RLMSEE-2020
The Russian Language in Modern Scientific and Educational Environment

A NEW TEXTBOOK FOR A NEW MULTICULTURAL WORLD

Vera Stepanenko (a)*, Elena Kolovska (b), Maiia Nakhabina (c)
*Corresponding author

(a) Moscow Region State University, Radio str., 10A, 31, Moscow, Russia, E-mail: stepanenkovera@gmail.com
(b) Moscow Region State University, Radio str., 10A, 31, Moscow, Russia, E-mail: elekolovska@gmail.com
(c) Moscow Region State University, Radio str., 10A, 31, Moscow, Russia, E-mail: mmnahabina@gmail.com

Abstract

The processes of globalization that have affected the entire modern world, advancements in information and communication technologies, socio-political changes in Russia's social life and active processes in the modern Russian language brought on by them. All this called for a new approach to the creation of educational materials on Russian as a foreign language (RFL). The central place among such materials traditionally belongs to the textbook: a learning tool that plays a leading role in the work of both teacher and the student. In this article, the authors of the new textbook for elementary proficiency in RFL (A1) Hello, Russia! presents the conceptual foundations of their approach to select and organise lexical and grammatical material in a textbook, as well as to fill it with information and present it. The textbook is aimed at the active use of modern information and communication technologies by students in their speech, since online communication is today practised by students of different generations, not just by young people.

1. Introduction

For as long as the practice of teaching foreign languages has existed, its main goal has always been to achieve a certain level of language proficiency quickly and efficiently, which explains the interest in varied teaching methods (Moskovkin, 2020). Since its inception, the RFL method has always been largely focused on communication. It has been called purposely-practical, communicative and practically-communicative, but its main focus has always been the practical mastery of the Russian language. This has had to do with the fact that most foreigners studying Russian have come to Russia to get a university degree. Being in a language environment, they usually studied Russian 'from scratch'. They were faced with a difficult task: they had ten months to reach a language proficiency level that would allow them to join the Russian students, which required them to master all types of speech activity at a level corresponding to this goal. That is why most textbooks and learning aids of the past ('Start', 'Practical Course of the Russian Language' etc.) were aimed at forming the necessary basic language and speech skills that would allow foreigners to study together with native Russian speakers.

The textbook has always been considered the main learning tool, playing a leading role in the work of the educator (teacher) and the educatee (student). For teachers, the textbook contains language material selected and organised according to the main goal of the educational process, i.e. mastering the fundamental functions of language: communicative, cognitive and emotional-evaluative. The material in the textbook is divided into sections or lessons organised in a way that allows students to master it and helps teachers systematize the educational process and make it efficient and accessible.

The textbook material enables the teacher not only to convey certain information or knowledge about a foreign (Russian) language to students but also makes the learning process easier and more efficient and lets students take an active part in mastering and discussing the material. The textbook helps students learn the basics of the language studied and develop the main language skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing (Schukin, 2018).

2. Problem Statement

In this article, we describe our vision of a modern Russian as a foreign language textbook and the requirements we set for it, using the A1 level textbook we have created to identify the main ways to implement these methodological ideas.

3. Research Questions

- Extralinguistic and linguistic changes that should be reflected in the textbook as the main language learning tool.
- The need to reduce the gap between educational and natural communication.
- Organising the language material in the textbook in accordance with the lingua-cognitive demands and abilities of students, their goals, interests, motivation, and speech needs.

4.   Purpose of the Study

This study aims to develop a new concept of selecting and presenting educational material in modern Russian as a foreign language textbook and attempts to apply this concept to elementary proficiency in Russian as a foreign language.

5.   Research Methods

We used the following methods in our study:

- Analysis of scientific publications, analysis of methodological and educational literature, comparison of the data obtained, its synthesis and systematisation.
- Selection of language material based on projection and modelling and the creation of educational texts and assignments; experimental education aimed at assessing their effectiveness.

The creation of new textbooks and manuals is a necessary process. It should be noted that the ideological character of the educational materials of the past reduced their communicativeness. The obligatory inclusion of certain socio-political topics, that did not belong in a real conversation, came into conflict with the very essence of the communicative method of teaching.

Life changed, the realities around us changed. Sciences related to the methods of teaching RFL, namely linguistics, psychology and psycholinguistics, have continued to develop. Most important today are the achievements of cognitive linguistics reflecting certain patterns of understanding and learning information related to the characteristics of the human brain; for example, even those described by Huang and Federmeier (2015). The modern Russian language, especially its vocabulary, also changed. Communicative situations changed, more topics appeared. The composition of the student population, their goal setting and their lingua-cognitive needs and abilities also changed. All this had to be reflected in the modern textbook to help keep the educational process up to date.

