A New Perspective on Teaching Russian: Focus on the Heritage Learner

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Data released in October 2000 by the US Census Bureau points to some of the crucial questions that frame the discussion to follow. At present the United States population includes the largest number of foreign born residents in its history, 11% of the total population (US Census 2000). Only recently are language professionals and policy makers beginning to recognize these speakers of immigrant (heritage) languages as a national resource. According to Brecht and Ingold more than 150 languages other than English are spoken in the United States and, importantly, the United States maintains ties with every single country in the world. Despite this reality and despite the fact that educational institutions in the United States have extensive course offerings in foreign languages, only a very small number of Americans attain the level of proficiency necessary for professional performance. It is the heritage speaker population that can fill this national need, and, therefore, it should be one of the targets of our instructional planning for the future. Heritage language acquisition is becoming a field in its own right within foreign language education. At UCLA, out of 26 regularly taught modern languages only three (Italian, French, German) do not enroll heritage students. The remaining languages all face the problem of how best to balance teaching and other resources between traditional foreign language learners and heritage speakers. What little research and curricular design that has been done is in Spanish since Spanish instructors have been grappling with the problem of two-track instruction for over 25 years. Interest and research in languages other than Spanish is developing, however, and the first national conference on heritage languages was held in Long Beach, CA in 1999. In September 2000 a Heritage Language Research Priorities Conference convened at UCLA sought to determine a research agenda for the emergent field.

The term heritage speaker has been defined in various ways, e.g. “to refer to a student of a language who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speaks or merely understands the language, and who is to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language” (Valdés 375), and as a person who has “a language of personal relevance other than English” (Fishman). These definitions establish fundamental distinctions between heritage and non-heritage language learners. Precisely because of these radical differences many Slavic faculty question the legitimacy of heritage students, dismissing them as "native speakers" who do not need any instruction. Many feel that their mere presence in the classroom impedes the progress of non-heritage students,
intimidating them and at times instructors as well. In view of the arguments articulated above, an opposite approach would be more enlightened and would also benefit the departments that are in crisis because of diminishing enrollments. Andrews (2000: 39) writes that “heritage learners are ... certain to become an increasingly important constituency in the Russian-language classrooms”. The fact is that heritage learners can have a great deal to offer. When well trained in their language of origin, they will have an asset that will enhance their professional life. Their number in all likelihood will continue to grow even though their initial level of competency in Russian may diminish as more of them will be American-born and exclusively American-educated. If departments tailor classes specifically to meet the needs of this population, the heritage learners may become the backbone of stronger and more vibrant Russian programs of the future.

Before designing courses appropriate for these learners, it is useful to take a close look at the major distinctions among students of Russian as a native language, a heritage language or a foreign language. The heritage students are neither typical students of a foreign language, nor of a native language. The table below indicates where the main differences lie.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Native</th>
<th>Foreign</th>
<th>Heritage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>L1 or L2 (age)</td>
<td>L1 (child)</td>
<td>L2 (after the first language has been acquired)</td>
<td>L1/L2?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposure to target language</td>
<td>Full language community</td>
<td>Outside of community</td>
<td>Limited community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Native speakers learn a language in childhood and continue using it throughout life in the multiple interactions of a full language community. Students acquire a foreign language when their own native language is fully developed for their age, and their fundamental view of the world is in their own native language. Their full language community will continue to be in the native language. Heritage learners had age appropriate native language skills when they began learning the new language that was to become their primary language because of immigration. The native language tends to remain at the stage where it was at the time of immigration and not infrequently even atrophies because in the limited community “the opportunity for stylistic options is reduced” (Romaine 45).

Thus, native speakers function within the full range of sociolinguistic and sociocultural communicative competencies. Heritage students lack the full
spectrum of competencies because of their contact with a limited community of
speakers, their incomplete or absence of education in Russian, and dominance of
English in their formal education. Foreign language learners typically have no
contact with the real life language community outside the classroom and therefore
unlike the two previous groups function in the narrower world of textbook
language.

In order to identify some of the differences between Russian heritage
speakers living in the US and their counterparts living in Russia, heritage students
at UCLA (41 respondents) were asked to translate a series of sentences from
English into Russian. The sentences (see Appendix A) test lexical items (1 - 7);
grammar (8-12); and use of capitalization (13,14). The same sentences were given
to a group of high school students at a private afternoon English school in
Moscow. The data allow us to divide heritage students of Russian into three
groups.

Group 1 comprises students who graduated or almost graduated from high
school in a Russian speaking country. They are the closest in grammatical
accuracy and breadth of vocabulary to educated native speakers.

