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Flipping the Classroom? From Text to Video in Teaching Russian Grammar

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1. Introduction

The notion of a “flipped classroom” has received considerable attention in recent years. This article reports on a project in which an instructor and two students co-created teaching materials to facilitate flipping the classroom. The purpose of the article is twofold. First, we explore some aspects of flipped classrooms in Russian language courses. Second, we reflect on the opportunities and limitations of student involvement in pedagogical development.

Recent work in cognitive linguistics and Construction Grammar suggests that the linguistic competence of language users can be modeled as a *constructicon*, a network of linguistic patterns with form and content (*constructions*) that are connected in numerous ways (Janda et al., 2018; Janda et al., 2020 and Endresen et al., this volume). This squares with the widespread idea of constructivism in pedagogy, whereby each learner constructs a knowledge network in the process of acquiring a language (Biggs, 1999; Biggs & Tang, 2011). To construct knowledge networks, L2 learners must engage in classroom activities that allow them to be active learners rather than passive listeners. How can we achieve that? One influential response is flipping the classroom (Abeysekera & Dawson, 2015): moving transmission of information out of the classroom and thereby freeing up valuable classroom time for student active learning activities. While in theory flipping the classroom may seem simple, in actual practice it is not. However, it is worth the effort. In a large meta-analysis of about 200 studies of flipped classrooms, Strelan et al. (2020) found a moderate positive effect of flipped classrooms on student performance, with the largest effects for the humanities.

The present study investigates the practical challenges of flipping the classroom in a beginners’ Russian course, and to some extent in more advanced courses. Our contribution can be summarized as follows. First,

we show that it is possible to free up valuable classroom time but that doing so requires specially designed learning materials that students can use outside the classroom. Second, we argue that students can play an important role in designing learning materials, because they know what they want from a textbook. Third, our project indicates that it is necessary to go beyond the traditional printed textbook. Accordingly, we discuss the advantages of a more flexible digital learning environment in which instructional videos can be embedded. Fourth, our experience suggests that an extreme version of a flipped classroom, in which all explicit instruction is removed from the classroom, is not a viable option, at least not in a beginners' Russian course. Fifth, we show that student coauthorship has a positive side effect as an important learning experience for the students and professor who participate as coauthors. Finally, we identify some obstacles that must be overcome for student coauthorship to work well.

Our argument is structured as follows. In Section 2, we discuss student coauthorship of instructional texts in a digital learning environment. In Section 3, we discuss instructional videos. In Section 4, we address our classroom experience so far and report on student evaluations. After a discussion of student involvement in pedagogical development in Section 5, we summarize our contribution in Section 6.

2. Coauthored instructional texts in a digital learning environment

Our collaboration was part of a larger project, in which a group of scholars at UiT The Arctic University of Norway created a new beginners' Russian course (Common European Framework of Reference [CEFR] A1), *Min russiske reise* [My Russian Journey] (see Sokolova et al. [in press] for a detailed discussion). The course is digital and consists of 35 lessons in which students follow two siblings on a trip through Russia.¹ The two siblings were born in Norway but have a Russian family background. In Russia, the siblings meet distant relatives and solve a family mystery. Each lesson contains texts (narrative texts and dialogues), vocabulary, exercises, and grammar.

Our task was to create the grammar sections for each lesson and to write a "mini grammar," a reference section that summarizes and describes all the language patterns that are covered in the course. An

¹ The course is available at <https://mooc.uit.no/courses/course-v1:UiT+C001+2020/about>.

important premise of the project was that students should have access to materials in their native language, in this case Norwegian. Three issues became clear from the outset. First, taking the ideas of flipped classrooms seriously, we realized that we needed relatively detailed explanations of the relevant language patterns. Previously, our university had used the textbook *Свидание в Петербурге* (Lærkes et al., 1999a–b), which includes very brief explanations of relevant linguistic patterns in each lesson. While these explanations work well as a supplement to classroom instruction, they are too brief to be suitable for self-study outside the classroom. In a flipped classroom setting, students are supposed to acquaint themselves with the relevant language patterns before class, and we therefore concluded that more elaborate explanations were necessary.

The second point we realized early in the process concerned the digital format. Providing detailed explanations of language patterns would be impossible in a traditional printed textbook for the simple reason that it would require too many pages. As is well known, publishers want to keep the number of pages low to make textbooks affordable. A digital format is more flexible, since there is no upper limit on the number of pages. Our course is open access, so there is no commercial publisher involved. Another advantage of the digital format is that both text and videos can be included. We return to the videos in Section 3.

