



THE USE OF AUTHENTIC VIDEOS IN TEACHING RUSSIAN CONVERSATION OUTSIDE THE LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract:

The use of authentic films offers great opportunities for developing the range of skills and abilities required in all aspects of speech activity. This type of activity is particularly important for students who study Russian outside the language environment. This article examines the criteria for selecting video films as linguo-didactic material, which can be used in teaching foreign higher education students with advanced language skills based on modern methodological principles, i.e. communicative approaches and linguo-cultural information about the studied country, as well as increasing personal motivation among students for learning. Analyzing the results of a trial survey conducted among foreign students, as well as identifying the linguistic and extra-linguistic features of selected films, the authors suggest ways to use video with the help of new technologies.

Keywords: Russian as a foreign language, modern Russian speech, authentic material, film selection criteria, outside the language environment

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1. Introduction

Selecting material for lessons of Russian as a foreign language is of crucial importance. Language learning outside the language environment requires a more sophisticated approach as students are less likely to hear or talk to native speakers. In other words, to help students develop their communication skills when they are having difficulties in realising their full potential. The question therefore arises as to how lessons can best be structured to compensate for this lack of communication with Russian speakers. A solution to this problem can be found in the use of authentic audio-visual material as part of the teaching/learning process. This type of educational material will provide students with a compelling and multi-faceted view of the life, culture, and language of the country of the studied language, as well as enabling different scenarios to be modelled that mimic natural communication conditions.

Course content aimed at improving conversational skills and linked to the use of videos for teaching foreign students in the classroom is influenced both by the selection of the material and its methodological organisation. The choice of material essential in organising lessons of Russian as a foreign language is determined by the lesson's objectives and the general curriculum, as well as the students' language ability level.

Certain communicative speech acts need to be undertaken which are appropriate for each stage of Russian language proficiency. Skills, abilities and competencies in various types of speech activity are formed by taking communicative tasks into account during a given period of teaching and in line with generally accepted communicative approaches.

No one doubts that one of the most important aspects of learning any foreign language, and Russian in particular, is the teaching of the spoken language. Teaching foreign students to express their thoughts orally and to hold a conversation in the target language enhances their communication skills, i.e. mastering the ability to use a foreign language to solve problems in communication which face students in daily educational, professional and cultural life.

There is no clear definition in contemporary Russian linguistic literature for the terms *colloquial speech and colloquial style* as there is little or no agreement among Russian educators on how these two concepts relate to one another. First of all, spoken language is considered as a stream of speech with specific set of lexical, grammatical and syntactic features (Khimik, 2014; Zemskaya, 2016; Litnevskaya, 2011).

Khimik speaks of the need to define the concept of the spoken language as a type of national language, i.e. a spontaneous flow of oral communication in the broadest sense, and colloquial speech as a functional style of literary language – a conscious choice of the speaker and a rhetorical technique used in certain situations in the narrowest sense. Thus, colloquial speech as a form of national language is "*an oral and spontaneous dialogical action, i.e. a communicative process, which can include any element, be it neutral, formal or colloquial, as well as various non-literary ones right up to the level of the obscene*" (Khimik, 2014).

Increased interest among linguists and methodologists on the need to learn the features of contemporary Russian colloquial speech can chiefly be explained by the global spread of abbreviated lexical units of argot, jargon and slang which have become widely used in various types of speech communication, e.g. in magazines, television and radio programmes and on the global Internet. Foreign students, particularly those who study Russian outside the language environment, are unfamiliar with this layer of vocabulary and so unable to recognise these elements in speech and texts. This could create difficulties for them in certain speech and linguo-cultural situations.

However, it should be stressed that there is a lack of textbooks and teaching aids that include Russian spoken language material for advanced students, i.e. for those who have already achieved a degree of language proficiency by attaining first or second certification levels. As a rule, the activities described in these textbooks are based on artificially created dialogues, most of which are unnatural in Russian colloquial speech (dialogical discourse), while educators call for activities with genuine speech structures that can occur in real communication. When teaching a spoken language, which is determined by an extra-linguistic situation and also an integral part of the act of communication, it is important to take account of the situation in which the communication takes place since the same model can be interpreted in different ways.

