



2022

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#### Recommended Citation

Cummings, Kelly Knickmeier; Lugo de Fabritz, B. Amarilis; Scott, Tia-Andrea; Ekong, Nsikakabasi; and Mason, Isabella (2022) "Psychological Safety in the Russian Language Classroom," *Russian Language Journal*: Vol. 72: Iss. 1, Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rlj/vol72/iss1/9>

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## Psychological Safety in the Russian Language Classroom

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### 1. Introduction

This article seeks to join the ongoing, vibrant discussion about how to foster inclusivity in our classrooms and build a pipeline of Russian language students that is more reflective of the demographic fabric of the United States. Three BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) third-year Russian language students and their instructors at Howard University collaborated as coauthors. We drew from the field of organizational behavior to consider the relevance the concept *psychological safety* may have for second language acquisition (SLA), and we begin to assess its utility in the Russian language classroom.

Psychological safety (PS) is the feeling that the workplace or learning environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking (Edmondson, 2019). When present, PS creates “a climate of curiosity and candor” (Edmondson, 2019, p. 44) and has been shown to increase collaborative learn-how behavior and knowledge sharing, strengthen teams working remotely, and leverage diverse perspectives (Clark, 2020).

We discuss the particular importance PS has for students of Russian who come from historically marginalized communities. In agreement with Lucey (2021), the focus is to center students’ voices in developing actions, strategies, and best practices that foster Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access (DEIA) and lead to social justice and successful retention in the field. With that goal in mind, we invited BIPOC undergraduate students to share their invaluable perspectives in this project as we think about the potential usefulness, or “operationalization,” of PS in the Russian language classroom.

### 2. Literature Review

Edgar Schein and Warren Bennis (1965) identified the need for psychological safety (PS), a prominent concept in organizational studies, to make people feel secure and capable of overcoming the defensiveness, or

learning anxiety, they may feel when faced with something that contradicts expectations, leading to collective goals and knowledge sharing instead of self-protection. Next, William Kahn (1990) asserted that PS facilitates employee engagement, allowing people to wholly express themselves during role performances. Kahn determined that when feelings of trust and respect characterize collaborative settings, people tend to believe that they would be given the benefit of the doubt. By 1999, Amy Edmondson (2019) had further developed the idea of PS into *team* PS. Since then, PS has been a valued interpersonal condition in clinical education and hospital settings (Edmondson, 2019). Companies like Google attribute their teams' innovative success to PS (Rozovsky, 2015).

Though workplace and educational environments differ—for example, employees are paid and are generally more mature in age and professional development than typical students—both environments require skills and skill development. *Individual-specific* skills (technical, verbal, written, social, “hard” and “soft,” etc.) are equally as important as skills like decision-making, voice, interdependence, and collaboration in *group-specific* and *leader-specific* performance and impact.

A growing body of research considers PS and its mediating role in engagement, creativity, and performance in education: the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom (Tu, 2021), project-based learning contexts (Han et al., 2022), and the perception of well-being and security in K–12 schools (Gilemkhanova, 2019). PS underscores positive psychology's discourse about the role emotions play in language learning (Dewaele et al., 2019; MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014). Foldy et al. (2009) asserted that PS is a foundational necessity when attending to the role of power dynamics in racially diverse groups (a discussion we revisit). Han et al. (2022) observed that students who feel a high level of PS develop adaptive practices for rebounding from failures and mistakes. Soares and Lopes (2020) applied a social network analysis and found a correlation among PS, authentic leadership, high-density networks, and several positive performance outcomes; they determined that “network density and psychological safety coevolve” (p. 69). A network in this context is a set of actors or nodes that correspond to a set of ties or links of a specified type (for example, friendship). Network density (homophily) and PS may be an influencing factor in student retention and career readiness.