Third, we realized that flipped classrooms require simple and user-friendly explanations. Vettori and Warm (2017) have shown that students' conceptions of excellent teaching are complex and multifaceted. However, in their analysis of a data set of about 3,000 student evaluations, they showed that students often appreciate a teacher's ability to provide good explanations and prefer that explanations be combined with illustrative examples: "If a teacher explains well and patiently, this is considered to be one of the most important signals of excellence" (Vettori & Warm, 2017, p. 199). This is where student coauthorship enters the picture. They know better than anyone else what they consider to be simple and user-friendly. Therefore, two bachelor of arts (BA) students in the second semester (Authors 2 and 3) were engaged to assist the professor (Author 1) in creating the grammar sections.

For each lesson, we identified a number of language patterns that needed to be explained. Author 1 prepared a draft that included examples

from the texts and some prose describing the patterns in question. All three authors then met together and examined the explanations in considerable detail, after which Author 1 rewrote the explanations (sometimes more than once). This procedure was repeated in weekly cycles until all authors were happy with the explanations and all lessons were covered. We worked together for almost two semesters. The students were in their second year of study and did not know any Russian before they enrolled in our study program at the university. They received a small honorarium for each session.

Typical conversations at our weekly meetings involved questions from Author 1 to Authors 2 and 3, such as, “Is this example too long and complicated?” “Will a first-semester student understand this explanation?” and “Is this rule simple enough?” Typical responses would be that examples could be simplified and that the sentences in the explanations were too long or had too many difficult words. Occasionally, we also decided to simplify rules. In some instances, we removed whole paragraphs, which we decided contained information that did not belong in a beginners’ course. As a result of the meetings, the grammar sections became much simpler and more user-friendly. We will elaborate on this point in Section 4, in which we discuss student evaluations.

A concrete example of how we worked involves “soft” adjectives like *синий* [dark blue]. Author 1 drafted a paragraph explaining that (almost) all soft adjectives have the letter *н* in the stem-final position. The problem with this generalization is that many other adjectives also have a stem-final *н*, such as *красный* [red]. Authors 2 and 3 found the explanation confusing and unhelpful. Author 1 suggested a couple of rewrites, but because the rewrites did not satisfy Authors 2 and 3, we decided to exclude the passage from our grammar altogether.

All sections have approximately the same structure:

- (1) Typical structure of grammar sections:
 - a. Introduction
 - b. Relationship to source language (Norwegian)
 - c. Examples from target language (Russian)
 - d. Explanation based on examples
 - e. Summary: Explicit rule

The introduction (typically one or two sentences) explains what the relevant language pattern is used for. Here is an English translation

of the introduction to the section on adjectives in Lesson 7: “In order to describe the properties of things, you need adjectives like *small*, *white*, *beautiful*, and *big*.” In other words, we focus on function (what needs to be expressed), not on form. We furthermore avoid a formal definition of “adjective,” because we decided that the four example words are more informative for beginners. Although we try to keep the inventory of grammatical terms as small as possible, we do not adopt the radical position of Janda and Clancy (2002), who stated that “there is virtually no linguistic terminology used in *The Case Book for Russian*” (p. viii).² In general, we prefer simple explanations with examples over more detailed definitions that might be found in reference grammars and general linguistics textbooks.³

Following the introduction, the grammar sections typically relate to the corresponding patterns in Norwegian, which is the native language of the target readership.⁴ Going back to Section 7 as an example, we show that some Norwegian adjectives have different forms for three genders. Again, instead of discussing the category of gender, we simply provide an example of one Norwegian adjective in all three genders. Doing so relates the relevant language pattern in the target language to something the students already know so that the Russian pattern will not come across as exotic or difficult. Then, the Russian adjective endings are presented with the following examples that involve vocabulary that has been introduced in Lesson 7 or earlier lessons. The relevant endings are boldfaced:

(2) Masculine: *бел**ый** стол* [white table]

Feminine: *бел**ая** стена* [white wall]

Neuter: *бел**ое** кресло* [white armchair]

After the examples, we make the point that, similar to Norwegian, Russian adjectives have different endings for the three genders. The section

² As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, the programmatic statement that there is “virtually no grammatical terminology” in *The Case Book for Russian* may be somewhat overstated; the book does contain some grammatical terminology, such as the names of the cases.

³ In a focus group meeting where we tested an early version of a lesson on a panel of students, one of the students commented that it was good that we used standard grammatical terminology, because the same terminology is used in other courses in languages and linguistics at the university.

