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Tracking Current Events in the Russian-Language Classroom

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1. Introduction

To 21st-century students and teachers alike, reading news media in the foreign language (FL) classroom can seem not just pedagogically useful but professionally and intellectually vital. In defining the concept of “translingual and transcultural competence,” the Modern Language Association’s (MLA) much-cited 2007 report “Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World” established a series of skills that students of foreign languages would need in order to navigate the modern world. Instructors would need to “systematically [teach] differences in meaning, mentality, and worldview as expressed in American English and in the target language,” and in so doing, help students acquire—among other skills— “the ability to understand and interpret its radio, television, and print media” (Geisler et al., 2007, p. 238). Nevertheless, in a survey of foreign language programs’ curricula, Rifkin found that literature in the target language (TL) still dominated many upper-level course offerings five years on from the MLA statement. He asserted that “poetry, short stories, and novels should not constitute the exclusive focus of reading assignments in upper-division language classes but should be read together with other texts, including periodicals; scholarly works on political, economic, and social and cultural history; and memoirs” (2012, p. 72).

In the fields of Russian, Slavic, and/or Eurasian studies, this prerogative to change our approach to FL instruction has become essential in the wake of Russia’s ongoing invasion of Ukraine. We must carefully consider the nature of our language and culture curricula, reckoning with, among other things, “Tolstoyevsky’s” complicity in the whitewashing of Russian culture; including Ukrainian voices and perspectives instead of defaulting to Russian ones; the Russian-speaking communities outside of the Russian Federation, as well as the diverse cultures of Kazakhstan, Estonia, Armenia, etc., where our students

will be studying abroad; and—perhaps most immediately—the need to become critical consumers of news media in a world of political polarization, ersatz Twitter experts, and state-managed disinformation campaigns.

The last of these obligations is not, of course, new: the cultivation of media literacy has long been recognized as a desirable goal of modern K-12 language arts education (Kellner and Share, 2005), and critical media literacy (the sensitizing of students to the ways media reflect the ideologies of a society) is increasingly necessary in an ever more divided media landscape (Pederson, 2023). Nor is information literacy a novel goal in secondary education; the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) highlights students' capacity to critically evaluate information sources as a pivotal educational goal.¹ Since consumers of news media are being flooded with competing theories about the basis for Russia's invasion and rationales for arming Ukraine, training students to carefully analyze treatments of current events—in multiple languages and across multiple cultural contexts—seems like not only a pedagogical obligation but a moral one as well. As Pederson (2023) notes, "sensitizing students to the embedded meanings in media representations will foster a better understanding of the target language's culture, as well as fostering a greater understanding of the embedded ideologies in their own society's media representations" (p. 180). In the lens of critical media literacy, examining FL media can be an invaluable part of a liberal arts education and demonstrates the centrality of foreign language study in our curricula.

Finally, the use of authentic media sources in the TL creates an opportunity for much-needed instruction in the use of online dictionaries and translation tools, including novel generative artificial intelligence. Students may be able to get the gist of a Russian-language news article with the help of Google Translate; however, the resultant text will contain awkward, un-nuanced phrasings, requiring human consultation for adequate comprehension—particularly if the original uses colloquial expressions (Robin, 2021). By examining the uses and shortcomings of machine translation through the lens of TL news media, students can

¹ See, for example, the consideration of source bias in the AAC&U VALUE Rubrics at <https://www.aacu.org/initiatives/value-initiative/value-rubrics/value-rubrics-information-literacy>.

maintain a baseline knowledge of current events and recognize the need for further mastery of the TL.

In this article, we describe a current events blogging project that can be incorporated into any level of the Russian-language curriculum, which serves to both enhance students' proficiency with the TL and accomplish the goals of increased media literacy and cultural awareness. Students follow current events through news sources from the Russian-speaking world and news sources for North American or English-speaking audiences (or sources in any other languages and cultures students may know well). Using what they learn from these various sources, students summarize the news in weekly blog posts for one month. Students also read and comment on their classmates' blog posts every week in order to learn about current events beyond their own topic, and they write a concluding reflection on the whole project. At the lower levels of the curriculum, the project is completed primarily in English, while at higher levels, students encounter more complex materials in the TL with the help of additional instructor scaffolding (including curation of media resources and directed work with machine translation; see sections 2 and 3). Second- and third-year students also use their findings from the project to create in-class TL presentations at the end of the semester.