Studies find that PS is important for student engagement, a “meta-construct that develops through time and in a positive environment” shaped by emotional, cognitive, behavioral, social, agentic, and academic dimensions (Tu, 2021, p. 3). As it does in the workplace environment, PS highlights leadership roles: for our purposes, instructors. This is especially so when establishing classroom climate, “the social-ecological context in which learners operate which can influence their attitudes, perceptions, behaviors, moods, performance, self-concept, and well-being” (Tu, 2021, p. 2). Classroom climate differs from classroom culture and is determined by such things as the physical environment and facilities; the instructor’s ability, methodology, and personality; rules and traditions; and instructional materials.

Experts have identified key elements for PS to be present. Clark (2020) provided a progressive four-stage framework of PS: inclusion safety, learner safety, contributor safety, and challenger safety. Each stage is rooted in the conditional factors of respect, permission, and social exchange. Inclusion safety is present when an individual feels able to interact with others as a human being without threat of harm and without self-regulation. Learner safety is present when an individual can engage in all aspects of the learning and discovery process. Contributor safety occurs when there is autonomy and respect for an individual’s ability to create value. Challenger safety provides cover in exchange for candor and innovation. Functioning outside of the parameters of one of the stages can lead to intellectual restriction (paternalism) or exploitation (Clark, 2020).

Similarly, Edmondson (2012) valued the practice of *teaming*, “a dynamic way of working that provides the necessary coordination and collaboration without the luxury (or rigidity) of stable team structures” (p. 42), and described “Four Pillars” of teaming: speaking up, collaboration, experimentation, and reflection (pp. 50–56). Per Edmondson (2012), teams become competitive and innovative when a teaming mindset is implemented: a group recognizes the need for teaming and then establishes a repeating cycle of communication, coordination, interdependent action, and reflection and feedback. PS is the free exchange of ideas, but Edmondson (2019) suggested that it is not being nice for the sake of being nice, a synonym for “extroversion,” a lowering of standards, or simply another word for “trust” (pp. 15–19); PS is a “temporally immediate experience” (p. 17).

PS emphasizes the dimensions that influence student engagement—its emotional, cognitive, behavioral, social, agentic, and academic dimensions (Tu, 2021)—and the practice of teaming emphasizes the co-construction of classroom climate among students and the instructor. Edmondson (2014) recommended a three-step process for operationalizing PS within teams: (a) frame the work that needs to be done as a learning problem, (b) acknowledge your own fallibility, and (c) model curiosity.

An example of another widely referenced operational model is “five keys” for effective teams developed by Google: (a) psychological safety, (b) dependability, (c) structure and clarity, (d) meaning of work, and (e) impact of work (Rozovsky, 2015). Google reported that “psychological safety was far and away the most important of the five dynamics we found—it’s the underpinning of the other four” because it counteracted the impulse to self-protect through silence and propelled teams “to harness the power of diverse ideas” (Rozovsky, 2015). In a later section, we discuss what the practice of teaming and the goals of Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) have in common.

These notions about teams, teaming, and PS become relevant to the SLA classroom when we consider the goal of group work in general while also attending to the individual learning experience. Ehrman and Dornyei (1998) noted some time ago that often the general purpose of groups in SLA classrooms is “to enhance the learning process, but not necessarily the growth of individual students” (p. 18). The concept of PS provides a contextual framework to resolve these processes that simultaneously accounts for the group *and* the individual. Kaila (2020) argued that PS provides an operational terminology to discuss numerous qualitative aspects of language learning that have been identified but often prove challenging to translate into practical application models or to measure. Kaila (2020) posited that PS broaches the interpersonal context by functioning as an antecedent to concepts already salient in SLA pedagogy, such as willingness to communicate (WTC), motivation, learning anxiety, learning experience, and, more specifically, Zoltan Dornyei’s L2 Motivational Self System.

