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## Review: *The Art of Teaching Russian*

Olga Mukhortova  
*Defense Language Institute*

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**Dengub, Evgeny, Irina Dubinina, and Jason Merrill, eds. 2020. *The Art of Teaching Russian*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press. 476 pages.**

*The Art of Teaching Russian*, a recent volume on Russian language research, teaching practices, and first-hand experiences in constructing a Russian college course, could become the tabletop book for every Russian scholar teaching in North America. University professors, high school teachers, Russian department chairs, deans, and, especially, graduate students will find it not only professionally engaging but also beneficial in several other ways since the book provides brilliant observations on the last two decades of the Russian field.

The introduction from the editors emphasizes the connection between the current volume and the 2000 volume, *The Learning and Teaching of Slavic Languages and Cultures*, in proficiency-oriented teaching supported by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Proficiency Guidelines, which is the measurement for Russian programs in North America. The editors acknowledge the swift development in teaching with technology, innovations in teaching language and culture, and the importance of addressing diversity and inclusion.

The volume covers different aspects of teaching the Russian language and culture. Part one includes several articles that provide an overview of the professional field. Part two focuses on the correlation between Russian language programs and World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages. Part three delivers the methods of teaching Russian language and culture from some of the best Russian professors in the field. Part four concentrates on curriculum and material development. Part five centers on teaching Russian culture with a focus on extracurricular activities, literary canon, and intercultural competence. The concluding part six specifies methods of teaching Russian with technology, emphasizing blended learning and research-based internet writing projects.

In part one, Aline Germain-Rutherford offers the broadest context for Russian language teaching. She presents a historical look at foreign language education of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and the place of the Russian language in this context. Her conclusion about the twentieth century appears to be negatively colored because

the US, a country of immigrants, tolerated non-English languages in its education system during the twentieth century. However, the picture changed at the dawn of the twenty-first century when the US government launched The Language Flagship program and National Security Educational Program, which identified several languages as critical to ensure national security. These programs were followed by the STARTALK project, the National Security Language Initiative for Youth, and the Critical Language Scholarship program. As a result, Russian became one of these critical languages (CL), and because of this status, it has been federally funded in high schools and colleges. Enrollment numbers, though, have been decreasing for both CL and traditional European languages, such as French, Spanish, German, or Italian (Dengub, Dubinina, and Merrill, 9). For Russian, the author provides data on CL undergraduate and graduate course enrollments data: 23,791 students enrolled in 1998 and 20,353 students in 2016 with some upward fluctuations in 2009 (26,740 students). The author emphasizes the recent change in the growing importance of foreign language expertise for successful job placement because of interconnected globalization and technological innovations, and she hopes that the US foreign language deficit will be overcome in the future. For US graduate students and directors of graduate studies, Germain-Rutherford's article presents crucial data and provides helpful advice for making wise professional choices and setting appropriate career goals. Furthermore, this section establishes the future of the constantly shrinking Russian job market and explains this trend in context.

In her article on teaching Russian in the US in the post-Soviet era, Cynthia Martin brings no less eye-opening data on the trends dominating the Russian field. She stresses the shift toward real-world proficiency and communicative competence with unprecedented access to authentic materials in all modalities. After a two-year Russian program (before study abroad courses), learners will usually reach the Intermediate Mid proficiency. The increased proficiency is connected to the growing use of standardized approaches to teaching and testing, including proficiency-oriented college programs and widespread use of ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines in accordance with tests in all modalities, such as the Oral Proficiency Interview, Writing Proficiency Test, Reading Proficiency Test, and Listening Proficiency Test. The proficiency movement is supported

by trends in independent learning, the technology revolution in teaching languages, and broad access to study abroad programs, independent programs as well as those funded by the US government. However, this proficiency-driven trend parallels a decreasing number of enrollments, degrees awarded, and faculty positions. Enrollments in Russian at two- and four-year institutions demonstrate a twofold decrease: 44,476 students enrolled in 1990 versus 21,962 students in 2013. Data on undergraduate programs in Russian language and literature display the same declining trajectory: 612 students enrolled in 1992–93 versus 371 students in 2013–14. Russian faculty positions posted on the Modern Language Association website are shrinking at the same swift rate. The faculty composition demonstrates an increase in US-based teachers with Russian as a native language after the fall of the Soviet Union, a population that entered the competition in this job market.