In accordance with the recommendations of "The Common Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment" (The Council for Cultural Cooperation's Education Committee, Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 1996) and taking advice from the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE) into account, Russia has developed a system of tests which evaluate the speech skills and competencies of Russian language speakers. There are six levels: Elementary (A1); Basic (A2); First Certification level (B1); Second Certification level (B2); Third Certification Level (C1) and Fourth Certification level (C2).

Areas of communication vary according to the development of the linguistic identity of Russian language students. Thus, the social sphere of communication is predominant at the beginner and elementary levels, while the socio-cultural sphere of communication is more commonplace at higher levels. In communication situations at the beginner and elementary levels a foreigner can realise his or her communicative needs in a limited number of daily communication situations, while, at the first level, students can express themselves in many situations, including the social sphere of communication.

The basic features of communication are fully reflected in authentic videos. And the methodological necessity for using authentic videos is no longer controversial having already been scientifically validated (Allan, 1985; Altman, 1989; Sherman, 2006). They introduce learners to a wide array of real life language experiences, both promoting an understanding of monological and dialogical speech and paying attention to non-verbal expressions of the Russian speech. Thus, authentic videos are the most effective material for studying all types of speech activity.

2. Material and Methods

The purposes of the study aimed at finding out the criteria of selecting authentic feature films for teaching students from the Great Britain, studying Russian, and also at investigating the details of the students' attitudes toward using videos. It is also meaningful to analyse the possibilities of using audio-visual lessons for such students, who study outside the Russian language environment.

The research questions were written as follows:

1. What student characteristics should be taken into account, when selecting of video-material?
2. What are the requirements imposed by the film itself?
3. What is the way to integrate video-lessons with the goal of improving student linguistic and extra-linguistic information, socio-cultural knowledge and expanding comprehension?

When investigating these issues, a survey was therefore conducted among Undergraduate language students (aged 19 to 23) at the University of Manchester's Faculty of Humanity. Participants came from different specialist areas ("Philology", "Linguistics", "Political Science" and "Mathematics"); by nationality (residents of Great Britain – 64%, residents of EU countries – 36%) and gender (men – 43%, women – 57%). An analysis of the survey's results has been used in determining the criteria for the selection of feature films.

The survey included questions which allowed respondents to indicate their preferences in the choice of films (e.g. genre, when the film was made), the goals that students set themselves when viewing, as well as their attitudes to this form of communication genre. Results gained from the survey have allowed us to draw the following general conclusions:

First of all, it should be stressed that most students had a positive attitude to this type of activity. 86% of respondents gave a positive answer to the question on the requirement to watch films during Russian language lessons, the reasons for choosing this communication genre as a means of improving their language proficiency level, in learning new grammatical structures and vocabulary, as well as expanding their knowledge about the history and culture of the country of the studied language. This was confirmed by their response to the question "Why do you want to watch films?" – to which students often replied, "to broaden my cultural horizons" or "to acquire more cultural knowledge".

It is also evident that respondents agreed that watching films in Russian was a necessary part of the educational process and that they would prefer to watch films in the classroom (on average 1-2 times a month). They felt this would enable them to receive timely explanations from the teacher on queries raised during the films.