⁴ With regard to gender of adjectives, we could point to parallels between Norwegian and Russian, but for other phenomena it was necessary to show that Norwegian and Russian are different.

concludes with a simple rule stating the ending for each grammatical gender in Russian.⁵

As mentioned, in addition to the grammar sections in each lesson, we also created a reference “mini-grammar” based on all the grammar sections from the lessons. We edited the text of the “mini-grammar” to form a coherent whole, but the explanations of each language pattern are otherwise identical to those in the lessons. The “mini-grammar” is organized in a traditional way to promote ease of reference:

(3) Organization of “mini-grammar”:

- a. Alphabet and writing rules
- b. Parts of speech
- c. Sentences: Parsing of sentences and case usage
- d. Constructions

The section on parts of speech focuses on inflection and provides paradigms for nouns, pronouns, adjectives, and verbs. The sections on verbs also include very brief introductions to aspect, verbs of motion, and reflexive verbs. The section on sentences explains how to identify main syntactic functions (subject, direct object, indirect object, etc.) and includes one subsection for each syntactic function that explains the case usage for each function. The explanations resemble those in Nessel (2014) but are much shorter and simpler. The section on constructions is inspired by studies in Construction Grammar (Goldberg, 1995, 2006; Endresen et al., this volume), which argue that the often nontransparent multiword patterns of a language constitute the backbone of native speakers’ linguistic competence. Our “mini-grammar” covers the *надо/нужно* constructions, the *у меня (есть)* construction, the *у меня болит* construction, the *мне холодно* construction, and the *мне сорок лет* [age] and *нравиться* [like] constructions. Most of the constructions in question are included in the *Russian Constructicon*, discussed in Endresen et al. (this volume).

The grammar sections and the “mini-grammar” would be less effective without the contribution of the student coauthors. The student coauthors helped remove superfluous material, replace difficult words

⁵ Grammatical gender illustrates the value of teaching materials that are calibrated toward the native language of the students. Since English does not have grammatical gender, gender in Russian needs to be presented in a different way to native speakers of English. As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, it is possible to draw on the students’ competence in other languages. For students who are native speakers of English but also know a language that uses grammatical gender (e.g., Spanish or German), it is possible to introduce Russian gender via Spanish or German.

with simpler phrases, and select and edit relevant examples. As a result, the student coauthors had considerable influence on the output of our collaboration.

3. Instructional videos in a digital environment

Taking seriously Vettori and Warm's (2017) focus on good explanations as an important aspect of excellent teaching, we decided to include instructional videos in our course. The videos were based on the coauthored grammar lessons described in the previous section, but, due to time limitations, Authors 2 and 3 did not participate directly in the production of the videos.

There is some evidence that students who watch videos before class in addition to reading assigned materials are better prepared for class than students who only complete assigned readings from a textbook (Stelzer et al., 2010; see also De Grazia et al., 2012). Videos have furthermore been shown to be motivational for students (Sande et al., 2021). However, as pointed out in a number of studies, positive results are most likely if the videos meet the following criteria (see, e.g., De Grazia et al., 2012; Raths, 2014; and Sande et al., 2021 for discussion):

- (4) a. They must be short.
- b. They must be devoted to a single topic.
- c. They must be of satisfactory technical quality.
- d. They must be compatible with different platforms, including smartphones.

Taking these criteria in account, we decided to include at least one video in each lesson. The videos are short, typically between two and four minutes, and are each devoted to a single topic. With regard to technical quality, we used the Camtasia software for Mac, which makes it possible to create videos combining screen recording and web camera capture of the instructor. We installed an external microphone (Blue Yeti) to provide sufficient sound quality. We followed the advice of Sande et al. (2021), who have argued that it is not necessary "to strive for a flawless recording" and suggested that "videos must be of sufficient quality, but they do not need to be perfect" (p. 231). The videos are in MP4 format, which can be used on smartphones.

The videos are structured as follows. On the first slide, the instructor (Author 1 of the present study) presents himself and introduces the

topic. The instructor's face is visible. Then, on the next slide, the talking head disappears, and the topic is explained in a stepwise fashion. By way of example, consider the presentation about the *у меня болит* construction in Lesson 28. First, the viewer is presented with a Norwegian example. Similar to the instructional texts discussed in the previous section, the video focuses on function. The Norwegian example shows the text, and the viewer must figure out how to say it in Russian. As shown in Figure 1, a Russian example is then given. The three callouts pinpoint the semantic contribution of each part of the Russian example.

Å ha vondt i en kroppsdell

Norsk:
• Jeg har vondt i hodet.
Russisk:
• У меня болит голова.

«Hos meg»: У + genitiv «gjør vondt» «hodet»

Figure 1: Presentation of the *у меня болит* construction in the video for Lesson 28

An example in the plural shows that the verb agrees with the body part. After presenting examples in the past and the future tenses, a simple rule is given that summarizes the properties of the construction. Figure 2 shows the complete slide, in which all information about the construction has been supplied.

