



**RUSSIAN VOICES: TEACHING RUSSIAN CULTURAL  
COMPETENCE, LISTENING COMPREHENSION, AND  
SPEAKING SKILLS THROUGH VIDEO INTERVIEWS**

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**Project Background and Rationale:**

What is the best way to introduce students to the complex, multiple perspectives that exist among speakers of Russian as part of the Russian language curriculum? This is the question that has guided the development of the project I have conducted as part of The Berkeley Language Center's Instructional Development Research Fellowship. Why is the issue of developing cultural competence such a pressing question for Russian instruction? As foreign language instructors we always have a responsibility to teach our students more than just tenses or cases, and this is all the more true when we teach a language that, as it were, makes the headlines. Historically, Russian instruction in the United States ebbs and flows in response to

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political tensions, and as a result, students of Russian, both L2 and heritage, bring with them a host of preconceptions about the language and culture they are about to study. As was the case nearly a century ago, when fascination with Russia first truly swept the English-speaking world, for many of our students, the Russophone world is simultaneously a markedly foreign and uncritically homogenous construct. For these reasons, I believe that giving students of Russian adequate cultural knowledge in order to make sense of current events, and allowing them access to speakers of Russian “beyond the headlines,” is a particularly important dimension of Russian language instruction at present.

While teaching Russian at Berkeley, I frequently fielded questions from my students about my experiences in Russia. During previous trips to Russia I had collected a number of materials for use in the classroom—I had brought back menus, train tickets, and games, taken pictures and shot videos. Over several semesters of teaching I found that the videos were, by far, the most popular. Even though we were already watching clips of Russian films in class, my students were particularly excited about seeing Russia “unedited.” The ability to understand native speakers in contemporary everyday contexts, rather than in scripted workbook exercises, was also particularly gratifying for my students, especially at the lower levels. I quickly realized that materials I was bringing into the classroom also helped me approach my students’ questions through a perspective that extended well beyond my own views of Russia and the countries of the former Soviet Union.

Inspired by my classroom experiences, and a growing awareness of the need for more teaching materials that would give students of Russian greater access to the multiplicity of perspectives represented in the Russian-speaking world, in my BLC project I have developed a series of lesson plans that emphasize cultural competence, while also building listening and

speaking competencies. At the heart of these lesson plans are 15 interviews with Russian speakers (both native and L2) which I conducted in Moscow in the summer of 2015.

Why prerecorded video interviews? With the advent of video and text chatting platforms such as Skype, and a number of social media platforms, cross-national collaborations have become increasingly popular. As ongoing scholarship suggests (see, for example, Warschauer & Kern, 2000), there is a host of possible ways to use technology as a cultural “bridge” in the language classroom. These include numerous synchronous and asynchronous *network-based language teaching* projects (Warschauer, 1995), and bring to light fascinating issues of student learner identity (Klimanova & Dembovskaya, 2013). Since it is not always logistically possible to incorporate a full-length collaborative exchange into an already full curriculum, however, my project aims to be modular and to allow teachers maximum flexibility in implementing the materials in their own classrooms. Though my project does not put students in direct contact with Russian speakers, it was important for me that in addition to developing cultural competence the project would also give students the necessary linguistic tools, i.e. listening comprehension and speaking skills, that would allow them to participate in conversations about cultural issues. For this reason I decided to create a hybrid exchange that helps to introduce Russian voices into the classroom via prerecorded interviews. Taking advantage of video technology, my project constitutes one half of a conversation with which students can learn to engage on their own time. The content and form of the interviews is designed in such a way as to empower students to increase both their knowledge about the Russophone world and their linguistic fluency.

Extensive research has shown the effectiveness of video use in foreign language instruction (for an overview of video use in foreign language instruction see Vanderplank, 2010;

for a teaching-focused perspective see Shrum & Glisan, 2009). Research also affirms that video is particularly well suited to improving listening comprehension (see Rifkin, 2003), developing communicative competence (see Weyers, 1999), and introducing cultural information (see Heron et. al. 1995). However, existing instructional videos for Russian tend to be highly scripted, provide a fairly homogenous view of Russian speakers, and are largely aimed at the novice level. The interviews I have recorded, on the other hand, are targeted at more advanced speakers and capture a group of diverse native speakers of Russian as well as advanced L2 Russian speakers, speaking in a natural, unscripted manner.

