

Sarah Wood

COLLOQUIAL RUSSIAN WITHIN THE CLASSROOM

Though all pillars of language learning are important, understanding meaning is imperative in both formal and informal social situations. Second language learners who study formal, "textbook" Russian are often hindered when abroad because colloquial Russian is not emphasized in a classroom setting. Textbooks are designed to teach the standard, but in informal situations colloquial items such as idioms, slang, and proverbial language are prevalent. Students should be systematically exposed to these items in Russian language classrooms in order to increase proficiency.

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Russian is a highly expressive and emotional language that cannot be understood through textbook language learning alone. Oftentimes, students are faced with difficulties in understanding colloquial Russian when abroad. "When faced with a sample of authentic colloquial speech, the student of Russian may lack both the linguistic and extra-linguistic knowledge to handle it effectively" (Finedore, 1988, 20). Students struggle to communicate colloquially because standard learning materials prepare them for highly structured conversations that are simply unrealistic in uncontrolled situations. This issue in standard teaching could be easily minimized with the addition of colloquial speech into the classroom. David Agatstein suggests that the remedy for this issue "lies in the early and systemic exposure of students to the peculiarities of colloquial Russian" (Agatstein, 1988, 42). This is not to say that standard learning is not effective in preparing students for situations abroad, but that it is important for students to also be introduced to colloquial terms in the beginning stages of the language journey.

In order to acclimate, make connections, and truly become proficient in Russian, students must be able to understand the semantics of colloquial language such as idioms, proverbial Russian, and slang. There are of course sound counterarguments against this claim that should and will be considered. However, this research simply poses the question, "can a language learner become linguistically and culturally adept without an understanding of colloquial items?" and seeks to prove that in the case of Russian, the answer is no.

An issue with incorporating colloquial language into beginning level classes is overburdening students. First year language learners have considerable difficulty remembering and even comprehending the concepts of the Russian case system and grammatical rules. Introducing colloquial expressions in tandem with grammar and simple vocabulary would prove challenging for students. However, it should not be expected that first year Russian students fully grasp the semantics of colloquial language in Russian. The purpose of systematically exposing students to this important piece of Russian language is general awareness. "Students must be made aware that the colloquial language represents a much broader continuum of variations than allowed by textbook language" (Agatstein, 1988, 42). Students should at least become familiar with the existence of colloquial Russian and its prevalent usage in informal situations.

Also difficult to grasp for students, according to Agatstein, are colloquial Russian's vowel and consonant reductions seen in the example of high frequency words such as "вообще" and "в самом деле" (Agatstein, 1988, 43). "Therefore, while an introduction to colloquial phonology is not necessary for the students' productive skills, their receptive skills would benefit greatly from it" (Agatstein, 1988, 43). By incorporating colloquialisms in the early stages of language acquisition, students could be given a head start in understanding these powerful items of the Russian language.

Another counterargument that should be considered is the perspective of the professor. According to a study conducted by the Department of Slavic and East European Languages and Cultures at OSU, student opinions on issues of proficiency and acquiring Russian language showed that "method and textbook used for Elementary Russian become secondary and may be overwritten by the instructor's enthusiasm for teaching or even by the instructor's personality" (Isurin, 2013, 47). Seeing as the instructor is one of the most important aspects of the acquisition process, he/she must be enthusiastic and relaxed enough to provoke the use of colloquial Russian in a controlled classroom setting.

However, for more traditional language instructors, this enthusiasm to teach colloquial language such as slang could be diminished by traditional pedagogical perspectives. As a professor skilled in teaching grammatical structures and explaining the case system, why integrate colloquial items that could be viewed as technically or grammatically incorrect? Though colloquial items are used in informal situations, they are not technically incorrect; they are simply variations of language that exist outside a standard textbook. Slang, idioms, and proverbial language are all accepted forms of communication with expressive meaning. To more traditional professors, the use of colloquial Russian in the classroom could be viewed as building a poor foundation. However, "students must be exposed to the real elements of the natural language – deletions, redundancies, and substitutions" in order to reach a level of "expectancy" (Agatstein, 1988, 42).

In addition to being exposed to the elements of natural language, students must be relaxed in the learning area. According to Lidia Pacira, getting students to use colloquial Russian is most successful in a relaxed atmosphere, where students are comfortable and at ease to ask questions. "In Russian conversation classes, linguistic accuracy should be somewhat deemphasized – to provide an opportunity for students to spontaneously speak Russian" (Pacira, 1987, 195). Though Russian conversation classes are incorporated into the learning process later, the same strategy of a relaxed atmosphere should be used in basic level classes when students are initially introduced to colloquial items. If students are too

afraid to ask questions, the likelihood of a miscommunication or lack of communication in an unstructured Russian-speaking environment is high. The relaxed classroom setting is a key ingredient for students to feel comfortable enough to use colloquial Russian, but that key ingredient is dependent upon the instructor.