Group 2 consists of students who attended school in a Russian-speaking
country through what is the equivalent of junior high. These students are
essentially in control of the complete grammatical system. However, they have
some lexical lacunae and significant stylistic gaps where use of academic or
formal language is required.

Group 3 ranges from students who were born in this country to Russian
speaking families to those who immigrated after completing elementary school in
Russia. All of these students were solely or primarily educated in English.

Of all the data analysis only two specific examples are presented here: the
use of li and the use of ikh -- these perennial irritants to an educated speaker of
Russian (for a chart of the complete results see Appendix B).

li: 100% of the students in Moscow answered correctly; 11% of
Group 3 and Group 2 answered correctly; 71% of Group 1 answered correctly.

ikh: 11% (Group 3); 77% (Group 2); 78% (Group 1)

Even though the accuracy of these values is no better than +/-20% and
consequently the results are not entirely significant statistically, a trend is
observable.

A similar study focused on vocabulary. A heritage class of 21 students
was asked, prior to reading “War and Peace”, to give definitions for 26 lexical
items that appear early in the novel. (See Appendix C). In an examination of the
results a trend once again is observable: heritage learners who attended school in
Russia for 9-11 years performed at a level close to that of a native speaker, but
heritage speakers who had fewer than 9 years of schooling in a Russian-speaking
country had observable lacunae (for a chart of the complete results see Appendix D).

Even such a preliminary sampling seems to support the premise that heritage speakers cannot be considered native speakers and thus are legitimate students in a Russian language program. Elimination of the lacunae found in the language of heritage speakers is one of the primary foci of instruction. But of course the heritage learners are not foreign language learners either. We need to compare their proficiencies with those of traditional foreign language students to determine whether there is a need for a different methodology and instructional materials.

Since the mid-1980s, students’ proficiencies in a foreign language have been measured by the ACTFL scale. If compared to non-heritage students receiving instruction in a foreign language, heritage language speakers usually possess skills that a non-native speaker of the language would require hundreds of hours to acquire, including some skills that FL learners may never acquire at the native-like level, such as native-like pronunciation, fluency in colloquial register and dialects, and sociocultural understanding (Brecht and Ingold).

The ACTFL score guides the instructor as to the proper placement of the non-heritage learner, i.e. what syllabus and what texts are likely to enable that student to advance on the proficiency scale. However, the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines are not helpful in designing a program of study for the heritage speaker. Even the least proficient heritage speakers often have the initial oral proficiency of Intermediate to Intermediate-Plus, and they have many lacunae that are difficult to describe in terms of ACTFL Guidelines. Those lacunae will not be obliterated in the course that is appropriate for the classroom taught learners of Russian who typically reach that level of proficiency after three or four years of college study (Thompson). It may thus be more advantageous to assess heritage speakers’ knowledge and determine a future course of study in terms of communicative modes (or domains): interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational in accordance with the Foreign Language Standards rather than the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines.

The three communicative modes are presented in the table below (Valdés 396).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpersonal</th>
<th>Interpretive</th>
<th>Presentational</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Face to face communication</td>
<td>Receptive communication of oral or written messages</td>
<td>Spoken or written communication for an audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written communication with individual who come into personal contact</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Heritage students can be expected to have mastery of the interpersonal mode, especially in close personal contact. They have no or little experience with the interpretive domain, as they do not use Russian for text and data analysis, and even less experience with the presentational domain, i.e. public writing and speaking. These two domains should constitute the second focus of the curriculum.

It is important to take into account as well the heritage students’ motivation for studying Russian. A series of surveys conducted at UCLA over a five year period, from 1996 to 2000 (for the 2000 survey see Appendix E), revealed that the majority of respondents wanted to study Russian in order to preserve or to recapture their Russian cultural heritage and either to get acquainted with or deepen their knowledge of Russian literature and history. This data correlates well with Andrews’ (1998) description of the Third Wave of Russian-speaking immigrants as “urbanized, educated” people (46). According to his statistics, 64% of adults in the Third Wave of Russian emigration “had received a degree from an institution of higher education” (54). Zemskaja also comments on the knowledge of Russian literature and love for Russian culture among the Third Wave (23). More information about the educational backgrounds of heritage students’ families would be helpful in determining whether there is a correlation between the loss of the first language and the level of parents’ education. Such information is not available at the moment, but research on motivations of heritage speakers to retain and study the home language is currently in progress. Family educational background is one of the issues being examined. (Kagan and Dillon 2001). In the meantime, preliminary studies of motivations point toward a third focus of instruction for heritage speakers, i.e. a culture/content-based curriculum.

