

Textbook: Focus on Students' National Identity

Adjusting a Textbook of RFL to E-Learning

Ella A. Zoidze (a), Eugenia E. Matveeva* (b), Tatiana S. Makarova (c), Maria A. Molchanova (d), Elena A. Morozova (e)

(a) *Moscow City University, 129226, Moscow (Russia), 4-1, 2nd Selskokhoziastvenny Proezd*

(b) *Moscow City University, 129226, Moscow (Russia), 4-1, 2nd Selskokhoziastvenny Proezd,*

(c) *Moscow City University, 129226, Moscow (Russia), 4-1, 2nd Selskokhoziastvenny Proezd*

(d) *Moscow City University, 129226, Moscow (Russia), 4-1, 2nd Selskokhoziastvenny Proezd,*

(e) *Moscow City University, 129226, Moscow (Russia), 4-1, 2nd Selskokhoziastvenny Proezd,*

MatveevaEE@mgpu.ru

Abstract

The article addresses the issue of using a traditional textbook, an essential learning tool, in e-learning environment by supplementing and adjusting it to the digital format. Regarding e-learning as an educational process based on interactive electronic means of storing and providing information the authors outline the main ways of transforming an existing RFL textbook into the mode appropriate for effective e-learning and e-teaching. While reviewing literature, the notion of an electronic textbook is explored as well as its difference from a traditional textbook. The authors describe their experience of a synchronous type of e-learning and promote the usage of tasks that allow students to revise the information independently and practise the skills acquired in class. The article dwells on how the educational content of the textbook "Russian for Beginners" by G.M. Levina was modified in order to be used for teaching RFL learners online. The resulting benefits of a new web-based version of an RFL textbook are analyzed.

Keywords: e-learning; digital textbook, Russian as a foreign language.

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Introduction

* Corresponding author. E-mail: MatveevaEE@mgpu.ru

The current situation of the pandemic and several lockdown periods that came as a result of COVID-19 prevention campaign could not but affect education in Russia as well as in dozens of countries. With an abrupt shift from the traditional to e-learning environment teachers of Russian as a foreign language (RFL) faced a challenge of adjusting not only approaches and methods but also the contents and format of the textbook used in the education course.

Whatever changes occur, instructors and students alike consider the textbook an essential learning tool (Azimov, 2020). In the context of e-learning the contents of the traditional textbook may fully correspond to contemporary educational goals and demands. Recognizing the increased adoption of mobile devices worldwide (Clark & Mayer, 2016), the authors of the article suggest supplementing the traditional textbook by adjusting it to the digital format. Such a digital textbook, also called an e-textbook, can be accessed via the Internet and downloaded on tablets, e-readers, smart phones, laptops, etc. Subsequently such e-alternatives to traditional textbooks can make learning / e-learning not only available, but also significantly higher perceived (Mayer, 2017).

The term “e-learning” can be interpreted as “using new multimedia and Internet technologies to improve the quality of learning by improving access to resources and services, as well as remote knowledge sharing and collaboration”. In this paper, the notion of “e-learning”/ “electronic learning” corresponds to an educational process based on interactive electronic means of storing and providing information (Sergeeva et al., 2020).

The first decision to be made is the choice of an Internet platform for the online course based on the current textbook. It is preferable that this platform be accessible on PCs and smartphones. It should also meet the requirements of openness and updating (Lagun, Skutnitsky, Slatov & Farafonov, 2019). While choosing the platform a teacher analyses the functions and options that are available (types of media to upload, presence / absence of time settings and assessment tools, types of feedback etc.).

In most cases the existing platforms do not meet all the necessary requirements, but this can be overcome by using external resources (test or quiz makers, podcasts, cloud storage, Google docs and other interactive web tools). Google educational solutions can be considered as an effective and easy-to-use option. Google Classroom is an open platform that can be filled with any material and that provides a wide range of compatible services and apps (Google docs, forms, maps, disk space, chat etc.) (Heggart & Yoo, 2018). If the range is still insufficient one can easily use other web resources and integrate them into Google classroom via hyperlinks.

The authors of the article as professional educators majoring in teaching RFL and implementing RFL teacher pre-service and in-service education programs at Moscow City University, Russia, believe that effective learning can be impacted by both the format of the textbook and the medium through which the material is consumed.

