Self-Directed L2 Learning for Professional Use in Adult Education: "RETOUR Russian for Tourism" – an Online Training Programme

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Abstract

This paper presents the methodology for self-directed learning of second languages using the example of one online Russian language training programme addressed to workers in the retail, restaurant, and hotel sectors. This programme was created by a consortium of training organisations and a university from six EU Member States — Spain, France, Italy, Greece, Ireland, and Bulgaria — within the project "RETOUR Russian for Tourism" (543384-LLP-1-2013-1-IT-KA2-KA2MP), funded with support from the European Commission within the Lifelong Learning Programme, Key Action 2.
Following the current paperless and keyboard-less trend in the use of ICT, the training programme, structured using learning outcomes, is mostly based on short videos (5 minutes on average and made available on a dedicated YouTube channel), but also includes paper-based materials. Every video is enriched with an introduction explaining the context of the dialogue and images demonstrating the most important vocabulary of each topic. Comprehension exercises are also included. The videos are produced in several different versions to suit the level of every learner. For example, there are videos with subtitles as well as videos with the audio track of one character muted, which offers users the possibility to practise their spoken Russian by dubbing the muted speech with the help of a specially created learning platform for voice recording. Some additional videos explain how to plan and monitor a personal learning programme so as to foster self-directed learning and others give advice on intercultural dimensions.
This programme offers a number of benefits including the use of practical and interesting videos tailored to specific needs, authentic texts, easy access to materials, and the possibility to learn online independently while managing individual schedules. These benefits lead us to believe that the methodology used in this programme can be used in different settings and can be applied for teaching/learning any foreign language for both people who work and do not have time to attend traditional language courses and students of professional training institutions.

1. Introduction

The main aim of the project RETOUR is to provide working knowledge of the Russian language at A2 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) to hotel, retail, and restaurant industry professionals and future professionals in order to help them to obtain language and cultural competencies that may enable them to ultimately be more successful and employable.

The pedagogical intention of the project was focused on creating a realistic, video-based learning tool. The training programme (available in French, Italian, Spanish, Greek, English, and Bulgarian) combines online education with traditional methods and modern, interactive means of learning.

The course is based on typical situations that one might encounter when hosting and serving tourists whose native language is Russian and it is comprised of three types of resources: *video, audio,* and *written text*; which are all easily accessible online (www.russian-for-tourism.eu) and include:

➢ thirty short videos on typical situations in hotel, restaurant and retail sectors recorded by native speakers and produced in several different versions

➢ paper-based materials with grammar information, exercises, audios, and transcriptions of the dialogues used in the 30 videos

➢ six additional videos explaining how to plan and monitor a personal learning programme so as to foster self-directed learning and how to deal with intercultural aspects to be taken into account when dealing with Russian tourists.

2. Structure and organisation of the course

The course is structured using learning outcomes and divided into three topic-based sections: "At the hotel", "At the restaurant", and "At the shop". It provides an introduction to the basics of Russian and thirty lessons. The 30 lessons are organised in 6 modules of 5 units:

Module I

    Unit 1: Booking a room over the phone

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Unit 2: Booking a room at the hotel
Unit 3: Checking in at the hotel
Unit 4: Hotel services
Unit 5: Entertainments and leisure
Module II
Unit 6: Room service – Part 1
Unit 7: Room service – Part 2
Unit 8: Problems in the room and medical care
Unit 9: Wake-up call
Unit 10: Hotel room payment and departure
Module III
Unit 11: Choosing a restaurant
Unit 12: Arriving at the restaurant
Unit 13: Having lunch at the restaurant
Unit 14: Additional order, requests
Unit 15: Breakfast in the hotel restaurant
Module IV
Unit 16: Dinner at a restaurant
Unit 17: Special menu (Some characteristic features of cooked food)
Unit 18: Resolution of conflict situations
Unit 19: Cash payments, gratuities
Unit 20: At the supermarket
Module V
Unit 21: In the men's department
Unit 22: In the ladies' department
Unit 23: At the children's wear store/shop
Unit 24: At the toy store
Unit 25: At a souvenirs shop
Module VI
Unit 26: Buying electronic appliances
Unit 27: Returning or replacing goods
Unit 28: At the confectionery
Unit 29: Buying adornments/decorations and accessories
Unit 30: At the pharmacy

