Vlogging Culture: 
Teaching cultural literacy with streaming pop-music videos in intensive beginning Russian

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AGENDA
1. The Challenge
2. The Project
   • Why music videos?
   • Culture & Cultural Memetics
3. The Technology
4. Implementation, Observations, & Student Feedback
5. Implications for the future
The interrelatedness of language and culture

**LANGUAGE**
- proficiency, effectiveness
- interaction, communication
- learned, shared behaviors

**CULTURE**
- cross-cultural competence
- values, beliefs, norms, customs
- dynamic aspects of natural-physical world; linkages to daily life

**REGION**
- awareness, “spatial” aptitude
- agriculture, climate, terrain, water, industry, resources, transportation
Difficulty of teaching cultural literacy in beginning intensive Russian

- Linguistic demands of 1st-year Russian
- Intensive course schedule
- Lack of instructor experience
- Lack of learner proficiency
- Inaccessibility of high-culture elements

Russians recite Pushkin!

Russian Language Day – June 6 – in Orsk, Russia
The video blog project

• **Stage One (current study):**
  – creation and implementation of video blog for streaming captioned pop-music videos in beginning Russian
  – assessment of initial perceptions and usefulness for teaching cultural awareness

• **Stage Two:**
  – indexing of cultural literacy topics available with expected learning outcomes
  – inclusion of topics in formal classroom assessments
  – implementation of social media elements of blog environment

• **Stage Three:**
  – analysis of learner outcomes in cultural literacy
  – blog enhancement for self-study
Cultural value of popular music videos

- Pop music and attitudes toward self and place
- Collectively created discourses of everyday life
- Expressions of consumer-driven economy and pop-culture environment
- Language is culturally authentic, contextually situated, and designed specifically for memorability and reciteability
  - The 5Cs: ACTFL’s *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century*
    - Communication, Connections, Comparisons, Communities
- Culture and cultural memetics
Cultural Memetics

- Culture can be transmitted:
  - vertically (from generation to generation)
  - horizontally (within one generation)
- Memes are cultural patterns that are replicated (passed) from person to person
  - melody, image, chorus, lyric, phrase
  - the catchier, the better
- Attractive, relatable, memorable, memorizable
- Consumerism – purposeful or collectively created
Poetry, advertising, and pop-music

• “Не тормози, ___________”
• “Русское радио. Всё ___________”
• “Ваша киска купила бы _________”
• “Есть идея...есть ___.”
Contemporary music videos

• “potent music/lyric/image combination” (Garza, 2009)
Cultural literacy topics

- stereotypes – caricatures and self-caricatures, parodies
- social and political commentary
- nationalism, military themes
- folk vs. contemporary themes
- gender issues, songs “о главном” (“about what’s most important”)
Benefits of glossed/captioned text

- affects primary and incidental vocabulary acquisition (Abraham, 2008)
- bridges the gap between reading and listening comprehension (Garza, 2009)
- construct a framework of comprehension for future application (Gruba, 2004)
Dr. Watson’s Video Blog

- [http://www.acerjw.com/rusmuz](http://www.acerjw.com/rusmuz)
- in development and used in class since 2011
Why a video blog?

• Culture of “video-on-demand”
  – new expectations by learners

• Interactive and “social” medium
  – familiar “consumer” environment

• More suited for beginning learners
  – Different approach than “Rockin’ Russian”

• User-, time-, and resource-friendly

Rockin’ Russian: http://coerll.utexas.edu/rr/
Technology Used

• **WordPress blog**: DIY blog program, hosted on personal website
  – free sites: blogger.com, wordpress.com, typepad.com

• **JW Player plug-in (v.5.0)**: to stream video and display subtitles in WordPress

• **SubtitleEdit (v.3.3.15)**: open-source subtitle synchronization program ([http://nikse.dk](http://nikse.dk))
  – SRT, XML, WebVTT
  – YouTube download site ([keepvid.com](http://keepvid.com))
Useful language learning videos should:

Garza, 1991, 2009:

1) present desirable linguistic material that is both current and accurate
2) have high audio/visual correlation in which the video track is essential to comprehension
3) have multiple layers, present cultural literacy issues, and provide paralinguistic elements such as gestures and body language
4) exhibit high production values, tells a complete story, is entertaining, and can maintain the interest of a native speaker