Purpose and objectives of the study

The purpose of the study is to outline the main ways of transforming an existing RFL textbook presented in either a printed paper version or a digital printed paper version into the mode that proves to be effective for e-learning and e-teaching in both teacher-guided and self-guided forms. One of the main objectives is to assess the educational content of the textbook from the point of view of reshaping it into the format best suited to be used by the learner of RFL interactively. The resulting presentation form of the tasks given in the textbook should enable the learner to exercise self-control and evaluation of educational outcomes.

Literature review

The current stage of society development manifesting itself in the rapid growth of information technologies and their impact on people's everyday life create a challenge for the education system worldwide (Tareva, 2017). Today great emphasis is put on the development of the electronic environment that makes the learning and teaching process in a modern classroom (both in schools and colleges and in universities) easier and more efficient (Kolesnikov, 2020).

The notion of an electronic textbook as a means of integrating information technologies into the modern classroom is becoming urgent, which becomes evident in the number of terms used to denote it: electronic digital book, e-book, e-text (etext), etextbook, e-textbook, E-Textbook, handbook (Aleksandrova & Pushina, 2018).

According to Aleksandrova and Pushina (2018), the usage of interactive electronic means in a language classroom can help students acquire the so-called 21st century skills as well as other competencies in the fields of intercultural communication, critical thinking and collaboration.

Since more and more students prefer using e-textbooks in the classroom and in self-education (Aleksandrova & Pushina, 2018), the results of the studies conveyed by Rockinson-Szapkiw, Courduff, Carter, and Bennett (2013), Piramanayagam, and Seal (2020) suggest that there was no difference in cognitive learning and grades between groups of students who used an electronic textbook and those who preferred the traditional one. Some researchers (Daniel & Woody, 2013) state that students reading

electronic text at home reported higher levels of multitasking, which can also be considered a benefit of using e-textbooks in a language classroom.

An interactive electronic textbook appears to be a tool of distant learning that serves as a means of optimizing the students' work in the classroom and requires certain changes in the education model combining traditional and distant learning practices in a language classroom (Aleksandrova & Pushina, 2018).

Interactive e-textbooks have a range of benefits which, according to Krechetnikov (2016), incorporate mobility, ability to be used asynchronously and to be edited, variability of tools and methods of learning. Besides, Aleksandrova and Pushina (2018) point out the authenticity of information with an option to be updated, the multifunctional character of the tasks presented, the objectivity of students' assessment, students' autonomy.

However, Kasper, Uiba & Mikk (2018) highlight the necessity to adapt the content and structure of an e-textbook to the learners' level: the low-achieving students profited from clear instructions, familiar icons, examples, and answering from the keyboard, while the high-achieving students benefited from key-combinations, menus with different levels, the Internet, analogies and lower density of terms in the material.

Scholars emphasize the role of the teacher when implementing blended learning or introducing the online format of education in a language classroom (Hung & Chou, 2015).

Undoubtedly certain problems can arise when developing or creating an e-textbook: many professors are likely to perceive the implementation of electronic tools as time-consuming and as an additional workload (Chiu, 2017). Nonetheless, teachers with higher self-efficacy are more likely to find a new technology easy to use.

Moreover, Norimanova (2018) emphasizes the role of analysing the learning objectives and requirements as well as the potential of the information technology tools to be used in the language classroom. As Taguchi (2019) points out, there are certain recommendations for teachers in terms of adapting language textbooks to the needs of the concrete age group: selecting materials that mirror a range of the second language pragmatic uses, replacing and supplementing existing materials with more authentic and varied examples when necessary. These principles can also be applied to adapting a textbook for an e-learning classroom.

An ordinary e-textbook is usually limited to the contents of printed textbooks, which lacks additional

learning functionalities without separating document content and style, functions like searching and linking, and interactivity and learning support (Gu, Wu & Xu, 2015). Therefore, in terms of creating an online course or an e-textbook (in online education) it is of high priority to use active learning strategies such as engaging learners in higher-order thinking (analysis, synthesis, evaluation), which will promote learner achievement, enhance learners' motivation and assure the students learn more efficiently (Huda, Ali, Nanji, & Cassum, 2016; Sun, Flores, & Tanguma 2012). Lin, Zhang and Zheng (2017) highlight that these strategies, as well as students' active regulation of learning, is considered to be crucial to the success of the online materials and e-textbooks created.