As student reflections indicate, this project is successful in its goal of increased media literacy. After four weeks of blogging, students develop a deeper understanding of the target cultures (TC) they are studying and demonstrate gains in TL proficiency with vocabulary that is meaningful for their course of study outside of the classroom, especially at the upper levels of the curriculum. Furthermore, they display more nuanced levels of media and information literacies and are able to indicate the sources and effects of media bias within the Russophone world and their own native cultures (NC).

2. Overview of the current events blog project

Blogging in the FL classroom is a fairly common practice, with many advantages on its own, including the fostering of an online community, improved writing proficiency, more self-reflection, and increased "audience awareness" in writing (see Anderson & Walsh, 2020; Armstrong & Retterer, 2008; Ducate & Lomicka, 2005; Fathi et al., 2019). In a 2019

review of social media, blogs, and wiki pages in FL teaching, Reinhardt notes that blogs allow for students to write socially, for each other, rather than only for their instructor. Blogs create an online community within a class, especially meaningful in hybrid or online courses, and a community beyond the classroom. Al-Jarf (2022) notes that a class blog on current events in an English as a foreign language (EFL) course led to greater language proficiency gains than the same assignment in a traditional pen-and-paper format. The students in this study also responded well to the collaborative nature of blogging, both as a way to learn from reading their classmates' posts and from reflection on their own writing in the class forum. Fithriani, Rafida, & Siahaan (2018) highlight the difference in student attitudes when writing for an instructor to get a grade or for classmates to share information; participating in a blog created more excitement for participation.

For the current events blog project under discussion, students read news media from the Russian-speaking world for one month, writing four weekly blog posts about the articles they read on the class's learning management system (LMS), typically in a forum tool that resembles an online message board composed of individual conversation threads that all class participants can read. Students write in whatever manner (casual, scholarly, etc.) is most comfortable for them, but are asked to include commentary on any differences they may have noticed between how distinct news media frame stories (e.g., details or language that might be present in one article about a current event but not in another one covering the same event).

In order to ensure variety on the class blog, students select one of six broad topics for their blog (domestic politics, foreign policy, business & economics, arts & culture, environment & ecology, or social issues). Students are encouraged to choose a topic related to an area of personal interest or a field that they are studying. Next, they choose a narrower subtopic, to avoid overlap in articles. For example, subtopics of domestic politics include local elections, legislature, and regional/ethnic conflicts; subtopics in social issues include healthcare, unemployment, and migration. (For a fuller list, see Anderson & Walsh, 2020.) The subtopics, however, should not be so narrow as to prevent the student from finding relevant articles in the news. If there is not enough coverage of a particular topic in the news, students will resort to writing short research summaries

instead of covering current events. Given that one of the goals of the project is to gain an understanding of how current events are covered in Russophone regions' media, students should be guided toward news sources, and away from Wikipedia or other non-news websites. Students should start to regularly visit sources from Russian-speaking countries for one or two weeks before choosing their individual focus, in order to gain a sense of regularly covered topics.

An important element of this project at all levels of instruction is drawing attention to how sources from Russian-speaking countries and in the students' NCs differ in their coverage and presentation of events. Each blog post must cite at least one article from a source written for a Russophone audience and one from a source written for a non-Russophone audience. The instructor provides a list of potential news sources geared towards Russian speakers in Russian-speaking places. First-year students also receive a list of mainstream English-language sources written for English speakers in this part of the world. Given the current state of media in the Russian Federation, as well as some states with large Russophone populations, it is necessary to annotate this list with some information on the type of source, such as whether it is state-sponsored or independent, and in which country the source is published. To mitigate any instructor bias, such sources are listed non-hierarchically (e.g., alphabetically) rather than on the basis of their assumed 'reliability.' (See Section 3.1.) Moreover, students are encouraged to use both state-sponsored and independent media sources as a way to compare the politically variable coverage of current events. Students are likewise required to compare coverage in the TC and their NC in order to better comprehend the tendencies and possible biases within their existing media diet.