The genre of the interview, or oral history, is itself very timely and has important antecedents in Russian-language culture. As Nobel Prize-winning author Svetlana Alexievich powerfully affirms in describing the genre of her books, “each person offers a text of his or her own [...]. Life moves on much too fast—only collectively can we create a single, many-sided picture.” In this project I have begun the work of collecting some of these rich “human texts” and making them available to students and teachers of Russian. Through these interviews I seek to provide students with a more personalized and nuanced picture of contemporary Russian culture. The advanced L2 speakers of Russian who were interviewed as part of this project serve as an important point of access for imagining what life in Russian speaking countries might be like for our students.

### **Project Goals:**

In summary, my BLC project was guided by five primary goals: first, to present a heterogeneous view of Russia and the Russophone world; second, to develop more dynamic and authentic videos for Russian language instruction; third, to improve L2 listening comprehension through familiarity with native speaker tempo and accent variation; fourth, to improve L2

speaking competency through exposure to native speaker models, and fifth, to help HL students develop more nuanced ownership of heritage language and culture.

### **Description of the Interview Database:**

With the project goals established, the first major stage of work was developing the interview questions. The interview guide for my project included three sets of questions—one for Russian speakers living in Russia, one for non-native Russian speakers living in Russia and one for Russian speakers living in the US, with a core set of questions that were the same for all three groups. In drafting the interview questions I was inspired by the Cultura project, which, since 1997, has enabled groups of students in different countries to connect online in order to develop greater cultural understanding (for an overview of the Cultura project see Furstenberg & Levet 2004). BLC faculty and Russian language coordinator, Lisa Little, were also consulted in the creation of the interview guide.

In the end, two different types of questions were included in the interviews—first, questions about biography and hobby, targeted to the novice-intermediate level, and second, open-ended questions about culture and abstract topics inter.-advanced level. The initial questions about biography and hobby introduce students to the respondents, and make it possible to use these “unscripted” speech samples early in language instruction in order to train beginning students to become familiar with a range of Russian speakers. These responses provide models for students to express themselves on standard first year topics such as age, family, education, favorite music, books, films or TV shows, and also serve as a lesson in the diverse interests and tastes of Russian speakers, from post-hardcore music to the Marvel franchise. Open-ended questions about ideas and beliefs introduce culture more explicitly. These questions expose students to more complex constructions in the context of discussions about



transcripts, captions, or subtitles for a given clip, and are able to annotate videos with cultural notes or questions. Especially usefully is a feature that allows students to slow down the audio of given clips by 50%. Videos are tagged according to the vocabulary words used in the clip, as well as by salient grammatical and cultural features, and are therefore easily searchable. It is also possible to group videos and other materials into a lesson plan that is accessible to other teachers. Figure 1 above shows the student view for one of the interview clips embedded in the LFLFC platform with the vocabulary list and 50% slowed audio options enabled. The LFLFC software is ideal for housing my interview project because it allows for maximum flexibility in accessing specific questions from the interviews and gives students multiple tools for developing their listening comprehension.

### **Pilot Testing and Student Feedback:**

During the course of the fall semester I developed and piloted a module which focused on the question what constitutes «счастье» (happiness) in Russian 4 (a fourth semester Russian class) and in Advanced Russian. Why this question? What constitutes happiness is a topic Russians discuss and debate quite often. One student who participated in the pilot expressed surprise “that some people were able to answer to the question ‘what is happiness’ immediately.” In fact, many L2 Russian speakers in my department reflected that they had never considered the question until it came up in a crowded Moscow kitchen or over shish kabobs on a dacha. The etymologies of the English word happiness and the Russian word «счастье» are particularly interesting in this light. English happiness harkens back to ideas about luck, while in Russian the word evokes ideas of fate, and one’s lot in life. Indeed the two words are semantically overlapping in their origins, but importantly distinct, thus bringing up both cultural and

linguistic issues. Unlike happiness, «счастье» carries its etymology on its sleeve, as it were. With words related to fate such as «часть» and «участь», clearly foregrounded, even as the meaning of «счастье» has changed in contemporary usage, which allows for a discussions about roots and etymologies as well as cultural issues.

Tellingly, the question of what constitutes happiness is already part of the curriculum in the fourth semester class. In the unit about «счастье» in the textbook *Russian Stage One: Live from Russia: Volume 2*, there is an accompanying video in which the topic predictably focuses on highlighting the dichotomy between the stereotypical American answer that happiness is tied to financial success and the Russian answer that happiness is tied to love. This is a dichotomy that the answers given by the interview respondents in my project begin to problematize. For example, in addition to mentioning family and love, some of my Russian respondents discuss happiness in terms money and success, others make reference to Eastern philosophies and the process of cultivating happiness and some suggest happiness is unattainable.

