RUSSIAN HERITAGE LEARNERS: SO WHAT HAPPENS NOW?

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“So What Happens Now?” asked David Andrews (1998) in the final chapter of his groundbreaking book on sociocultural perspectives of the third-wave of Russian immigration. He was referring to the future of the Russian language as spoken in the United States by Russian émigrés and their children who, according to Polinsky (1996, 5), are “semi-speakers” of Russian. Polinsky speculated that Russian in the United States might become an “endangered” language (1). Indeed, it has been documented (Andrews 1998, Zemskiaia 2001) that immigrants of the third wave (1970-1990) are on a fast track to assimilation. Furthermore, this may be true not only for the second generation but also for the generation that is sometimes referred to as the “1.5 generation” (Shin 5). Despite the prevailing trend toward assimilation, Andrews (1998) speculated that because of the post-Soviet freedoms that allow émigrés to maintain contact with the metropole and because of the frequency and numbers of new arrivals from Russian-speaking countries, Russian in the United States will survive and will even influence “the language and culture of Russia itself” (160).

Andrews’s prediction about the survival of Russian in the U.S. seems to have been validated in the near decade following its formulation. Russian heritage learners have come in significant numbers to our classrooms, and their goals have advanced beyond simply satisfying a language requirement or enhancing their GPA with an “easy A.” In this anniversary article, we will catalog and analyze the changes that have taken place to date in Russian heritage

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1. The authors are grateful to Maria Polinsky for suggesting the Frog pictures as a basis for research and also for useful discussion, to Michael Marakhovsky for transcribing the narratives, and to Debra Friedman for her help in analyzing the transcripts.

2. While this term has not been used in regard to Russian emigrés, it has become mainstream in literature about Asian heritage learners. It refers to those who arrived at an early age and whose education was exclusively or predominantly in English.

instruction and then posit anew Andrews’s provocative question, “So what happens now?”

When Andrews was writing his book in the nineties, there were no programs in the country that focused on the children of Russian immigration. Moreover, even the term “heritage language” that we routinely use now did not yet exist. The term entered common usage in the United States after the First National Conference on Heritage Languages in Long Beach, California, in 1999 (Peyton et al.) and has since become mainstream among foreign language educators. Prior to the 1990s the needs of the Russian heritage student were either neglected or did not figure prominently in Russian programs. There are several reasons for an evolution in attitudes and practice on the part of the Russian-language programs.

First, the numbers of heritage learners in our classes have grown logarithmically. A change in enrollment patterns has become pronounced since the early 1990s. Consequently we have had to reassess our needs and priorities and start paying close attention to our heritage students. It could even be said that, with the exception of Spanish (see Roca and Colombi), it is scholars working with Russian data who have contributed most extensively to the body of knowledge in the field (Andrews 2001; Polinsky 1996, 1997, 2000, in press; Zemskaia 2001) and who have assumed leadership roles in the pursuit of heritage language acquisition theory and practice. Slavica Publishers, for example, published a textbook for Russian heritage learners in 2002 (Kagan, Akishina, Robin), now in use in a minimum of 28 institutions (as reported to Slavica Publishers, August 2005). To the best of our knowledge, no other languages except for Spanish and Chinese have yet published textbooks devoted specifically to heritage learners.

Second, learner differences were considerably less pronounced in the grammar-translation era when students typically memorized rules and paradigms. After the onset of the proficiency movement and communicative-based approaches, many Russian instructors concluded that they had nothing to teach to the largely orally-competent heritage learners within the framework of the established curriculum. In a communicative- or discourse-based approach, heritage learners and foreign language learners were no longer compatible. Once we began to use a communicative interactive framework to define the curricular goals and the curriculum itself, the differences between heritage learners and foreign language learners created a chasm that could not be easily or efficiently bridged within the same class. In order for heritage learners to attain the higher level competencies within their reach, they need instructional methods and material designed especially for them (Kagan and Dillon 2003).