Thus, special attention should be paid to the technical tools of developing the e-textbook in question. When creating or developing an e-textbook, Lagun, Skutnitsky, Slatov and Farafonov (2019) have worked out several criteria for choosing suitable software shells including the price and quality correlation, as well as the interface characteristics.

Methodology

In the process of adjusting the traditional textbook for e-learning purposes we had to review the exercises by adding or reducing the number of words or sentences, we also had to provide audio files to accompany listening activities. Senior students and professors were involved in making digital recordings that now demonstrate a variety of voices.

In order to reduce the number of external web resources we decided to use two major platforms – Google Classroom with all relevant tools and services and LearningApps. The latter is a web site where any user can choose templates for different interactive tasks and games (matching pairs, classification, text input, a multiple choice quiz, cloze text etc.) (Ansari & Tripathi, 2017).

For the purposes of RFL course (A1) we mostly used text input and classification templates. It should be mentioned that special attention was given to providing models and examples that students can rely on if they have difficulties with understanding the task. All instructions were given in Russian and English for the same reason. Tasks that require text input cannot replace handwriting practice, but they can automate another necessary skill of using Russian keyboard layout.

Reading activities are accompanied by audio recordings of all the given texts, the unlimited access to these files helps to practise pronunciation both during the lesson and after it. Here we see a significant aid to the teacher who can by no means repeat one and the same extract dozens of times, the recordings allow students to play, rewind, make pauses and repeat all the necessary fragments.

In order to check their pronunciation and accuracy self-recording can be used. Some tasks are not interactive and require written answers to be checked either by the teacher or by fellow students. Answers can be written in Comment sections or attached as separate documents open for joint access. Final tests were made additionally using both LearningApps and Google Forms. Students get instant results and can “rewrite” tests if they fail.

As a result, we got an online environment where students can work together and individually with or without the teacher’s assistance. With the help of Google Classroom tools, we recreated the already familiar textbook environment (6 lessons, each containing reading and listening activities, grammar and vocabulary exercises and tests) that can now function as an interactive supplement or study companion.

At the stage of planning, we recommend to prepare different reference materials or extra assignments for different types of learners. Such materials can be attached to the primary assignment as a Google document, presentation, audio or video recording or a hyperlink.

Apart from the outlined web tools we suggest the following list of online resources to diversify visual aids: tools for mind mapping and brainstorming (Miro, Mindmeister) can be used during teacher-students interaction at the stage of introducing new vocabulary or grammar; tools for creating interactive images and videos (Thinglink) can be effective for creating nontrivial visuals; services for creating animated videos (Biteable, Renderforest) that can serve explanation purposes; virtual boards for note taking, planning and group work (Linoit, Padlet); tools for creating interactive tasks and games (Flippity, Wordwall), they can also be used for test taking.

Web resources should be thoroughly selected depending on the type of content, level of language, type of activity (collaborative online work, online self-study, peer-review, project work etc.). An important issue is that the majority of existing web tools has an English language interface, which is a benefit as English is an intermediary language in teaching RFL. Thus, a combination of an approved textbook and e-learning facilities makes an effective up-to-date complex that can make online classes a positive experience for both students and teachers.

Results

The source-textbook of our research work is the textbook “Russian for Beginners” (A1. Russkiy yazyk dlya nachinayushchikh) written by Galina M. Levina in co-authorship with Elena Yu. Nikolenko. Galina M. Levina holds a doctoral degree in pedagogics and is currently employed as a full professor of the Department of English Language Theory and Cross-cultural Communication of State Autonomous

Educational Institution of Higher Education of the City of Moscow “Moscow City University”.

The importance of the textbook for learners studying Russian as a foreign language is proved by the fact that in 2019 the printed version of the textbook was published in the digital form by IPR Media Publishing House and presented in the educational digital library system IPR BOOKS (Fig. 01). This system appeared as a result of the joint effort of IPR Media and the foundation “Russkiy Mir”. Their proclaimed purpose is to gather a collection of the best educational resources as a means of implementing the state priority project “The development of the export potential of the system of education in Russian”. According to this project predictions, the number of foreign students studying in Russian colleges and universities should exceed the figure of 700,000 by 2025 (Pasport prioritetnogo napravleniya, 2017).