Table 1: Students' preference for film genres

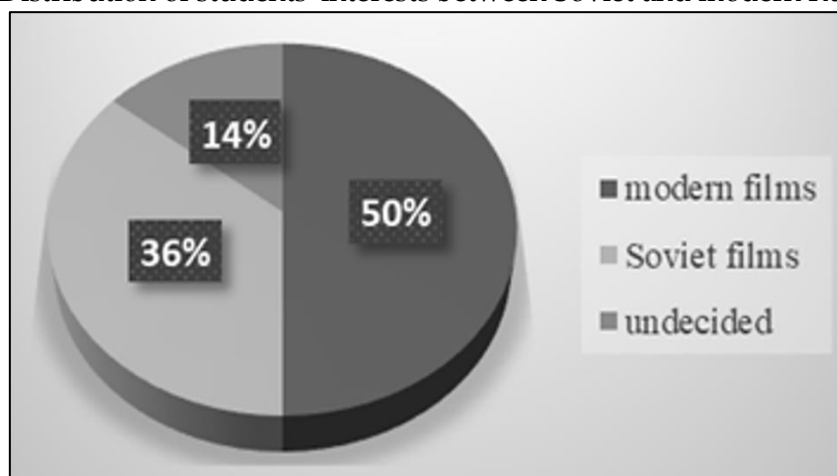


Among the 14% of students who considered this type of activity unimportant were those who had the opportunity to communicate in Russian, as well as those who have never watched films in Russian. However, such negative comments do not dissuade us from our general view on the benefits of video lessons.

It is important to note that among the comments explaining why it was necessary to watch films were answers such as "for fun and enjoyment". This is a reaffirmation of the concept of the human spirit as well as the need to conduct classes in a fun and entertaining way. With this in mind, the teacher is faced with the problem of choosing suitable video material to work with students in the classroom. There are questions about the genre of the film, the time of its release and its "language content". The survey identified the following preferences presented in percentage ratios in Table 1.

Opinions were divided on the choice between old Soviet and new contemporary films. 36% and 50% of respondents favoured Soviet and modern films respectively. It is interesting to note that 14% of students were unable to decide on either option.

Figure 1: Distribution of students' interests between Soviet and modern Russian films



A variety of views were expressed on the pros and cons of both film genres. So, for example, some students considered Soviet films to be outdated and not a reflection of

modern-day life, while others believed that films shot in the Soviet era had undoubted advantages, i.e. plots were original, realistic and reflected Russia's history, as well as depicting an interesting time in the country's evolution.

3. Results and Discussion

Nowadays, the Internet gives wide possibilities to find any kinds of videos of any choice, giving everyone access to an endless supply of available e-content. However, that could be a problem for students, who can't make the right decision: to choose the appropriate videos their own and evaluate this material. The usefulness of videos, having linguistic, extra- linguistic information and socio-cultural knowledge, can be decided by teacher.

One way of familiarising foreign students with Russian culture which contributes to the expansion of linguistic and extra linguistic information is showing authentic feature films during Russian foreign language lessons. From a linguistic and cultural point of view the use of films plays an important role in teaching foreign students in the classroom as they are an important medium for the portrayal and accumulation of information. This gives students the opportunity of learning more about Russian life both past and present, to gain an understanding of the realities of Russian life, and to acquire new background knowledge.

Equally, watching feature films during Russian foreign language lessons is helpful not only in learning more about Russian life and culture etc. but also in the consolidation of previously studied lexical and grammatical material, as well as the assimilation of new vocabulary. Working with these audio-visual aids also helps to develop listening skills which are one of the most difficult receptive types of speech activity. They also encourage students to take part in discussions and conversations, which, in turn, helps to improve their oral skills. All this makes the learning process fascinating and entertaining.

Work with authentic feature films as audio-visual aids helps in providing more effective solutions to a range of methodological problems by:

- 1) Accelerating the overall learning process by increasing the volume of material studied in the classroom;
- 2) Encouraging student motivation to learn a foreign language and speech activity, as well as stimulating their interest in the material being provided for them;
- 3) Ensuring the consolidation of linguo-cultural material through a flow of simultaneous information via audio-visual channels over a shorter period of time;
- 4) Providing more complete and reliable information on a number of studied phenomena and processes;
- 5) A familiarisation with the cultural values of citizens from the country of the studied language;
- 6) Describing the significant realities, symbols, ideas, values, customs, traditions, norms and rules of behaviour of native speakers of the studied language;
- 7) Providing an opportunity to introduce different layers of vocabulary;

- 8) The development of listening skills, pronunciation, intonation and phonetic features of the language, as well as helping to improve phonemic hearing;
- 9) The development of skills in productive types of speech activity (e.g. discussion of a film's content, impressions, and expression of individual opinions on the many issues shown in the film, either orally or in written form) which enhance the effectiveness of visual images, the power of suggestion and emotional perception;
- 10) Learning non-verbal means of communication (body language, facial expressions, gestures, etc.).

