Nicole Bugrim, University of California, Los Angeles

Russian as a Heritage Language: Teaching Methods Based on Linguistic and Cultural Issues

1. Introduction

True to its reputation as a “melting pot,” the United States granted permanent resident status to almost 79.5 million immigrants from 1820 to 2013, with nearly four million coming from the former Soviet Union.\(^1\) Soviet emigration has been categorized into four waves: “The first—after the revolution of 1917, the second—tied to World War II, the third—in the 1970s, when Jews and dissidents were permitted to leave the USSR and dissidents were also deported, the fourth—from the end of the 1980s, that is, in the period during and after Perestroika.”\(^2\) Today, the descendants of these Russophone immigrants represent a variety of heritage language speakers in the United States.

A heritage language speaker is defined as “an individual who is exposed to a language other than English at home but educated primarily in English,” and the language spoken at home can be referred to as a heritage language.\(^3\) Two kinds of heritage language speakers have been identified. The first, a broadly defined heritage language speaker, has a connection to the language through their family and cultural background, but because the language was not spoken at home, they have no functional proficiency.\(^4\) Many third and fourth-generation immigrants fall into this category. A narrowly defined heritage language speaker, on the other hand, acquires the

---

\(^1\) See Office of Immigration Statistics, 5–15.
\(^2\) 1-я—после революции 1917 г., 2-я—связанная со второй мировой войной, 3-я—в 70-е годы, когда был разрешен выезд из СССР евреям и диссидентам, а также происходила высылка диссидентов, 4-я—с конца 80-х годов, т. е. в период перестройки и постперестройки. Zemskaja, “Volny emigratsii,” 3. All translations by Bugrim.
\(^3\) Carreira, Jensen, and Kagan, 1.
language at home, usually before or simultaneously with English. This group includes children of Russophone families that emigrated during the 1990s; many of them arrived in the United States before the age of ten, and over 50 percent learned to read Russian before English.

Heritage language learners are heritage language speakers who study the language in a formal educational setting. Although both broadly and narrowly defined heritage speakers have cultural ties to their language, their linguistic capabilities set them apart from one another. In this paper, only narrowly defined heritage learners are discussed. Broadly defined heritage learners enter the classroom as second language learners without any functional proficiency. Narrowly defined heritage learners, on the other hand, “bring to the classroom some measure of competence in the language.” Most are schooled in English, however, and receive little to no formal education in their heritage language. When they enroll in a language class in high school or college, they are therefore often, as the title of a recent paper describes them, “lost in between.” Their knowledge of the language is not as advanced as native speakers’, but acquiring the language at an early age gives them a set of linguistic capabilities different from those of second language learners. Heritage language learners are thus out of place in both native speaker classes and second language classes, requiring a third option: heritage language classes.

One major factor affecting heritage students and their motivations for studying their heritage language is the idea of cultural identity. Many feel that they are neither entirely American nor entirely Russian (or another Russian-speaking ethnicity) but a combination of the

5 See ibid., 41–42.
6 See ibid., 52.
8 See Carriera and Kagan, 42.
9 Ibid.
10 See ibid., 45.
11 Isurin and Ivanova-Sullivan, 100.
two. Sixty percent of respondents in the National Heritage Language Survey reported that they view themselves as X-American (X being their heritage ethnicity), 33 percent as non-American, and only 6 percent as American (1 percent as other). Russian was the third most common language selected by respondents as their heritage language (with 12.7 percent of the total 1,732 responses), and many of these respondents reported having close familial ties to it; in fact, the most common reasons for Russian heritage students to study their language were to learn about their roots and to be able communicate better with family and friends both in the United States and abroad.

Heritage language teaching is a relatively new field, with most of the scholarship having been written in the last ten to fifteen years. Although ideas and teaching methods are still evolving, material has been published that discusses the differences between heritage language learners and second language learners—such as Zyzik’s “Toward a Prototype Model of the Heritage Language Learner: Understanding Strengths and Needs”—as well as the effects of these differences on classroom dynamics and methods of teaching—such as Carreira’s “Supporting Heritage Language Learners through Macrobased Teaching: Foundational Principles and Implementation Strategies for Heritage Language and Mixed Classes.” Most articles focus on speakers of one language and on a particular aspect that distinguishes heritage language learners, like Ivanova-Sullivan’s “Lost in Between: The Case of Russian Heritage Speakers,” Karapetian’s “Defective Armenian: The Destructive Impact of Heritage Language Anxiety,” and Wiley’s “Chinese ‘Dialect’ Speakers as Heritage Language Learners: A Case Study.” There is also material available on general linguistics that elucidates the differences between heritage learners

---

13 See ibid., 43.
and second language learners, such as Kallestinova’s “Aspects of Word Order in Russian” and Lemke’s “Language Development and Identity: Multiple Timescales in the Social Ecology of Learning.” Most of the literature focuses on either linguistic or cultural aspects. This paper combines these aspects to illustrate the kind of classroom that will address the needs of heritage learners.

