

Using Poetry in a Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract

Educational technology awards many new advantages to teaching and learning a second language. Current research in second language acquisition states that in order to attain high learning outcomes foreign language learning has to be authentic, culturally meaningful and cognitively appropriate. Computer-based instruction allows to introduce authentic and culturally rich materials from the very beginning of language learning, and thus motivate and empower the students. Poetry in a foreign language classroom presents an ideal medium through which the students can learn new grammar and vocabulary in context, practice their pronunciation and correct intonation while improving their cultural and literary knowledge of the target country.

The paper discusses a web-based project developed at Yale University that contains more than a hundred poems in Russian, geared to different levels of proficiency, all with complete audiofiles, extensive glosses, background notes in both languages and supplementary grammar and vocabulary exercises. The paper focuses on the benefits of computer-mediated instruction based on the literary poetic texts and proposes different ways of integrating poetry into the second language courses at different levels of proficiency, from beginners to advanced learners.

<http://russianpoetry.yale.edu/>

Digital format enables language learners to work on their own pace, extending the learning beyond the classroom and granting the learner more autonomy, it allows to access the audio simultaneously with a printed text, and it can provide extensive support to a novice language learner such as glosses opening on demand, images, questions guiding the reading comprehension, and additional context. Computer-based reading and speaking activities are also discussed.

Keywords: Second language acquisition, technology and language learning, digital humanities

Theoretical Background

Research in foreign language acquisition indicates that it is highly desirable to introduce the learners to the authentic and culturally significant materials early in the instruction, making the learning process more meaningful and enjoyable. Richards and Rogers [1] pointed out that in order to attain successful learning outcomes, learners “must be engaged in meaningful and authentic language use.” Alice Omaggio [2] also advocates the use of authentic and culturally appropriate materials from the very beginning of language instruction. The *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* [3] developed by American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages state that 1) authentic language should be used in the instruction whenever possible 2) creative practice must be encouraged in the proficiency-oriented classroom, and 3) cultural understanding must be promoted in various ways so that students are sensitive to other cultures.

Cultural competence and knowledge of high culture along with everyday customs is something that has been emphasized in successful foreign language teaching. In light of these expectations of learners’ cultural competency, it is highly beneficial to introduce culturally meaningful materials early on. At the same time it is a very challenging task for any foreign language instructor since the selected texts have to be not only authentic and culturally significant but also appropriate linguistically and accessible even to the beginners.

In the past several decades there has been a growing interest in the computer-based materials based on authentic literary texts that teach all four language skills through the integrated use of print and digital media affording the learner more flexibility and independence, making learning more individualized, and extending the learning environment beyond the classroom. Alice Omaggio points out that there is growing evidence that digital environment greatly benefits the language learners because “computers provide context and aid memory and cognition.” [4]. Other researchers agree in finding numerous advantages of

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computer-based materials in language learning: G.J. Frommer identified several factors that enhance the language learning processes, such as the ability of computers to provide students with “richer mental images to support language learning” [5].

Development of reading skills can benefit greatly from a digital format. Some foreign language acquisition theorists [6] view reading as a most important activity in a language class, because reading is not only a source of information and cultural knowledge but also a way of consolidating and extending one’s knowledge of the language. Justification of the importance of reading are numerous in language methodology studies: it is the skill that once developed, can be easily maintained by the learners themselves without a help from the teacher, thus leading to a life-long language maintenance. Reading also gives valuable insight into the target language country’s literature, history and culture, thus enhancing the multicultural competence of the learners. The great advances in recent teaching methodologies have been made on providing more guidance and the means of support for students through pre-reading and post-reading activities and activating both bottom-up and top-down processes of decoding the text.

Multiple studies in L2 acquisition proved that simultaneous presentation of sound and image is very useful in learning a second language. It is especially true for a language as grammatically complex as Russian where the syntax and word order are considerably different from English. Having the audio juxtaposed with the text is extremely helpful because it draws learners’ attention to the correct semantic units of the sentence and in this way aids listening and reading comprehension. Moreover, the ability to hear the text over and over improves pronunciation and intonation, and facilitates the retention of the new vocabulary and grammatical features.

