Describing Russian Literacy Instruction in the Community Schools

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What are characteristics of HLLs?

- Near-native aural and speaking abilities in their home language without explicit teaching (Tomasello, 2005).

- The heritage (home) language is incompletely acquired and undergoes fossilization and attrition (Polinsky, 2000).

- Receive little instruction in literacy in the HL (Friedman & Kagan, 2008). Do not develop literacy in a heritage language.
We also know:

Many parents are engaged in heritage literacy with the children at home and in **community schools** (Friedman & Kagan, 2008):

- 70% of college-age HL speakers said that during their childhood their parents read to them a variety of books, newspapers, and magazines in the HL. (HLLS, 2009)

- Over a half of the children of immigrants learned to read first in their heritage language or in that language and in English simultaneously (HLLS, 2009)
Community Schools:

- Attempt to teach the children their HL and to help the parents establish literacy routines at home (Lyutykh & Polski, 2009; Otcu, 2010)
- Socialize with others of similar background (Wong & Lopez, 2000; Shibata, 2000; Liu, 2010).
- Typically run by volunteers who may lack training in the subject and pedagogy (Li, 2005; Xiao 2006).
- Have not been consistently found effective in increasing children’s proficiency in reading and writing (Kwon & Polinsky, 2005; Lee, 2008; Xiao 2006) => My focus is on literacy
Literacy – a discourse in and around the written language – is not regarded as simply a set of cognitive skills to be learned. Rather, it is viewed as a complex interactive and interpretive process, which is situated in a particular social and cultural context, in particular ways and for particular purposes (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000)
Why is literacy not spontaneously acquired?

The abstract nature of the written language, which is central to literacy, makes it difficult to learn without systematic instruction, which builds on the learner’s spontaneous (i.e., everyday) experiences and focuses on the development of ‘scientific’ concepts of language through formal instruction (Vygotsky, 1986; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).
Effective English literacy instruction in diverse elementary classrooms:

- Maximizes opportunity to read for pleasure (Dickinson, Flushman, & Freiberg, 2009; Daniel, 2005): *read-aloud* and *independent*

- Fociuses on culturally appropriate meaning construction (Knapp, 1995; Teale, 2003): *discussion*

- Active teacher involvement in the form of *discussion*, such as conferencing with students and *book talks* or *literature circles*, promotes comprehension and concept building (Ruby, 2003; Teale, 2003).
Effective literacy instruction (continued):


- Promoting deeper understanding and use of the words in new and meaningful contexts (McLaughlin et al., 2004):
  - Direct teaching of *word meaning*;
  - Systemic teaching of *word analysis* skills including roots and affixes;
  - Engaging students in *word games, riddles*
We don’t know how literacy instruction look in community schools:

So, the present study Questions:

- What instructional practices (e.g., meaning-making, vocabulary work, grammar teaching, and others) are present in community schools?
- What ‘scientific concepts’ of Russian language and literacy are taught in the instruction?
- How is time spent in the classroom?
- How do teachers explain their choice of instructional practices and scientific concepts?
METHODOLOGY (larger study)

- Mixed-method concurrent triangulation design
- Setting: 2 community schools in a large metropolitan area
- Data sources:
  - 84 surveys from parents of 162 children (108 elementary)
  - 12 parent interviews
  - Naturalistic observation: 22 Saturdays and 21 Sundays
  - 21 hours of structured observation in the classrooms at both locations
    - RCWS - 2 of the language/literature classes were observed three times each, resulting in 12 hours of observation.
    - RSNS – classes taught back to back by the same teacher were observed three times each, resulting in 9 hours of observations.
- 3 teacher interviews
Setting

- The Russian Center in Western Suburbs (RCWS) started in October of 2007 as an enrichment weekend program to teach children the Russian language and culture. Between 30 and 50 children, ages 4-14, enrolled at RCWS to take one to three hours of instruction at different times.

- The Russian School in Northern Suburbs (RSNS) started in 1996 with only seven students. At the time of the study, the school enrolled 100-120 children, ages 4 to 17 and had 18 teachers.
Characteristics of school families

Mean age (SD) of parent respondents 37 (4)

Mean (SD) of parents’ reported English proficiency (scale 0-5) 4.4 (0.7)

Two-parent, middle and upper-middle class households 95%

Families lived in the U.S. between 5 and 17 years 90%

Parents with bachelor degree or higher 92%

Time Russian language is used in Russian-American households 85%

Families with primarily Russian-speaking family friends 90%

Children and adult books in the Russian language in the home 100%

Russian language journals and newspapers in the home 40%

Families visit Russian-speaking country every year or two 20%

(additional 40% went less often)

Expected children to grow up literate in the Russian language 70%
Children characteristics