Dornyei (2019) recognized the “undertheorized” status of the L2 Learning Experience component in his system and noted that the dimension is lacking operationalization (p. 23). He called for an

operational “engagement-specific framework” that could create “links between concrete aspects of actual student engagement and concrete aspects of future student aspirations” (p. 27). The L2 Motivational Self System posits two self-guides called the *Ideal L2 Self* and the *Ought-to L2 Self*, which are informed by a third dimension called the *L2 Learning Experience*. The second language or L2 Learning Experience is defined as “the perceived quality of the learners’ engagement with various aspects of the language learning process” (p. 26) and is associated with both the student’s imagined experience and the actual experience (p. 23). In response, Kaila (2020) asserted that PS is a “viable factor” and perhaps a “lost piece” in students’ L2 Learning Experience (p. 37). This assertion seems plausible when we revisit Edmondson (2014)’s three-step operational model previously outlined. When teaming and co-constructing a positive classroom climate, student and instructor are, in fact, utilizing this operational practice.

There is more to consider about how PS and interpersonal risk-taking inform the language learning journey and the extent to which PS’s operational models can be applied in SLA and the Russian language classroom. In the next section, we explore the correlation between PS and diversity.

### **3. Psychological safety and diversity in the classroom**

Acknowledging the need for students to feel PS in a classroom is critical when tackling issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. When thinking about PS in the Russian language classroom, we are addressing BIPOC students’ and students from other marginalized communities’ ability to feel comfortable engaging in a subject and a field in which they are severely underrepresented. Only 17 Black or African American women and just 3 Black or African American men earned bachelor’s degrees in Russian in the United States in the four-year period from 2009–2010 to 2013–2014 (Murphy & Lee, 2019). At Howard University, the only Historically Black College or University (HBCU) with a Russian program (a Russian minor), we encourage a population that is underserved in the field at large (United Negro College Fund, 2005) and find ourselves in constant dialogue with students about how to support them, as well as how to attract and retain additional students in Russian language courses.

While the number of Black students who have earned a bachelor's degree in Russian is low, the number of students from diverse backgrounds entering our institutions of higher education is increasing. One telling example is Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland. Montgomery County Public Schools is the 14th largest school district in the U.S. Only 25.3% of the population self-identifies as White, and 39.8% participate in the Free and Reduced Meals (FARMS) program (Montgomery County Public Schools, 2019). The U.S. K–12 population is diversifying from both the racial and socioeconomic standpoint. Data show that post-millennials are the most racially and ethnically diverse American generation to date, and early benchmarks indicate that they are likely to become the most well-educated generation in the history of the U.S. (Fry & Parker, 2018).<sup>1</sup>

The ability to negotiate culturally diverse classroom environments becomes even more relevant when considering the importance of HBCUs and Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) in promoting students of color in higher education (Gordon et al., 2021). HBCUs, for instance, serve only 0.1% of the overall student population but account for 20% of Black students who complete bachelor's degrees (Ford & Reeves, 2020). Given that the post-millennial generation is already in our Russian language classrooms, what has prevented and continues to prevent students from underrepresented, underserved, and marginalized communities from entering and, more importantly, remaining there? To address this question, our undergraduate coauthors lead the discussion for the remainder of this section, and we cite their respective contributions when apropos.

Dweck (2000) found that students' self-theories about intelligence often assume either an entity view or an incremental view and that these beliefs about ability to learn can be positively shifted toward a growth mindset when early learning experiences in a new subject are aligned with established competencies. According to Dweck (2000), "Those who are led to believe their intelligence is a malleable quality begin to take on challenging learning tasks and begin to take advantage of the skill-improvement opportunities that come their way" (p. 26). Kuh et al. (2006) suggested that faculty should consider the implications self-theories can have on student success and persistence in post-secondary studies, especially for students from historically underserved communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Per the study, "post-millennials" refers to those ages 6 to 21 in 2018."

Contributing undergraduate author Tia-Andrea Scott emphasizes this and advocates for what she calls the “perfectly-imperfect classroom”:

This is an environment where students are allowed to make mistakes and feel comfortable doing so and where students know they will not be judged by their fellow peers or their educators. Many times, students of color, varying sexuality and gender, and different socioeconomic status can feel underrepresented, as if they do not belong in the spaces they are taught about: for example, textbooks, future job environments and workplaces, or higher institutions of education.