The poems present an excellent opportunity for the beginning language learners to get exposed to authentic literary texts. Is it much easier to find a short poem that a beginner can read with some supporting materials (glosses, pre-reading activities, post-reading comprehension checks), and create a rewarding experience of working with an authentic text and thus maintain learner’s motivation in the language learning.

Project Description

Russia is well known for its rich literary legacy, but while many great authors, such as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, can be read and appreciated in translation, poetry loses much of its musicality and beauty in translation. In his “Lives of the Poets” Samuel Johnson said “Poetry cannot be translated; and, therefore, it is the poets that preserve the languages; for we would not be at the trouble to learn a language if we could have all that is written in it just as well in a translation. But as the beauties of poetry cannot be preserved in any language except that in which it was originally written, we learn the language.” [7]

The purpose of my poetry anthology [8] is to introduce students to the great treasures of Russian poetry in the original, starting with Alexander Pushkin and the poets of the period that is known as the Golden Age of Russian poetry in the nineteenth century and moving chronologically into the twentieth century, ending with the poets of what has come to be known as the Silver Age. All the poets selected for this project represent the classical canon of Russian poetry, well familiar to any Russian and taught in Russian schools. The chosen poems reflect the essential poetic heritage of each poet, and the anthology includes a wide variety of texts suitable for learners at different levels of language proficiency. The poems selected for each author are coded by level of difficulty. The coding is an approximation; it is certainly possible to read a more complex poem earlier in one’s studies; it would just take more time and effort. There is a brief biographical sketch for each poet, allowing the student to situate the poet within the Russian literary tradition.

The digital format of the companion website [9] allows for links between various sections and pieces of data, and students can gain access to vocabulary glosses and a rich supplemental cultural information that is essential for appreciating the poem. The glossed windows can be opened on demand, this option is tailored to students’ own needs and proficiency level.

The audio component of the anthology is especially valuable. Learning poems by heart has been shown to have many benefits for language learning: listening to a poem multiple times and repeating it aloud, a student is acquiring the correct pronunciation, intonation, vocabulary, and structure. Therefore it is highly recommended that students of all levels try to memorize the poems as they read them. While the anthology is designed as an introduction to Russian poetry, and the poets and poems are listed chronologically, the poems can be read out of order if the instructor wishes to focus on a particular author or a theme. In the questions for discussion there are frequent calls for comparison between poems



dealing with the same subject by different authors drawing the students' attention to the interconnectedness of the Russian literary tradition. There are also open-ended questions for discussion in English or in Russian, depending on the student's proficiency level, for example: "We see in the poem that Pushkin's favorite season was fall. What is your favorite season and why?" There are also questions testing comprehension level in detail, such as "Draw a picture of a winter landscape described in the poem." In addition to the discussion questions, a series of assignments focusing the student's attention on grammar and new vocabulary, stressing understanding of morphology to facilitate vocabulary retention.

The anthology can be used by any learner of Russian, be he/she a registered student or an independent learner. It can function as a component of a language or literature course, or it can be used in a "Russian for Heritage Learners" class. In addition to asking students to memorize some of the poems, oral presentations can be assigned on the poet of the student's choice so that the student does additional research and takes a more active role in the learning process. This works especially well in the Heritage Learners' courses, where students are more accustomed to memorizing poetry and want to share their parents' cultural heritage.

Conclusion

This project grew out of my firm conviction that reading poetry in the original is extremely rewarding and motivating for any student of a foreign language. It is especially true for Russian, where poetry has always been an integral part of the literary tradition and culture, where the poets are highly revered and poetry is memorized from the lower grades of the elementary school through high school. This is an important consideration since there is an expectation of some knowledge of poetry embedded in a Russian culture, and all students learning Russian as a foreign language are expected to be familiar with Russian poets. Reading and learning poetry by heart presents many benefits for language learners of all levels: it allows the learner to simultaneously learn the new vocabulary, work on pronunciation and see the grammatical features of the language operating in a real context. It also provides an excellent introduction to formal register, syntax and style features, and this is especially helpful for heritage language learners who are most comfortable in the conversational mode of discourse but typically are not very familiar with formal or literary language style. Rather than limiting the students' reading activities to a series of worksheets with separate sentences or artificial reading texts created specifically for beginners, reading short poems supplemented with supported materials online and glosses allows the learners to have an authentic and meaningful foreign language experience increasing learner motivation and leading to better learning outcomes.

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