Ethnic and National Minorities of the Russian Federation: A Diversity-Based Curriculum for the Intermediate Russian Classroom

The Russian Federation is home to nearly 200 different ethnic groups, together comprising approximately 20% of the country’s population. And yet, most beginning and intermediate Russian language textbooks rarely make any mention of Russia’s cultural diversity, leaving the foreign learner of Russian with the false impression of Russia as an ethnically and racially homogenous space, and of Russian-speakers as a uniformly Slavic-identifying group. In addition, the resulting lack of awareness of the complex social and political dynamics stemming from inter-cultural contact hinders students’ ability to correctly parse and interpret the many images of national minorities found in contemporary Russian media and pop culture. In its 2007 report entitled “Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World,” the Modern Language Association emphasized the growing need for students of foreign language to acquire “deep translingual and transcultural competence” (p. 3) and for a language pedagogy that fosters greater understanding “in meaning, mentality, and worldview as expressed in American English and in the target language” (p. 4). However, in order to achieve these goals in the teaching of Russian, we must first expand upon the stock images most commonly associated with Slavic Russia, as well as broaden the nature of both materials and discussion surrounding cultural topics in the Russian classroom.

As a BLC Fellow, I spent spring semester 2013 developing a curriculum to target some of the current deficiencies in cultural resources, as well as designing lesson plans to both augment and challenge students’ perception of the Russian Federation. The curriculum was designed specifically for fourth semester Russian students, but can be adapted to meet the needs of students of various levels, and consists of five basic thematic modules: 1. Introduction to Ethnic Diversity in the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation, 2. Tatars, 3. Peoples of the Caucasus, 4. Siberian Peoples, and 5. Wrap-up of major issues and themes, with discussion on how these cultural discourses transmit cross-nationally. The two overarching goals of each module are to provide students with both historical and contemporary perspectives on some of the minority
ethnic groups inhabiting the Russian Federation, as well as to discuss the contemporary issues arising from cultural contact in a multiethnic, multinational state.

**Ethnographic Map of the Soviet Union**

One of the most challenging--yet vital--discussions with the topic of diversity and cross-cultural relations is the issue of discrimination and stereotyping, particularly those originating from a politically dominant social group and targeting a marginalized population. The difficulty inherent in this task was noted, for example, by Tedick and Walker who summarized the dilemma by lamenting that “[i]t is easier to deal with Oktoberfest in the German classroom than to explore the emergence of xenophobia among youth in Germany and to contrast and compare their emergence to parallel patterns in the United States” (p. 308). Unfortunately, most textbooks seem to skirt the issue entirely, instead reducing cultural discussions to small colorful boxes listing...
“ethnic food” and notes about minority group surnames. This reduction of culture to lists of surface symbols has been criticized by Liddicoat as being inauthentic and entirely insufficient to gain the necessary “multiple perspectives” of other cultures through language (2008). Indeed, a critical part of language pedagogy is giving students the tools needed to be able to navigate the sometimes-messy process of cultural negotiations, which are rarely simple enough to be contained in a minimally intrusive sidebar panel.

