



Special Russian Online-Courses for 'Advanced' Beginners

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Abstract

Background: Among the variety of modern distance-online courses of Russian as a foreign language, it is important to mention the special course "Conversations with Russians" (A1-A2) posted on the portal "Education in Russian". For courses of levels of Russian as a foreign language A1 and A2, video fragments from the same interviews are presented, but tasks are of varying complexity that corresponds to the level of knowledge of the students. One cannot deny that the complexity of the material is high for beginners. The aim of the work is to study the lexical composition and grammatical structure of texts, their comparison with the accepted standards recommended for a specific language level.

Methods: During the first stage of our research, we used quantitative methods: determination of the size of text, the speech rate, the ratio of familiar and unfamiliar words, Flesch–Kincaid grade level. During the second stage of our research, we assessed the syntactic complexity of the sentences and the adequacy of the given tasks.

Results: The average size of a text at the level A1 (102 words instead of 120-150 words) is a little less than it is recommended for this level in standards. This fact is compensated by the high percentage of unfamiliar words (11, 3% instead of 1%). The speech rate exceeds the standard level A1 (160 syllables/a minute instead of 120 to 140 syllables/ a minute). On the A2 level the size of an average text is even lower (81 words instead of 170-200 words) which is compensated by a high level of unfamiliar words (3.1 percent instead of 1.5 percent) and the complexity of the proposed tasks, the purpose of which is a research the specific information in a fragment.

Conclusions: It is important that during the course a student can show his contextual guess in order to understand the most important in the text: what is a speaker talking about, who is talking, what is a main idea of an interview. Thus, such courses help to prevent the language barrier. Criteria of level A2 are closer to the standards.

Keywords: Russian, open education, readability, essence

Introduction

The variety of modern online courses is rather comprehensive. Our attention in this work is concentrated around courses of Russian language for foreigners. The resource in this study offers six courses corresponding to the levels of knowledge of Russian language: (1) Elementary level – the survival level (corresponds to the level A1 in the CEFR system); (2) Basic level – the pre-intermediate level (corresponds to the level A2 in the CEFR system); (3) I certification – the intermediate level (corresponds to the level B1 in the CEFR system); (4) II certification – the upper-intermediate (corresponds to the level B2 in the CEFR system); (5) III certification - advanced level (corresponds to the level C1 in the CEFR system); (6) IV certification - level of language proficiency (corresponds to the C2 level in the CEFR system).

In the system of learning Russian as a foreign language, the most popular courses are elementary and basic levels. In this article, we will go into details of the content of these courses. The basic unit of our research is a text and its qualitative and quantitative complexity [<https://pushkininstitute.ru>].

Methods

During the process of analyzing the structure of online courses of Russian language for beginners we found that all of them have a module called "A special course". In our courses levels A1-A2, this part is dedicated to the theme "Conversations with Russians". This module consists of audio and (or) video fragments of interviews with famous politicians, journalists, sportsmen, and artists. A module "Conversations with Russians" is a unique one and it differs from a general content of a course. In our work, we have decided to separate results of this module from the main course.

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1. Analyzing the size of a text according to the Standards

Table 1 shows the quantitative information about the average size of a text posted on the portal “Education in Russian” and in the educational standards. Information is given in a number of words [http://gct.msu.ru/docs/A1_standart.pdf, http://gct.msu.ru/docs/A2_standart.pdf].

Table1. Average size of a text

Levels	Standard (words in a text)	Main course (words in a text)	Special course (words in a text)
A1	250-300	133	102
A2	600-700	215	81

2. The analysis of quantitative criteria of complexity of a text

Under the quantitative criteria of complexity of a text, we take such measurements as an amount of words in a sentence, an amount of symbols in a word, and index iFK. These results have been obtained using “Readability statistics” in Microsoft Word. The “Fresh-Kincaid” index is determined based on this quantitative information.

The Flesch–Kincaid readability tests are designed to indicate how difficult a text in English is to understand. The Flesch–Kincaid index was developed under contract to the U.S. Navy in 1975 by J. Peter Kincaid and his team. The original formula for iFK is:

$$iFK = (0.39 * \text{sentence length} + (11.8 * \text{number of syllables in a word}) + 15.59$$

This formula consists of a sum of products of two constants 0.39 и 11.8 and an average amount of syllables in a word and an average amount of words in a sentence.

The iFK was spread abroad and adapted for other languages. Such adaption for the Russian language was materialized by I.V. Obortneva according to the results of comparing six millions texts in Russian and English languages. The Russian version of the iFK index is presented below [<http://ito.edu.ru/2005/Moscow/VIII/VIII-0-5149.html>].

$$iFK = (0.5 * \text{sentence length} + (8.4 * \text{number of syllables in a word}) + 15.59$$

We used this version of the formula adapted by I.V. Obortneva when calculating the iFK index of a text. It is important to mention that in the educational standards there is no information on recommended quantitative criteria of complexity of a text.

The information in the column “Standard” has been found by analyzing texts, which are recommended by the educational standard. The information is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The quantitative criteria of text complexity

Criteria	A1 Level			A2 Level		
	Standard	Main course	Special course	Standard	Main course	Special course
Words in a sentence	8.8	2.7	6.9	10.3	7.7	11.2
Symbols in a word	4.5	4.8	5.1	5.1	5.1	5.0
iFK	6.87	4.07	6.34	8.04	6.74	8.41

3. The analysis of qualitative criteria of complexity of a text

In this work under the qualitative criteria of complexity of a text, we imply the amount of unfamiliar words, amount of complex phrases, ease of reading, level of education, and euphony. This data has been obtained using “Readability statistics” option in Microsoft Word.