Scott adds:

Students of color are too often at risk of prejudice in their learning environments, leaving them to feel even more threatened when they make a mistake, due to outcomes like how they will appear or what will be said to them. Yet, in a psychologically safe classroom, as well as a perfectly imperfect classroom, a student of color will be able to learn freely, feel supported and gain understanding after their mistakes, and excel in the fact that they can determine their own learning experience and outcome. *This* is how we reach out to students of color in the language learning world.<sup>2</sup>

Scott’s input reflects three significant aspects of the language learning experience that PS embodies: implicit theories of voice, fault-tolerant culture, and self-determination theory. We discuss each one in turn.

### ***3.1. Implicit theories of voice***

*Implicit theories of voice* are “taken-for-granted beliefs about when and why speaking up at work [or in the classroom] is risky or inappropriate”

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<sup>2</sup> Tia-Andrea Scott is a junior majoring in Political Science and double minoring in Afro-American Studies and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Growing up, she lived in Georgia, Florida, New York, and Ireland, providing her with a variety of experiences in the K–12 system. Her work with the Board of Education for Pawling Central School District (Pawling, New York) on ensuring diversity in predominantly White regions has provided her with a background in diversifying and improving learning spaces, as well as a passion for amplifying student voices.



(Edmondson, 2019, p. 32). Under such “rules,” employees/students self-silence great ideas and contributions. These rules are hard to dismantle and reframe because “silence” provides an immediate benefit for oneself (p. 34). Research shows that implicit voice theories are widely held and augment self-censorship in work environments (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). Implicit theories of voice may account for the inconsistency behind why some demographically diverse teams perform well and others do not (Edmondson, 2019). Scott further shares:

As a student with a processing disability, I recommend instructors regularly survey and poll the class to monitor the accessibility of their material and pacing. Making such checkpoints a common occurrence improves the sense of PS because it signals to students that it is acceptable to express their respective needs/required accommodations without interference from implicit theories of voice.

### **3.2. *Fault-tolerant culture***

Tu (2021) defined *fault tolerance* as “the safety that students and teachers feel in the classroom context for taking initiative, interacting, and speaking out their ideas without being embarrassed, humiliated, and punished” (p. 2). Han et al. (2022) argued that a “fault-tolerant culture positively moderates the relationship between psychological safety and psychological empowerment” (p. 5). During this article project, Scott interviewed Shawn Marshall, English teacher and Teachers Union President in the Hawthorne Cedar-Knolls Union Free District in Westchester County, New York, which predominantly serves students diagnosed with emotional disturbances. Students enrolled at Hawthorne often experience multiple obstacles that can affect their learning and socialization, like attention deficit disorder (ADD), anxiety and depression, autism spectrum disorders, and dissociative identity disorder (DID). The district serves mostly Black and Brown students that come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, undereducated families, and poverty and whose parents have low involvement in their child’s education. Marshall (personal communication, March 28, 2022) emphasized the importance of modeling and operationalizing PS in the classroom: schools “need someone to understand the concept of

generational trauma on a complex level” and to consider “how inequality in our country directly contributes to trauma.” Marshall’s classroom serves as an example of why a fault-tolerant environment is necessary; there are multitudes of students like his with soaring potential that benefit from feeling safe enough to learn and make mistakes, as they may not have that environment at home.

In terms of social context, Marshall (personal communication, March 28, 2022) recommends encouraging students to be unafraid to ask about different perspectives, lifestyles, and points of view through the deconstruction of the (intimidating) hierarchy most classrooms unconsciously submit to. Scott provided the perspective that many underrepresented students are used to being met with aggression and only know how to react with the same hostility. To counteract this dynamic, an instructor could share with students that they are enacting Clark’s (2020) idea of *inclusion safety*, which entails respect for the individual’s humanity, as well as permission to interact, followed by the actual exchange of interaction without harm. Inclusion safety signals to students with trust issues that they are not in danger and builds a structure of interpersonal security needed to feel safe in the classroom.

