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Diversity, Equity, Access, and Inclusion: Lessons for the Russian Language Classroom

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Introduction

Diversity, Equity, Access, and Inclusion: Lessons for the Russian Language Classroom

The current special issue tackles some of the most difficult pedagogical questions facing Russian language instructors today. As the articles illustrate, there is a growing awareness of the possibilities of critical pedagogy to dismantle existing hierarchies and to create inclusive spaces for learners. The authors included in this special issue provide us with what the field has long needed yet direly lacked: scholarship that offers both theoretical and practical guidance to integrate diversity, equity, access, and inclusion (DEAI) in curricula and study abroad programming. A number of the authors turn, rightfully so, to existing research by foreign-language specialists who have published on the barriers facing students from underprivileged and underserved communities (Reagan and Osborn 2021; Osborn 2006; Tochon 2019). While the field of Russian language studies is relatively new to this discussion, the current issue demonstrates an eager desire to change longstanding practices that have disadvantaged students from diverse backgrounds. The relative lack of Russian language materials centering social and racial justice reminds us of the lasting, troubling legacy of structural racism that informs the missions of educational institutions and that has driven knowledge production in the academy, including in Russian language pedagogy. Confronting these biases requires acknowledging and rectifying what is, in the assessment of Sunnie Rucker-Chang and Chelsi West Ohueri, “the epistemology of ignorance and white innocence” that has allowed scholars in Slavic Studies to locate “race and racism outside our region” (Rucker-Chang and West Ohueri 2021, 218–19).

Thankfully, those in the field have begun to see what must change for our classrooms, our programs, our study abroad offerings, and our teaching materials to be antiracist and truly inclusive. The articles in this special issue bring forth thought-provoking research for educators both in the US and abroad who hope to transform teaching and learning practices. The pieces were conceptualized, drafted,

written, and edited in the wake of the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, by law enforcement. Floyd's murder, along with the murders of Breonna Taylor and other unarmed people of color, struck home the racial inequalities and ongoing violence experienced by BIPOC communities. ACTR joined with our sister organizations—ASEEES, AATSEEL, and ACTFL—in condemning systemic racism and pledged to make ACTR programs, particularly those abroad, spaces that are safe, inclusive, and equitable (ACTR 2020). A true commitment to these goals requires thorough assessment of past and current practices that, rather than embracing diversity, have prevented BIPOC students from feeling welcomed in the Russian language classroom. As Rachel Stauffer passionately outlines in her recent piece for the ACTR Newsletter, this work will not necessarily be comfortable: "Transforming a field from one that is and has historically been predominantly white will certainly not be easy, fast, or perfect." All the more reason, Stauffer argues, for us as educators to commit to antiracism and to dismantle white supremacy culture (Stauffer 2021, 7). Considering structural barriers is a key component to this work; as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva reminds us, "Whereas for most whites racism is prejudice, for most people of color racism is systemic or institutionalized" (Bonilla-Silva 2017, 8). Nowhere does the institutionalization of racism come across most apparently as in the striking statistics offered by Dianna Murphy and Hadis Ghaedi in their article for this special issue. As Murphy and Ghaedi point out, even as the undergraduate population across the US has grown in racial diversity, the number of students of color graduating with a BA in Russian Language and Literature has remained consistently miniscule.

This special issue begins with Murphy and Ghaedi's findings to demonstrate the current disparities between undergraduate populations across the US and the gender and ethnoracial distribution of students earning degrees in Russian. Most startling are the statistics showing that for the twenty years of the study, minority students, particularly African Americans, have been direly underrepresented among Russian majors. What are we to do as language instructors and program administrators? How can we begin to address the structural racism within our classrooms, institutions, and programs? How can we create inclusive K-16 settings that honor the linguistic, racial, and ethnic diversity of the Russian Federation (RF)? What measures can be taken to center diversity and inclusion in

the study abroad context? The articles shared in this special issue offer persuasive answers to these questions.

Thomas Jesus Garza argues that placing social justice at the center of one's curriculum allows an instructor to create an intersectional "third space" in the classroom. As Garza's article eloquently shows, the process of decolonizing syllabi requires a shift in positionality and perspective; moving from the theoretical to the practical implementation of ideas, Garza illustrates how to reexamine what we teach and how we teach it. Working in a similar vein, Veronika Trotter and Svitlana Melnyk offer an exciting example of how to integrate critical pedagogies into the upper-division Russian language classroom. Trotter and Melnyk describe a project-based learning activity in which students research and compose Russian articles on prominent African Americans who traveled to Russia and the former Soviet Union. The project, which has helped create nineteen new Wikipedia articles, provides instructors with an inspiring model for the Russian language classroom.

