Review: *Student-Centered Approaches to Russian Language Teaching: Insights, Strategies, and Adaptations*

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This volume consists of twelve chapters, three written by the editors setting an overview of “student-centered teaching” (two at the start of the volume and one at the end), with nine chapters in the middle, written by different authors. These nine center chapters share a basic structure: an opening statement of the problem they will look at, a Russian-language version of that overview, then several pages of theory/background on the specific topic being addressed, and then a discussion of the specific study/intervention conducted. Each chapter ends with both a conclusion and a “lessons learned” section. Each of the nine center chapters focus on different aspects of instruction, and they are often further enriched with appendices providing specific examples of the materials referenced in the chapter. These nine chapters will be particularly helpful to current and future teachers in providing guidance and examples for how to implement practices that can only loosely be called “student-centered.”

The first three of these nine chapters rely on survey data from Russian-language learners. Maslova explores how to increase beginning students’ self-regulation skills in relationship to micro-level Can-Do statements and strategy use. Lorenz surveys learners at the end of first-semester Russian about their attitudes toward grammar instruction, finding that his cohort of students preferred a deductive approach and mechanical exercises. Lorenz’s study, conducted at a single university, raises questions about how representative his sample is, especially in absence of demographic data about the students completing the survey. Replicating the study with a national survey would give the field a better sense of the range of learner attitudes toward inductive/deductive grammar approaches. Mistecký and Místecká document attitudes to the Russian language in Czechia up to 2018, drawing on corpus and survey data for their findings. Theirs is the most methodologically rigorous of the three mixed-methods studies in this section of the volume.
Three chapters look at various aspects of classroom teaching and testing. Anderson describes a curriculum revision process that starts with setting course proficiency outcomes and leads to implementing a “flipped” classroom model for intermediate Russian. Baer and McIntyre explore task-based assessment and rubrics in the context of remote instruction; their examples of rubrics and integrated performance assessment will be particularly useful models for other teachers of Russian. A’Beckett explores the teaching of figurative language with late beginners on the basis of the nominal metaphor, illustrating her ideas with a comparison between Venice and the “Venice of the North.”

Three other chapters describe useful teaching/learning projects. Zheltoukhova focuses on preparing students for a short-term study abroad experience with online activities that highlight cultural differences, linguistic preparation in pragmatics, and an electronic exchange. While few of her students took advantage of this preparation because it was extracurricular, the chapter reminds teachers of the need to explicitly prepare students for study abroad in a multidimensional way. Khotimsky and Leontyeva offer a helpful, practical survey and evaluation of digital tools that teachers can use for student-centered classroom practice and projects. Sokolova and her multiple coauthors describe the process of creating an online textbook for learners of Russian as a foreign language in Norway. Their reflection and evaluation of development process may help others find the right platform and models for new open-access textbooks.

The best coedited volumes are ones where the whole is far more than the sum of the parts because all the chapters contribute to elucidating multiple dimensions of a well-conceived and clearly-defined central point. Despite the nine interesting contributions, this volume falls rather short of giving the field a clear picture of what making Russian language instruction “student centered” would look like. Part of the problem is that the term “student-centeredness” remains amorphous. In the second chapter Nuss gets close to defining it when she presents a contrastive list of the characteristics that distinguish instruction in teacher-centered vs. learner-centered environments. Yet she doesn’t go on to explain how to operationalize some or most of these characteristics in structuring a university-level Russian course in any detail. Her chapter ends with some small suggestions about offering alternative assignments, but it
would have been more helpful to see how the nine characteristics of the “student-centered” classroom are reflected in an actual course syllabus or other student-facing materials.

Despite this, the individual contributions do much to recommend the volume, especially to an international audience, since four chapters (Místecký and Místecká, A’Beckett, Sokolova, and Leontyeva) address Russian-language learning outside of the United States. The volume is also quite up to date, since most chapters explicitly address changes that the COVID pandemic has had on students and teaching practice.

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For decades, Martinsen fostered international dialogue on Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment, gathering interpretations from the most dedicated students and scholars. Her reader’s guide distills this criticism into a concise, accessible handbook, an authoritative scholarly guide in English. Martinsen’s guide is handy for syllabus writing and as a teaching supplement to cover the novel’s central themes and narrative techniques.

In Chapter 1, Martinsen contrasts Dostoevsky’s novel with the usual whodunnit, terming it a “whydunnit” as the murderer’s identity is known from the outset. She situates Raskolnikov’s motives within the context of Western materialist ideologies, comparing the influence of superficial ideologies on Russian society to the facades of St. Petersburg that mask the earth’s regenerative power. Martinsen aligns Dostoevsky with the pochvenichestvo movement that saw earth-rooted peasants as morally superior to the well-read intelligentsia.

Chapter 2 explores Dostoevsky’s third-person narrative shifts: at times, implicating the reader in Raskolnikov’s thoughts, and at others, providing a detached perspective. Martinsen orients readers within the narrator’s seemingly chaotic narrative, which often mimics Raskolnikov’s evaluative emotional process, thereby inducing Raskolnikov’s feverish psychological and philosophical momentum in the reader. For Martinsen, Dostoevsky destabilizes the guilt script (feeling bad about and making...