Vettori and Warm (2017) have shown that a teacher's sense of humor figures prominently in students' conceptions of excellent teaching. To create a humorous and informal atmosphere, the instructor presents himself in each video as "your grammar uncle." Each video ends with the words "Don't forget that I'm your grammar uncle." We created a special logo for the "grammar uncle" and included it on the first and last slides of each video (see the lower-right portion of Figure 2).

Producing videos was a learning experience for Author 1, who had very limited experience producing videos before the project started. Author 1 completed a one-hour training session with a professional but was then responsible for figuring out the process on his own. The learning curve was steep in the beginning, but after a few weeks of experimentation,

Author 1 felt at ease with the recording and editing, and he was satisfied with the resulting videos. Although this project has ended, he continues to make videos for other courses.

Å ha vondt i en kroppsdel

Norsk:
• Jeg har vondt i hodet.

Russisk:
• У меня бо́лит голова́.

«Hos meg»: У + genitiv

«gjør vondt»

«hodet»

Verbet retter seg etter kroppsdelene!

Flertall:
У меня бо́лят но́ги.
'Jeg har vondt i beina.'

болеть:
• i-verb
• entall: бо́лит
• flertall: бо́лят

Fortid: болеть i fortid
• У меня бо́ле~~ла~~ голова́.

Fremtid: болеть i fremtid
• У меня **бу́дет** бо́леть голова́.

Regel om å ha vondt:
a. У + person i genitiv + болеть + kroppsdel i nominativ
b. Verbet retter seg etter kroppsdelene.
c. Verbet bøyes i fortid, nåtid og fremtid.

Figure 2: Complete slide for the *у меня болит* construction in the video for Lesson 28

To summarize, even for an instructor with very limited video production experience, it is possible to acquire the necessary skills to produce videos in just a few weeks. It is important to note that while instructional videos may be a valuable supplement to textual materials, video recording requires considerable time and effort. In our experience, creating a short video of 2–4 minutes on average takes 2–3 hours. However, if the videos can be reused several times (for example, every year a course is offered), we find it worthwhile to invest the required time and effort.

4. Experience so far and preliminary evaluation

What was the effect of the grammar sections and the instructional videos on the actual classroom practice? Do they facilitate flipping the classroom? What do the students say? Because the complete course has been offered only once, it is too early to draw definite conclusions. However, some preliminary remarks are in order. We will consider both the experience of the instructors and the course evaluations by the students.

Author 1's experience as a course instructor was substantially different from previous years in which he used a traditional printed

textbook. With the digital resource, the students had access to more detailed material, which they could use when preparing for the class. In accordance with the concept of a flipped classroom, this outside preparation made it possible to set aside more classroom time for active learning, for example, working on the exercises in groups.

Some limitations need to be taken into consideration, however. First, instructors must consider what kind of students are enrolled in the course. Our students' backgrounds and skills are quite diverse, since the course is open to anyone who meets the general requirements for admission to Norwegian universities. Some students have had some previous exposure to Russian, while others are true beginners. Some students are right out of high school, while others have previous university experience. It seems fair to say that the flipped-classroom strategy we adopted worked better for stronger students. Taking advantage of the text materials and the instructional videos requires both related skills and discipline. At the same time, it stands to reason that the students who used the materials outside the classroom got more out of the classroom time than they would have otherwise. A possible response to the student diversity problem is to provide instruction for students, detailing how to make the most of the text materials and the instructional videos.

A second point is that the flipped-classroom strategy we adopted made it easier to adjust the classroom practice to the needs of individual students. Because more time was freed up for group work and other active learning activities, we were able to help weaker students overcome their challenges and could give stronger students extra exercises to work on in class.

A third and very important point concerns the version of the flipped-classroom strategy that is adopted. Taken at its extreme, flipping the classroom implies moving all transfer of information out of the classroom. We opted for a more cautious approach. We presented the relevant language patterns briefly in class, and students participated in student active learning activities after short question-and-answer periods. Stated differently, the strategy we adopted was not *qualitatively* different from our previous, more traditional classroom practice. But it was *quantitatively* different, insofar as we freed up more time for student active learning activities in the classroom.

What did the students say? In a digital questionnaire distributed at the end of the semester, students rated the course relatively highly and generally commented that the course materials included good and relevant examples and phrases that are useful in everyday speech. Students furthermore appreciated the copious and detailed grammar sections. They also commented favorably about the instructional videos. Students pointed out that the explanations were easy to follow. They also mentioned that the videos could be revisited many times and were thus useful for review purposes.