This process of cultural negotiations is manifested in many ways, including through sometimes-negative interaction. In the Russian context, the most frequent targets of emotionally charged and prejudiced discourse are members of Caucasian nationalities, particularly those from the North Caucasus, including Chechens, Ingush, and various peoples descending from indigenous Daghestani ethnic groups. In part, this prejudice has been cultivated through the Russian “War on Terror,” stemming from events surrounding the Moscow apartment bombings in 1999, the ensuing Second Chechen War, and several tragic hostage standoffs in subsequent years. In part, it is in response to increased immigration of Caucasian (and Central Asian) peoples to large urban centers, such as Moscow, where their lack of status has sometimes led to participation in criminal activity, as well as a reputation as a source of cheap, unskilled labor. The manifestations of Caucasian-directed discrimination range from the truly extreme--such as skinhead rallies and violent attacks--to the more subtle--such as apartment ads specifying preference for tenants “of Slavic appearance” (“Предложение для мужчины славянской внешности.”), a euphemism discouraging applicants from southern regions. The end result is that Russian-generated images of Caucasians have become mainstays of TV and film, where dark unshaven men in track suits, speaking non-standard Russian with exaggerated accents, have become stock antagonists destined to face-off against a protagonist “of Slavic appearance.” To a native Russian consumer of media and pop culture, the visual and linguistic cues marking a person from Caucasus are unmistakable; but to a foreign learner of Russian, these cues can be difficult to parse and even more problematic to contextualize. The overarching themes, however, should be entirely familiar: discrimination, assimilation (both linguistic and cultural), immigration/xenophobia, the creation of ethnic humor relying on a set of stereotypes easily accessed by a native audience, and even the parallel discourse of a “war on terror,” with the accompanying range of attitudes and behaviors that it has been used to justify.
Caucasian stock characters from the movie “Brother” (Брат, 1997)

Ad from a couple looking for an apartment in Moscow: We are Slavic!

The importance of giving students the tools necessary to decode these popular images while making connections between Russian and American socio-cultural dynamics has been
formulated by Pennycook as a “pedagogy of engagement” (1999). Through explicit discussion about social issues relevant to students’ lives, the classroom focus then shifts to “how students are invested in particular discourses and how these discourses structure their identity...[linking] teaching with the lives and concerns of students.” (Kramsch 2010 :206). A key component of the curriculum, however, will be the integration of native-sourced materials to both balance out the more dominant Russian-produced images, as well as to create a more nuanced discussion of majority/minority negotiations challenging students to engage simultaneously with multiple perspectives on these complex cultural negotiations.

In some cases, historically formed and perpetuated prejudices have become encoded in language. The modern Russian language has a number of proverbs and sayings betraying the historical stereotypes of Tatars that, through casual language formulas, influence popular consciousness. In discussing, Tatars, I will present students with three common Russian sayings:

**An uninvited guest is worse than a Tatar.**
Незваный гость хуже татарина

**Scratch [the surface] off a Russian and you'll find a Tatar.**
Потри русского – найдешь татарина

**Angry/mean like a Tatar.**
Злой как татарин

The students’ task will be to decode the popular images of Tatars embedded in these sayings, considering what they mean, both literally and figuratively, and what kind of associations they evoke. Through this exercise, students will begin to uncover and contextualize the popular historical image of Tatars and understand the degree to which linguistic habits, particularly formulaic speech, can reinforce these images and inform popular perceptions.
In addition to discussing the historical context and motivation for the modern shape of popular Tatar images, students will be presented with both Russian and Tatar-produced media coverage of the push to create schools in Tatarstan that use Tatar as the primary language of instruction. Using these videos as their springboard, they will be invited to engage in contemporary socio-political debate on the multiple issues surrounding Tatar language education and cultural revival, a debate that finds parallel in American political discourse on assimilation and the nature of education geared toward immigrant populations. Tatars, of course, are indigenous to parts of the Russian Federation and are Russian citizens, so part of the challenge in unpacking this strand of discourse is the very definition of what it means to be an immigrant. However, the discourse content surrounding the issue of the linguistic assimilation vs. cultural autonomy of minority groups is readily applicable to the American context.
One of the most common effects of cultural and linguistic assimilation programs is eventual inter-generational cultural atrophy. Although various cultural revivalist movements are occurring among ethnic minority groups in the Russian Federation, some of the effects of decades-long assimilation campaigns are already irreversible. This is most readily apparent in the fate of numerous indigenous Siberian languages that have already become extinct, and the many more that face almost certain extinction within the next generation. This is due in part to the nature of Russification, particularly during the Soviet era when it was at times quite aggressive; in part it is also due to the loss of traditional occupations and lifestyles, and the inherently incohesive structures of far-flung and traditionally (semi) nomadic groups vulnerable to the influences of a more consolidated and socially dominant culture. Students will be introduced to the highly diverse language map of Siberia and provided with multiple perspectives on language loss and cultural atrophy, modulating between insider and outsider views, and nuancing the possible intermediary relationships between individual and culture, including degrees of foreignness and the effects of linguistic assimilation on identity as well as one’s relationship to the majority culture.
Ethnic humor: popular Russian images of Chukchi, an indigenous Siberian ethnic group. Russification was meant to create a stronger sense of identification between non-Russians and the Russophone center, but stereotypes of underdeveloped indigenous cultures persisted.