On the basis of the information gathered so far it is possible to draw some preliminary conclusions regarding a program that would address the specific needs of heritage students of Russian. An ideal curriculum would be content based and have three foci of instruction: linguistic lacunae (grammar and vocabulary), communicative lacunae (primarily interpretive and presentational domains), and cultural lacunae (literature, history) that students have identified as the main motivators for their interest in studying Russian.
Russian instructors teaching heritage speakers at the present time have the following choice of materials:

1. Textbooks of Russian as a Native Language;
2. Textbooks of Russian as a Foreign Language.

But neither is suitable. Textbooks of Russian for native speakers are intended either for elementary school children or for high school students preparing for college entrance exams. The elementary school textbooks are unsuitable because of the age difference and because the choice of material (fairy tales, children’s short stories and poetry) is cognitively inappropriate. The college exam preparation manuals are appropriate cognitively but assume that the student attended a Russian high school and acquired a whole layer of cultural and linguistic knowledge that heritage students lack.

To place heritage speakers together with students of Russian as a HL is to fail the needs of the former and to intimidate the latter. The following table sums up the differences between heritage learners and learners of Russian as a foreign language.

PEDAGOGICAL NEEDS: NON-HERITAGE VS. HERITAGE LEARNERS*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching domains</th>
<th>Non-Heritage Learners:</th>
<th>Heritage Learners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pronunciation and intonation</td>
<td>instruction throughout course of study</td>
<td>typically none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>full range</td>
<td>age appropriate/literary/academic/formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>micro-approach (e.g. case by case)</td>
<td>macro-approach (i.e. by concept)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>small texts, gradually and slowly increasing in volume and complexity</td>
<td>fairly large and complex texts almost from the very beginning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>Sentence level, gradually advancing to paragraph level. The writing even at high levels of proficiency rarely approaches native ability.</td>
<td>High degree of internal grammar allows expansive writing assignments at early stages of instruction. Macro-approach to writing: concentrate on the content and gradually improve spelling, grammar and stylistics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>micro-approach: initially restricted to dialog,</td>
<td>macro-approach: emphasis on monologue and</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
First and second year classes of Russian as a foreign language entail both an approach and a syllabus that are inadequate for heritage learners because they have high aural proficiency, native-like pronunciation, and vocabulary that is adequate for the needs of family and possibly community (e.g. shopping, making appointments, etc.). They also have some grammatical intuition that will function effectively if supported by declarative knowledge of grammar, i.e. “explicit and conscious” knowledge of rules that “can be articulated by the learner” (Hadley 67). They stagnate in classes that deal with rudimentary pronunciation, beginnings of grammar and vocabulary. They need a macro, not micro, approach to grammar, paradigms of declensions and conjugations rather than one case at a time. They also need extensive work on orthography, unlike non-heritage learners who basically can write anything that they can say. Even though spelling rules are necessary for both groups, many of the mistakes made by heritage learners are not made by foreign language learners. In that sense, the instruction they need is similar (though not identical) to the instruction Russian children receive in elementary school. Understandably students of Group 3 whose whole educational experience was in English and who never received formal education in Russian make more spelling mistakes and even their cursive writing resembles an “alphabet soup” (Bermel and Kagan 420). Experience indicates that even students of Group 2 need reinforcement of their writing skills before they can be comfortable writing in Russian.

Since foreign language students at the ACTFL Intermediate-High, Advanced levels of instruction are able to express age-appropriate ideas, it would seem possible to place heritage speakers together with these students. However, such a merger is also inadvisable because of the vastly different needs of the two groups. First, non-heritage students do not have the same spelling problems and do not profit from extensive and repetitive spelling assignments that are much needed by heritage learners. Second, even if both heritage and non-heritage
students have similar levels of oral proficiency, heritage speakers need work on pragmatics and stylistics that is typically beyond the reach of even advanced learners of Russian as a foreign language. Without development of these skills, heritage learners will never progress in the language. Third, non-heritage learners unlike heritage speakers need ongoing work on aural comprehension as it remains their least developed competency (Thompson 276). Fourth, heritage learners who have never been taught grammar find the explanations in the textbook almost incomprehensible because unlike the foreign language learners they have not been exposed to the meta language of instruction.

There is clearly a need for textbooks and other materials designed to meet the unique needs of heritage students. Such a textbook needs to be cognitively appropriate; start at the point of comfort; move rapidly but consistently; have adequate grammar explanations and employ a macro-approach to grammar; incorporate those layers of vocabulary that students are unfamiliar or only marginally familiar with: contain pertinent cultural, sociocultural and sociolinguistic information. And finally, like the foreign language learner, the heritage learner needs to be taught learning strategies.

