In Support of a Proficiency-based Definition of Heritage Language Learners: The Case of Russian

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In Support of a Proficiency-based Definition of Heritage Language Learners: The Case of Russian

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This paper addresses the problem of placing and teaching heritage speakers of immigrant languages in college-level foreign language programmes, drawing conclusions from research on heritage speakers of Russian. For pedagogical purposes, heritage speakers cannot be viewed either as native speakers of the target language or as foreign language learners, and are best treated as a separate population requiring their own curriculum and materials. The paper advocates that students’ proficiency be used as the basis for placement and curriculum development. An essential tool in determining heritage proficiency is knowledge of a student’s linguistic biography, and therefore biographical information should be solicited from incoming heritage students. Heritage students’ motivation for studying their heritage language can serve as a guiding principle for materials selection and curriculum design.

Keywords: proficiency, heritage learners

Introduction

The sources of language acquisition of heritage speakers can be presented as a triad:

family – community/community schools – formal education.

Each of the elements in the triad can have a greater or lesser prominence depending on the language, history of the language group migration and attitude to language preservation, among other factors. ‘A defining distinction between heritage and foreign language acquisition is that heritage language acquisition begins in the home, as opposed to foreign language acquisition which, . . . is usually begun in a classroom setting.’ (UCLA Steering Committee Report, 2000).

One other distinctive feature in the education of heritage language learner (HLLs) is the existence of and the role played by community schools. According to Compton (2001: 147), the number of such schools is on the rise in the USA and Canada. Fishman (2001: 94) divides heritage languages into indigenous, colonial and immigrant, and places Russian, the language of the heritage speakers described in this paper, among ‘recently arriving’ immigrants. In the USA, unlike some other immigrant communities, for example Chinese (Wang, 1996), the Russian community has not established a system of community schools. In addition, it is rarely taught in K-12. Thus the
preservation of Russian as a heritage language depends on the intergenerational transfer of linguistic competences in the family, ‘parents [being] perhaps the single most significant source of heritage language input for immigrant children’ (Shin, 2003), and on college level programmes of Russian.

For those HLLs who study Russian in college, a programme of Russian as a foreign language may become the vehicle of their language maintenance and development. As will be shown in this paper, students who emigrated at a preschool age or who were born in the USA to Russian-speaking parents, while having no or little literacy, typically begin language study with a high degree of oral/aural proficiency (see Comparison of Proficiencies: Heritage and Non-heritage speakers below). Given HLLs’ initial proficiencies, it is realistic to design a curriculum for them that aims at the attainment of Advanced or even Superior proficiency (according to the ACTFL Guidelines) which is rarely achieved by non-HLLs in the course of undergraduate instruction (Thompson, 1996). Accordingly, an HL programme must be designed differently from a programme for traditional foreign language learners. The curricular goals in a HL class will differ considerably from the expectations foreign language educators have for non-HLLs. Wiley (1996: 195) discusses the ways in which instructional practices ‘affect the ability of students to become literate’, and argues that instruction can yield positive or negative results. Given that for HLLs the development of literacy is particularly important, Wiley’s comment should be kept in mind: while HLLs have the potential to achieve high proficiency, they will not achieve it without a soundly designed curriculum.

One of the reasons that proficiency-based placement policies are particularly important – and need to be made explicit in HL instruction – is that some HLLs perceive placement in separate heritage classes as a form of discrimination (Gonzalez Pino & Pino, 2000). Students have every right to question their placement if it is based on their surnames, puts them in classes that are not challenging enough or are too difficult, or are otherwise deficient. As with all students, HLLs should have access to instruction at their level of ability. As Valdés (2000) states, in formal educational settings (K-16), the definition of a HLL, the instructional policies used to teach such learners and the curriculum design for their instruction all need to be based on measurable characteristics. There is a need to create placement policies, based on proficiency testing rather than on race, ethnicity or surname. Otherwise HLLs have every right to question the motivation behind their placement as well as to resist it and resent it. As some students’ perceptions that HL instruction is discriminatory might suggest, another factor can compromise its goals: although the numbers of HLLs in some languages have increased many times over the past decade, some instructors and language departments still incline toward dismissing them as native speakers who are not legitimate students in foreign language classes because of their ability to speak and comprehend the language. Some regard these students as having an unfair ‘advantage’ over their nonheritage peers (Clyne et al., 1997). Still others believe that heritage students without literacy should be treated as true beginners.
This paper will discuss the placement of heritage speakers in a university foreign language programme and will demonstrate that HLLs need to be understood as a group with a distinct proficiency profile and thus:

(1) cannot be dismissed as native speakers who need no instruction;
(2) do not need to be placed in beginning language classes;
(3) can be tracked and placed according to their backgrounds; and
(4) need a curriculum with a structure and a set of materials that differ considerably from those intended for foreign language students.

