textbooks.

Writing a textbook, it seems, is sort of like running for political office: you have to believe in yourself, offer others something they need, put yourself “out there,” and be fully committed to the chosen task. One can sense the dedication of the authors to this project; there is so much they have thought of and very little of which they did not. They are to be commended for offering the foreign language profession an excellent new option for learning Russian.

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Every time a new Russian textbook is released, it raises similar expectations among both experienced and new teachers: *Would this textbook make my teaching life easier?* The hope is even more anxious when the textbook is designed to help students move from intermediate to advanced proficiency, a challenging task that needs more published teaching materials. *Panorama* is a textbook meant to respond to this market need.

*Panorama* is organized on thematic principle. Its 16 chapters are various and can be taught in any sequence: образование, социальные сети, преступление и наказание, здравоохранение, религия, внешность, город, семья, диалог культур, гендерные отношения, богатые и бедные, творчество, окружающая среда, герои современности, работа, путешествие и туризм. The choice of topics is