Misuse of colloquial language among new students who do not fully grasp the implications and expressive means of the Russian language is a valid concern. Introducing colloquial language too soon runs the risk of students having a lack of respect for the terminology. Language learners who do not grasp the power of expression could easily instigate an issue by using colloquial language inappropriately. However, a crucial part of the language learning process is making mistakes and avoiding the same mistakes in the future. By using colloquial language at all, a non-native speaker may be applauded for even attempting to make a meaningful connection with a native Russian, assuming the timing and circumstance is appropriate. Coleman suggested that, “by choosing to use a slang term we are providing information about ourselves and about our relationships and interests” (Coleman, 2012, 110). “From this perspective, social meaning—divorced from semantic meaning—is at the core of what slang is” (Slotta, 2016, 119). As both scholars suggest, colloquial Russian creates a bond between speakers by creating open and expressive means of communication. To attempt to connect and fail is more beneficial to language acquisition than a complete lack of understanding.

Students who are taught the standard oftentimes find themselves lost in informal conversations. David Agatstein states that students use an “unnaturally bookish language,” (Agatstein, 1988, 41) and “more importantly, they lack the most basic skills to comprehend what they hear” (Agatstein, 1988, 41). Overly formal language in a casual situation is ill placed and is likely to make the listener uncomfortable. This sort of helplessness in a basic conversation in Russian is avoidable with exposure to proverbial Russian, slang, and idioms.

Proverbs in Russian, for example, can easily be understood literally by a non-native speaker, causing confusion and misunderstanding. “Russians quite often make allusions to the most common proverbs, using incomplete forms that may be incomprehensible to learners” (Vanyushkina, 2007, 112). The same is true of Russian slang. Russian slang is highly difficult to understand without knowledge of its global, political, historical and social influences. According to Thomas J. Garza, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian language underwent tremendous changes. “From mass media to commerce to politics, the language began to show the effects of the assimilation of previously unfamiliar lexicon and situational usage, as well as of the introduction of non-Russian neologisms and substantial numbers” (Garza, 2008, 211). These changes make Russian slang all the more difficult to analyze for a non-native speaker. There are simply too many spheres in which a student may delve, which is why awareness of these intricacies in colloquial Russian is imperative. For first year students, historical, political and social influences may be too complex for the beginning. Instead, students should practice recognizing slang and it’s different uses for already known vocabulary words. For example, “sila” and “blesk”, meaning “strength” and “shine” in English, can both be used to express positive emotion (Patton, 1980, 274). Without incorporation of these colloquial items into the early stages of language learning, students may find themselves lost in everyday conversation.

These complexities of proverbial Russian, idioms, and slang prove quite difficult to overcome, especially with little to no information beginning the Russian language journey. However, if students are made aware of and exposed to unique colloquial language systematically, they will become more fluent and capable in Russian. Proverbial Russian, idioms and slang can act as effective tools for coloring conversation and delving into the fascinating cultural and historical context hidden in each word. According to a study conducted by Natalya Vanyushkina, an average resident of Russia used 74% of 2,000 various Russian proverbs in their daily lives (Vanyushkina, 2007, 114). In the study, Vanyushkina found that “American students of Russian displayed limited knowledge of the most common Russian proverbs” (Vanyushkina, 2017, 127). Vanyushkina’s survey clearly shows the lack of knowledge of colloquial Russian among American students. The most important aspect of her survey, however, makes clear American’s lack of understanding of the cultural and historical complexities sewn through colloquial Russian.

In the Russian language, colloquialisms are emotive expressions used in moments of unrestricted conversation. Colloquial language, if meaning is clear, can serve as a peephole into the famous and controversial “Russian soul”. In a study of the Russian language related to it’s culture conducted by Anna Wierzbicka, she discovered “a fundamental semantic theme in the Russian language as ‘emotionality’, that is, “the tremendous stress on emotions and on their free expression, the high emotional temperature of Russian discourse, the wealth of linguistic devices for signaling emotions and shades of emotions” (Wierzbicka, 1998, 458). Blindness to these nuances of the Russian language due to standard learning interpretations is a limitation in thorough understanding. The complex semantics within Russian colloquial language and the significant divergence of word meaning from Russian to English are both concepts difficult to grasp even for the experienced student. However, Anna Wierzbicka highlights a poignant example of the complexity of semantics in colloquial Russian with the expressive word, “xoxotat” which is translated as, “to laugh” (Wierzbicka, 1998, 460).

She uses the word “xoxotat” to convey the impact that language has on culture. “Since the word ‘xoxotat’ is very common and highly colloquial in Russian, it’s special focus on loud and unrestrained laughter suggests a greater salience of this kind of behavior in Russian culture: the message of the lexicon seems to be that from the point of view of mainstream Russian culture, people are expected to sometimes—perhaps even often—laugh loudly and without restraint, out of sheer merriment, and to do so without attempting to control the bodily expression of their good feelings (shaking, falling over, rocking, etc.)” (Wierzbicka, 1998, 460).

This example of a single word in colloquial Russian exuding such a powerful meaning is exactly the reason that colloquial Russian should be introduced in first-year classes. To become fluent in Russian grammar and to be able to identify vocabulary terms from a list does not encapsulate the pure and powerful meaning that Russian colloquial language offers. To become culturally fluent and to comprehend the deep meaning in the Russian language takes time. “It behooves us, therefore, in teaching colloquial Russian to demonstrate how to take full advantage of what is exploitable and within the student’s reach—namely, the context and cohesiveness of the colloquial utterance” (Finedore, 1988, 21). Students must be exposed to colloquial items from the beginning in order to attain proficiency and true understanding of Russian language and culture.

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Sarah Wood - BA student, University of Kentucky (UK) 410 Administration Drive, Lexington, KY 40506