The third factor in the evolution of heritage language preservation is societal. Assimilation of immigrant groups into U.S. society appears to be deviating from the patterns of the past. Discovery of “the benefits of ethnic solidar-
ity" (Alba 25) marks a break with the main features of U.S. past. Immigrant groups have summoned the economic, social and cultural resources to make solidarity rewarding, and they have begun to act in defiance of what appear to be the laws of upward mobility in the U.S. context, maintaining their attachment to their ethnic communities across generations (25). In a volume entitled Reinventory the Melting Pot: The New Immigrants and What It Means To Be American (2004), Gary Shteyngart, a Russian-born American novelist (author of The Russian Debutante's Handbook, 2002) who arrived in the United States at a pre-school age, explains the new phenomenon: "Today, people like myself, Russians by birth and Americans by education, don't need to choose a single, exclusive identity. Equally at home (and equally homeless) in both cultures, we are global citizens of an increasingly borderless world" (2004, 290). Even if these attitudes do not reflect the views of every Russian immigrant of the recent waves, they are nevertheless noteworthy. Only time will show, of course, whether these attitudes will endure or change once again. Our job as educators is to respond to the needs of the moment, and those needs seem quite clear—students want to preserve and improve their competency in Russian language and culture.

Finally, at this point in the evolution of most Russian programs came 9/11, the cataclysmic event that launched twenty-first century thinking in the United States. The U.S. government and the general public suddenly came to the realization that to meet the linguistic needs of the nation, immigrants and their children should be encouraged to retain the language of their country of origin. The expression "a national resource" in regard to heritage speakers has since permeated both academic and governmental parlance (Campbell and Peyton; Brecht and Ingold; Brecht and Rivers). The new "sputnik moment" awakened the U.S. to the urgent need for national competency in languages other than English. Even though there is no longer a Soviet threat, Russian remains among the most important critical languages of the political and economic arenas, as indicated by the establishment of the Russian Language Flagship programs.3

All these factors have combined to produce a major shift in the attitudes of language professionals toward heritage learners. The prevailing approach had been to cast these students from the FL classroom as swiftly as possible because the heritage learners impeded the "real work" of teaching foreign language and because it was commonly believed that heritage learners' only need was to obtain literacy just by learning Cyrillic.

By the end of 2001 the language field was primed to examine the notion of heritage teaching and learning with new energy and commitment to develop

3. Language Flagships seek to produce university graduates with a "superior" level of proficiency in languages critical to U.S. national security. The programs are funded by the National Security Education Program (NSEP).
this valuable resource and truly serve the learning needs of the heritage lan-
guage communities that, in cities like Los Angeles, constitute the majority
population of the society and even our classrooms. Heritage learning is now
on the linguistic map to stay.

This anniversary issue of SEEJ provides us with the podium from which to
echo David Andrews and ask once again, “So what happens now?” There
have been considerable achievements in the novice field of heritage language
teaching and learning, but many questions, of both linguistic and program-
matic nature, remain to be answered.

The roadmap for the next phase in the evolution of the Russian heritage
field should begin with a new, refined definition of Russian heritage learners.
The best-known definition of a heritage learner belongs to Valdés: “[Heritage
learners are] individuals raised in homes where a language other than English
is spoken and who are to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage
language” (375). Polinsky offers a definition of the heritage language, not the
speaker, and focuses on the order of language acquisition, which Valdés does
not address. “By heritage language I mean a language which was first for an
individual with respect to the order of acquisition but has not been completely
acquired because of the switch to another dominant language” (Polinsky, in
definition that emphasizes the dichotomy between foreign language acquisi-
tion that “is usually begun in a classroom setting” and heritage language acqui-
sition that “begins in the home” (8). All of these definitions or parts thereof
are valid for most if not all heritage languages. However, there are also lan-
guage-specific features to consider.

