

FLEAT PRESENTATION: VIDEOTEXTS

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Our talk is about a pedagogical tool which we call a “videotext.” In a nutshell, it is a video which is subtitled in the target language. The topics exemplify culture (both ‘big C’ and ‘little c’). Conjoining aural, visual, literal, and cultural cues, the videotext allows students to learn language and culture simultaneously.

This project began when we realized there were few cultural video materials for elementary levels in Russian. The conventional wisdom is that culture should be taught at upper levels, and that a high language proficiency is needed to discuss cultural concepts. Yet, enrollments are greatest at the elementary level, and curiosity is high in the social, political and economic upheavals upon the fall of Communism. Many students initially become interested in the language precisely because of such cultural issues, and we wanted to tap this curiosity while using the medium that students favor: video.

We were also frustrated with trivial chit-chat conversations offered in textbooks for oral work. It seems to us that students receive satisfaction from expressing their knowledge about non-superficial topics, even if in a rudimentary way. If you are going to practice oral work, why not do it with more thoughtful material than chit-chat? After all, Russians themselves sit around the kitchen table and talk about the soul, whither goeth Russia, Dostoevsky - and also about food and drink.

Moreover, authentic Russian native-informants are now plentiful. The number of Russian *émigrés* in the U.S. is rising sharply even in small-town America. Each often has an amazing tale of how they ended up in rural Virginia. With today’s lightweight digital video cameras, it is easy to make one’s own video-interviews that make the new culture come alive for students. These are “authentic” videos, in which the human element is vivified. The native informants are ordinary people, not actors, using their native tongue to relate personal experiences and opinions in an unrehearsed manner. As one recent student recipient of the prestigious Truman award explained in her application, she got turned onto Russian language through the Russian people she met.

The big contribution, however, came from Dick Kuettner, who trained a crew of students to do Cyrillic subtitling of all native speech using the Sanako software program.

In the videotexts, the speech is captioned, word for word, in the target language. The syntax, vocabulary, articulation, and tempo are geared to the elementary level, giving students enough time to listen, view, and read without being rushed. Speech tempo directed to an elementary audience can more easily be transcribed in full, than a feature film, where speech can be only approximately subtitled.

With subtitled video, students utilize three channels of learning simultaneously -- *hearing* native speech, *reading* the word-for-word transcription in Russian, and *observing* gestures, facial expressions, and intonation of native speakers from vastly different regions of Russia. Oral comprehension always lags far behind reading ability. Captioning bridges the gap between reading and listening comprehension. I myself as a new immigrant remember a younger neighbor asking me “Dyuwannaplay?” It sounded all like one long word. Seeing it written as five words helps put various channels of comprehension together.

The topics are various. There are about 35 videotexts in our collection thus far (See list in Appendix or online at <http://tmc.wlu.edu/russian>). The instructor can select the topics that suit a particular class’ interests. Some topics are meant to prepare students to spend a summer study in St. Petersburg. These themes deal with lifestyle (such as: dinner etiquette, greeting and parting etiquette, family life). Other topics cover history and politics, a common interest of students (Peter the Great, The Great Terror, the transition from communism, environmental issues). In yet other videotexts, poetry and children’s stories are recited by professional actors. Students should know how vastly the Russian language spans the globe - through 11 time zones and over 21 different ethnicities. However, videos which accompany textbooks unfortunately are usually set in Moscow.

The first videotext is admittedly amateurish, but it is still the students’ first day’s assignment: to learn the alphabet. In the videotext, Dennis (a young man from Perm, in the Ural region, who arrived in our town as an illegal janitor at WalMart) enunciates words which are cognates in our two languages. Students thus learn not only the alphabet but also the sound system.

Next is a demonstration of how to cook borshch, Russia’s national cuisine. Natasha was an exchange student at our university, a young woman from Belorussia who happened to be in love with Aziz, from Kirgiztan. The Communists were very successful in Russifying the republics - Aziz did not speak his Kirgiz tongue until Communism fell, and Natasha’s native tongue at home was not Belorussian. Students wonder out loud whether their parents objected to their diverse ethnicity or to the fact that one was Christian, and the other a Muslim. Secondly, they learn which food staples are most common in Russian cuisine: beets, cabbage, onion, carrots, potatoes, sour cream, bread; and common kitchen vocabulary such as pots and pans. They also gain linguistic knowledge: When they make up their own famous borshch recipe, they drill the imperative mood: **boil** the water, **peel** potatoes, **cut** the onion, **add** the beets, **grate** the carrots, and finally, **eat!**

Student evaluations rated the following video as No. 1. Lucia, a Tatar woman, who also lives in our town, came to our class one year, though declined to come the next year, because she

was pregnant; it is a cultural taboo for a pregnant woman to appear in public. Again, students noted that Lucia spoke fluent Russian. She barely knows her parents' Tartar tongue. Her parents lived in a Tatar village in the Ural region where the first Chernobyl nuclear meltdown occurred in 1957. Neither the outside world nor the local population knew about it. The truth came out only in 1991, and was recorded in a Russian-language documentary, "Living on the Atomic River." The local population has been studied all these years for the effects of radiation. Lucia swam in the radioactive river, ate the radioactive fish, was studied by doctors. Women still haul water from the street well in buckets in the dead of winter. There is abject poverty, yet Lucia's reaction upon watching the film was, "Oh, I'm so homesick!"