The socio-political changes that began in Russia in the second half of the 1980s and especially intensified after 1991 resulted in the expansion of educational goals and objectives, and also changed the style and content of educational materials. In addition, the abrupt democratisation of speech associated with these changes affected not only the lexical layer of the language but also its syntactic layer, which has always been the most conservative. For example, the number of clipped and parcelled structures has increased. Depending on the purpose of the sentence, the word order varies more easily and freely, which Ionin and Luchkina (2018), reportedly affects the perception of speech. Language means belonging to different functional styles also tend to mix in a single utterance, and informal speech is penetrating into all other styles. What was previously considered a violation of the norm has come to be perceived as one of its variations. This shows the influence of informal speech, unfamiliar to foreigners who learned Russian under the classical schemes, on the codified language; as Kostomarov (2007) noted, the weakening of the literary norm has affected not only Russian but also many other languages of the world. These schemes are even less applicable to online communication, which emerged not so long ago and quickly became part of our daily lives. This includes all kinds of instant messengers and social networks, which mainly require the use of short but informative phrases and similarly short and precise answers.

Many researchers note the need for students to understand this type of speech not only when they study Russian as a foreign language but other languages as well (Brown-Schmidt et al., 2015; Ng et al., 2020). This makes the preparation for live dialogue with native speakers, which bridges the gap between educational and natural communication, a critical need of our time. Foreigners not acquainted with the peculiarities of informal Russian speech cannot communicate freely. This is indicated by many methodologists, including the authors of the book Methods of Teaching Russian as a Foreign Language edited by Professor Lysakova (2019).

In Russia, biographical texts have traditionally been used at the elementary, basic and novice levels, as well as in testing and evaluation materials. They contain information that the authors find interesting, informative and suitable for subsequent paraphrasing and discussion, which suggests further use in speech practice. However, this type of work implies strictly educational communication, whereas nowadays we need to, first of all, teach students to understand spontaneous speech and the casual speech used in lecturers. It was much easier to teach foreigners to understand and use the clichés widespread during the Soviet era than prepare them for the above-mentioned types of speech and adequate verbal responses to them.

This approach to teaching still exists today. For example, one of the most popular modern RFL textbooks, The Road to Russia (basic level), features a text about the outstanding Russian poet Anna Akhmatova. The text calls Anna Akhmatova a real star of Russian poetry and says that everyone in Russia knows and loves her poems. It tells about her first book, its title and when it was released. Akhmatova wrote about love, and many of her poems were set to music by talented composers, while famous artists painted her portraits. The Moscow Literary Museum has two hundred portraits and photographs of Akhmatova, and the house where she lived in St. Petersburg has been turned into a museum dedicated to the poet. After reading the text, students are prompted to answer questions about its contents, meaning they have to find and recite information. They do not even offer an opportunity to imitate real-life communication and, therefore, do not prepare students for it, whereas 'changes in the lingua-cognitive space of students, their goals, interests, motivations and speech needs are all factors that call for a different organization of the educational staple that is language material (Stepanenko, 2008, p. 242). To solve this problem, we first need to determine what changes in the language are sufficiently relevant for the early stages of learning Russian, and in what types of language activity they should be taken into account.

Compared to speech, changes in the language system are less noticeable and more difficult to see. The language system changes slower than the conditions under which a language functions or the structure of discourse. Therefore, we can confidently say that the syntactic structures that are traditionally taught in RFL courses are fairly stable, and their repetition in educational materials, as noted by Shantz (2017), allows the creation of a sufficiently strong foundation of grammatical knowledge. However, in spontaneous speech, these grammatical constructions are used in various modifications that make it difficult for foreigners to understand such speech.

At present, the integration of the Russian education system into the European one makes it necessary to correlate the requirements for assessing language proficiency, which entails a shift in emphasis on the communicative component of educational texts, which should be as authentic as

possible. This will allow students to better understand and generate verbal messages when speaking with native speakers, which is what everyone learning a foreign language strives for.

The needs of the modern world have changed. People travel freely and are used to studying different languages, but the discrete form of communication that has come from the Internet and has become exceedingly popular only makes it possible to study a foreign language and interest people in it through an entertaining and easy-to-understand presentation of the educational material.

That is why we are faced with a new task today: to combine the language base with a more exciting, fun and comprehensible way of presenting it, and to connect the contents of educational texts more closely with real life, with real-life situations.