The information in the column “Standard” below has been found by analyzing texts, which are published in the educational standard as recommended. The percent of unfamiliar words has been calculated by comparing these texts and the official lexical minimum of this level. For this purpose we use the program “AntConc” [<http://laurenceanthony.net/software/antconc/>]. With this program, we identify the most frequent words used in a text. The information is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. The qualitative criteria of text complexity



Criteria	A1 Level			A2 Level		
	Standard	Main course	Special course	Standard	Main course	Special course
Amount of unfamiliar words, %	1%	0.9%	11.3%	1.5%	1.2%	3.1%
Amount of complex phrases, %	0%	0.1%	3.8%	6.2%	0.9%	25%
Ease of reading (1-100)	92.4	100	90.6	87.4	94.9	90.8
Level of education (1-20)	3.8	1	3.1	5.2	3.4	4.1
Euphony (1-100)	89.6	90.6	90	92.4	91.5	89.4

4. The analysis of syntactic criteria of complexity of a text

Besides the analysis of lexical content of these courses, we also pay attention to the syntactic structure of sentences in a text. Sentence structure in Russian language is not fixed. The complexity of a sentence depends on the structure of that sentence. We analyze the amount of words before the main predicate in a sentence and the amount of subjects and (or) predicates. The information is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Syntactic complexity of a text

Criteria	A1 Level			A2 Level		
	Standard	Main course	Special course	Standard	Main course	Special course
Amount of subjects and (or) predicates in a sentence	1.16	1.25	1.6	1.2	1.18	1.45
Average amount of words before the main predicate in a sentence	1.18	1.2	1.4	1.3	1.23	2.1

Results

The attained results indicate that texts of the main course of levels A1 and A2 are similar to the standard ones in their complexity, but on average have fewer words. Such format is compensated by their sufficient variety in each module. We should also point out the fact that there is a significant difference in the amount of words in the sentences. Texts posted on the portal are mostly presented in the forms of dialogues or short announcements consisting of short sentences. At the same time, to complete post-reading exercises successfully a student is required to understand the text completely.

An average size of an A1 special course's text is much smaller than the recommended one for this level. It is compensated by the high percentage of unfamiliar words (11.3% instead of 1%). Before reading the text, students watch (listen) the original recording. Then the student is given a small fragment of the recording with a reduced rate of speech and a clear pronunciation of some lexical units, while the student is allowed to read the text of the interview.

For A1 and A2 special courses of Russian as a foreign language, video fragments are taken from the same interviews. However, the complexity of given the tasks corresponds to the level of student knowledge. It is easy to understand that complexity of the texts is too high for beginners. This method of presenting new material, which differs from the traditional ones, required to be scientifically proven.

The audio and video segments' speech rate exceeds the standard level A1 (160 syllables / min instead of 120-140 syllables / min.). At the A2 level, the average text size is even smaller, which is compensated by the large amount of unknown words (3.1% instead of 1.5%) and the complexity of the post-reading tasks, the purpose of which is to extract specific information from each fragment.

In addition, it is worth to mention the themes of texts in these special courses. No text corresponds to a theme of the everyday life, which according to the standard levels A1-A2 should be oriented.

The readability parameters for the special course are three times higher than those of the main A1 level textbooks. It is important that students understand the most important information in the text: what is the question, who is the speaker, what is the main idea of an interview. Such method of presenting a text helps students to overcome a language barrier and to be ready for a real conversation with a native speaker. These parameters of A2 level are close to the standard ones.

Conclusion

With the processes of globalization and informatization of the educational system in recent years, a phenomenon known as an “open education” becomes more and more popular. “Open education” is education without academic admission requirements and is typically offered online. This kind of education broadens access to the learning and training traditionally offered through formal educational systems. The qualifier “open” refers to the elimination of barriers that can preclude both opportunities and recognition for participation in institution-based learning. The main aspect of openness is the development of open educational recourses.

The advantages of open education are the following opportunities for students:

- To plan their own method of education according to their interests and desires;
- To make their own flexible schedule;
- To continue education while being in any part of the world.

However, there are also some disadvantages of open education system, such as an inability to continue learning without access to the internet and a lack of external control.

The open education portal "Education in Russian" is concentrated on the work, the main aim of which is to popularize the Russian language in the world. In this regard, the attention is paid to the process of learning Russian as a foreign language.

It should be emphasized, that on the portal we can see a mix of modules with texts that correspond to the educational standards and the module “Special course”, the complexity of which is several times higher than the recommended one.

During the “Special course”, a student can imagine the process of a real conversation. After successfully completing a task, a student can overcome the primary “shock” and fear to talking with a native speaker. The “main course” teaches students according to all educational standards. This combination proves the success of the methodology used by portal developers to teach Russian as a foreign language.

Methods for determining the complexity of texts can be used later in some other cases. At the same time, they not only describe and explain the methodological concepts of authors of a course, but also can also help to design new, scientifically grounded and methodologically balanced tasks for students, based on reasonable quantitative criteria of a teaching text. This fact may lead to the development of educational technologies in the field of teaching and learning Russian as a foreign language.

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