In the case of Russian heritage speakers, we need to take a closer look at
Identification of students according to wave will inform our process of plac-
ing heritage Russian students accurately in our programs. The descendents of
the first two waves have long been fully assimilated. They may have a fam-
ily interest (Fishman) in learning the language, but they have no functional
skills. More recent waves of immigration bring us students with a wide range
of language competencies (Kagan) depending on the characteristics of each
wave. The immigrants of the third wave (from 1970 to the collapse of the So-
viet Union) left their homeland, never expecting to go back, and in some
cases they are still reluctant to travel to Russia or send their children. The
fourth wave (the 1990s) did not sever any connection when leaving. They
fully expected to travel to Russia, and they routinely have business and other
dealings with former compatriots. They send children to spend the summer
with their grandparents and may even consider moving back. There are al-
ready signs of a fifth wave, characterized by temporary migration typically
for job-related reasons.

In addition to the different waves of immigration, currently in the U.S.
there are distinctly different Russian-speaking communities that need to be mapped and studied. Information about them will also guide us in developing curriculum suitable to their needs and motivations. There are different subsets of émigrés in various localities in the United States. In New York and Los Angeles, for example, we mainly encounter Russian-speaking immigrants from large cities, mostly ethnically Russian or Jewish (the third wave in particular was heavily Jewish). Both groups typically speak Russian as their only home language. There are also communities of Russian-speaking bilinguals. For example, many of the 138,015 people in Los Angeles County who according to the U.S. Census speak Armenian at home also speak Russian.

In view of these different identities and a spectrum of language proficiencies in the heritage population (Hornberger), we propose a language-specific definition of Russian heritage learners: “At the beginning of the twenty-first century in the United States, Russian heritage learners are the children of the third, fourth and later waves of immigration whose level of competency in Russian is directly tied to the amount of education they received in the former Soviet Union.”

On the basis of a study of heritage students’ age at the time of emigration, we divided Russian heritage students into four groups according to their linguistic biographies and their resulting language competency (Kagan; Kagan and Dillon 2001). These groups are valid for now but may need to be reconfigured with changes in migration patterns or language attrition. Group 1, the most proficient group, comprises students who attended or completed high school in Russia or in one of the former republics of the Soviet Union. These students have a fully developed grammatical system, a native range of vocabulary, and an inside familiarity with Russian culture. Group 2 consists of students who attended school in the former Soviet Union for five to seven years, and therefore experienced an interruption in their Russian language development in adolescence. These students have a strong knowledge of the Russian grammatical system but do not have the same range of vocabulary or register as educated native speakers. Groups 3 and 4 can be characterized as “incomplete acquirers” or “forgetters” (Polinsky 2000). Group 3 includes students who attended elementary school in the former Soviet Union, while Group 4 consists of students who emigrated as preschoolers or who were born in the United States to Russian-speaking parents. These students have therefore been educated primarily or solely in English. In order to preserve Russian as a viable heritage language in the United States, university programs need to be able to offer courses that have been tailored to address the particular needs of students in Groups 3 and 4, and maintenance courses that would both arrest language loss and promote continuing study in our programs to fight patterns of attrition and language loss to students from Groups 1 and 2. Lynch (2003a) remarks that “By the time these bilinguals reach high school and college classrooms, acquisition of the HL has become more of a second language (L2) ac-
quisition process than a first language (L1) acquisition process. By the adolescent years, a quite distinct array of social and cognitive factors determining language acquisition and use is at play. English has become the dominant language for most in social interactions with peers and siblings, and it is the language in which they have been conditioned to think and learn in school.” The overarching challenge of teaching heritage learners is to raise their language competency to the level of their adult cognitive development. Accordingly, the UC Consortium Heritage Guidelines suggest offering a special program to heritage learners and advocate establishing different goals for this population. Kagan and Dillon (2004) propose a matrix for heritage learner education that includes the following components: proper placement; time on task; programmatic rigor; specific instructional materials; an uninterrupted, comprehensive curriculum; instructors trained in heritage language acquisition; a multi-year sequence; consideration of the home/community native speaker environment; and a metalinguistic framework that raises awareness of the importance of grammatical accuracy and register (100).

As a next step toward formulating a heritage-learner-focused curriculum, we need to discuss the specificity of curricular design. Rifkin (see his article in this issue) “has confirmed data reported by the Foreign Service Institute suggesting that students of Russian require more than 700 hours of classroom work to achieve advanced-level function in the language.” Heritage learners have been exposed to many more hours by the time they enroll in a Russian language course. To determine realistic goals, we need to find a point of departure, i.e. to catalog these learners’ linguistic abilities in ways that can translate into innovative curricular design.