### ***3.3. Self-determination theory***

Marshall’s (personal communication, March 28, 2022) recommendations call for a fault-tolerant culture and a consideration of the factors that facilitate an individual’s right and motivation to speak and to make collaborative decisions. Self-determination theory offers a mechanism for understanding the relationship between motivation and behaviors and proposes two models for work motivation: autonomous motivation and control motivation. *Autonomous motivation* is the self-driven and optional tendency to implement behaviors when one recognizes their value (self-determination is high), whereas behaviors implemented because of *control motivation* are driven by external, non-selectable stimuli (self-determination is low) (Han et al., 2022). The behaviors people enact at work reflect a combination of both. Self-determination and optimal motivation rely on the satisfaction of three basic needs in the social environment: autonomy (to perceive thoughts and freely decide actions), competence (to sense and experience capability), and relatedness (to experience a sense of belonging and interdependence).

Foldy et al. (2009) have argued that PS and team diversity do not guarantee positive results for team learning without first attending to three cognitive understandings: identity safety, an integration-and-learning perspective, and high-learning frames. *Identity safety* is the notion that one's (racial) identity "is welcome and does not incur risk" (Foldy et al., 2009, p. 26). An *integration-and-learning perspective* is present when a group recognizes the potential in diversity. A *learning frame* is one's mindset toward new situations, information, and ideas.

Coauthor Nsikakabasi Ekong suggests that the operational model of PS facilitates autonomous motivation and self-determination in language learning:

Psychological safety is linked to three key words: comfort, expression, and acceptance. Without those three words, the very essence of the subject is defeated. For students to experience PS, they must: first, be comfortable enough to approach their instructors with ideas and opinions; second, communicate or express said ideas and opinions without fear of repercussions; and lastly, they must have both verbal and nonverbal authentication that their thoughts are heard and valued. Only under such a climate can learning be said to be *optimal*.<sup>3</sup>

Ekong maintains that:

one's ability to brew and perfect an idea, or a string of ideas, depends on the socio-emotional factors of their environment. Having talked with students here at Howard University about the topic of PS, they emphasized the following things: the need for encouragement from instructors; the need for positive interaction with zero hint of hostility from both parties; and the need for inclusivity, especially in a country that has diverse demographics like the U.S.

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<sup>3</sup> Nsikakabasi Ekong is a junior majoring in Biology and double minoring in Chemistry and Russian. He is from Eket, a city in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Nsikakabasi has been diligently pursuing his passion in science while maintaining mentorship positions on campus. He is pursuing medicine with the hope of helping his community back home in Nigeria and other underrepresented communities.

When answering the question “What does PS look like when undergraduates and faculty collaborate on research projects?” Ekong turned to Clark (2020)’s third and fourth stages of PS: contributor safety and challenger safety. *Contributor safety* is “the respect for the individual’s ability to create value” and “the permission for the individual to work with independence and their own judgment”; *challenger safety* is the presence of candor, defined as the “respect for an individual’s ability to innovate” and “permission to challenge the status quo in good faith” (p. 103). Ekong emphasizes the benefit of high-learning frames when the condition of PS is present:

The line between contributor safety and challenger safety is the threshold for *true innovation: the birth of fresh ideas*. A good example is the making of this article. We, the students, were allowed contributor safety with the freedom to write from our minds and perspectives while also being able to vet each other’s work and provide encouragement.

#### **4. Recommended strategies for establishing psychological safety in the Russian language classroom**

All three of our student coauthors expressed two realities that deter BIPOC students and students from other underrepresented and marginalized groups from joining the Russian language classroom. The first: *We do not see ourselves or our communities’ intellectual histories reflected in the course materials*. This statement correlates with Anya’s (2020) reference to a study that found that “40% [of African American students] reported that their courses would be more relevant if African or Afro-descendant themes were more emphasized in first- and second-year segments” (p. 102). Our students shared that reading Anya’s review was reassuring because it comprehensively articulated, with the backing of statistics, the “proof” of something that they had long felt. What offers a positive outlook is that the remedy for this situation offers an actionable, “concrete strategy” (Anya, 2020, p. 104) and that a growing cohort of instructors, textbook authors, and scholars are attending to this issue (Stauffer, 2020).