Transforming postsecondary language instruction not only requires reassessment of how we teach Russian; it also demands we consider the linguistic and cultural diversity of the Russian Federation. An eye-opening forum on the teaching of Indigenous languages of the RF addresses this topic, with authors sharing their teaching and learning experiences in Chukchi, Even, Evenki, Juhuri, Mari, Nivkh, Tuvan, and Yakut (Sakha). As the first published forum in English to examine teaching Indigenous languages of the RF, the pieces make a remarkable contribution to the growing interest in Indigeneity Studies among students and instructors. Moreover, as the authors point out, offering the opportunity to learn the Indigenous languages of the RF—whether independently or as a module in a language class—promotes plurilingual and intercultural competence among students.

The last two articles in this special issue address DEAI initiatives in study abroad and virtual exchanges. In "Implementing Inclusive Secondary Russian Language Programs," the authors provide concrete examples of how the National Security Language Initiative for Youth (NSLI-Y) develops partnerships with local organizations in countries of study to accommodate students, including those from BIPOC communities and those with disabilities. An integrative approach that combines asynchronous readings and resources, assistive technologies,

student orientations, and staff trainings helps make the NSLI-Y programming equitable and accessible. The final article, written by Jeanette Owen and Nellie Manis, focuses on how to both recruit students from underrepresented populations and strengthen the capacity of host institutions to meet the needs of diverse learners. Owen and Manis show that thanks to sustained engagement and outreach initiatives, the Critical Language Scholarship (CLS) Program has managed to increase diversity among its study abroad participants overall. However, in the case of Russian, the gains in diversity remain lower than in other languages. The CLS Program, as Owen and Manis emphasize, remains dedicated to recruiting applicants from underrepresented institutions like HBCUs and HSIs.

Taken in their entirety, the articles included in this special issue provide a sobering assessment of where we are as a field; by the same measure, the research presented offers hope for instructors, students, and program administrators that equity-minded practices and ongoing efforts to address structural racism are having an impact on how we think about the traditional Russian language curriculum. These efforts are guided by a sincere dedication to social justice and to antiracist teaching practices. Centering students is at the core of this movement. Thus, the articles remind us of the powerful role instructors have in shifting the discourse about language and identity. Joining recent forums in *SEEJ* and *Slavic Review* dedicated to equity in Slavic Studies, this special issue continues an ongoing conversation about the legacy of racism in our field and the means to combat it.

In addition to the articles focusing on DEAI, this issue of *Russian Language Journal* includes two additional articles and an essay translation submitted through our regular review process. In the first of these articles, Mark Elson tackles the topic of the Russian coordinating conjunctions *u* and *a*. He examines both “formal” and “informal” approaches to this topic, with formal treatments invoking the principles and structures of theoretical linguistics and informal treatments relying primarily on translation, which is sometimes accompanied by limited commentary referring to function. In the end, he rejects both treatments in favor of a meaning-based treatment, invoking Jakobson’s notion of taxis to explain usage of these conjunctions.

In the second article, Kor Chahine and Uetova examine the French

L1 subset of the Russian Learner Corpus, comparing the errors of L2 and heritage learners of Russian across all CEFR levels. The authors describe linguistic phenomena found in five linguistic categories (spelling, morphology, syntax, lexicon, and discourse) and conclude that, with the exception of spelling for heritage learners, syntax proves most troublesome for both groups. Of particular interest to those involved in learner corpora is the discussion of automatic error annotation.

In this issue of *RLJ*, we also include a translation of the essay “Широта русской души” by Aleksei D. Shmelev, which was originally published in the volume *Ключевые идеи русской языковой картины мира*. The translation is included as a way of introducing more broadly a vein of Russian scholarship that examines culture through key lexical items. In “Широта русской души,” Shmelev treats issues that are key to Russian self-identity and attempts to define many central cultural terms that are particularly difficult to render in other languages.

The publication of these articles would not have been possible without the careful consideration of our peer reviewers, and we thank them for their dedicated efforts. In keeping with the journal’s editorial standards, all articles completed a double-blind review before publication. With thanks to the time and energy of our authors and reviewers for their work, we happily share with you this issue of *Russian Language Journal*.

Colleen Lucey
Guest Editor

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