In an effort to provide students with a broader view of Russophone communities, the project descriptions have been rewritten in recent years to emphasize that the blogs need not focus solely on the Russian Federation. We provide our students with a broader list of potential news sources from outside Russia. Although there are many English-language news sources that are based in the Russian Federation and remain available to our US-based students, there may be fewer such media for Anglophone readers in countries like Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, or Estonia. Centering those countries in the project may thus prove more feasible for

third-year Russian students, who can access those countries' Russophone news media. Since US institutions ceased offering study abroad options in the Russian Federation following the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and since such programs have moved to Central Asia and Eastern Europe, including sources from these places can help introduce students to their destination country's unique cultures and political landscapes prior to their arrival.

To capitalize on the social nature of blogs, students also read the posts of their classmates, which allows all participants to learn about current events in areas other than their chosen topic and subtopic. Students are required to briefly comment on at least two other students' blog posts each week, before the next post is due. These short (25- to 50-word) response posts create opportunities for TL speech production at every fluency level, and since students can experience anxiety when writing blog posts for a peer audience (Al-Jarf, 2022), these comments' brevity, low stakes, and enthusiastic or inquisitive tone help mitigate such anxiety. After the final blog post, students write a reflection on the blog project, which can be submitted privately to the instructor or posted to the blog as well.

The general structure of this blog project can be modified and repeated at different levels within a multi-year curriculum. As "CML [critical media literacy] pedagogy should lead to the acquisition [...] of new vocabulary, and therefore increased communicative proficiency" (Pederson, 2023, 188), language learners at any level can benefit from this blog project. Below, we address the specifics of implementing it at first-, second-, and third-year levels of instruction.

3. Implementing the project at various levels

3.1 In the first year: Making first impressions

First-year Russian students are able to read and write at a basic level, which does not allow for reading and summarizing TL news articles. While it can be a useful exercise to look at the headlines of Russian-language news sources to see what first-year students can understand, they will not be able to meaningfully work with full articles in Russian, nor will they be able to write in the TL outside of familiar topics related to daily life. However, engaging with current events in the Russian-speaking world is still a worthwhile class project which students find

to be rewarding and a refreshing change of pace from the regular assignments of a language class. Even when primarily done in English, the current events blog introduces students to contemporary Russian-speaking cultures, including the different types of news sources that can be found there, and inspires them to gain further proficiency and read more deeply in the TL.

In the second semester, students receive a list of news sources from the Russophone world that are available in English, such as the independent news source Meduza, expat-oriented sites such as *The Moscow Times* or *The Astana Times*, or the English-language page for the Russian state news agency TASS. Although their level of fluency limits them to English-language sources, students are able to observe meaningful differences in how events are portrayed in the US or British press and in media published in countries where Russian is spoken. Students at the first-year level often have less exposure to Russian-speaking cultures, particularly outside of Russia, and this project allows them to learn about culture through a topic that they are already interested in, such as business or ecology, which might not be covered in a first-year textbook.

The project also includes a small Russian-language component even in the first-year curriculum. Students' blog posts are required to include at least ten words and phrases in Russian relevant to the articles' content, woven organically into the students' NL prose. Such words could be anything from a spelled-out numeral to a proper noun, e.g., река Москва [the river Moscow], to a title and name, e.g., Президент Казахстана Касым-Жомарт Токаев [the President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Zhomart Tokaev]. The Russian-language requirement encourages students to transliterate unfamiliar proper names, a valuable phonetic practice for novice learners.

Perhaps most importantly, implementing the current events blog in first-year Russian prepares students to repeat this project later in the Russian curriculum. When the language requirement is enhanced in second- and third-year Russian, students will already be familiar with the structure of the project, so they can focus more on the TL components. Additionally, the ability to read and write more in Russian can serve as an enticement for students to continue, as well as a way for them to see their own progress.