Our students also provide cautions: they recommend that in developing course materials, instructors thoughtfully avoid reducing underrepresented and underserved intellectuals and their less commonly

taught histories to objects of study. Secondly, our students discern that, in knowledge production, there is work and perspectives that White and other privileged groups cannot do or reach. That is why PS is an important factor in the classroom: it provides the rationale that necessitates and invites diverse voices.

The second reality our students emphasize is that there are systemic relations of power that have had and continue to have cultural and material effects on our field. Gatekeeping mechanisms have led to structural, methodological, pedagogical, and generational effects on the study of Russian by students and scholars who come from historically marginalized communities (Anya, 2020). Examples of these effects include the historical emphasis placed on having intermediate to advanced Russian language proficiency in order to attend study abroad programs and the demographic portrait of the “canon” in language and literature classrooms. Contributing author Nsikakabasi Ekong articulates that “[underrepresented] students are generally unaware of the career opportunities that come with knowing world languages and Russian specifically; one of the ways to move forward would be to increase this connectivity.”

Our third student collaborator, Ollie Mason, concurs, suggesting that instructors and advisors could better explain and emphasize the material, psychological, and social benefits of studying Russian.<sup>4</sup> Mason suggests an actionable strategy: invite BIPOC and other underrepresented academics and professionals to join the classroom setting and share their journey in Slavic and Eurasian studies and intersectional careers. If a climate of PS is present, the conversation can proceed without euphemisms lacking rigor that are unsustainable in the 21st century; the conversation can proceed with candor and contributor and challenger safety, calling such things as racism, genocide, and violence what they are. In the context of such earnest discourse and PS, problems can be redefined and reframed in innovative ways because more voices are allowed to be engaged within what has been a historically homogenous educational setting. Once again, this would employ Edmondson (2014)’s three-step model.

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<sup>4</sup> Isabella Mason (their preferred name is Ollie) is a junior in the International Affairs Department, interested in studying Russian and Chinese politics. Their interests include media studies, video games, and developmental psychology. Ollie is a two-time fellow in the I.D.E.A.S. in REEES Think Tank, researching representations of indigeneity in Russian media and sci-fi literature (learn more at <https://www.reeesthinktank.com/>).

Mason has developed Table 1, which organizes what they understand to be the internal and external benefits of studying Russian in a psychologically safe classroom climate.

*Table 1. Benefits of Psychological Safety for BIPOC Students Studying Russian, East European, and Eurasian Languages*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Internal benefit</b> (Benefit to self)	<b>External benefit</b> (Benefit to the field/ community/society)
Material	Increases job search options and graduate and professional school competitiveness  Enhances resume development, especially through project-based learning	Increases diversity of perspectives, voices, and contributor safety, accelerating creativity and innovative research
Psychological	Increases inclusion and learner safety  Facilitates self-actualization	Increases challenger safety in the field
Social	Opens new cultural landscapes and increases cultural appreciation and knowledge	Mitigates gatekeeping mechanisms and racism by insuring inclusion and contributor safety  Builds cultural competencies to foster democratic values, participation, and civil society

The internal and external benefits Mason has provided reflect some of the ways in which more inclusive approaches in the classroom can lead to enhanced student engagement and appeal to students from underrepresented backgrounds who increasingly demand easily

identifiable “returns on investment” in the choice of academic subjects.

PS is a collective effort that celebrates diversity of thought. When PS is present, people can be their whole authentic selves while participating in conversations, decision-making processes, the exchange of new ideas, and, importantly, the process of feedback. As Edmondson (2019) has said, “Voice is mission critical” (p. 39). To amplify diverse voices, PS requires leadership (in this case, instructors) to model inclusive attitudes and behaviors while making explicit statements that set clear boundaries, challenge the status quo, and encourage group members to self-promote and take credit for their contributions and impact.