**Russian-speaking Students on American Campuses**

During the 20th century, four successive groups known as ‘waves’ (Andrews, 1998: 2) of Russian speakers emigrated from Russian-speaking countries to Europe, the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Israel. The First Wave was the result of the Communist Revolution of 1917; the Second Wave came after World War II; and the Third Wave dates from the early 1970s to late 1980s. The Fourth Wave is the post-Soviet Union emigration, which began in the late 1980s. The majority of Russian speakers currently studying Russian at American colleges belong to the Third and Fourth Waves of immigration. Andrews (1998) characterises them as a sophisticated and cosmopolitan group, appreciative of their rich cultural heritage. Zemskaja (2001) shows that Russian émigré parents, while not opposed to their children’s assimilation, want them to preserve Russian language skills and appreciation of Russian high culture, which they frequently equate with knowledge of Russian literature, an attitude that should play a role in the curriculum design.

**Biographical Information as the Basis for Placement**

Lo Bianco (2003) considers HLLs’ linguistic biographies to be one of the most informative tools available for understanding linguistic profiles. Each student’s history plays an important role in determining his or her linguistic ability in the heritage language. Biographical data that are particularly important include age at immigration, family relationships and composition, family attitudes toward assimilation and language preservation, personal interests, and academic or professional aspirations (cf. Lacorte & Canabal, 2002). Although these are all variables, both experience and data show that it is possible to place Russian HLLs into three groups based on biographical data.

Group 1, the most proficient group, comprises students who graduated from high school in Russia or a Russian-speaking country (i.e. a former republic of the Soviet Union) and, consequently, have not been away from the Russian-speaking community for long. These students can be considered educated native speakers because they have a fully developed grammatical system, a native range of vocabulary and inside familiarity with Russian culture. However, they are typically unfamiliar with the demands of the presentational mode in Russian.
Group 2 consists of students who attended school in a Russian-speaking country for five to seven years (an approximate equivalent of American junior high school) and whose language development in their teenage years was interrupted by emigration. These students have a fairly complete knowledge of the grammatical system but do not have the same range of vocabulary and register as educated native speakers. They are also unfamiliar with many sociolinguistic, sociocultural and cultural conventions because they have not interacted with the adult world on adult terms.

Group 3 can be characterised as ‘incomplete acquirers’ and ‘forgetters’ (Polinsky, 2000). There are two main subgroups in Group 3: (a) students who attended elementary school in a Russian-speaking country, and (b) students who emigrated as preschoolers or were born in the USA to Russian-speaking parents, and have been educated entirely in English. For programmatic purposes, students of Group 3a and 3b can be placed together.

Preliminary empirical data supports the three-group division. To form a comparison of HLLs and native speakers of comparable age, Russian-speaking students at UCLA (41 respondents) were asked to translate a series of sentences from English into Russian. The sentences tested students’ knowledge of grammar. High school students at a private English school in Moscow, who were considered educated native speakers for their age group, formed the baseline group. A second study focused on vocabulary. For detailed description of the results of both studies see Kagan and Dillon (2001). The students’ knowledge of grammatical structure and vocabulary correlated well with years of schooling. The study also demonstrated that even those students who received most or all of their high school education in a Russian-speaking country (Group 1) had some lacunae. Finally, the comparisons indicate that to a large degree biographical data is a reliable basis for HLLs’ placement, and that the most important biographical variable correlating with proficiency is the amount of schooling received in a Russian-speaking country.

Comparison of Proficiencies: Heritage and Nonheritage Speakers

In addition to the studies described above comparing HLLs to native speakers, a third study focused on a comparison of proficiencies of HLLs and non-HLLs. Ten translations from English into Russian were evaluated: five by HLLs of Group 3 after eight weeks of initial literacy instruction in a course designed for HLLs and five by non-HLLs after three or more years of language study. The results indicate that the initial proficiency of Group 3 after eight weeks of instruction is comparable to or higher than the proficiency of non-HLLs after three or more years of language study.