3.2 In the second year: Seeking TL articles, using translation tools

At the beginning of second-year Russian, students begin having curated encounters with Russian-language media. Students complete the same English-language reading tasks as those outlined above, and likewise post their English-language blog summaries on the course LMS. They also begin to explore news articles in the TL. Based on their comparative reading of English-language news stories, students search for Russian keywords on Google to find Russian-language articles covering similar stories. For example, in the spring 2021 semester, one student found a relevant article by searching for *Навальный* [Navalny] and *арестовать* [to arrest], having seen ‘Navalny’ and ‘arrested’ in multiple US-based articles. As a final step, students send the instructor at least one relevant TL article that they have confidently identified as similar to the English-language ones detailed in their blog posts. During a subsequent class session, the instructor uses brief citations from student-submitted articles to reinforce recently acquired textbook content.

This more mediated entry into TC media not only gives students a personal stake in classroom discussions; it also helps the instructor highlight sociopolitical minutiae of the TL in authentic texts. For example, in the Fall 2022 semester, two students separately submitted articles citing NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg’s commentary on the Russian invasion. When referring to Ukraine, one article, from *Ukrainskaia pravda*, used the preposition *в* (“*в Украине*” [in Ukraine])² while the other, from RIA Novosti, used the preposition *на* (“*на Украине*” [in the Ukraine]).³ Side-by-side versions of these citations were presented in the next class session, and students were asked to catalog the similarities and differences they found between them. When the distinct prepositions were noted in the discussion, students were able to consider the political charge of that choice in preposition and the reason why each of those publications might use *в* or *на* (e.g., the country they were based in, their stance on Ukrainian sovereignty, etc.).

When second-year students encounter TC news articles in this mediated fashion, it affords the class additional opportunities. Language learners of all levels use online translators, but do not or cannot always recognize those tools’ potential flaws. Google Chrome’s ‘Translate this

² <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2022/10/11/7371475/>; accessed via Google Chrome on June 21, 2023.

³ <https://ria.ru/20221011/stoltenberg-1823192355.html>; accessed via Google Chrome on June 21, 2023.

page' function helps students rapidly determine if a TL article covers the same topic as the English-language articles they have already encountered, but might introduce un-nuanced or inadequate translations that the student might not be able to recognize. As Knowles (2022) has detailed, actively reflecting on such translation tools' output with language learners will help them engage such resources—and the TL—more mindfully.

News media provide fertile ground for such metalinguistic reflections on translation tools. Figurative language (euphemisms, metaphors, puns, etc.) feature meaningfully in Russian-language news media, and Google is not always equipped to contend with it (see Robin, 2021). For example, fourth-semester students would likely be able to recognize most of the words in the following headline. However, Google Chrome's 'Translate this page' function provides little help to those who don't immediately identify the concluding idiom:

**В Белоруссии будут наказывать
получателей зарплат "в конверте"**
**Belarus will punish recipients of
salaries "in an envelope"**

Figs. 1 and 2: screen captures of an article headline on RIA Novosti⁴

Many students would not immediately intuit that the phrase 'зарплата в конверте' [salary in an envelope] is equivalent to the English phrase 'getting paid under the table.' In-class exercises asking students to analyze rather than passively accept Google Translate's version will aid their independent navigation of TC news articles. For example, during one class session, students assessed the accuracy of the translated article lede below,⁵ and then identified features of the original Russian that seemed to present difficulties for Google.

⁴ Images retrieved from RIA Novosti (<https://ria.ru/20210301/zarplata-1599523334.html>) and accessed via Google Chrome, May 31, 2023. English version via 'Translate this page' function.

⁵ Images retrieved from Узнай Россию [Discover Russia] (<https://rbth.ru/watch/1347-blog-piterville>); accessed via Google Chrome on June 21, 2023. English version via 'Translate this page' function.