An analysis of modern textbooks and tests on European languages shows that the search is going in the same direction, because, apparently, low-key communication, a lack of time, the accelerated pace of life and the facilitated perception of information (when its volume is limited by the size of a single small screen of your computer, tablet or smartphone) are the trends created by life itself and which are reflected by language. These trends can be found in manuals on Russian as a foreign language, but they have never appeared in textbooks as a concept before.

When it comes to the informational content of modern textbooks, we believe that students should learn the Russian language using materials that depict Russia as a multilingual country with a multifaceted history and culture, with an open and rich modern life and with a very diverse environment and climate. This content is relevant for a wide range of learner categories and not only for those intending to study at Russian universities. Moreover, it is especially useful for students who study outside the language environment, when it is more difficult to 'grasp the style' and dynamics of modern speech and get an adequate idea of the Russian reality.

All these requirements are implemented by the team of authors from the Moscow State Regional University (Stepanenko, Nakhabina, Kolovska, Plotnikova) in the new series of Russian as a foreign language textbooks for levels A1–B1, Hello, Russia!. The first book in the series, an elementary level textbook, appeared in 2020. The new textbook is based on an interactive script model in which a group of foreigners from different countries is studying Russian online with a teacher from Moscow. When creating the teacher character, the authors took into account the modern requirements of this profession: «RFL teacher molds in students' consciousness understanding of Russian value system and corrects their stereotypes about Russia and Russian people. The central concept here is the concept "Russian Language". On motivational-pragmatic level RFL teacher's language personality acts as the manager of intercultural communication. The main characteristics are authoritativeness and friendliness» (Shaklein & Mikova, 2018, p. 1386).

The textbook's model is aimed at involving a large number of people in the communication process, and we are not talking about virtual characters but real students who use this textbook.

For example, this is how some of our 'virtual students' talk about themselves (when studying the use of the ablative case under the Describe Yourself communication topic) when answering the teacher's question about who they wanted to become when they were little: 'As a child, I loved painting and sewing, and contemplated whether I should become a fashion designer or an artist. But then I decided that an artist only paints, and a designer both paints and sews, so I became a designer'; 'At first I dreamed of

becoming a doctor. But I have always loved nature, so already as a kid I decided that I wanted to be a biologist'; 'History was my favourite subject at school, so I wanted to become a historian. I studied the history of Spain at university. And I have always loved art and architecture. And then it hit me that there was a profession created just for me! And now I work as a tour guide.' After reading the text (the task before the text asks students to translate direct speech into indirect speech: 'a) Read the text. Describe how the characters answered Nina Ivanovna's question'), students get the following tasks: 'b) Who did you want to become when you were little? And what profession did you actually choose? c) In the past, children used to dream of becoming a doctor, a teacher or an astronaut. And whom do modern children want to become? What do you think?'

The textbook features recurring characters: a group of foreigners studying Russian online under the guidance of a teacher from Moscow. Each character comes from a different country. Each of them has their own biography and a certain motivation for learning Russian, and they all plan to go to Russia for one reason or another. The textbook also features one more recurring character. Everyone knows him. No Russian textbook is complete without the mention of Pushkin or some kind of story about him. So the authors decided to make him one of the characters, give him an opportunity to comment on certain things and tell the students about himself. He first appears at the beginning of the textbook, in the Names of Professions vocabulary section, and then regularly takes part in the educational process. He talks about Red Square and the @ (at) ligature used in all email addresses around the world to separate the name from the domain, which, in Russian, we call a 'dog'. He also tells about Yasnaya Polyana, where his 'colleague' Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy lived, about the town of Pushkin and so on. By introducing this character, the authors tried to 'draw a line from the past to the present'.

Methodologists and teachers of Russian as a foreign language working in Russia have long been interested in the socio-cultural adaptation of foreign students, which remains relevant to this day (Fedotova & Miller, 2018). The 'cultural background' of the textbook Hello, Russia! is organised in a way that helps make the initial stage of adaptation go smoothly regardless of where a student is learning Russian (in the environment or outside the environment).

The authors tried to tell students a lot about Russia and show it as part of the larger world. This directly influenced the selection of lexical material and informational content. On the one hand, we included international words that are familiar to speakers of many languages (primarily Europeans) and have long been used in Russia: banana, bank, bar, businessman, music and sport. On the other hand, we added historically young words primarily related to online communication that are new not only for the Russian language. This vocabulary is introduced with the necessary commentary in order to avoid morphosyntactic interference which foreigners may experience under the influence of their native language (Carrasco-Ortíz et al., 2017). The authors use this lexical material as they consider it relevant primarily from the point of view of communicative necessity, although no basic vocabulary of any level includes such words as Instagram, hashtag, email, selfie, blog, blogger, chatbot and so on.