While the obvious surface causes of language loss and cultural atrophy are the historical processes of colonization and Russification, the underlying dynamics between the majority/minority cultures are a good deal more complex and require critical reflection of the part of the student in order to avoid oversimplification of what is actually a multifarious process of negotiation. As part of the discussion surrounding the nature of assimilation—particularly as it relates to second language acquisition--students will read an excerpt from a diary by a Yakut writer who goes by the penname Dalan:

... In our college years we dreamed of speaking perfect Russian, speaking without the slightest hesitation. In prison, deprived of the opportunity to speak my native language, I could practice Russian all I wanted. I noticed that if you speak Russian constantly, then you begin to think in Russian. I learned to construct sentences directly in Russian without resorting to building the sentence first in Yakut and then translating it into Russian, as I used to.

...Yet in prison I didn't take much pleasure in my fluent Russian. In the depth of my soul there remained the feeling that I had somehow lost something very valuable, something immensely my own.

Even though this is a very small sample of a larger and more detailed text, there is nonetheless a clear indication of the ambivalence the writer has grappled with while adopting Russian as his
second language, as well as evidence of how his feelings toward Russian language acquisition have changed over time, dependent on external (social) circumstances. This issue as expressed here, however, is far from black and white, far from the assumed clear dichotomy of colonizer vs. colonized, villain vs. victim. It is also demonstrates how strong a role language plays in identity, especially for those people who move between multiple language systems. In addition to discussing the dynamics, motivation, and meaning of assimilation, students will also be challenged to critically reflect on the experience of language learning, both in terms of the process and the symbolic value, as well as how (second) language acquisition affects identity (re)construction.

There is currently greater ethnic diversity than linguistic diversity in Siberia due to assimilation.

This newly-designed curriculum has several broadly-defined goals, and rests on the premise that we must redefine whom we commonly envision as Russian speakers and as citizens of the Russian Federation, moving away from the homogenous surface images too often presented in
Russian-language textbooks. Through this series of lesson plans, intermediate students of Russian will both learn about minority ethnic groups on their own terms and in their own voices by utilizing native primary source materials, as well as directly confront the challenges and issues which arise in multicultural societies and spaces, finding parallels between Russian-based discourse and Americans. Such discussion is hoped to challenge students’ assumptions about inter-cultural dynamics while gaining a deeper, more nuanced understanding of contemporary Russian society, culture, and politics.

References


Diary entry is excerpted from:

http://www.sakharov-center.ru/asfcd/auth/?t=page&num=11980

Отношение к родному языку тоже менялось сродни этому. Якутский и русский языки мое поколение изучало с одинаковым рвением. Всегда считалось, что они взаимно обогащают друг друга. Но я думаю иначе. У двух наших языков разные законы, разные исторические условия возникновения. Поэтому взаимно обогащать друг друга они не могут.

Вот почему, запутавшись, сегодняшние якуты вынуждены общаться в быту на каком-то ужасном гибрид из двух языков. То же самое происходит в печати, официальной среде, на радио. Встречаешь массу якутов, не умеющих толком говорить ни на русском, ни на якутском языках. А как можно жить, дыша только вполдыхания? Вот она — наша билингвистика. Приятно слушать одноязычных русских — как чист их язык, как они умеют облекать в слова свои мысли! Поставим рядом двуязычного якута -косиноречие, неуменение
четко формулировать мысль. Невольно отдашь предпочтение интеллекту и кругозору первого представителя человеческой расы, хотя второй на самом деле ничуть не уступает ему ни в том, ни в другом.