To investigate linguistic proficiencies of Russian heritage students, we are now moving beyond OPI results (Kagan and Friedman) and analysis of grammar deficiencies (Polinsky 1997, 2000). We are currently investigating the development of narrative and rhetorical devices that full Russian speakers (to use Polinsky’s term) employ over the course of their interactions (Berman and Slovin 1994). Heritage learners who emigrated from the former Soviet Union prior to completion of an elementary education in effect seem to have been deprived of a vital stage of development in the mother tongue.

The Study

Eighteen Russian heritage students (see Appendix for biographical data) described a series of Frog, Where Are You? pictures (Mayer) used by Berman and Slovin in their well-known study of narrative in 1994. In analyzing the narratives, we focused on narrative strategies. The baseline data came from a native speaker.4 We also used the data from the transcripts made by Anilovich

4. The native speaker who made the recording at our request moved to the U.S. from Russia at the age of 24 in 1989 after completing her university education.
and Slobin. A complete report of the study is in process and will be published at a later date. In this article, for the purposes of establishing the goals and elaborating a curricular design for future heritage language instruction in Russian, we offer a brief summary of the results. Slobin notes that “in acquiring a native language, the child learns particular ways of thinking for speaking” (1991, 12). We speculate that when language acquisition is interrupted before these “ways of thinking and speaking” have been firmly established, the child may not learn those ways of speaking and expressing herself that would lead to becoming a full native speaker. Berman and Slobin point out that “a proficient native speaker selects and organizes information in ways that result in a language-specific rhetorical style.” They further comment: “In becoming a native speaker of a given language, the child learns to attend to particular aspects of experience and to relate them verbally in ways that are characteristic of that language” (611).

We have analyzed the following features typical of narration in Russian:

1. Inverted (emotive/expressive) word order
2. Word repetition for emphasis
3. Parenthetical words and cohesive devices

Word order figures significantly in Russian rhetorical style. Every learner and teacher of Russian would agree that acquisition of native-like word order is one of the most challenging hurdles on the path to the higher levels of language performance. The question we pose here is: do heritage learners of Russian of Groups 2–4 use native-like flexible word order or do they adhere to the rigidly Subject-Predicate sequence of “objective word order” (Krylova and Khavronina).

According to Berman and Slobin, “[a] skillful narrative does not simply consist of a linear chain of successive events located in time and space. Rather, events must be packaged into hierarchical constructions” (13). No event packaging and establishing of a hierarchy of events is possible in Russian without flexible word order appropriate to the topic at hand. Krylova and Khavronina discuss the differences between emotive and non-emotive speech. “Word order begins to play the role of a stylistic device, i.e. helps to create emotive speech, when the rules for arranging words in non-emotive speech are violated.” Deviations are expressed as “subjective word order or inversion” (113).

In an orally delivered narration, it is only natural to expect emotive word order (see Zemskaja 1978 for multiple examples). Since heritage learners’ initial language acquisition is naturalistic, we might expect them to have ac-

5. Yana Anilovich was Slobin’s collaborator in the original Frog, Where Are You? study. As Slobin (2004) mentioned, she recorded and transcribed the Russian narrations.
quired a native speaker’s instinct for word order variation. That is not the case, however, according to our data.

The native speaker in the study implements the flexibility of word order to full advantage and forms an expressive description of the pictures. Of 86 simple sentences in her narration, 11 sentences (12.7%) have the inverted “emotive” P–S sequence. This is also confirmed in the narrations by Russian speakers (ages 9–53) in the Anilovich and Slobin study. In the narration of the eighteen heritage speakers there are a total of five cases of word order inversion, all of them occurring at the beginning of the story and all of them variations of the “zhili-byli” type. We can thus draw the conclusion (albeit of a limited nature) that heritage speakers overwhelmingly favored the Subject-Predicate (this has been confirmed by Polinsky, personal communication). Geisherik also found that the writing samples of heritage learners “consistently demonstrated confusion in the theme-rheme structure of the Russian sentence” (60); in other words, the packaging was not done according to the native norm of narrative. As a result, the descriptions lack the emotional charge provided by a nuanced word order.