Leaders who model PS regularly request feedback and actively listen to all ideas and concerns while responding with a consistent appreciative manner. They promote asking for and receiving help and model social recognition, encouraging students to openly acknowledge one another so that students feel noticed and valued. They monitor for microaggressions and attitudinal behaviors that isolate others and emphasize building connections (network density; homophily) among students. Another actionable strategy is to seek learner safety for oneself and to experiment in order to do and learn something new. For example, when trying out a new mode of instruction or a new corpus of texts, openly share with your students that you have not done this before. Doing so models transparent, interpersonal risk-taking.

One of the side effects of this growth mindset is that instructors can conceptualize the classroom as encompassing a horizontal framework that looks to create the broadest engagement of instructors and students. Rather than a traditional hierarchical construction, based on evaluative practices that emphasize broad student modes of inquiry, and instead of traditional vertical learning practices, in which success is measured as the ascent along a narrowly defined mastery of linguistic and cultural knowledge, instructors and students *co-construct* the classroom culture and climate (Han et al., 2022).

An emerging teaching practice that applies this horizontal learning framework and PS is the use of group projects that emphasize Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL). Blessinger and Carfora (2014) have defined IBL as “an approach to enhance and transform the quality and effectiveness of the learning experience by adopting a learner-centered,

learner-directed, and inquiry-oriented approach to learning that puts more control for learning with the learner” (p. 5). In this approach, “the learner moves from a passive to an active participant in the learning process, [and] the instructor also moves from being an isolated subject matter expert to an instructional leader, learning architect, and learning guide and mentor” (p. 5). IBL is a cognitive, psychological, and social process of which mentorship is an important dimension.

PS can facilitate, or operationalize, the process of co-construction among instructors and students when engaging in IBL. If we revisit Edmondson (2014)’s three-step process, we recognize her claims that (a) framing the work as a learning problem *signals uncertainty and interdependence*, (b) acknowledging your own fallibility *signals that mistakes and feedback are allowed*, and (c) modeling curiosity *signals the necessity for voice*. These benefits of PS summarize the dimensions and components of language learning and self-determination that our three third-year Russian language students discussed.

Finally, we could reframe the Russian language classroom as a contact zone, which HBCUs and MSIs represent. Described by Mary Louise Pratt (1991), *contact zones* are “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (p. 34). By its nature, the Russian language and area studies classroom *is* a contact zone, but one we can make a discursive sanctuary which results in multilingualism, intercultural competencies, regular critical reassessment, (re)reading, and pedagogical innovation. Envisioning our classrooms as contact zones expands our ability to dismantle implicit voice theories and institutional gatekeeping. We come to create the academic equivalent of what Pratt (1991) has identified as *safe houses*: “social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, [and] temporary protection from legacies of oppression” (p. 40).

Through implementing approaches like the ones we have proposed, instructors can create a classroom that does not deny or erase the complexity of Russian language study or its vibrancy as a contact zone. Such recommendations can establish an atmosphere of support for



developing a broad range of inquiry. They suggest how to implement the stages of inclusion and learner, contributor, and challenger safety explicit in PS. And they reward us with the interdependence, curiosity, and candor that motivates student and instructor alike.

## 5. Conclusion

The increasing diversity of the language classroom can prove to be both invigorating and challenging to instructors. Considering pedagogical practices that increase PS in the classroom provides instructors who ponder the question “Where do I start?” with actionable strategies when trying to develop a more inclusive learning environment. Reenvisioning the instructor’s role as a guide in the classroom can transform our classrooms into a horizontal community of learners who practice successful teaming.

We appreciate the forthright vulnerability and insight of our contributing undergraduate coauthors, and we hope to have initiated a discourse about the potential usefulness, or “operationalization,” of PS in the Russian language classroom and its value for the development of DEIA strategies and best practices.

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