In their article, Angelika Kraemer, Jason Merrill, and David Prestel draw a typical portrait of a US college Russian program (usually four years of instruction) as small and particularly vulnerable in the situation of decreasing enrollments in all humanities in the US. The authors depict the ways in which colleges are taking steps to deal with these situations. In particular, Russian programs have become more innovative in teaching and technology, advertising the benefits of learning Russian for professional use through collaboration with other departments focusing on global competence. The authors suggest being more proactive and collaborative in the face of decreasing enrollments, sharing best practices for promoting Russian programs for students as well as for faculty and university managers. These practices include an increase in professional development, outreach programs, and curriculum development.

Cori Anderson, Julia Mikhailova, and Anna Tumarkin deal with problems connected to the widespread Intermediate level proficiency of bachelor of arts graduates who enter a US graduate program and must serve as teaching assistants providing level-appropriate teaching input. The authors investigate the causes of underprepared nonnative Slavic graduate students as well as the implications for job market competition for which announcements use vague “near-native proficiency” descriptions. The authors suggest the minimum requirement for oral proficiency should be of Intermediate High to fulfill all ACTFL standards so that graduate-level students can provide meaningful and comprehensive

teaching inputs through a communicative approach. However, the typical US undergraduate program is constructed in such a way that it does not offer enough opportunities to develop this level of proficiency because of limited contact hours (three to five hours per week). Through a case study from University of Wisconsin-Madison's Department of German, Nordic, and Slavic Languages and Literature, the authors propose several solutions to increase proficiency levels: include rigorous competency exams in the curricula, hold individual postexam meetings with the language program director to discuss deficiencies and develop an individual study program, and develop summer or yearlong study abroad programs or intensive summer programs in the US, funded by the Foreign Language and Area Studies program or from other sources. The authors suggest paying more attention to language and pedagogical training because they are essential to building a strong curriculum vitae for a highly competitive job market.

Opening part two is Thomas Garza's article on the fourth edition of the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages in teaching and studying Russian. He provides a brief history of their standards and structure and asks for more accountability and assessment from professional organizations, the job market, K-12 and postsecondary educators, and federally funded language programs. The author also shares the impact the standards have made on learners and educators, emphasizing that the next step is for learners to reach proficiency levels of Advanced or higher in order to answer market demands. Dianna Murphy, Narek Sahakyan, and Sally Sieloff Magnan continue to discuss the World-Readiness Standards but at the postsecondary level. The authors present their large-scale, mixed-methods study that investigated the relevance of the Standards for K-12-16 education. The study is based on two research questions: "'Do the students' goals correspond to the Standards' goals?' Second, 'How are the Five Cs [Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, Communities] of the Standards represented in a hierarchy of students' goals?'" (Dengub, Dubinina, and Merrill, 125). The answer to the second question is of particular importance for teachers of Russian who create Russian language course syllabi because the answer highlights that students' priority is Communities followed by Communication.

Part three, on approaches to teaching Russian, opens with Betty Lou Leaver and Christine Campbell's article promoting the transformative

language learning and teaching (TLLT) approach. The authors recommend it as the next step following communication language teaching. Focusing on learners' autonomy and personal transformation, TLLT emphasizes the crucial role of an autonomous and responsible learner in mastering language to near native level of proficiency that has been in demand from US government agencies for years. The authors highlight the change in the teacher's role in learning, from instructing to facilitating and creating an immersive environment. They also share Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center experience in implementing this type of instruction in Basic, Post-Basic, and Defense Threat Reduction Agency intensive courses in Russian.