Here are a few examples from the native speaker’s narrative that demonstrate subject-predicate inversion:

1) начали (P) они (S) искать по всей комнате/ своего
   nachali oni iskat’ po vsei komnate/ svoego
   started they to search through all room their
   лягушонка/
   liagushonka
   little frog
   “They started to search through the whole room for their little frog.”

2) Вот/ и пошли (P) они (S) искать лягушонка/
   vot/ i poshli oni iskat’ liagushonka
   so and went they to search little frog
   “And so they went to look for their little frog”

3) а... вот/ а за собою гнался (P) улей пчел (S) ...
   a vot a za sobakoj gnalsia ulei pchel
   and so and after dog took off hive bees
   “And so a hive of bees took off after the dog”

Word repetition is another common rhetorical device in Russian oral discourse. Russian speakers routinely utilize phrases of this kind: Я это очень очень люблю ia eto ochen’ ochen’ liublu ‘I like that very very much’ and мы кричали кричали, но он не слышал my krichali krichali, no on ne slyshal ‘we yelled yelled but he did not hear’ to signal emphasis. Zemskäia in Russkaïa razgovornaia rech’ (1978, 92–94) has multiple examples of repeti-
tion: поднимаемся/поднимаемся по склонам podnimaemsia/podnimaemsia po sklonam... ‘we climb up climb up the slope’; трава зеленая-зеленая trava zelenaiia-zelenaiia ‘the grass is green green’; море вот так и вот так more vot tak i vot tak ‘the sea is such and such’; И вдали вдали там где-то деревня I vdal vi dal tam gde-to derevnia... ‘And far far over there somewhere is a village ...’.

The native speaker in the study successfully uses repetition to make the narration expressive. In some instances she repeats the words while in others she repeats, but in a slightly different way.

4) Искали искали и звали его из окна/iskali iskali i zvali ego iz okna/
searched searched and called him from window
“They searched and searched and called him from the window.”

5) и тихонечко тихонечко убежал
i tikhonechko tikhonechko ubezhhal
and quietly quietly fled
“and quietly quietly ran away”

6) а... вот/ а за собакой гнали улей пчел, целая стая
a vot/ a za sobakoi gnalsi ulei pchel, tselaia staia
and so and after dog took off hive bees whole swarm
пчел гнались за бедным псом
pchel gnalis’ za bednym psom
bees took off after poor dog
“So a hive of bees took off after the poor dog, a whole swarm of bees.”

Another narrative strategy is the use of cohesive devices. The heritage students in the study employed few cohesive devices, mainly limited to: и i ‘and’, а a ‘and/or/rather’, но no ‘but’, and который kotoryi ‘who/which’. The native speaker in the study and the speakers in Anilovich/Slobin data have access to a broad range of cohesive devices, such as а вот a vot ‘and so’, и вот i vot ‘and so’, вдруг vdrug ‘suddenly’, тогда togda ‘then’, после того как posle togo kak ‘after’, затем zatem ‘after that’, в результате v rezul’tate ‘as a result’, etc., as a means of tying the narration together and proceeding in a coherent and cohesive manner. They also include parenthetical words (по-видимому po-vidimому ‘obviously’, кажется kazhetsia ‘it seems’, понятно poniatio ‘understood’, наверное navernoе ‘probably’, etc.). Here are some examples:

7) И вот однажды ночью...
i vot odnazhdny noch’iu
and so once once night...
“And so once in the night ...”
8) Bot// и мальчишка по-видимому был очень обижен
vot i mal’chishka po-vidimomu byl ochen’ obizhen
so// and boy obviously was very offended
“And so the boy was obviously very offended/hurt ...”

9) А вот и собака очень... испугана
A vot i sobaka ochen’ ispugana
and so also dog very frightened
“And so the dog was very frightened as well”

10) Bot, кажется, сова их преследует
Vot kazhetsia sova ikh presleduet
so seems owl them follows
“So, it seems, the owl is following them.”

