

But What Does That Mean?



**TEACHING TRANSLATION
TO TEACH LANGUAGE
AND VICE-VERSA**

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Students and Texts



- All texts are authentic Russian texts – sources in handouts – which have been used in classes.
- The student population is
 - At the level 2+ / 3 threshold (or higher) on DLPT5
 - ✦ ACTFL Intermediate High / Advanced Low
 - Working with Russian on a daily basis
 - Drawn from classes over eleven years, comprising hundreds of individuals

The Class



- **We have two versions for Russian learners**
 - RUSS2040 – for Level 2 (Intermediate High)
 - RUSS3040 – for Level 2+ (Advanced Low)
- **And UKRN3040 for Level 2+ Ukrainian learners**

Materials



- All materials are Level 3 – that is, they are
 - opinion pieces,
 - presenting and defending points of view,
 - with strong authorial presence or ‘voice’, and
 - exhibiting literary style and syntactic constructions.
- They are all authentic – written by natives for natives.

Sources



- Texts are drawn from op-ed, columns, and blogs.
- Common sources include but are not limited to
 - Grani.ru, an independent Russian paper
 - Slon.ru, an independent news organization
 - Gazeta, an independent Russian paper
 - Den', a Ukrainian daily
 - Ukrainska Pravda, an independent Ukrainian paper
 - Vysokiy Zamok, a newspaper based in L'viv
 - Longer blog and Facebook or V Kontakte entries

Data



- **Texts vary in length**
 - A session generally will have 2200 to 2400 words, generally four texts in total
- **Sometimes a class is built around a theme**
 - Political events (Putin at Valdai; elections; Ukrainian conflict)
 - Arts and entertainment
 - Science
- **The default is current events, mostly politics and war**

Structure I



- **Students get credit for 40 hours, most of which are independent work in their offices.**
- **The texts are emailed to the students.**
- **They may use any working aids, including on-line.**
- **They have a month to produce rough drafts, which they email to us.**

Structure



- The rough drafts are corrected, at this stage, for comprehension, and returned to the students.
- The students have another month to complete final drafts and email them to us.
- Their final drafts are returned to them with comments before the final day of class.

The Final Session



- The class meets once in person, though students are encouraged to call or email if they have questions.
- The rough draft-and-corrections means that no student comes to the final session with comprehension or major syntax errors in their translation.
- The class discusses the *translation* of each text.

Discussion



- Each student reads the translation of one or two sentences.
- When possible, we choose students who did particularly well on that selection.
- If most or all students had trouble with it, we lead the discussion by pointing out the problem area(s).
- Students usually offer alternatives.

Why?



- **Even at L2+/Advanced, students struggle with translation of upper-level texts.**
- **Problem areas we have identified include:**
 - Case endings – not recognizing them or (more frequently) ignoring them
 - Syntax – particularly participles and verbal adverbs
 - Emotive and emphatic word order
 - Cultural references

The DLPT conceals problem areas



- Learners who can successfully achieve a 2+ or even 3 on the DLPT frequently have problems in translating.
- Answering multiple choice questions is much easier.
- Guided to possible answers, students can “check their work” against the questions.

Grammar teaching exacerbates them



- **One constant: lack of cohesion**
- **Students treat each sentence as an isolated unit**
- **Grammar exercises encourage this**

Left-to-Right Ambiguity



- In Slavic languages, case and gender make participial and relative clauses unambiguous.
- If the relative is masculine and there are three feminine nouns between it and its antecedent, straight left-to-right translating will missassign it.
- References from one sentence back into another can become dangerously ambiguous, if not clear but wrong.

Translation as a Knowledge Check



- Asking a student to translate a paragraph will measure knowledge of all the elements:
 - Syntax
 - Grammar (case usage)
 - Vocabulary
- Thus translation can test knowledge of the language in a way that MC questions cannot.

Reversing the Flow



- **Students will be able to explain the difference between English constructions.**
- **Teaching them to associate phrases and idioms with East Slavic ones helps them to understand the language.**
- **For example, how do East Slavic speakers speak of ‘the past of the past’, English’s perfect?**

Comparing English and Slavic



- **Discussing how English focuses attention on parts of a sentence and comparing that with the ways Slavic languages does that can help them retain those patterns.**
- **Discussing how English as a word-order language needs to be adjusted to convey the focus or emphasis of Slavic teaches them to be aware of what's happening in the Slavic language.**

Group Discussion



- **Students are encouraged to offer their alternative translations.**
- **Discussions of shades of meaning, implied meanings, ambiguities, and reasons for choosing cultural referents enhance the students' understanding.**
- **Discovering that there are as many right answers as wrong ones can help with confidence.**

Facilitating understanding



- Having students translate a few sentences or a paragraph aloud helps them, and their listeners, to hear cohesion – or lack of it.
- Getting away from one sentence at a time helps students understand the need to consider the whole text.
- Cohesion and the whole text helps students understand the argument being made.

Peers



- Coming into the discussion with a twice-checked draft allows students to be fairly confident of their contributions.
- A collegial atmosphere in a group discussion, rather than a lecture, allows students to make contributions and offer their insights.
- Discovering that others had the same trouble spots also boosts confidence.

Questions?



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