On the other hand, we use the global cultural 'landscape': well-known landmarks that have become symbols of their countries (the Eiffel Tower and the Leaning Tower of Pisa, Big Ben, the Egyptian pyramids, Gaudi Park and the Sagrada Familia); great artists whose paintings one of the characters, Juanita from Spain, saw in the Hermitage: Titian, Rembrandt, Rubens, Leonardo da Vinci; famous

political figures such as Vladimir Putin, Jacques Chirac and Angela Merkel; other celebrities such as Emir Kusturica and Milla Jovovich. Leonardo DiCaprio, whose grandmother was Russian, is also mentioned in the textbook, as are some 'cultural symbols', including those related to popular culture: along with Operation Y, the characters watch The Game of Thrones and the movies Titanic and Spider-Man.

Today, modern information and communication technologies have greatly expanded our capabilities compared to what methodologists and practising teachers have used until recently, not to mention back in the 1960s or 1970s. And the integration of students (and not only the young generation) into online communication even forces us, to some extent, to conform to this style in order to make learning more accessible and interesting. When creating the textbook, the authors tried to take into account the specifics of modern-day communication and the possibilities of the modern information space. For example, the textbook actively uses QR codes with links to original Internet resources that will give the students the opportunity to 'visit' one of the coldest places on the planet, the city of Oymyakon in Yakutia, as well as see St. Petersburg and the Far East, Mikhailovskoye and YasnayaPolyana, 'use' the Moscow Metro and listen to music concerts there, 'meet' various interesting people and even learn how to cook borscht (Russian cuisine is a recurring topic in the textbook, because, as Elistratov (2016) notes, it should be considered a type of cultural code). The textbook also contains links to resources created by the team of authors: educational audio and video podcasts, quizzes etc. Traditional topics are also looked at through the prism of new technologies. For example, the text about the group of 'virtual students' is followed by the task 'Take a selfie with your group and post it on Instagram with the hashtag #hellorussia. Tell us about your group in the comments. Start with the words *'This is our group. This is…'*; it is suggested that they start a blog in Russian, which is much more fun and communicative than writing the usual 'paper' essays etc. While creating the textbook, we used these educational materials for experimental learning in groups of foreign students in the Moscow Region State University and Russian language groups set up by branches of Rossotrudnichestvo in different countries, which confirmed the effectiveness of this lingua-didactic model.

The modern situation is characterised by the emergence and rapid development of a fundamentally new area of human communication. The Internet has transformed the world, uniting it into a single multicultural information field. In the new Russian as a foreign language textbook Hello, Russia!, the Russian 'cultural landscape' is inscribed into the global cultural context. This is reflected in the semantic content of the educational materials, in the vocabulary (the authors considered it possible to expand the elementary lexical minimum due to the need to reflect the current modern realities), in the new set of communicative situations and in the ways the material itself is presented. For instance, in order to form and develop the listening skills of students, all lessons are accompanied by audio courses available on the textbook's website. The audio was recorded taking particular account of the results of studies on modern live speech Cole and Shattuck-Hufnagel (2016).

The textbook is aimed at the active use of modern information and communication technologies by students in their speech. It also has a full-fledged digital version which can be used for distance learning if necessary. The online version also suggests the presence of feedback from the teacher, which, as noted by Máñez et al. (2019), is an important motivating factor for students. The textbook features a fast-paced,

entertaining plot, which, from the very beginning, engages students in its events. The story will be continued in the future parts of the textbook.

6. Findings

6.1. We have specified the extralinguistic and linguistic changes that have taken place over the past decades and which need to be reflected in a Russian as a foreign language textbook:

- modern people have a wider set of situations and areas of communication
- educational materials no longer have to be ideological in character
- information is presented mainly in discrete form in many modern areas of communication
- informal speech is now present in all functional styles of the Russian language, and the language norm is flexible and variable.

6.2. We have demonstrated the need to reduce the gap between educational and natural communication when teaching Russian to foreigners.

6.3. Using the textbook Hello, Russia! as an example, we have shown how language material can be organised and presented in accordance with the lingua-cognitive needs and abilities of students to increase their motivation and interest in learning Russian as a foreign language.

7. Conclusion

The concept of a new RFL textbook would have been impossible to create without analysing the development of this aspect in Russian lingua-didactics. Globally, a conclusion has long been reached that the educational process should be aimed at the practical use of language. This is reflected in all the main textbooks and teaching aids of the past, which were created to help students get involved in communicative activities in Russian as soon as possible. Recent changes in educational materials reflect the changes in the economic, political, cultural and social aspects of life.