- 108 (53 males and 55 females) elementary-age children (between ages 5 and 11)
- 88 U.S. born
- 31 children attended weekend classes at the RCWS and 40 at the RSNS.
- The average length of attendance 19 months
- 23 children did not attend either school, but participated in the schools’ holiday celebrations and other community events.
Parental Perceptions of Children’s Russian Proficiency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Mean(SD)</th>
<th>In school Mean(SD)</th>
<th>Not in school Mean(SD)</th>
<th>Comparison between in and not in school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall proficiency</td>
<td>3.3 (.98)</td>
<td>3.5 (.93)</td>
<td>2.9 (1.0)</td>
<td><em>t=2.5</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Russian literacy competency</td>
<td>2.1 (1.5)</td>
<td>2.5 (1.5)</td>
<td>1.5 (1.4)</td>
<td><strong>t=2.8</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Russian aural competency</td>
<td>4.0 (.97)</td>
<td>4.1 (.91)</td>
<td>3.8 (1.0)</td>
<td><em>t=1.7</em></td>
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</tbody>
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*Note: Scale 0 to 5; 0=skill is absent and 5 = native-like*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Years in the U.S.</th>
<th>Age of students in observed class</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valeria</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6-7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lana</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalia</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7-10</td>
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Structured Observations

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity codes:</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Materials used</th>
<th>Concepts Involved</th>
<th>Types of questions (open or closed)</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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<tr>
<td>Reading aloud (1)</td>
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<td>Independent reading (2)</td>
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<td>Conferencing/book talk (3)</td>
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<td>Games (11)</td>
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<td>Discussion (4)</td>
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<td>Direct Teaching (5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing (6)</td>
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<td>Other______________(10)</td>
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Teacher Interviews

Teacher experiences in the weekend schools
1. Tell me about the school? How long have you been teaching here?
2. What is your academic background? How much teaching experience do you have?
3. Why did you decide to come here? Do you have another job?
4. What is it like to be a teacher in the Russian weekend school?
5. What do you see as a main benefit of this school? From your perspective, do children like coming?
6. to this school? To your class? What makes you think so?

Teacher beliefs and instructional practice
1. What do you think is a reasonable goal for these children to accomplish in the weekend school in regards to literacy learning?
2. In your view what is the most effective way to teach these children how to read and write in Russian? Do certain activities work better in your classroom than others? If so, which ones?
3. Who are your most successful learners? Why do you think this is the case? Who are your learners who struggle the most? Why do you think this is the case?
4. What were the main objectives for this lesson? How does it fit in the semester? Or the curriculum?
5. What kinds of resources do you use to help prepare for the lessons?
FINDINGS:

Instruction
- How time is used in a classroom
- Teaching philosophies
- Scientific concepts of literacy
Average time spent on activity in one-hour lesson

- Reading Aloud
- Writing and Board Work
- Homework
- Review
- Discussion
- Vocabulary
- Study
- Grammar study
- Games

Time in minutes

Natalia (7-10 year-olds)
Lana (8-10 year-olds)
Valeria (6-7 year-olds)
Valeria believed that since these classes are “extra work” for the children who came to school on the weekend, it was only fair to try make learning ‘fun’ for them. To this end she placed emphasis on games and other interactive activities during the lesson.
The most important thing in learning the language is to “seek out and receive vivid impressions of life in that language” (I:T:L:35-36). Such impressions come from everyday life experiences, and reading great literature is just one venue to such experiences. I see my mission in sharing my personal vivid impressions of the literature that I love with these children and cultivating their souls.
Most of these children can read decently and even write some. This is because the parents and grandparents spend time at home teaching the children to read and even, hopefully, reading with them regularly. A study of grammar, however, is not what a parent would typically do, or want to do. This is probably the most tedious and boring task. Considering that it is difficult to motivate these children to do all this additional work in Russian, the school is the only place where they can get this knowledge. Of course it is a rather abridged version, but this is better than nothing. I see my role in providing them with a structure for learning Russian grammar and hope that parents can supplement this at home. (I:T:N:55-64)
Interactions: Similar and different

While discourse in all three classrooms was primarily teacher-dominated, the lessons were highly interactive. Teachers commonly used closed and open-ended questions to interact with students.

- Natalia was using more closed questions that focused on grammar and vocabulary.
- Lana was a master of open-ended questions, which aimed at prompting the students to think about big ideas from the texts.
- Valeria used both types of questions to ensure students’ active participation in conversations and games.
Explicit teaching of concepts:

- Valeria: alphabet, consonants, vowels, sentence, and word.
- Lana: metaphors, similes, hyperboles, synonyms, parts of speech.
- Natalia: had the highest presence of scientific concepts (e.g., parts of speech, tenses, aspects, gender agreements)
Thus, each teacher:

- had professional training and a distinct sense of their mission (contrary to some literature)
- Established sound instructional routines and classroom organization, created language- and literacy-rich environments (supported by literature)
- Due to *severe time limitations*, truncated the content of instruction and concepts covered guided by (1) personal teaching philosophies and (2) attempts to accommodate parents’ theories about how instruction should look.

(Dickinson & Tabors, 2002; Tabors, 1997).
Implications:

- Dramatic differences in the instructional practices, content, and concepts that HL elementary age learners experience in the classrooms are likely responsible for inconsistent results in the studies of effectiveness of community schools.

- Need to look at how parents’ and teachers’ language ideas interplay and guide teachers’ instructional practices in the community-based classrooms.

- There is a need to identify specific and ‘limited’ linguistic and literacy content, mastery of which in elementary years would optimize the learners’ trajectory towards high proficiency in heritage language.
Thank You!