The Introduction provides information on the Russian alphabet, the rules for pronunciation and reading, Russian phonetics (exercises included), accentuation in Russian, intonation of the basic communicative types and basic Russian grammar: the noun - gender, number, and case.
Each unit is divided into two parts: Part A – for beginners (O – A1) and Part B – for pre-intermediate learners (A1 – A2). The organisation of the unit is intuitive with a clear, logical structure.
<u>Part A</u> of each unit includes:
➢ **Grammar**, presented as:
  • grammatical structures and tables with brief explanations
  • examples to illustrate the grammatical structures
  • practise (drills, replacement (based on analogy) exercises, transformations, etc.).
The aim of these exercises is to practise the grammatical structures explained in the unit.
➢ **Vocabulary**, presented as:
  • speech patterns needed for vocabulary semantization (with visual support — illustrations, photos etc.)
  • drills to master the use of vocabulary
  • exercises which stimulate productive speech activity.

The linking component between **Part A** and **Part B** of each unit is a section called **"The most used expressions on the topic"**, which is:
  • a word list comprising the essential vocabulary in the unit (in alphabetical order)
  • a list of polite expressions.

Part B concentrates on developing skills for:
➢ **listening** comprehension (passive skills) – by listening to different versions of the videos on specific topics; (**Version F** – with subtitles in each language; **Version B** – with subtitles in

Russian and the audio of all the characters; **Version G** – with subtitles in each language and one character muted)

- ➢ **reading** comprehension (passive skills) – by reading the dialogue in parts for better understanding
- ➢ building **dialogues** (active skills) by participating in mini-dialogues on a specific topic
- ➢ correct **pronunciation and intonation** (active skills).

The use of the material is supported by two short guides: one for teachers and one for learners on how to use the RETOUR training course.

3. RETOUR course creation: a step-by-step guide

The project started its activities with a selection of **30 typical situations** that people working in the hospitality sector might encounter when meeting and serving tourists whose native language is Russian. Typical situations, selected with the help of the Russian Hotel Association (RHA) and the European Association of Hotel and Tourism schools (AEHT), served as a basis for the RETOUR teaching programme.

Afterwards, one dialogue was prepared in Russian and English for each of the 30 typical situations selected. The RHA and AEHT were actively involved in the process of writing the dialogues and gave suggestions on how to improve the texts in order to make them as realistic as possible.

Partners then translated the **dialogues** into their national languages and improved on the English version.

The Bulgarian partner, UNWE, produced **30 videos in Russian**, related to the selected typical situations, and edited them in **five different versions**:

1. **Version A:** full audio
2. **Version B:** full audio with subtitles in Russian
3. **Version C:** full audio with subtitles in Russian in a simplified phonetic alphabet
4. **Version D:** one character muted with subtitles in Russian
5. **Version E:** one character muted with no subtitles

The partners enhanced the videos by adding the subtitles in national languages, as well as introductions, comprehension activities and images and then edited the videos to create two **additional versions**:

6. **Version F:** full audio with subtitles in each national language
7. **Version G:** one character muted with subtitles in each national language

At the same time, **six additional videos** were produced by Sud Concept (the French partners of the project). Three of these videos provide information on intercultural aspects to be taken into account when dealing with Russian tourists and the other three videos explain how to create a personal learning plan. The videos were dubbed by all partners in their languages.

All videos have been uploaded on a dedicated RETOUR **YouTube channel**. To facilitate easy navigation, each language has its own video playlist:
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCLn6xjVtH88T1aje6TLE0Dg/playlists

Finally, **written materials** were produced in English and then translated into each of the partner languages.