The modern method of teaching Russian as a foreign language aims to create a new integral style that will be reflected in everything: in the textbook, in the selection of educational materials and texts for reading, as well as in testing and evaluation materials (we primarily mean the TORFL tests that determine the level of proficiency in Russian as a foreign language). It will meet the needs of modern society and help us integrate into the international educational space. It will also help debunk the myths about Russian being extraordinarily difficult to learn and will help encourage and motivate foreigners to study it.

References

Brown-Schmidt, S., Yoon, S. O., & Ryskin, R. A., (2015). People as contexts in conversation. *Psychology of Learning and Motivation - Advances in Research and Theory, 62,* 59-99. https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.plm.2014.09.003

Carrasco-Ortíz, H., Velázquez Herrera, A., & Jackson-Maldonado, D. (2017). The role of language similarity in processing second language morphosyntax: Evidence from ERPs. *International Journal of Psychophysiology, 117,* 91-110. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijpsycho.2017.04.008

Cole, J., & Shattuck-Hufnagel, S. (2016). New methods for prosodic transcription: Capturing variability as a source of information. *Laboratory Phonology, 7*(1), 8. https://doi.org/10.5334/labphon.29

Elistratov, V. S. (2016). O russkoj "fagomagii" [About Russian "fagomagic"]. *Russia and the West: the Dialogue of Cultures, 10* [in Rus.]. http://www.regionalstudies.ru/journal/homejornal/rubric/75-discuss/439--q-lrq.html

Fedotova, N. L., & Miller, L. V. (2018). Features of adaptation of foreign students to the Russian linguo-cultural and educational environment. *Russian Language Studies, 16*(2), 191-206. https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-2264-2018-16-2-191-206

Huang, H.-W., & Federmeier, K. D. (2015). Imaginative language: What event-related potentials have revealed about the nature and source of concreteness effects. *Language and Linguistics, 16*(4), 503-515. https://doi.org/10.1177/1606822x15583233

Ionin, T., & Luchkina, T. (2018). Focus on Russian scope: An experimental investigation of the relationship between quantifier scope, prosody, and information structure. *Linguistic Inquiry, 49*(4), 741-779. https://doi.org/10.1162/ling_a_00288

Kostomarov, V. G. (2007). Globalizirujuscheje vlijanije massmedia na yazyk [The Globalising Influence of Mass Media on Language]. *Presidium of the International Association of Teachers of Russian Language and Literature, 2003–2007: collection of research papers. MIRS, 2007,* 120–127 [in Rus.].

Lysakova, I. N. (Ed.). (2019). *Metodika obuchenija russkomu jazyku kak nerodnomu [Methods of teaching Russian as a non-native language]*. KNORUS. [in Rus.].

Máñez, I., Vidal-Abarca, E., Kendeou, P., & Martínez, T. (2019). How do students process complex formative feedback in question-answering tasks? A think-aloud study. *Metacognition and Learning, 14*(1), 65-87. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11409-019-09192-w

Moskovkin, L. V. (2020). Development of ideas about the teaching method in didactics and linguodidactics. *Russian Language Studies, 18*(3), 295-314. https://doi.org/10.22363/2618-8163-2020-18-3-295-314

Ng, S., Payne, B. R., & Liu, X. (2020). Execution of Lexical and Conceptual Processes in Sentence Comprehension among Adult Readers as a Function of Literacy Skill. *Scientific Studies of Reading, 24*(4), 338-355. https://doi.org/10.1080/10888438.2019.1671849

Schukin, A. N. (2018). *Russkij jazyk kak inostrannyj: osnovy uchebnikovedenija [Russian as a foreign language: fundamentals of textbook studies]*. Ikar. [in Rus.].

Shaklein, V., & Mikova, S. (2018). National aspect of modern RFL teacher language personality. *The European Proceedings of Social & Behavioural Sciences. 18th Professional Culture of the Specialist of the Future,* 1378-1389. https://doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2018.12.02.147

Shantz, K. (2017). Phrase frequency, proficiency and grammaticality interact in non-native processing: Implications for theories of SLA. *Second Language Research, 33*(1), 91-118. https://doi.org/10.1177/0267658316673403

Stepanenko, V. A. (2008). *Slozhno li obuchat' slozhnomu predlozheniju? Lingvodidakticheskije problem prepodavanija russkogo jazyka kak inostrannogo [Is it difficult to teach a complex sentence? Linguodidactic problems of teaching Russian as a foreign language]*. Kachestvo zhizni. [in Rus.].