Листаете вы ленту, а там вдруг русские крестьяне и бояре пляшут под Бейонсе и отпускают шуточки про русское крепостное право. На таком нельзя не зависнуть.

You are scrolling through the tape, and there suddenly Russian peasants and boyars are dancing under Beyonce and making jokes about Russian serfdom. You can't help but get hung up on something like this.

Figs. 3 and 4: screen captures of an article lede on Узнай Россию [Discover Russia]

Upon perusing the article, students intuited that ‘the tape’ would be better rendered as ‘your feed’ and ‘under Beyonce’ as ‘to Beyonce.’ They noted that ‘get hung up on’ sounded too negative in context. This observation gave them the chance to consider the etymological root of *зависнуть* [to hang, hover] (via the already familiar verb *висеть* [to hang]) that likely produced the faulty translation. Students then offered accurate ones (e.g., ‘get hooked on’). For homework, students used Chrome’s ‘Translate this page’ function on the articles they had previously sent to the instructor. They had to find a similarly ungainly sentence, correct it for style and grammar, and consider the reasons why the Russian-language original might present difficulties for machine translation. In addition to encouraging judicious use of such tools, such back-translation tasks help students become more aware of choices that machine translation is making on their behalf. Consequently, they reassert their agency as language learners (Klekovkina and Deine-Higney, 2022). Such guided use of these tools helps make students more astute users of the translation resources that they already employ, helping them grapple with TL nuances as they begin engaging with TC media independently.

3.3 *In the third year: Reading news articles in the TL*

The third-year level blogging project was first completed during the 2021-22 and the 2022-23 academic years. During this period, stories about Russia's ongoing war with Ukraine featured prominently in the news. Students expressed anxiety that, in the aftermath of Russia's February 24, 2022 full-scale invasion, some seemingly 'lighter' topics (sports, art, etc.) they had selected would be eclipsed in day-to-day war coverage. However, to universal surprise, such 'lighter' topics now acquired front-page status even in English-language media, and students found that seemingly distant cultural phenomena were not untouched by the war. Other students began following media outlets from Ukraine (e.g., *КП в Украине* [KP Ukraine], *Ukrainskaia pravda*) to further enrich the comparative and ethical stakes of their project.

In the third year, students continue to compare news coverage from the NC and TC, but now actively bring TL media into the comparison. In each blog post, students must summarize and compare no fewer than three TL news articles about their topic, preferably with geographical and ideological variety. The blog posts published on the LMS continue to be primarily written in English, but the criteria for Russian-language elements are more robust: at least ten relevant new vocabulary items gleaned from the TL articles must be organically woven into the student's NL prose, and students must compose longer, more lexically and grammatically complex responses in the TL to their classmates' posts. At this level, students also submit Russian-language versions of their posts—which must likewise include vocabulary newly acquired from the TL articles in grammatically coherent sentences—directly to their instructor. Students typically appreciate this distinction from the first- and second-year blog submission protocol. Yet posting longer, more complex TL texts for their classmates can induce anxiety. Attending to such psychological variables in TL blogging is important: while Yousefifard & Fathi (2021) argue that blogging in the EFL curriculum can increase student motivation, Chen (2016) and Fathi et al. (2019) found a decrease in self-efficacy after blog-mediated writing instruction.

Another change is that students are encouraged to examine the NL stories they have gathered before delving into the TL ones. This task sequence, although it may initially bias their interpretation of current events, is useful for language acquisition purposes: it allows students to

reflect on the limits of their TL vocabulary vis-à-vis their native language; it helps them be on the lookout for synonyms and/or related etymological roots, as well as other nuances of language. As in the second-year project, third-year students are asked to surmise any particular words that might appear in TL articles (e.g., the aforementioned арестовать [to arrest]). However, since students now independently read the Russian-language articles, their blog post must indicate whether their guesses about the TL words were correct, and they must note at least ten unfamiliar words that they encountered in the TL articles.

