Review: Unlocking Russian Pronunciation: A Supplementary Multimedia Mini-Course in Phonetics Based on Famous Russian Songs

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Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.70163/0036-0252.1322
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rlj/vol71/iss1/12

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Kimberly DiMattia’s *Unlocking Russian Pronunciation* provides a much-needed supplement to the instruction of phonetics currently available in most Russian textbooks. Combining insights gained from academic studies of phonetics in the tradition of Elena Bryzgunova and Irina Odintsova, with a thoroughly modern approach to multimedia-driven instruction, *Unlocking Russian Pronunciation* presents the topic in a straightforward and approachable manner. The mini course consists of a textbook and instructional videos, which introduce learners to a hybrid Russian transcription system that aims to make explicit the rules of Russian phonetics. DiMattia’s system is designed to be used as a supplemental resource at any level of Russian instruction or by students independently.

*Unlocking Russian Pronunciation* is first and foremost attuned to the anxieties and needs of L2 Russian learners and consists of strategies students can immediately put into use. In the textbook and website materials, DiMattia focuses on the mechanics—and psychology—of learning to sound more “authentically” Russian. Since DiMattia is not a native speaker of Russian herself, the insights she shares are all ones from which she has personally benefitted. She understands the difficulties of the task at hand and generously shares anecdotes from her own experience, including recordings made during her first-year college Russian course. In this way she serves as an example for L2 students of the degree to which it is possible for them to improve their phonetics—something that could be particularly valuable for students whose Russian teachers are native speakers.

The mini course consists of ten lessons, which are built around seven popular Russian songs: «Калинка», «Цыганская песня», «Катюша», «Мой костёр», «Подмосковные вечера», «Тонкая рябина», and «Грузинская песня». The focus on these songs adds a meaningful cultural component to the materials. Each lesson presents a key topic of Russian phonetics, such as resetting the default mouth position (prompted by the refrain “jaw, tongue, lips”) or voiced and voiceless consonants. No prior knowledge is assumed, which means that it is possible to introduce the transcription system as early as in the first semester of elementary Russian. Teachers, as well as more advanced students, will notice that the answer keys in the textbook treat learners as though they have not encountered
any of these topics before. On a practical level this means, for example, that vowel reduction is not noted in the transcriptions until chapter 4. In fact, “Калинка,” the first song treated in the book, is transcribed three times in three successive chapters—each time with a more complete knowledge of Russian phonetics reflected in the transcription system. However, specific phonetic rules such as vowel reduction could easily be shared with students before they are introduced in the transcription system. Changes to the transcription system itself could also be introduced, though that would require rewriting the answer keys.

The textbook contains a written introduction to each topic, exercises to practice the rules of transcription from each lesson, answer keys for the exercises, and song lyrics and chords, with notes on how singing will change pronunciation. These materials alone do a solid job explaining the phonetic rules underpinning the transcription system, but it is really in the multimedia supplements, which are hosted at unlockingrussianpronunciation.org, that this system shines. Each lesson is accompanied by an instructional video, a spoken lyrics video, and a performance video for each of the seven songs treated in the book. In the instructional videos (ranging in length from 4 to 26 minutes), DiMattia explains the transcription rules in detail. She pays special attention to the mouth and tongue position and provides students the opportunity to practice making the sounds with her. The spoken lyrics videos serve as a detailed annotation for the written answer keys. In the performance videos, DiMattia—sometimes accompanied by another musician, sometimes alone with her guitar—brings the songs to life for students. In the book, DiMattia suggests that singing is optional, but the lyrics and chords are up on the screen, so that students can easily sing (and even play) along, and it is hard to resist the pull. Also accessible via DiMattia’s website are Quizlet sets, which help students practice their transcription skills, and announcements about upcoming live singing sessions and master classes. The website is intuitive and works well on mobile devices.

In addition to these student-focused resources, the website also has materials for instructors looking to incorporate this system into their courses. The teacher section of the site includes a goals menu and feedback form, a suggested ten-week syllabus, recommendations for getting student buy-in and advice based on DiMattia’s experience teaching the material, as well as video recordings and PowerPoint presentations from the five-week masterclass that was held in the summer of 2020. Depending on the background and preferences of the instructor, the instructional videos could be assigned to students in a flipped classroom model or used by the
instructors themselves to brush up on the material before introducing it to students. There are also opportunities for teachers to observe classes lead by DiMattia and consult with her individually.

Unlocking Russian Pronunciation provides a structured, yet lively, way of introducing phonetics into the Russian-language classroom. The textbook and website materials are targeted to students with different learning styles and help to make the instructor’s job easier. This supplementary course would be of interest to all teachers of Russian, but it might be especially helpful for graduate students starting their Russian-language teaching career and those in the field whose training is primarily in literature and not linguistics.

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Although Mikhail Bulgakov’s classic The Master and Margarita has become an inevitable fixture of Russian literature survey courses, it can nevertheless present a challenge even for seasoned instructors. As the text repeatedly slips between locales, historical periods, and narrative voices, Bulgakov’s novel seems more and more like a world unto itself. In my experience, there always proves to be something in this world—rewritten Gospels, a moving romance, the gun-toting cat—that will draw undergraduates in. And yet, when a tight syllabus gives me but four classes to tackle the novel’s elaborate system of leitmotifs, allusions, and historical realia, I feel like I fail to do the work justice.

J.A.E. Curtis’s A Reader’s Companion to Mikhail Bulgakov’s “The Master and Margarita” represents a valuable tool not just for such harried instructors, but also for the undergraduate reader interested in further exploring the novel. Curtis, who has authored or edited several essential volumes on Bulgakov, is eminently qualified to compose a work of this type. This book presents a welcome update to the similar companion (to which Curtis contributed) published by Northwestern University Press in 1996. Curtis’s text references the subsequent twenty-plus years of Bulgakoviana and tackles the novel’s intricacies in a more linear fashion, deftly cataloging “some of the principal lines of debate and disagreement about the text” (xii) for the benefit of professor and pupil alike.