The techniques used in second language classrooms are not beneficial to heritage learners; in fact, they are sometimes detrimental to them. A heritage language classroom must address not only heritage learners’ linguistic needs but also their cultural needs. This paper argues that because of heritage language learners’ differences from second language learners, language classrooms must be altered to address both linguistic aspects, such as how the language is acquired and which grammatical demand greater focus, and cultural aspects, such as language anxiety and how language defines identity, in order to better accommodate heritage language learners.

II. Linguistic Aspects of Heritage Learners

What distinguishes heritage language learners from second language learners are the concepts of implicit knowledge and explicit knowledge. Implicit knowledge, in which “children learn the structural properties of their native language without a conscious intention to learn them and without awareness of what they have acquired,” is associated with first language acquisition. Heritage language learners usually have implicit knowledge of their language, “which is a consequence of having acquired the language naturalistically in early childhood.”

---

14 See Zyzik, 29.
15 Ibid., 23.
16 Ibid., 25.
In other words, heritage language learners do not have a conscious knowledge of the grammar of their language.

When heritage language learners and second language learners are compared performing a series of tasks, the results show that while the former have an advantage most of the time, they are disadvantaged when a task requires metalinguistic knowledge (that is, explicit knowledge of the language).\textsuperscript{17} For example, in an exercise that asks students to decline a noun, second language students can recall memorized case endings, which are learned explicitly, but heritage language students may not be able to do so. Lacking metalinguistic knowledge, “[heritage language] learners are at a disadvantage when exposed to materials that are intended to teach grammar to [second language] learners.”\textsuperscript{18} Additionally, second language learners “are intimately familiar with exercises that ask them to fill in the blanks, transform sentences from one type to another, and replace underlined forms.”\textsuperscript{19} They are “accustomed to completing them with the goal of applying previously learned vocabulary or grammar.”\textsuperscript{20} Heritage language learners, on the other hand, often view exercises as “an opportunity to communicate a message using any combination of grammar and vocabulary they have at their disposal.”\textsuperscript{21} Therefore, exercises that work well for second language learners do not work as well in heritage language classrooms.

Basic-level cognition (BLC) and higher-level cognition (HLC) also differentiate heritage learners and second language learners.\textsuperscript{22} BLC consists of three components: implicit

\textsuperscript{17} See ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 26.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} See ibid., 21.
(unconscious) knowledge of the language structure, explicit (conscious) knowledge of word meanings, and the automatic way in which the speaker uses this knowledge. HLC, on the other hand, “is the extension of BLC: it includes low-frequency vocabulary [...] grammatically (more) complex sentences, and it comprises written discourse.” Both native and heritage speakers have BLC because they do not have to process everything they are saying; speech comes naturally. They can acquire HLC through education in their heritage language. Many heritage speakers possess only BLC because they have not been formally educated in their language.

**Teaching Methods Based on Linguistic Differences**

Current teaching methods for second language learners focus on explicit knowledge of syntax and morphology, that is, word order and the structure of words, including noun and verb prefixes and suffixes. When heritage learners are in a classroom that uses second language materials, however, “in the best-case scenario, [they] simply do not benefit as much from these activities as a group of [second language] learners would [...] in the worst case, [heritage language] learners become confused by explicit grammatical explanations about aspects of the language they already know implicitly.” An alternative approach is necessary.