The lesson plans that I am working to create around the existing interviews incorporate a range of other media in order to supplement and contextualize the individual responses. For example, the «счастье» pilot lesson includes dictionary work, readings from Tolstoy’s *Family Happiness* (1869), and a clip from the 1968 film

*We’ll Live Till Monday*, in which students are assigned the task of writing an essay about happiness. Figure 2 shows the matrix of texts that supplements the «счастье» lesson.

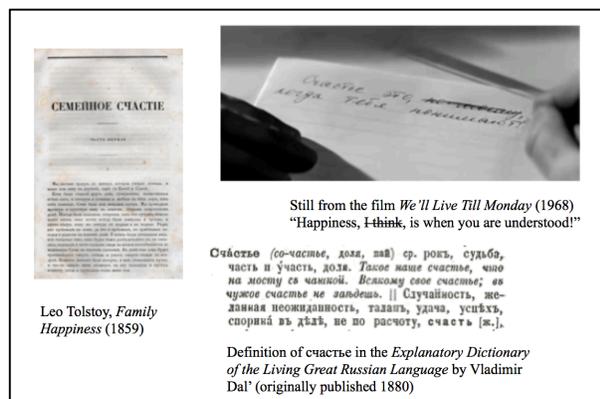


Fig. 2— supplementary materials from the «счастье» module

All of the individual «счастье» interview clips, as well as the supplementary materials are available in the LFLFC lesson plan view (see Figure 3 at right), which is available to instructors with access to the LFLFC database. As a result, the individual lesson modules are easily accessible.

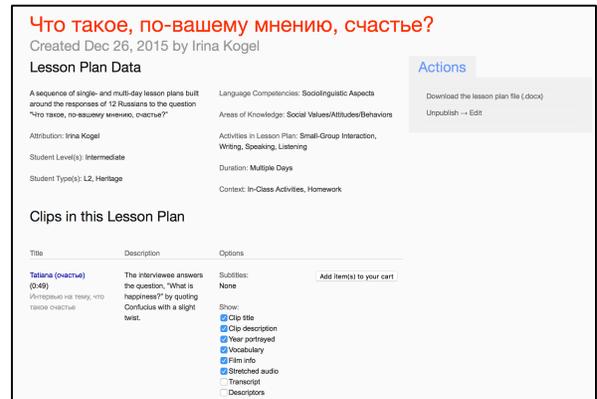


Fig. 3—Teacher View of the «счастье» lesson plan in the LFLFC

To reiterate the pilot context, I tested the «счастье» module in a fourth semester Russian course in which there were 8 students. With this first group of students, the lesson took approximately 50 minutes over two class periods and was embedded in a unit about «счастье» from *Russian Stage One: Live from Russia: Volume 2*. In the Advanced Russian class there were 7 students (for some students in this group, the Advanced Russian course was their fifth semester in the language, but others had spent up to 10 years studying Russian or were heritage speakers of the language; more students in Russian 4 (5 out of 8 students) had been to Russia as compared to the Advanced Russian class (2 out of 7 students)). In the Advanced Russian I piloted a stand-alone lesson presented during a single 80-minute class period. Data was collected in both classes via pre- and post- class surveys, which students could fill out in English or Russian.

In the fourth semester Russian class we started off with a discussion of the Tolstoy reading. Then we watched three clips in response to the question what constitutes happiness as a class. The clips chosen for this introduction to the material were arranged by difficulty, with two relatively accessible responses flanking a rather more complex answer, in order to build student confidence before they engaged with the clips for homework. Each clip was shown twice in

class, once at full speed, and once at half speed with a discussion following in which we teased out the key words in each response and mapped them on the board, comparing the vocabulary from the clips with that from the Tolstoy excerpt. Students watched the clips without transcripts so they could focus on the video, but were given transcripts after class and were instructed to watch the videos again at home with the transcript to reinforce what they had seen in class. Individual clips were assigned for homework along with a vocabulary building exercise. During the next class, there was a short discussion cementing key vocabulary words and a conversation about what students found surprising in the responses

In Advanced Russian this module involved some a good deal of homework preparation (with students reading the Tolstoy excerpt and preparing a presentation about one of the respondents), but this allowed us to launch into a more detailed discussion during the class. We began by reading the Dal' dictionary definition of «счастье» as well as definitions from more contemporary dictionaries to ground the discussion. Then the students outlined the conceptions of happiness espoused by Tolstoy's characters and we used this as a baseline for comparison with the interview responses. After individual presentations we watched the clips as a group and then discussed them in turn. After the presentations, students were encouraged to formulate and defend an opinion about the interview, as they had to explain whom they would rather befriend based on how the respondents defined happiness. Finally, we watched an excerpt from the film *We'll Live Till Monday*. Ideally, a capstone project for the module would have the students write a short essay on the topic of happiness that is assigned in the film («Мое представление о счастье»).