William Comer continues the discussion on the changes in approaching Russian teaching. He describes contemporary second-language acquisition models of grammar instruction implemented in US educational institutions, bringing the best examples from the textbook *Mezhdru nami* by Lynne DeBenedette, William J. Comer, and Alla Smyslova. Focusing on the beginning level of proficiency, he describes implementing six principles of form-meaning mapping connections in the textbook: (1) lexical level, "where learners map the words or phrases to a basic semantic meaning" (Dengub, Dubinina, and Merrill, 166), (2) grammar level, in which learners pay attention to inflectional morphology, (3) phonological level (intonation is connected to the question type), (4) functional level, on which learners "map the sentence type to the idea of making an inquiry about an object," (Dengub, Dubinina, and Merrill, 166) (5) sociolinguistic level, and (6) contextual level, in which learners work to connect the sentence to a situation. Dealing with grammar teaching, the author relies heavily on input theory and insists that grammar should not be the primary focus for beginning learners but must be integrated into building the reading, listening, writing, and speaking skills. He also proposes to pair grammar instruction with authentic materials for higher levels in the framework of content-based instruction.

Lynne DeBenedette continues this section with a description of her approach to teaching a third-year Russian, language-driven but not completely content-based course that aimed at helping learners achieve Advanced proficiency. The author shares the structure of her course and discusses the arguments and guiding principles of what she has included in her materials and why. Since this course is based on *Hipsters* (2011) by

Valerii Todorovskii, the author also describes how to deal with a film as a text for a language class focusing on language and culture and accompany the film with appropriate readings.

Benjamin Jens, Collen Lucey, and Benjamin Rifkin share their experience in constructing an advanced level course based on oral history and implementing it into the Russian language curriculum, in accordance with all the rules and regulations on projects involving human subjects. The oral history project connects the World-Readiness Standards with a research-driven course, step by step. The authors provide guidance on helping students to develop initial and follow-up questions, analyze the data, and understand the responses. They also offer students' responses and evaluations of the oral history courses. This article is an invaluable resource and an excellent starting point in creating a content-based course in the Advanced-Superior level that connects culture and language through the personal experience of a learner.

The section's closing article deals with perhaps the most popular and well-loved part of any language class: songs and singing. Karen Evens-Romaine, Stuart H. Goldberg, Susan Kresin, and Vicki Galloway deal with this topic, masterfully bringing up all the existent scholarship on songs in language learning to offer models and materials for every level of proficiency, including mixed-level and heritage classrooms. In addition, they provide data that supports the benefits of using songs in learning a foreign language. The spotlight of the article is Georgia Tech's Critical Languages Song Project (<https://clsp.gatech.edu/clsp19/>), designed for upper-level courses and Advanced proficiency. For this reason, the antithetic songs are arranged to increase students' time on task and to draw their attention to linguistic as well as cultural details.

In part four, Olga Kagan and Anna Kudyma offer their framework for developing textbooks of Russian as a foreign language as well as for textbooks for heritage speakers, combining a theoretical agenda with practical experience gained in the classroom. This article could be seen as a behind-the-curtain view of one of the most popular second-year Russian textbooks, *V Puti*. The authors describe how they implement backward design and aim at a proficiency level first. They explain how they approached the selection of vocabulary and grammar-focused activities and how they chose cultural context, based on nonauthentic and authentic texts for reading and listening activities. The authors emphasize

the importance of developing all modes of communication for learning experiences: real-life situations (task-based scenarios and role-play) for interpersonal communication combined with interpretative reading and listening as well as presentational writing or speaking. For heritage speakers, they offer to move from aural proficiency to literacy, from speaking to writing, and from a colloquial, home-based language register to a more formal and academic one. The article could be recommended for all professors who construct proficiency-based courses at any level, since it provides a conceptual starting point for creating such a course for a college-level Russian program.