Figure 01. “Russian for Beginners” by Galina M. Levina & Elena Yu. Nikolenko as appears in the educational digital library system IPR BOOKS

The screenshot shows the IPR BOOKS website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the IPR logo and links for 'О ПРОЕКТЕ', 'КНИГИ', 'РКИ В БИБЛИОТЕКАХ', 'ИНФОРМАЦИЯ', 'АВТОРАМ', 'КАТАЛОГ', and 'ЛИЧНЫЙ КАБИНЕТ'. The main content area features a book cover for 'A1. Русский язык для начинающих (Russian for beginners). Учебник'. Below the cover, there is a green button labeled 'Чтение ONLINE' and a star rating of 4.5. The metadata section includes:

- Издательство: Ай Пи Ар Медиа
- Авторы: Левина Г.М., Николенко Е.Ю.
- Научные школы: Московский городской педагогический университет, Московский государственный университет им. М.В. Ломоносова
- Год издания: 2019
- Место издания: Саратов
- Количество страниц: 164
- ISBN: 978-5-4497-0047-6
- Тип издания: учебник

 The description section is titled 'Описание' and contains the following text:

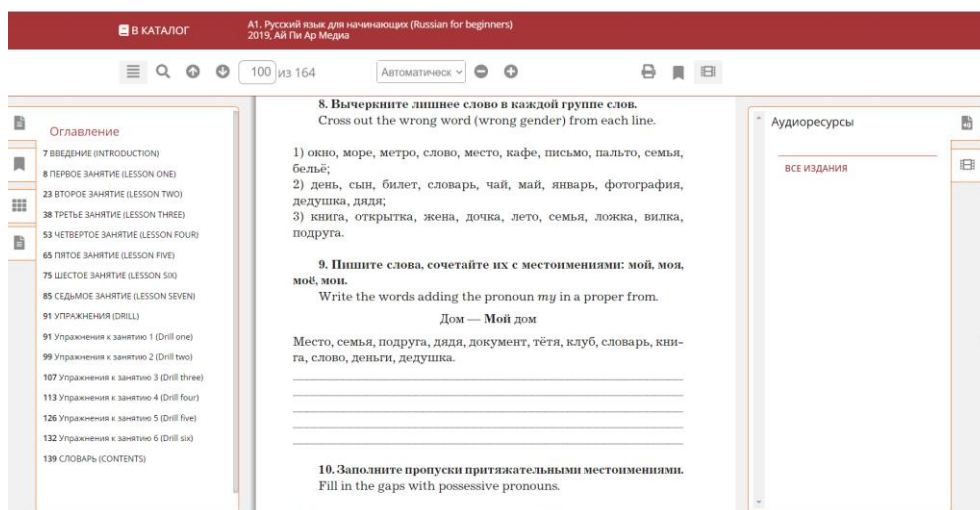
Учебник на основе авторской методики позволяет тем, кто начинает изучать русский язык, быстро овладеть основами разговорной речи, научиться понимать отдельные высказывания на русском языке и составлять собственные на базе 400 лексических единиц. Знакомит с началами грамматики: род и число имен, понятие о виде и времени глагола. Объем первой части: 30–40 аудиторных часов (1 кредит) + 30–40 часов самостоятельной работы (1 кредит). Учебник предназначен для подготовительных факультетов, курсов русского языка, индивидуального обучения. Textbook based on the author's methodology allows quickly master the basics of speaking: learn to understand individual statements in Russian and make their own on the basis of 400

Thus, there exists the digital version of the textbook which has not yet become interactive. The point we would like to make here is that the educational impact of the textbook in the world where the demand for qualitative online teaching seems to have been growing since the winter of 2019 could be intensified by making the activities and tasks work online. As a result of our research work the educational content of the textbook “Russian for Beginners” was modified in order to be used for online ‘in-class’ as well as for ‘out-of-class’ teaching of RFL learners.