To assure the best use of the RETOUR course, **two guides** were prepared:
- ➢ a guide addressed to learners on how to use the training programme
- ➢ a guide addressed to language teachers on how to integrate the training programme into classroom activities.

A **Personal Space** was created through the website of the project (www.russian-for-tourism.eu) to provide learners with the possibility to **practise** their **pronunciation** with the help of the RETOUR videos by recording their voices and receiving evaluations of their audio files by Russian language teachers.

The second part of the project was dedicated to the pilot of the new training materials. Feedback was collected on the first version of the RETOUR training course from teachers and learners with help of the specially created **Feedback Questionnaires**.

Pilot courses were conducted in every partner country in 3 different modalities:
- ➢ Online – **self-learning modality**
- ➢ Online – **supported learning modality** (the learners were supported by a tutor and other learners by using the forum section on the website)

> ➤ **Face-to-face courses** (in ordinary classes with a language teacher).

In total, across all of the partner countries and with the support of AEHT, 42 Russian language teachers and 609 learners tested the materials.

After the pilot concluded, the suggestions, comments and feedback of the learners and L2 teachers were analysed and summarised in an **Overall Pilot Report**, the data of which were used to improve the first version of the products.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Teaching methods

The teaching methodology of RETOUR is based on the communicative approach through the implementation of modern methods and practices in foreign language learning. The course focuses on developing receptive skills (listening and reading comprehension) and productive skills (oral and, to a lesser degree, written skills) and provides a balanced selection of topics, vocabulary and grammar exercises, which can be used to achieve communicative competence.

The videos combine sound and visual perception corresponding to the context. The videos give learners the opportunity to gain basic knowledge about the way in which to communicate with Russian speaking tourists. The process of watching the videos enhances both perception and comprehension since the speech is supported by images. This results is creating the effect of "presence" and "participation". It further contributes to stronger interest in the material taught. This, in turn, affects favourably the quality of the learners' speaking skills.

The combination of exercises and practise at A1 and A2 levels aims to develop speaking skills. The course focuses on continuous control and practise of pronunciation by giving learners the opportunity to record their voice and get feedback and assessment from their teacher.

4.2. How to benefit from the course

The way the material is structured provides more options and makes it possible to acquire knowledge more efficiently both "horizontally" and "vertically". When working with beginners the teacher can choose different approaches, for example, using the learning materials **"horizontally"** by practising Part A and "**The most used expressions on the topic**" section with absolute beginners or starting with **The most used expressions on the topic** and then move on to the videos, the texts and the exercises in Part B for more advanced learners.

The benefit of the different versions of the videos can be exploited by carefully selecting the versions that best suit the level of every students' individual skills and abilities as well as what they need to develop or improve:

> ➤ **Version A** is the most difficult one and should be watched only by those who have acquired some knowledge of Russian
> ➤ **Version B** will help to develop listening and comprehension skills and will also improve reading abilities. The use of subtitles in the same language allows learners to involve different channels (written and audio-oral) and to stimulate the learners' attention in a multiple modes
> ➤ **Version C** will help to develop listening skills
> ➤ **Version F** will help to get learners acquainted with the content of the dialogue
> ➤ **Versions D**, **E** and **G** can be used by learners for oral practise with the help of the **Personal Space**, a learning platform on the project website where students can record themselves dubbing the parts of muted characters in order to practise their speed, pace, fluency, and pronunciation and where they can also send their recordings to teachers for feedback and evaluation.

The training programme supports self-directed learning and can be utilised by people using tablets and smartphones. It, therefore, can be very beneficial for teaching Russian to people who work most of the time (in restaurants, hotels, and in the retail sector) and so do not have the possibility to attend traditional classes. However, there are also written materials for teachers and learners that facilitate the use of the training programme in traditional classroom settings too. In conclusion, the organisation of this course makes it accessible to anyone willing to learn Russian, whether that be:

> ➤ individually
> ➤ through a correspondence course with teacher support
> ➤ in a group (classroom seminars, language courses).