“Zhili-byli...”: Russian Folklore in the Intermediate Language Classroom

BLC Project, Fall 2019
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Textual features of the fairytale

- Formulaic, often cyclical narrative structure
- Combination of vivid imagery + concrete plot
- Repetition and the rule of 3
- Orality (alliteration, rhyme, & mnemonic devices)
Project Goals

1) To gradually build students’ comfort level with reading narrative texts in Russian

2) To introduce students to a foundational aspect of Russian culture, while also engaging students in a critical consideration of how national cultures are conceived or constructed
Focus: Traditional Magic Tales and their 20th Century Adaptations

1) Recorded textual variants
   - Alexander Afanasyev’s collection of Russian fairytales, 1860s

2) 20th century revisions and adaptations
   - Ballets (Modernist and Soviet)
   - Modernist paintings and illustrations
   - Soviet rock music
   - Animated films (Soviet and Post-Soviet)
   - Advertisements
   - Political emblems and political cartoons
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Cluster 1: The 3 Bogatyrs

Learning goals:
1) Introduce students to the genre of the bylina (East Slavic heroic epic), as well as later re-castings of the bogatyrs (Slavic epic heroes) in Modernist and Post-Soviet art
2) Increase students’ sensitivity to register and tone in Russian texts
3) Familiarize students with the process of approaching and understanding Russian texts that are highly allusive or intertextual, and which may therefore present a particular challenge to L2 learners
The 3 Bogatyrs: Texts

1) Excerpt from the bylina *Solovei-razboïnik (Nightingale the Robber)*

2) Three paintings of bogatyrs by prominent Russian Modernist artists

3) The song *Drevnerusskaia toska (Ancient Russian Blues)* by the Soviet/Post-Soviet alternative rock group Akvarium (1996)

Mikhail Vrubel, *Bogatyry* (1899)

Viktor Vasnetsov, *Bogatyri* (1898)

Ivan Bilibin, Illustration for the bylina *Vol’ga* (1903)
The 3 Bogatyrs: Pilot (Russian 4)

Day 1: Viktor Vasnetsov’s *Bogatyri* (1898)

Introduction to Dobrynia Nikitich, Il’ia Muromets, and Aliosha Popovich
AKVARIUM, DREVNERUSSKALA TOSKA (OLD RUSSIAN BLUES), 1996
The 3 Bogatyrs: Pilot (Russian 4)

The 3 Bogatyrs: Pilot (Russian 4)

Stanza 2:

На поле древней битвы нет ни копий ни костей,
Они пошли на сувениры для туристов и гостей,
Добрыня плюнул на Россию и в Милане чинит газ,
Алёша, даром что Попович, продал весь иконостас
Один Илья пугает девок, скача в одном носке,
И я гляжу на это дело в древнерусской тоске...

Student translation:

On the ancient battlefield there are no spears, no bones
They went as souvenirs for tourists and visitors,
Dobrynya spat on Russia and works at a gas station in Milan
Alyosha, a Popovich, sold all the iconostasis for nothing
Only Ilya scares girls, jumping in one sock,
And I look at this in old Russian ennui...

Student’s search terms:

- Alyosha
- Popovich
- Dobrynya
- Ilya
- Iconostasis

Student interpretation:

“Alyosha, Dobrynya, and Ilya are all the names of famous Russian bogatyrs. The stanza is describing them as forsaking Russia to evoke a cynical view of modern Russia in comparison to its glorious folk tradition.”
Cluster 2: Masha and the Bear

Key textual features: 1) repeated phrases and verbal formulae; 2) “folkloric”/folksy style (ex. “griby da iagody,” “babushka da dedushka”); 3) diminutives (ex. “dozhdik”)
Instructions – Retell the story of “Masha and the Bear” using the illustrations below for guidance:
Cluster 3: Shurale (Tatar folklore)

Texts:

1) Short prose version of *Shurale and Byltyr*

2) Excerpt from the narrative poem *Shurale* (1907) by Gabdullah Tukai (1886-1913), Tatarstan’s national poet

3) Clip from the Soviet ballet *Shurale* (1945)
Cluster 3: Shurale Pilot (Russian 3)

Sample responses to discussion questions about Tukai’s *Shurale*:

1) *Why was it important for Tatarstan to find its own national poet?*
   - “Because Tatarstan wanted to create its own unique identity and not just be a part of Russia’s identity.”
   - “It was important to find a national poet in order to increase Tatar patriotism.”

2) *Tukai often turned to Tatar folk motifs in his poetry. Why do you think that is?*
   - “Because his Tatar folk heritage was an important part of Tukai’s identity.”
   - “I think that folk culture shows how life is for the majority of people, and reflects the spirit of the country.”