This series of tasks—surveying English-language media, making guesses about the vocabulary of Russian-language news stories, composing English- and Russian-language versions of their blog posts—serves several purposes: 1) establishing a ‘control’ group of key concepts in order to facilitate a more grounded transcultural comparison of current events; 2) encouraging students to preemptively consider variations in morphology and part of speech; and 3) facilitating a reflection on stylistic, syntactic, and semantic differences between English and Russian. Indeed, these goals are intertwined, given that media representations creatively use language in order to socialize their audience for specific goals, and such audiences tend to passively accept those representations (Pederson, 2023, p. 178). By frontloading, testing, and then interrogating their NC-derived linguistic expectations of TC media representations, students not only become familiar with semantic and stylistic differences between English and Russian, but also become sensitized to unspoken norms within their NC’s media representations (Pederson, 2023, p. 180). For example, one student noted that Russian-language articles on 2022 Siberian wildfires focused more on their local economic consequences and refrained from connecting them to other global environmental disasters—an omission the student didn’t expect, given the English-language articles’ readiness to treat them as part of a larger symptom of anthropogenic climate change. By expecting, and then failing, to find the word засуха [drought] in TL articles, the student became aware of the framings that they took for granted due to representational and ideological norms in their NC media.

By the end of this project, students are better equipped to navigate news media in multiple languages from a more thoroughly translinguistic and transcultural perspective.

4. Student reflections

Regardless of the level, students write an English-language reflection after completing the final blog post; third-year students write an additional TL version. In these reflections, students at every level of fluency expressed an appreciation for the project. Some students highlight their initial concern about the feasibility of the project, as the amount of work can feel daunting; others expressed anxiety about meeting its varied TL requirements. However, the vast majority note that it was not difficult to complete the project, and even enjoyable to do so. Students—even first-year language learners reading in their NL—consistently comment on how they feel more connected to the Russian-speaking world and its cultures. Many students arrived at realizations that aligned with the project's larger goals concerning media literacy, information literacy, knowledge of Russophone cultures and metalinguistic reflection.

4.1 *Media literacy*

Students frequently observe notable differences in media coverage across sources, as well as biases and lacunae within specific media sources. On the one hand, it can be difficult for students to find sources from both within and outside the Russian-speaking world that address politically sensitive or rarefied topics. For instance, it may be difficult to find a *Guardian* article on the premiere of a play in Riga that received robust TC coverage. On the other hand, this absent coverage is itself an important lesson about local and global news media. Some students observe that news sites courting an American or global audience painted Russia with a broad brush or focused only on international events, while news sources written for audiences in countries with large Russian-speaking populations feature more localized news stories. While it is not necessarily surprising that US-based news media do not cover local events in Kyrgyzstan or Estonia, it remains an important revelation for the students.

The reflections also demonstrate how this project reveals media bias and impresses on students the need to seek out multiple sources. Students frequently write about the negative attitude toward Russia they found in the American press, and about the one-sided view of the government in the Russian state media. The bias of various sources was particularly clear during the 2017 Duma elections in Russia: one first-year student found

that US-based media wrote very favorably about opposition leaders such as Alexei Navalny, although official Russian media supported his arrest, while British and Australian newspapers struck a neutral tone. First-year students often indicate an interest in how Russian-language news sources would cover events.

In 2023, one third-year student⁶ highlighted how the project helped them uncover patterns of unwitting bias in their own media consumption. The student juxtaposed a variety of different news sources on the Orthodox Church's reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and in considering the articles' different factual emphases, the student became aware of gaps in their own knowledge. They sought out additional sources to address this issue, and realized what news media may gloss over and expect their readers to (not) know:

While it was certainly interesting to look into the news sources I was reading and evaluate them based on their potential biases, the real challenge was trying to pick apart the politics of the various [national] Orthodox churches that were each contributing their own opinions on the war in Ukraine. Speaking to [a professor of religious studies] helped me realize there were all sorts of blind spots in my own understanding of the situation that were making it hard for me to understand where each side was coming from. [...] So if I have learned anything, it's that when it comes to this issue, evaluating sources isn't enough—there is so much background knowledge required to make sense of the churches' actions, and my worry is that most news agencies are not providing this context for readers, or may not even be aware of the more complicated implications of their reporting on the Orthodox church.