In the surveys there was clear video fatigue in Russian 4, where video was a large component of the textbook homework, but where the video material was not necessarily

interesting to the students. Some students wrote that video-based exercises are difficult, but by and large I think perception of difficulty is a sign that students are stretching outside their comfort level and learning. This concern does raise important issues about the need to scaffold the interviews properly by helping students learn good watching/listening strategies and the need for providing captioning at some point in the viewing process, especially for students who may have hearing impairments (see Winke, Gass, & Sydorenko 2010 for a discussion of the use of captioning in instructional materials for the Russian language classroom).

Most of the students remarked that the module had not changed their ideas about happiness, as such, but that they had learned something about the Russian concept of «счастье». Students in both classes wrote that they enjoyed the range of perspectives offered by the interviews and highlighted their surprise that so many of the speakers reference eastern philosophy and thought—and this issue could be developed into a whole separate lesson on Russian interpretations of eastern thought and where Russia find itself in the intersection of east and west. Students in the fourth semester class overwhelmingly stressed that they liked the unscripted quality of the videos and the fact that the respondents were not actors, in contrast to the materials in their textbooks; and the Advanced Russian students also appreciated that the materials were not simplified as in textbook exercises. Again in both classes students were aware of the potential for expanded listening comprehension that the videos offered and largely commented that they would like more assignments of this kind. Students in the Advanced Russian class stated that they enjoyed the degree of freedom that the lesson gave them and that they appreciated have the chance express their own ideas and opinions.

### **Project Applications and Uses in Teaching Heritage Russian:**

Depending on student's language proficiency and course structure, instructors can adapt

the materials I have developed, and one of the strengths of the project is the range of uses to which the interviews could potentially be put. The structure of the interviews is particularly conducive to this kind of flexible approach since the interviews will be available via the LFLFC as whole films and individual clips, with the individual clips organized by question and respondent. In addition, each interview follows a predictable pattern. One of the most productive uses for these interviews would be as a jumping off point in a conversation class, though they could also be incorporated into pre-existing lessons by topic. Additional modules with supplementary materials like the one developed for the pilot lesson on «счастье» will soon be available

These interviews can also be adapted for use in heritage courses, where more emphasis could be placed on giving students the opportunity to reflect on how their perspectives and those of their family members converge or diverge from the opinions of the native Russian speaking respondents. With the interviews as a model, heritage students could also undertake an oral histories project of their own by interviewing members of their own families or Russian speakers in the university community. Finally, the use of video captions provides particularly interesting possibilities for heritage language teaching. Research into both student-produced captions and the use of captioning to help improve delayed L1 literacy shows promising results and might fruitfully be applied to the heritage context (see Kothari, Pandey & Chudgar (2004) for a discussion of the use of captioning in developing L1 literacy, and Williams & Thorne (2000) for a study that showed gains in language proficiency as a result of student-created captions). Though this kind of captioning work could be undertaken with a variety of video materials, the interview format is particularly conducive to this kind of work because the videos largely lack background distractions and are focused, by design, on individual speaker utterances.

Lesson plans for using the interviews in heritage classes will be available by summer 2016.

### **Conclusion:**

In creating a database of interviews and related exercises and activities that can be used at varying levels as an entry point for discussing Russian culture in the Russian language classroom, while at the same time spurring improvements in listening comprehension and communicative competence, this project addresses several key needs in Russian instruction. At a time of escalating political tensions between Russia and the US, which have impacted everything from economic growth to scientific development, creating materials that will help advance cultural competence is a crucial component of our work as language teachers. This project is geared towards giving students access to a wider range of Russian voices and perspectives than any one teacher can provide. At the same time, the interviews should prove to be interesting materials that serve to motivate student language acquisition. In sharing these materials with other teachers of Russian via the LFLFC I hope to take advantage of the technological affordances of the LFLFC platform (a separate website for those who are unable to get access to the LFLFC is also planned).

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