The ten students translated a cohesive text (a 250-word excerpt from a novel) from English into Russian as part of their homework assignment. In grading the translations, the instructor catalogued mistakes in spelling, grammar (both morphology and syntax), vocabulary (misused words, English calques, stylistic inappropriateness) and discourse (whether the text could not be understood and accepted as native-like). Additionally the instructor read the Russian translations aloud to three native speakers of Russian who served
as judges. The goal was to see whether, if delivered orally, some of the translations would ‘pass’ as native discourse. While HLLs made a greater number of spelling mistakes than non-HLLs, both groups made a similar number of morphological mistakes such as case endings and verbal conjugation. Compared with non-HLLs, HLLs made half the number of mistakes on verbal aspect and also produced more discourse that would be accepted as native-like in oral communication, i.e. if spelling and morphological errors could be discounted. For statistical results, see Table 1.

In Table 1, we show the averages and standard deviations for five categories of errors made by HLLs and non-HLLs. The ratio of mean differences to adjusted standard errors should be distributed approximately as a normal variable (Beyer, 1991: 25). A small ratio means that the difference is not statistically significant, i.e. it may be due to random fluctuations. The ratio of about 1.96 would mean that only in 5% of cases such a difference may be due to random causes. The values in rows 1, 4 and 5 are approaching this limit. Therefore, they can be considered as close to being statistically significant, but not yet at the 95% significance level.

**Table 1** Error analysis of HLLs versus non-HLLs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of errors</th>
<th>HLLs (n=5)</th>
<th>Non-HLLs (n=5)</th>
<th>The ratio: differences of averages to their adjusted standard deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>7 + 8 + 5 + 2 + 12 = 34</td>
<td>8 + 1 + 0 + 4 + 2 = 15</td>
<td>+1.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The same mistake is counted only once</td>
<td>Mean: 6.8 ± 3.7</td>
<td>Mean: 3.0 ± 3.16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case/case endings</td>
<td>1 + 7 + 5 + 0 + 1 = 14</td>
<td>7 + 0 + 3 + 4 + 1 = 15</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean: 2.8 ± 3.03</td>
<td>Mean: 3.0 ± 2.73</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreement</td>
<td>1 + 6 + 5 + 1 + 1 = 14</td>
<td>2 + 2 + 5 + 2 + 1 = 12</td>
<td>+0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean: 2.8 ± 2.5</td>
<td>Mean: 2.4 ± 1.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspect</td>
<td>0 + 1 + 1 + 0 + 0 = 2</td>
<td>1 + 1 + 3 + 0 + 2 = 7</td>
<td>-1.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean: 0.4 ± 0.5</td>
<td>Mean: 1.4 ± 1.14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse that would not be accepted as native-like even in oral communication</td>
<td>4 + 7 + 6 + 3 + 6 = 26</td>
<td>9 + 8 + 8 + 5 + 5 = 35</td>
<td>-1.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean: 5.2 ± 1.64</td>
<td>Mean: 7.0 ± 1.87</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Programmatic Differences: HLLs Versus Non-HLLs

The terms *macro* and *micro approach* are used in the paper to describe the basic principles of curricular design for HL and non-HL programmes. The macro approach to curriculum design, which is advocated here for HLLs, involves applying top-down strategies to language teaching, while the micro approach, which is typically used for non-HLLs, applies bottom-up strategies (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000).

While HLLs in Groups 3 (the least proficient group) discussed above can handle real-world listening and speaking tasks from the very beginning, thus justifying a macro approach, they fail at the level of subskills: their vocabulary is vast in comparison to non-HLLs but still inadequate for high level performance; they produce rapid fluent speech, but it is full of errors in grammar and register; and they can write an essay that may have interesting content but may also be unintelligible because of spelling errors. Even with their deficiencies, however, HLLs are capable of performing globally, on a macro level, i.e. negotiating meaning in a large variety of situations. Their global competence calls for a macro approach to an HL curriculum: instead of starting by teaching elements such as grammatical categories, vocabulary and spelling, and building to global tasks, i.e. rather than inhibiting HLLs’ knowledge as often happens when they are placed in foreign language classrooms, instructors can start with the much more cognitively rich global tasks and use them to teach elements.