Мы в студенческие годы мечтали в совершенстве овладеть русским языком, чтобы говорить без малейшей запинки. В тюреме, лишенный возможности общаться на родном языке, я мог сколько угодно упражняться в русском. Заметил, что если постоянно говорить по-русски, то и думать начинаешь на русском. Научился строить предложения сразу по-русски, не прибегая, как раньше, к переводу заранее построенного на якутский лад предложения. Наверное, это и называется сейчас методом погружения, столь модным среди преподавателей иностранных языков. В конце концов, мне показалось удобнее и легче общаться на русском (так же, по всей видимости, поступают современные русскоязычные городские якуты: строят предложения сперва на русском, потом переводят на якутский).

К слову сказать, эта проблема знакома и писателям. Думаешь над очередным предложением, а в голову в первую очередь приходят его русские варианты. В итоге некоторые предложения выглядят обычной калькой с русского, а само произведение из-за обилия русских терминов — неуклюже и коряво.

Да и в тюрьме мой беглый русский уже мало радовал. В глубине души не тающей лыдяной лежало чувство потери чего-то драгоценного, бесконечно родного. В детстве такая метаморфоза может произойти незаметно. Но я-то воспитывался в настоящей якутской семье, характер, весь мой уклад жизни, душа, наконец, были якутскими. Нелегко было отодвинуть родной язык за ненадобностью в сторону и перейти срочно на другой.

С самого раннего детства я буквально купался в атмосфере якутской песни, сказок, олонго. До войны вся наша патриархальная семья жила в одном доме в Бийакйё. Часто к нам приезжали младшая сестра Кугаса Акулина Захарова и Табахырь-Винокуров, гостили по несколько дней. И тогда начинался настоящий праздник песни и олонго. Более того, Табахыров был совершенно удивительным сказочником. К сожалению, ни одна из его сказок не сохранилась, никто не догадался их записать. Олонхосуты не столь высокого класса, братья отца Гаврила Устинович, Гаврил и Иван Иннокентьевичи Яковлевы тоже частенько собирали детвору, сказывали олонго.

У моего дяди Гаврилы Иннокентьевича, председателя сельсовета, всегда останавливались уполномоченные из центра. Все они очень хорошо одевались и, как правило, были красноречивыми рассказчиками. Именно от них еще до школы я услышал на чистейшем якутском языке о приключениях Мюнхгаузена, лилипутах и Гулливере, путешествии Робинзона Крузо... Как я мог отказаться от всего этого?

С каким же удовольствием и наслаждением заговорил я на родном языке, когда наконец встретил своих в первой колонии поздней осенью. Не помню, чтобы когда-нибудь до или после вот так, почти физически, ощушил сладость каждого произносимого слова. С чем можно сравнить это ощущение, эту силу материнского языка? "Во дни сомнений, во дни тяжких раздумий о судьбах моей родины ты один мне поддержка и опора, о великий, могучий, правдивый и свободный русский язык!" Как верно сказано о родном языке!

Якутский язык! Язык досточтимых моих предков! Немеркнувшее слово великого Екскюляха и Ойунского!
Единственный на свете сумевший воплотить воедино грохочущие лавины грозных стародавних времен юга с безмятежным безмолвием полярных пустынь в дивный монолит дерзновенной фантазии олонхо, в неповторимый узор прекрасных легенд и сказаний, в сладкозвучное песнопение — язык народа саха. Я уверен, что ты не исчезнешь бесследно, канув в Лету безвременья грядущих лет, а займешь достойную нишу в сокровищнице культуры человечества, присоединившись вековечно к мудрости народов мира.