Continuing the discussion of materials used for teaching Russian, Rachel Stauffer addresses the issue of diversity in Russian language textbooks. She suggests that most US-published textbooks do not reflect the identity of US-based Russian language learners because of their concentration on mainstream whiteness and privileged middle- and upper-class personalities. She advocates for a diverse representation of nondominant groups of learners to help them in their Russian learning. The author provides an analysis of *Beginner's Russian* (2010) by A. Kudyma, F. J. Miller, and Olga Kagan; *Golosa* (2012), Book 1 and 2, by Robin, K. Evans-Romain, and G. Shatalina; *Live from Russia!* (2008) by M. Lekic, D. Davidson, and K. Gor; *Mezhdru nami* (2015) by L. DeBenedette, W. Comer, A. Smyslova, and J. Perkins; and *Troika* (2012) by M. Nummikowski. The author indicates that “the textbooks provide little to no representation of disability, non-heteronormativity, and nontraditional families in their imagery, vocabulary lists, and texts. Non-socially-dominant races and ethnicities are represented in the images and texts of all the books, although such representation is not equal to those of socially dominant categories” (Dengub, Dubinina, and Merrill, 288). The author suggests several ways to include races that are not socially dominant as well as ethnicity and diversity. One suggestion involves looking at other US-published foreign language textbooks, such as those for Spanish. The author provides a glossary of inclusive terms for introductory Russian textbooks.

The final article in this section emphasizes the importance of the Russian language corpus in language pedagogy. Olyesya Kisselev and Edie Furniss offer an approach to teaching Russian using Russian corpus linguistics to focus on authentic data combined with technology.

The authors briefly describe how to apply basic corpus methodologies in teaching Russian as a foreign language and provide a survey of recourses and examples that could be implemented in a Russian course using inductive learning. Such an approach, they argue, helps learners to create more native-like texts.

Part five on the teaching of culture opens with Ekaterina Nemtchinova's article on intercultural competence as one of the primary goals in a Russian language classroom. The author brings a theoretical framework to discuss and develop intercultural competence in the classroom, including methods of assessment. She describes communication between Russian and US learners via the internet as one of the main ways to develop this skill. The project, called keypal exchange, aims to find differences and similarities through real-time communication, reflective writing in blogs, and individual presentations that connect American and Russian cultures. Other activities include teaching culture through activities based on proverbs and other sayings, inviting guest speakers, viewing paintings, and participating in scenario-based activities. The author also highlights that a significant outcome for learners is also the increased self-reflection on their own culture.

The final section, part six, is dedicated to teaching with technology. This topic has increased in importance since 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent shift to remote learning. In their article, Shannon Spasova and Kristen Welsh answer the question that many colleges and universities face in Russian language courses: how can the course keep the same level of proficiency while reducing contact hours from five or six hours to three per week. The authors present their experiences in creating a blended student-centered environment for beginner and intermediate Russian courses in Michigan State University and in Hobart and Williams Smith Colleges. The authors present the structure and scheduling and discuss the benefits of blended learning and teaching with technology.

Stepping aside from writing as a grammar- and vocabulary-oriented assessment tool, Cori Anderson and Irina Walsh share their experience building proficiency-driven, student-centered writing assignments on Russian culture. These assignments help students become independent Russian writers by introducing them step-by-step to internet-based research, self- and peer-editing, blogging, and wiki

writing. Such projects motivate students to be autonomous learners, deal with authentic materials for reading and listening comprehension, and exercise presentational speaking at the end of their research work.

Finally, this volume serves as the best source for a bibliography on the latest research in the Russian teaching field. Every article is supported by an excellent bibliography specifically focused on the topic. Thus, this book can be the starting point for K-12 teachers and grad students and the point of return for in-service instructors to create proficiency-oriented and heritage student-centered courses.

*Olga Mukhortova*  
*Defense Language Institute*