Heritage speakers are legitimate students in a Russian language class if the curriculum addresses them as having a unique starting point and particular instructional needs and challenges them to attain the status of legitimate native speakers. As Gonzales Pino and Pino have asserted regarding Spanish-speaking heritage students “[p]ost-secondary educators are increasingly recognizing the need to serve this population more effectively” (27). We hope that this article will open a discussion of more effective programs and practices for heritage speakers of Russian.

WORKS CITED


APPENDIX A.

Translate into Russian:

1. one o’clock in the morning
2. a two-bedroom apartment
3. season
4. an apartment building
5. to ask a question
6. I’m a junior in college.
7. I major in______________.
8. Last summer I went to Russia to visit my family.
9. I want to know whether you’re going to Russia next summer.
10. I have a doctor’s appointment tomorrow.
11. I want someone to explain it to me.
12. My family came from Siberia and their family came from the Caucasus.
13. It happened in February.
14. They live in the South.
### APPENDIX B

#### Grammar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years in school in a Russian-speaking country</th>
<th>1-4 UCLA</th>
<th>5-8 UCLA</th>
<th>9-11 UCLA</th>
<th>8-9/2000 MOSCOW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of respondents</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammatical competence: <em>li</em></td>
<td>1 + 8 - *</td>
<td>2 + 12 - *</td>
<td>10 + 4 - **</td>
<td>18 + 0 -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>2 no response 11%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammatical competence: <em>ikh</em></td>
<td>1 + 8 - ***</td>
<td>14 + 4 no response</td>
<td>11 + 1 - ****</td>
<td>18 + 0 -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

+ correct answer; - incorrect answer
* ili, esli
**esli
*** ikhnia, ikhniaia
**** 16 years out of Russia, speaks Georgian and Armenian
APPENDIX C

Vocabulary

1. dvorjanin - nobleman
2. lakei - man-servant
3. mundir - full-dress uniform
4. pokrovitel' stvennyi ton - protective, condescending, patronizing tone
5. svoistvennyii - peculiar
6. blagodetel' - benefactor
7. ezheli - if (vernacular)
8. predannost' - devotion
9. lovkost' - adroitness, dexterity, deftness
10. bezapelliacionno - peremptory, categorical, allowing of no appeal
11. vsia znat' Peterburga - all of St. Petersburg's nobility
12. obriad - rite, ceremony
13. besprestanno - continually, incessantly
14. uchtivyi - civil, courteous, considerate
15. sobesednica - interlocutress, interlocutrix
16. polagat' - suppose, think
17. sverx''estestvennyi - supernatural
18. ravnovesie - equilibrium, balance
19. vosxstitel'nyi - delightful
20. pokojnyi - the deceased
21. neukliuzhi - clumsy, awkward
22. otylechennyi - diverted, distracted, drawn away
23. ubezhdennyi - convinced, confirmed, persuaded
24. ispodlob'ia - look from under the brows
25. besputnyi - dissipated, dissolute, licentious
26. perina - feather-bed
**APPENDIX D.**
Vocabulary: Results of the Test in Appendix C.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Living in</th>
<th>USA</th>
<th>Russia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Years in school in Russia</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>5-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of respondents</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary competence: 19 century vocabulary (26 items)</td>
<td>14.3 ± 2.1</td>
<td>4.7 ± 3.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* 8 respondents had 100%
APPENDIX E - Motivation of Heritage Learners

What are your reasons for studying Russian language or literature? You may circle more than one answer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grades completed in Russia</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-11</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To preserve Russian culture</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To read Russian literature</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* self-education; not to lose it
** I want to live and work in Moscow
*** interesting lectures; personal; GE requirement;
   to improve my GPA
NOTES

1 This article is reprinted with permission from *Slavic and East European Journal* 45.3 (2001): 507-18.

2 The 90s have seen publications addressing the problems of heritage speakers of languages other than Spanish. Some examples are Rouchdy (Arabic); Ching and Hsiang-te Kung, also Tse (Chinese); Andrews, Polinsky (Russian); Cummins (Tagalog); Tran-Nguyen (Vietnamese).

3 The reports of both conferences are available at www.cal.org/heritage. For the printed report of the UCLA conference see *Bilingual Research Journal* Volume 24, Number 4, Fall 2000. 475-488.

4 For a detailed description of heritage speakers’ profile of oral competency, see Andrews 1998, Polinsky 2000 and earlier work. For written competency analysis, see Bermel and Kagan.