In the 18 narratives by heritage speakers, we only found 3 instances of parenthetical words (оказалось okazalos’ ‘it turned out’; наверное navernoе ‘probably’; к сожалению k sozhaleniu ‘unfortunately’) and one attempt at cohesiveness (вдруг vdrug ‘suddenly’).

Discussion and pedagogical considerations
Lynch (2003a) referred to the “critical period hypothesis” that “maintains that someone who begins to acquire a language after early childhood can never be considered a ‘native speaker’” and concluded that “many HL speakers in the US do not attain ‘native-like’ ability despite having begun naturallistic acquisition of the language within the so-called critical period, i.e., from birth through the early school years.” What holds them back? This is the question that concerns us most of all as we attempt to answer David Andrews’s question. We speculate that at issue are not so much vocabulary deficiencies as an inability to produce native-like discourse.

In their narratives, the participants both succeeded and failed. They succeeded because their vocabulary and grammar were adequate for communicating the events that transpired. All the narrators gave adequate narrations so that a listener would be able to follow the sequence of events in the pictures. However, not one of the heritage learners produced a fully formed story characteristic of Russian narration, because their narrations lacked expressiveness and cohesion. As a result, the narratives, while adequate, were impoverished. They listed the events rather than created a story about them. Since all eighteen narratives were limited in the same way, we can assume that the lacunae did not reflect individual limitations as much as they constitute a standard feature of the heritage learners’ speech.

Certainly foreign language learners also need instruction in narrative
strategies and rhetorical devices; however, heritage learners, being capable of reaching high level competency within a much shorter time period, need to be exposed to these devices and strategies from the very beginning of classroom instruction. The “Frog” study provides confirmation that the macro approach (Kagan and Dillon 2001) is appropriate for heritage speakers. Some curricular suggestions may be found in Chevalier (2004), who proposes a model of using written genre-based discourse to fill in heritage speakers’ discourse lacunae.

Conclusions

If we accept the earlier stated premise (Berman and Slobin) that “[in] becoming a native speaker of a given language,” the child “learns to attend to particular aspects of experience and to relate them verbally in ways that are characteristic of that language,” we can conclude that if heritage speakers are expected to acquire native-like levels of language competency, our instruction needs to compensate for their interrupted childhood experience. Teaching learners to narrate “in the language-appropriate manner” may result in their recapturing the language that was lost when they switched to another dominant language. Recapturing the early lost language should lead in turn to a greater sensitivity to discourse in other spheres, such as high level professional discourse. We do not assume that one cannot be achieved without the other but rather that in the “chaos” that is language learning (Larsen-Free man), a desired result can be triggered by reconstructing the language acquisition process. This effect has been described by Gleick as “sensitive dependence on initial conditions” (8). Foreign language learners, while capable of achieving similar proficiencies, can rely on their background knowledge, knowledge of other languages, and language-learning experience, but not on recapturing prior, and possibly dormant, knowledge. The power of that dormant knowledge may constitute the main difference between the heritage and the non-heritage curricula. While strategy- and discourse-based curriculum is a worthwhile option for non-heritage learners, it is a requirement for the heritage program (Lynch 2003b). Formulating a plan that will take heritage learners to high levels of competency via recapturing their childhood language is one of the answers to the question “So what happens now?”

6. The strategy-based (Cohen) and discourse-based (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain) approaches can be described as macro-approaches.
7. Gleick explains that in weather, for example, this translates into what is half-jokingly known as the Butterfly Effect—the notion that a butterfly stirring the air today in Peking can transform storm systems next month in New York.
REFERENCES


Rifkin, Benjamin. “Fifty Years of Pedagogy in SEEJ: The Learning and Teaching of Slavic Languages. Past, Present and Future.” This issue 29–44.


APPENDIX 1: Age of Arrival

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age at emigration</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Y. T. 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>I. Z. 8</td>
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N = 18 (Groups 3 and 4)  
Born in U.S. (N = 4)  
Arrived before age 7 (N = 4)  
Arrived at 7–9 (N = 10)