The next videotext shows Tatiana, a middle-aged professional Russian, in her apartment in St. Petersburg. Five of our students had traveled there in 2000, three months after the election of Vladimir Putin as President. Tatiana agreed to answer the students' prepared questions about this early experience with "democracy." Supplementing this video's subtitles are Tatiana's typical singsong intonation, and warm body language. Although Russians culturally appear sullen and uncommunicative in public, (e.g., they never smile or greet a stranger on the street), they are exceedingly warm in private. This videotext often interests students who study History, Politics or Journalism. Our collection includes several post-election interviews with residents of St. Petersburg about the recent presidential election, their personal economic changes since the fall of communism, and their (widely varying) understanding of the concept of democracy.

In the next example, Natasha recounts everyday cultural differences between American and Russian lifestyles, as she sees them. First impressions count. This was Natasha's first visit to America. The first difference she noted was that Russians have no concept of "personal space" or privacy. Because they live in small apartments (often an entire family in a single room), they sit, stand, talk, eat very close to one another.

We can next return to our Walmart janitor, Dennis, 2 years later. In this videotext he acts out 14 skits that exemplify emotion verbs. These are quite difficult in Russian: students were asked to describe whether and why he is angry, happy, sad, nervous, afraid, jealous, sick to his stomach, etc.

We were fortunate in the last videotext to have two professional actors as native assistants; you can tell they are actors when Anna reads children's stories, and Sergei recites poetry as their readings come alive. Reciting poetry is a very Russian thing to do.

Thus we see that each videotext integrates the teaching of culture with language. For example, all the history videos, such as Peter the Great, drill the students on the instrumental case. In Russian, when you say, Peter was tsar in the 17th century, "tsar" is not nominative (or subjective completion), but instrumental. Because sentence structure in Russian is unlike

English, it requires extra drilling. You may as well learn something about Peter the Great at the same time as you're drilling the instrumental case.

One end result is that the videotext accelerates both cultural and language learning by multiplying the channels of acquisition, while maximizing the accessibility of content. In turn, captioning increased the rate of absorption and decreased the psychic cost of learning a difficult language. Subtitles can bring more advanced videos to elementary students.

A second end result is that both instructor and student have the flexibility to use the subtitles in full, partially, or not at all. There are always two versions of each video: with and without captioning. Weaker students tend to require subtitles, while gifted students often wish to be challenged.

Let us end with an excerpt from the film *White Nights*. In it, Mikhail Baryshnikov dances to a song by the gravel-voiced bard, idolized by a generation of Russians, Vladimir Vysotsky. The class had previously studied two subtitled protest songs of Vysotsky's, and the next day a student brought this excerpt to class.

APPENDIX: LIST OF TITLES TO DATE

APPENDIX A: Titles of videotexts (minutes and seconds in parentheses) used in beginning -to-intermediate Russian classes; see <http://tmc.wlu.edu/russian>

1. How Russians perceive Americans (14:31)
2. Differences between Russian and American ways of life (8:18)
3. Demonstration: Natasha and Aziz cook borshch (21:22)
4. Breakfast, lunch, dinner (3:01)
5. Dinner etiquette (9:25)
6. Russian etiquette:
 - (a) When to say 'vy' versus 'ty'; when to use the patronymic (7:30)
 - (b) ways of saying hello and good-bye (5:28)
7. Russian weddings and traditions: Civil and religious (3:08)
8. Is Sasha married? (1:05)
9. *Maslenitsa* holiday (1:47)
10. Gender issues: Galya's diary (one page adapted from P. Kozhevnikov's *Dve tetradi*) (1:50)
11. Our first vocabulary: Russian alphabet, sounds, and cognates (5:40)
- 12-17. Children's stories, told by actress Anna Rodionova and others:
 - "Elka" (9:31)
 - "How Nika studied to swim" (2:43)
 - "If" (7:06)
 - "Singing lesson" (4:32)
 - "Little Red Riding Hood" (7:32)
 - "Lastochki" (4:26)

18. Skits: What emotions does Denis exhibit, and why? (5:17)
19. Emotions by Sasha (4:43)
- 20-22. Poetry recitations by actor Sergei Kokovkin and others (2:07, 7:42, 2:35)
23. Mikhail Zoshchenko (2:00)
24. Highlights of Russian history: Peter the Great (7:49)
25. The city of St. Petersburg (19:54)
26. History of the Russian language (8:39)
27. Soviet history: Highlights of events, 1905-1991 (7:24)
28. Stalinist terror, one example (5:08)
29. Student Sings "The Internationale" (1:17)
30. World War II: Seryozha; first page, adapted from V. Panova's *Seryozha* (4:59)
31. The 1957 nuclear explosion in Cheliabinsk: Living on the atomic river (7:16)
32. The Brezhnev years: Commentary about the film *Chuchelo* (28:25)
33. Vladimir Vysotskii, televised concert (16:00)
- 34-36. Social and Political Change: Interviews with Denis, age 29 (19:58); Tatiana, age 50 (35:22);
and Svetlana, age 65 (25:27) about Post-Soviet social change and the 2000 presidential elections.
37. Chechnya (13:47)