PLUS:
5) have high memetic value – memorable, attractive, catchy
Implementation

In-class
• change-of-pace exercise – 2-3 times a week
• targeted classroom discussion
• pre-viewing activity
  – activate schemata
  – introduce viewing focus
• post-viewing activity
  – discuss cultural topics, draw connections with home culture
  – speaking/reading/listening practice to reinforce

Out-of-class
• provided to students as a supplementary resource
• students urged to use on their own at their leisure
Initial observations

• connections between home and target cultures
• questioning cultural realities in Russian-speaking world
• humming melodies, singing choruses, promoting videos and artists to peers
• searching and recommending new videos for the blog
• clarifying grammar and vocabulary issues – planned and incidental
  – pronunciation
  – verb conjugations
  – case forms
Student survey: May 2014 (N=15)

• Anonymous survey (hosted on SurveyMonkey.com) offered to 34 students

• Nine open-ended questions
  – What aspects of language/culture did you learn from the blog?
  – What video did you like the most and why?

• Ten Likert-scale agreement items
  – The video blog gave me valuable insight into Russian culture.
  – The blog motivates me to want to study the language more.
  – The blog helped make Russian culture a little more “real” to me.
Student responses

• When asked what they liked most:
  – “real word language and culture exposure”
  – “lightened up the course”
  – “[I] wanted to sing along...had to learn some new words”
  – “The music was good, but being able to know what they were saying made them even better”

• When asked what aspects of Russian language they learned:
  – “how to pronounce certain things” or “how normal Russians speak” and “the speed at which Russians communicate.”
  – “Being absolutely 100% honest with you. I did not know what in the world a conjugation was at all. But when we watched Pupsik I constantly saw the conjugation for love in the ‘I’ form and I don’t know why, but it literally made me realize what a conjugation was for.”
Student responses cont.

• When asked what aspects of Russian culture they learned:
  – better understanding of how Russians perceive Americans and how Russians and Americans have similar tastes
    • “different perspectives” ...“little nuances of Russians” ... “how they treat holidays,” “city life,” and “current events”
  – “helped further my understanding of the culture” and
  – “brought Russian to life and made it something we can see...not just words in a book.”

• When asked what their favorite video is/was on the blog and why:
  – lyrics (easy, not complicated)
  – cultural elements (Russian perspectives, Western/American influences)
  – song/video quality (good beat, funny video)
  – memetic value (easy to memorize or catchy, “stuck in my head”)


Likert-Scale Agree/Disagree data

- 93% of respondents (N=14/15) agreed:
  - the blog was useful for learning about culture
  - generated interesting discussion
  - made Russian culture more “real”

- 86% (N=13/15) agreed the blog motivated them to want to study the language more

- 80% (N=12/15) agreed the blog motivated them to want to study the culture more

- Only 34% of respondents expressed interest in more language exercises to accompany the videos

- 46% said they would use the blog in the future to practice language skills
Evidence-based implications

• visual contextualization + written and spoken lyrics = “potent”
• bilingual glosses/captions crucial at this level
• memetic value of song+video combination = saliency
  – incidental learning (noticed, sought out for practice, recalled)
  – more important than “song likeability” (see Beaseley & Chuang, 2008)
• video blog effectiveness
  – highly manipulable, DIY environment
  – effective and time-efficient use in-class
  – afforded increased contact hours outside of class
  – mirrors the way music videos are consumed in native language settings
    • sharing, leisure viewing, playlists
  – avoids typical pitfalls of using technology
    • unfamiliar activities or technology
    • technology for the sake of technology
Implications for the future

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Vlogging Culture:  
*Teaching cultural literacy with streaming pop-music videos in intensive beginning Russian: A pilot study*  

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QUESTIONS?
Useful References


Russian Language Videos

- **stereotypes – caricatures and self-caricatures, parodies**

- **social and political commentary**
  TVRain (Producer). (2012, February 29). *Preved, Medved*. [Recorded by Vasya Oblomov, Kseniya Sobchak, & Leonid Parfyonov]. Retrieved from [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=do0wm0xTNY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=do0wm0xTNY)

- **nationalism, military**
Russian Language Videos

• **folk vs. contemporary themes**

• **gender issues**

• **high memetic value**