The developed tasks and activities can be divided into those that a learner can work with independently or in collaboration with other learners and those ones that require a teacher’s guidance and monitoring. Special emphasis is placed on the development of materials using which a learner can independently revise the information and practise the skills acquired in class.

The textbook comprises 7 units planned from 4 up to 6 teaching hours. Although a number of tasks (drills) are presented in the digital version of the textbook (Fig. 02), the online format of carrying out RFL classes made it necessary to review the traditional way of working with such tasks and the oral or written mode of checking and assessing them so as to make such tasks fit for truly independent interactive work.

Figure 02. “Russian for Beginners” Drills, p. 100



We have pursued the following pattern of adjusting the education content of the textbook:

- We have chosen the accessible and free (unless used for commercial purposes) platform for placing the developed / adjusted tasks, namely a Google Classroom.
- We have chosen the accessible and free software application that allows to make education material work online, namely Google Forms for test-making and LearningApps for developing interactive exercises with the use of different templates.
- We have reconsidered the layout of tasks meant for independent studying in accordance with the requirements imposed on us by the chosen apps.

- We have created additional tasks for independent studying that allow to practise the material presented by the teacher in class.

The task did not prove to be technically demanding though it turned out to be time consuming. It is best effected in two teams – one team designing additional tasks and changing the layout of those given in the textbook; the other – digitizing them.

We are further going to provide an example of what has been done on the basis of Unit 1 of the textbook.

Figure 03. “Russian for Beginners” – textbook fragment, p. 17

| Мужской род (он) Masculine Gender (he, it) | Женский род (она) Feminine Gender (she, it) | Средний род (оно) Neuter Gender (it) |
|---|---|---|
| Оканчивается на согласный Ends in a Consonant сын, муж дом, город | Оканчивается на А, Я Ends in А, Я мама, тётЯ рука, ручка | Оканчивается на О, Е Ends in О, Е местО, морЕ |

Внимание: слова ПАПА, ДЯДЯ, ДЕДУШКА — мужского рода.

Attention: words ПАПА (dad), ДЯДЯ (uncle), ДЕДУШКА (grandfather) are Masculine.

22. Какого рода эти слова?

What Gender do these words belong to?

Друг, подруга, тётЯ, слово, брат, семья, кофе, муж, дочка, метро, окно,
место, рука, душ, ручка, город, паспорт

Here the notions of the grammar category of gender of Russian nouns (masculine, feminine and neuter) are introduced and a task is presented to drill the material (Fig. 03). We have digitized it according to one of the most suitable templates of LearningApps. The resulting task is given below (Fig. 04).

Figure 04. Indicate the gender of nouns.



A number of exercises have been developed where such topics as possessive pronouns, tense forms and stress placement are practised.

We have also worked out a series of online tests including multiple choice tasks and tasks to be peer reviewed or checked by a teacher in order to evaluate the progress and learning outcomes.

Discussions

The experience that is described in this paper deals with a synchronous type of e-learning. It demands a systematic though distant interaction between a teacher and a group of students under the conditions of computer-mediated communication. In such an environment printed learning material (textbooks) that proved their effectiveness in the traditional classroom, can be adjusted and enhanced by relevant web-technologies and e-learning tools. We suggest that such alterations are, on the one hand, inevitable and, on the other, – beneficial for students who can remember what they see easier and relate to it more effectively, read or hear via interactive media.

A new web-based version of an RFL textbook has several benefits: it restructures the material to meet the

requirements of distant learning (more emphasis is given to individual activities, mutual learning and peer assessment); it provides instant feedback (tasks and tests are checked automatically); it makes it possible to make an unlimited number of attempts at doing exercises (following the trial and error principle) and it can save much effort and time usually spent on checking students' papers, organizing group work and distributing additional tasks.

Conclusion

One of the main objectives of developing an e-textbook by supplementing the traditional one is to make learning tools more suitable for contemporary academic use. Another objective is to impact learners' academic outcomes beneficially. Additionally, when using the traditional textbook adjusted to the digital format, students may achieve better levels of academic performance with reduced effort. Nevertheless, the authors of the article concluded that further study is needed to better understand and generalize results of the effectiveness of e-textbooks versus print text in the learning process.

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