Macrobased (also called “top-down”) teaching is a method that offers a solution to this problem. Comparing microbased and macrobased methods illustrates why the latter works well in heritage classrooms. Every method is split into categories: vocabulary and grammar, reading, writing, speaking and listening, and culture. While micro-based approaches begin with small, restricted topics and work toward more advanced material, macrobased approaches begin with

---

23 See Zyzik, 22.
24 Ibid.
25 See ibid., 29.
26 Ibid.
longer and more complex texts, topics, and input. Microbased teaching is implemented in second language classes, while macrobased teaching is more helpful for heritage language learners because “a defining feature of macrobased approaches is that they teach grammar and vocabulary as dictated by function or context.” Additionally, “macrobased approaches are well suited to more advanced levels, where learners have the functional skills to engage in complex and authentic activities at the outset of instruction.” This kind of teaching allows heritage students to use the basics they already know confidently in order to expand their knowledge of the language. It teaches the language within the context of a chosen topic and allows students to use their base knowledge to learn about this topic. One example of macrobased teaching can be found in a program at the University of Texas-Pan American. The Medical Spanish for Heritage Learners course utilizes macrobased teaching methods to lead its students “from colloquial discourse, to texts within the genre of popular scientific discourse, to scientific texts using technical terminology and the grammatical constructions of scientific discourse.” In this program, students learn about their area of interest while also expanding their language skills by using the language in a context.

Another issue that heritage learners who have not studied the language in a formal setting must overcome is their relatively weak literacy:

Individuals who were educated in Russian (in the USSR, in old or new Russia, or in immigration) usually preserve the Russian language better. Not only can they speak it (like many speakers born abroad who represent the second, third, and fourth generations of immigrants of the first wave, or like children of the fourth wave of immigrants who were educated abroad), but they are educated in the rules of grammar and orthography, and they can read and write. They are set apart by

---

27 See Carreira, 125.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 126.
their knowledge of Russian in the written form, that is, skills that those who are taught Russian only at home often do not possess.\textsuperscript{31}

In one study, heritage learners self-assessed their knowledge of their heritage language in four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) on a scale (none, low, intermediate, advanced, native-like). For listening, the results were mostly split among intermediate, advanced, and native-like (27.5 percent, 31 percent, and 36.8 percent, respectively). Most considered their speaking skills to be intermediate or advanced (37.8 percent and 24.3 percent, respectively). For reading and writing, however, the results were mostly in the low and intermediate range, with 28.8 percent and 39.6 percent, respectively, for the former and 40.3 percent and 36.2 percent, respectively, for the latter.\textsuperscript{32} With these results in mind, teachers must focus on what heritage students need. While they may possess confidence in their speaking and listening skills, their writing and reading abilities are comparatively weak and therefore require greater attention in class.

Because of the difference between the two types of teaching methods, “materials designed originally for teaching grammar (syntax and morphology) to a population of [second language] learners will have limited applicability to the [heritage learner] classroom.”\textsuperscript{33} Many aspects of teaching must be altered, specifically those pertaining to grammar. On the other hand,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} Лица, получившие образование на русском языке (в СССР, в старой или новой России, в эмиграции), как правило, лучше сохраняют русский язык. Они не только умеют говорить на нем (как многие родившиеся за границей представители второго, третьего и четвертого поколения первой волны или как дети эмигрантов четвертой волны, получающие образование уже за рубежом), они обучены правилам грамматики и орфографии, читают и пишут. Их отличает умение пользоваться русским языком в письменной форме, т. е. навыки, которых нередко лишены лица, учились русскому языку лишь дома. Zemskaja, “Faktory,” 211.
\item \textsuperscript{32} See Carriera and Kagan, 46.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Zyzik, 29.
\end{itemize}
“[second language classroom] methods and materials targeting vocabulary will be readily transferrable to the [heritage learner] context.”34

IV. Russian Language and Cultural Identity

Issues affecting heritage language teaching extend beyond the linguistic capabilities of heritage language learners to questions of cultural identity. Every heritage learner is different, bringing to the classroom their own unique background and connection to the language. Cultural identity and language anxiety in heritage learners demand modified classrooms for these students.

a. Identity

Identity can be defined as “the performance, verbally and nonverbally, of a possible constellation of attitudes, beliefs, and values that has a recognizable coherence by the criteria of some community.”35 In this context, language plays an immensely important role, because “language choice is not only an effective means of communication but also an act of identity.”36

Joshua Fishman explains the role of language in a person’s life in the following way:

Another dimension of what people tell you about when they tell you about language and culture is why they like their language, why they say it is important to them. They tell you about kinship. They tell you that their mother spoke the language to them, their father spoke the language, their brothers, the sisters, the uncles, the aunts, the whole community. All the ones who loved them spoke the language to them when they were children. Just before their mother died she spoke the language to them. All the endearments, all the nurturing, that is kinship is tied into a living organism of a community by people who know each other, and they know they belong together. That is what the old sociologists call “Gemeinschaft.” We belong together. We have something in common. We are tied to each other through the language.37