Even elements such as grammar and spelling can be approached in a macro fashion: e.g. in Russian, as HLLs comprehend all the cases and use them correctly in at least some discourse situations, they can be taught case structure as a whole (i.e. they can be taught all the cases for a particular declension class at once) instead of learning one case at a time as non-HLLs do. Because they comprehend most grammatical forms and can recognise and/or produce many of them, HLLs can handle explanations and clarifications of many concepts at the same time (a macro approach) rather than the introduction of one concept at a time (a micro approach).

A Curriculum for Heritage Speakers: The Importance of Motivation

The discussion below centres on the least proficient HLLs (Group 3), i.e. students with minimal or no literacy. The study of error patterns above and extended comparisons in Schwartz (2001) and Kagan and Dillon (2001) indicate that HLLs have proficiencies and lacunae that differ from non-HLLs’. The use of existing materials not specifically intended for HLLs has generally been unsuccessful: instructors of Russian who have used materials written for Russian children have learned that these materials are not suitable to the cognitive and cultural characteristics of adult HLLs (Bermel & Kagan, 2000). Those who have used textbooks, either beginning or advanced, intended for learners of Russian as a foreign language have not been successful either. Materials, methods and teaching strategies all need to be appropriate to students’ age and their cognitive abilities.
Learners’ motivation plays a key role in defining appropriateness. HLLs are adult learners of a language that, while it is no longer their dominant language, nevertheless remains their language of (mostly informal) communication. Is it their native tongue? Or is it a foreign language to be (re)learnt? No matter how we look at it, the heritage language is of ‘particular family relevance to the learners’ (Fishman, 2001). Zemskaja (2001), while discussing the significance of preserving the Russian language for émigrés of all four ‘waves’, cites case studies where people born in Russian families abroad who have never been to Russia still refer to Russian as their native language. While students cannot be placed into an HL programme on the basis of emotional attachment to the language, their motivation should be used to determine the content of such a programme. Some data are available to indicate the nature of HLLs’ motivation: in a survey of speakers of Russian conducted at UCLA in 2000, 16 of 41 students named preserving family ties as the main reason for studying Russian, 31 named their desire to preserve Russian culture and 33 said they studied Russian so that they could read Russian literature. Only seven mentioned career goals. (Students could circle more than one answer.) I would suggest that concerns about preserving Russian culture and studying Russian literature are also manifestations of a desire to stay close to their families because, as was discussed earlier, the current Russian-speaking immigrants are well educated and have a high regard for Russian culture. Experience shows that parents’ and grandparents’ positive attitudes strengthen the students’ interest in studying the language. In addition to building upon students’ emotional and cultural motivation, a programme can help HLLs develop their instrumental motivation by demonstrating that their proficiency in the home language may help them in their careers.

The content of a language course for Russian HLLs would include Russian classical literature, poetry and film. In addition, because students have been educated in American schools, HL courses should have a cross-cultural perspective that would clarify the learners’ home culture through comparison. A cross-cultural approach also contributes to the development of higher-level discourse skills and strategies while involving students in comparing, analysing text, and participating in debate and discussion. In addition, the utilisation of a cross-cultural approach to develop higher-level linguistic skills suggests that there may be more similarity between an HLL curriculum and teaching English for academic purposes than between an HLL curriculum and a traditional foreign language programme. ESL students’ fairly high proficiency turns out to be insufficient ‘for dealing with the complex demands of the university’ (Brinton et al., 1997: xi). Similarly, HLLs’ proficiency, which may be advanced in many situations, is not adequate for dealing with academic, professional and otherwise formal encounters.

Conclusions

In the past several years, there has been much discussion in the USA regarding the importance of professional (Superior or higher) level language proficiency for the national security (Brecht & Ingold, 1998; Brecht & Rivers, 2000; Campbell & Peyton, 1998; GAO Report, 2002). Even if national interests
were not of importance, language proficiency enriches the individual and can be gratifying both in terms of intellectual and professional achievement (Carreira & Armengol, 2001; Krashen, 1998). HLLs, because of their long exposure to the language, are good candidates for gaining such proficiency more quickly if the instruction they are offered meets their needs. While we agree with Pauwels (this issue) that ‘the family is a crucial site of language maintenance’, we must keep in mind that the family typically conducts interactions in an interpersonal mode, and heritage speakers would be unable to gain familiarity with the interpretive and presentational modes, i.e. achieve higher linguistic proficiency without well designed and rigorous college level courses. While some data common to Russian heritage language speakers may distinguish their situation from that of learners of other heritage languages, the general principles discussed would, with appropriate modifications, be applicable to other language programmes.

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**References**