The following additional linguistic characteristics of video films also need to be taken into account: availability of information (open access to Internet resources), the ability to store videos on portable devices, and equipping classrooms with modern technology; the possibility of organising simultaneous educational activities for those in the classroom and the disciplined organisation of work done by students in their own time; the combination of a clear form of video visualisation with the possibility of multiple presentations.

Thus, this type of activity with advanced level foreign students should therefore be regarded as one of the most effective and interesting ways of organising the educational process, but only if working with films is undertaken according to a clear plan that includes a range of exercises to develop different skills and the consolidation of new material. When working with a group of foreign students the teacher should consider not only the methodological tasks relating to the lesson's objectives, but also keep in mind the long-term interests of the students which, in turn, can result in more productive learning, especially for those students, who study outside the language environment.

4. Conclusion

The lexical component of videos needs to be kept in mind in any discussion of contemporary and old films as didactic material. On the one hand, modern films reflect modern language usage and are littered with slang expressions and real speech constructions of modern oral conversation that include literary, neutral and non-literary vocabulary. On the other, examples of classic Soviet films have undoubted advantages over contemporary ones because they only contain standard Russian vocabulary. Watching films from the "Golden Fund" of Soviet cinematography helps to explain the large number of "catchwords and expressions" which have become deeply rooted in the Russian language.

Research undertaken on the use of authentic feature films in teaching the Russian spoken language to foreign students has enabled us to identify six main criteria for the selection of video films:

- 1) Genre affiliation. Preference given to video films (in accordance with training objectives and goals, programme themes) with an interesting and entertaining

storyline, which contributes to the development of personal attitudes among students to what they see;

- 2) Duration of the film;
- 3) Ensuring the video reflects the students' communicative abilities as well as their interests;
- 4) The richness of the country's information, the depiction in the film of modern-day Russia or the realities of the period of interest which provides a visual representation of real life, traditions and linguistic realities of society during a certain historical period;
- 5) The range of socio-cultural and socio-linguistic information contained in the film, reflecting different areas of communication and communicative situations;
- 6) The film's language content.

It is also necessary to bear educational and cross-cultural values in mind, as well as the relevance of the themes presented in the film. However, problems in choosing the right material often arise, namely what source should be used. Which is better? Contemporary films or old ones that are classic film industry examples, but which, in someone's opinion, have already lost some of their relevance to the issues underlying the film's plotlines?

In considering the development of language in a historical context, as well as the diverse range of student opinions on the choice of film from a particular period in Russia's history, it has to be remembered that acquisition by the students of language (lexical and grammatical) knowledge, skills and abilities, as well as background/extra linguistic features, are the most important elements in Russian language study. Consequently, students should not be denied the opportunity of watching Soviet and modern films as both provide a broad and detailed understanding of Russian life both from a linguistic and historical perspective.

The results of the survey have shown that the use of authentic video material when teaching Russian as a foreign language is of great interest to most students. However, some students are not ready to devote their lessons to watching any kind of films, which is quite understandable and can be explained by lack of time. The Russian language lesson at the University of Manchester lasts 50 minutes and takes place only twice a week. This is why some students prefer to use the lessons to clarify something unclear to them, to communicate and etc.

This fact makes us to define other vector of development for this type of activity: using new technologies to create special courses of video-lessons for students learning the Russian language outside the language environment. The modern e-learning platforms offer a wide range of opportunities for creating an interesting, interactive and useful audiovisual course, encourage students to become self-disciplined learners and help to save time for the classroom work.

The use of authentic feature films in the absence of real situations can provide the teacher with great opportunities to develop the communicative and audio/speech abilities of advanced level students, as well as to actively use the linguistic and didactic

potential of old and modern feature films for broadening cultural knowledge - ideas that are not only relevant to today's society, but also to earlier stages in Russia's historical evolution. We believe that the use of feature films, integrated in e-course, can improve students' practical skills as well as stimulating their interest, while at the same time being helpful in achieving positive results in the teaching and learning process.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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