In a similar vein, one third-year student noted that US-based coverage of the ongoing Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh would go into greater historical detail, intuiting that a typical *New York Times* reader might lack context for that part of the world; Russian state-run media, on the other hand, assumed their reader's familiarity with that region's history and geopolitical circumstances.

⁶ All direct quotes from students are shared with written permission.

4.2 Cultural knowledge

Many students have also mentioned that the blog project changed their preconceived notions about Russia and other Russian-speaking countries. By looking at current events from a different perspective, students were able to see that the former Soviet republics are real places, not just abstract concepts. This project also allows students to discover elements of Russophone cultures that may not fit into a language curriculum, such as relations between the Orthodox church and Central Asian Muslim communities, local approaches to fighting climate change, Russian-language pop music, or the ways that Russian-speaking countries responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since students choose their topics, they have a higher degree of interest, motivation, and connection to those aspects of the TC. However, as students read the blog posts of their classmates, they learn even more about Russophone cultures, and become further interested in what their fellow students think and care about.

4.3 Metalinguistic reflection

In 2023, the project's sustained focus on bias and comparison helped a third-year student become aware of subtler, misleadingly 'neutral' matters of language itself—both in English and in Russian. A textbook-based discussion about impersonal constructions and passive voice from earlier in the semester took center stage when the student considered the matrix of variables (Russia- vs. US-based media, independent vs. state-affiliated media, etc.) that the project introduced.

By comparing Russian-language and English-language articles on Russian international politics, I encountered how language can lend itself to represent ideological biases: from anti-Western and pro-war statements in Russian state-sponsored media to anti-war and pro-Western sentiments in Ukrainian news for Cold War rhetoric and fear-mongering in Western reports. The tone and vocabulary used in Russian-language and English-language media often helped implicitly convey these biases. Russian-language news used passive voice, whereas English-language news often used active voice (very rarely an occasional passive voice statement). Although I know passive voice is the Russian-language writing convention, in Russian-language news I perceived this as a means

of deflecting blame and it at times displayed how language can be weaponized to obfuscate truth.

4.4 Community learning

A number of students described an appreciation for the interactive nature of the blog project. By reading their classmates' posts, they learned about topics they may not have had any knowledge about previously, such as Russian efforts to fight climate change or the politics of the Riga theater scene. Students expressed an appreciation for the variety of posts, as well as the chance to exchange opinions with their classmates through comments. Especially during remote learning in 2020-2021, and for students studying Russian online, the blog gives students a way to connect beyond their study of Russian.

All told, these reflections indicate that the news blog project helped introduce students to new sources of current events and allowed them to see how their own biases affect how they read the news. A frequent refrain among students is that reading the news broadly and comparatively helped them see various phenomena—such as Russian popular opinion about climate change—as less monolithic or uniform than they had previously assumed. Students at higher levels also acquire a more nuanced understanding of Russian grammar, a richer vocabulary, greater regional knowledge, and a higher degree of media and information literacy.

5. Conclusions

The current events blog project has been well received overall by students as a way to both increase their knowledge of the Russian language and to learn about current events from Russian-speaking countries and regions and how they are covered there. Certain features of the project can be further tweaked in future iterations. A frequent obstacle is the tendency for students to approach the blog as a research project rather than a catalog of current events. This mistaken assumption may be due in part to a lack of consideration for what topics are consistently covered in news media. Students are encouraged to look at news websites in advance of choosing a topic, but a more scaffolded approach could ensure that they visit the websites and note the range of article topics prior to making their project selection. Students could post headlines to the blog before they begin

reading articles and writing their posts. Another pre-project activity would be to sort the headlines by topic, which could also introduce students to the vocabulary of common topics which may already be familiar to them.

Overall, the project has proven to be effective at drawing students' attention to a variety of news sources about the TC. Students are also able to see the importance of information literacy in today's world, and to become more curious and critical consumers of Anglophone and Russophone media alike.

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