34 Ibid.
35 Lemke, 72.
36 Wei, 14.
37 Fishman, 73.
Identity is shaped by the community around an individual, and language plays an important role in defining that community. In the case of an imperial language like Russian, however, assumptions should not be made about an individual’s identity based solely on the language they speak. In a 1970 census of the Soviet Union, “some 13 million Soviet citizens declared themselves […] to be of non-Russian ethnic origin but to have Russian as their native language.”38 For example, “only 12.8 percent of the Karaim, a Turkic-speaking group living for the most part in Lithuania, declared Karaim as their native language.”39 This phenomenon is further examined in a study by Bhavna Dave of Russian speakers in Kazakhstan. Bota, a citizen of Kazakhstan who does not speak Kazakh, says, “‘I think and speak in Russian. Yet I am a Kazakh at heart and will never think of myself as anything else.’”40 Russian is her native language, but she does not think of herself as ethnically Russian in any way; she identifies as Kazakh. Given the number of ethnicities that populate the fifteen former Soviet Republics, Bota’s story could be, to a greater or lesser degree, that of any student entering a heritage classroom today. Teachers, then, must be prepared to address a wide variety of cultural backgrounds.

*b. Language Anxiety*

Language anxiety has been described as follows:

In a diasporic setting, where exposure to the heritage language is naturally limited, speakers’ proficiency often remains underdeveloped and noticeably weaker than their dominant language. As a result, they may be subjected to teasing, ridicule, error correction, and criticism by more proficient speakers in the family and the wider heritage language community, which leads to internalized feelings of incompetence and fears of judgment.41

38 Comrie, 2.
39 Ibid.
40 Dave, 64–65.
41 Karapetian, 1–2.
This is experienced by heritage speakers across languages. In a study of third-generation Mexican-Americans, participants expressed insecurity about their Spanish language skills, the product of “comparisons between their Spanish output and the linguistic performance of the [native speakers], which is compounded by teasing.” Speakers of Armenian reported similar experiences, with teasing and jokes from family members resulting in “a toll on speakers’ self-esteem and willingness to engage in future communication in the heritage language.” Indeed, “for many heritage speakers, interactions […] especially with better skilled speakers, function like an endless guessing game in which they are persistently in fear of being caught.” The same trend occurs in Russian communities. Anxiety discourages heritage speakers from taking language classes, making it difficult for them to improve their proficiency.

V. Teaching Methods Based on Language and Cultural Identity

Macrobased teaching methods integrate a wide range of cultural topics with language instruction. Because of the cultural diversity among heritage Russian speakers, however, and because most students reportedly take Russian classes to connect with their roots, creating a classroom in which all students can feel represented and thrive is a challenging but necessary goal.

Teachers should possess “a great deal of knowledge about and personal experience with the learners’ cultures” as well as “knowledge […] of historical and current immigration issues

---

42 Goble, 48.
43 Karapetian, 9.
44 Ibid., 13.
45 See Carreira, 125.
and language policy.”

Ideally, a heritage classroom will incorporate aspects of all represented cultures. For example, if the curriculum includes a discussion about art, the lesson plan should feature material not only about Russian artists but also about Armenian, Belorussian, and Ukrainian artists, and others according to the makeup of the class. Teachers should also be aware of language anxiety and avoid stigmatizing students who speak with regional dialects or accents. They must make students feel comfortable and unafraid to participate in class, and they should remind them regularly that heritage students without prior formal education in the language are not expected to have the same proficiency as a native speaker.

The significance of a heritage language lies not only in the bond between the speaker and the language itself but also between the speaker and their linguistic community. When heritage speakers are encouraged to improve their language proficiency in classrooms that address their unique needs, the language is preserved. Language preservation is vital to the development of the identity of the individual as well as the culture and traditions of their community. More broadly, heritage language speakers, having been exposed to multiple languages and cultures, are well equipped to promote international understanding in careers such as translation and diplomacy. Because of the growing number of Russian speakers in the United States as well as recent political tensions, bilingual Russian speakers are as invaluable as ever.

---

47 Schwartz, 236.
Works Cited