The first few lessons of “My Russian Journey” was also tested in a high school class. The feedback from the high school students resembled that of the university students. The high school students also found the grammar sections helpful, but compared to university students, they emphasized the value of the instructional videos even more strongly. This may indicate that videos are particularly useful for younger students. At the same time, the positive feedback from the high school students may suggest that we succeeded in creating videos with simple and focused explanations, which may be helpful not only for university students but also for younger learners.

The course is offered every fall semester, so in a few years we will be able to draw more definite conclusions. However, the instructors’ experience and student evaluations so far suggest that a combination of carefully designed grammar sections and instructional videos may facilitate successful implementation of a moderate version of the flipped classroom.

5. Student involvement in pedagogical development: Opportunities and challenges

What are the lessons learned about student involvement in pedagogical development? In general, our experience was positive. Not only did we succeed in creating a product that instructors and students find helpful, but we also learned a lot from working together. At the same time, some challenges emerged that need to be taken into account to ensure a successful project.

The students (Authors 2 and 3) reported that they improved their knowledge about the Russian language through the project. In a sense, they received an extra weekly language class while the project lasted.

During our meetings, they would say things like “Oh, I forgot about that” and “Aha, now I understand how that construction works.” There is some truth to the saying that you do not understand something until you have explained it to someone.

In addition to strengthening their Russian language competence, Authors 2 and 3 felt the project improved their academic writing skills. Working intensely on structuring a text and explaining abstract notions to first-year students was a useful experience. They also found it interesting to participate in the planning and implementation of a pedagogical development project. Both academic writing and project development are transferrable skills that are useful beyond the Russian classroom.

Two challenges emerge from our collaboration. First, Authors 2 and 3, who were second-year students when we worked on the project together, argued that participating in a project like this was challenging. Although they would gladly recommend participating to other students, in their opinion, the project might have been more suitable for third-year students.

The second challenge concerns time management. Students have busy lives, and their primary focus is to do well in their courses and also have time for extracurricular activities and jobs. In other words, there are limits to how much students can be expected to do in a pedagogical development project. Author 3 pointed out that in order to carry out the project successfully, the time requirement must be communicated from the outset.

Author 1 (the professor) also learned a lot from the collaboration. Even for a language instructor with more than 25 years of classroom experience, it was helpful to see exactly what students found difficult. Quite often, he was surprised. Words or concepts that seemed simple to Author 1 were considered problematic by Authors 2 and 3. It was useful to be reminded that only the students themselves know what is challenging and what is not challenging for them.

Another important lesson concerns the structure of the work. As mentioned in Section 2, Author 1 prepared a draft version of the relevant texts before each meeting. It would have been conceivable to start each meeting with a tabula rasa and then brainstorm about the contents before starting to write together. While this approach would have given the

students more influence on the process, we are nevertheless satisfied that we did not choose this option, because it would have required too much time. Stated differently, a professor can benefit immensely from collaborating with students, but the professor must be prepared to take the lead and produce concrete materials that can be discussed in the meetings.

6. Concluding remarks

In this article, we have reported on a project in which a professor and two second-year students co-created teaching materials for the purposes of flipping the classroom in a beginners' Russian course. Our contribution can be summarized as follows. First, we demonstrated that it is possible to free up classroom time for student active learning activities by designing effective learning materials that the students can use outside the classroom. Second, we suggested that students can play an important role in designing these learning materials. Third, we argued that flipping the classroom forces us to go beyond the traditional printed textbook and explore the opportunities of a digital learning environment in which instructional videos can be embedded. Fourth, our project does not lend support to extreme versions of flipped classrooms; instead, we opted for a moderate version whereby some, but not all, transmission of information was moved out of the classroom. Fifth, we argued that student coauthorship has a welcome side effect, insofar as it represents a valuable learning experience for the participants—both for the students and the professor. Finally, we identified some obstacles that must be overcome for student coauthorship to be successful. In particular, it is important to utilize more advanced students because some projects may be more suitable for them than for first- or second-year students. It is also important to clarify how much time the students will be expected to spend on the project. We also suggest that the professor prepare concrete materials for all meetings in order for the project to yield the desired output.

Our study leads to a number of questions for future research. Although the course materials we created have received positive evaluations, the complete course has been offered only once. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate student evaluations in the years to come to gain more knowledge about the relationship between student coauthorship of

learning materials and flipped classrooms. While these and other issues remain open, we hope our project will inspire other professors and students to work together. Student coauthorship is a promising strategy for improving the way we teach Russian.

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