

Young Heritage Language Learners: Russian Language Teaching Strategies

Zoya EFIMOVA

1.0 Introduction

Recent studies show that heritage language learners¹ (HL) and foreign (L2) language learners require different teaching approaches. According to the research, L2 learners need a more traditional micro-approach, starting with words, moving to sentences and then to texts. The macro-approach, on the other hand, is appropriate for HL learners, i.e. it is more beneficial for them to start with texts and content gradually improving grammar, spelling etc. Though the theory seems to be correct, the problem is that most of the observations were made with university level students (e.g. Kagan and Dillon 2001, 2008) whose dominant language (L1) proficiency is at adult level. But will the suggested approach work as well with younger heritage language learners? In this article we are going to address this question.

2.0 Study groups

I base my observations on my experience teaching Russian both as a foreign and as a heritage language.

The first study group consists of about 100 young HL learners aged 4 to 15 whom I taught from 2012 - 2017 in Russian language classes in San Jose, California. The HL students come from families with one or two Russian speaking parents. They are mostly fluent Russian language speakers with no or limited literacy skills. American English is their dominant language.

The second group includes about 60 adult students of L2 Russian taught in Japan through 2008-2011 in Tokyo University for of Foreign Studies and Chiba University (colloquial Russian, elementary and intermediate level). The first language of all students is Japanese, which is very different from Russian phonologically, grammatically and sociolinguistically. I will use my experience with this group to check suggested theories on teaching strategies for L2 learners and to draw some examples.

It is clear that the two study groups differ not only in prior language exposure but also in age, dominant/first language and cultural background, which we will put under careful consideration in comparing the teaching approaches.

¹ 'Heritage languages are spoken by early bilinguals ... whose home language is severely restricted because of insufficient input. As a result they may understand the home language and may speak it to some degree but feel more at ease in the dominant language of their society.' Polinsky 2013

3.0 Teaching approach: macro vs micro

Though heritage language speakers have been around since ancient times, as people started to migrate, heritage language learning is a considerably new field of inquiry. In the recent two decades, it has been recognized that common practice of combining HL and L2 students is not beneficial for both groups as they require different teaching approaches. Foreign language learning starts from simple words and phrases and progresses to sentences and texts. Grammar and cultural aspects are taught topic by topic. HL learners have a prior broad exposure to study language, and it has been noted that it is more efficient to build learning process on their knowledge and apply top-down approach. Kagan and Dillon (2001) suggest that adult HL students have acquired most of the phonological and grammatical system and can start with fairly large and complex texts in both oral and written aspects of language. Lynch (2003) states macro-approach as one of main principles in 'HL pedagogy should emphasize grammatical and lexical development through discourse level activities' (p.37).

Following, I will go through the main teaching domains - pronunciation and intonation, vocabulary, grammar, reading, writing, speaking, listening. First, we study the differences in approach to teaching L2 and HL adult learners with English as first/dominant language as suggested by Kagan and Dillon (2001), and then check the appropriateness of these observations on study groups described above.

3.1. Pronunciation and intonation / Phonology

Kagan and Dillon (2001) state that L2 learners need consistent instruction in pronunciation and intonation throughout the course while HL speakers do not (pp.148-150).

The phonological systems of two different languages are different, so L2 learner are first trained to recognize different phonemes of other language and then to pronounce them. For Japanese students mastering Russian pronunciation, it is essential for them to learn the many phonemes that do not exist in their own language. Such consonants as affricates /tʃ/, /tʃ/ (often transliterated as ch), fricatives /ʃ/, /z/, /ɕ:/ (sh, zh, sch) and vowel /ɪ/, differentiation between /r/ and /l/ usually require extensive training. As Japanese has typical CV or V syllable structure it is also difficult for Japanese speakers to acquire consonant clusters pronunciation as they tend to insert a vowel between two consonants. For example, Russian *privet* 'hello' will be often pronounced as *purivet*. There are also many other phonetic phenomena such as vowel reduction, consonant devoicing etc. to be learned. Therefore pronunciation is one of very important issues in teaching Japanese speakers Russian, and this requires extensive instruction.

Kagan and Dillon (2001) argue that adult HL learners do not need special instruction at the phonetic level as they have close to native level proficiency of pronunciation, stress and intonation.

Young HL learners coming to Russian language lessons typically can speak their home/heritage language as well but they often need some training in pronunciation and phonological awareness. Two issues appear in this teaching domain: articulation and phonological awareness.

The first problem is that at age 5 and even older vocal tract articulators can sometimes be not fully developed. Akishina and Akishina (2007) state that often children have difficulties pronouncing particular sounds such as /r/, /l/, /s/, /z/, /ʃs/. Or replace consonants /ʃ/, /z/, /ɛ:/, /tɛ/ with /s/ and /z/ (p.67). Children with low proficiency of Russian Language often have problems with pronouncing and recognition vowel /i/. Interestingly enough, list of 'difficult phonemes' for young HL learners is very close to one for Japanese L2 Russian learners. Pronunciation training must be addressed either in Russian language class or at special language therapist sessions by age 5 or 6 as as it can be challenging to correct pronunciation at older age, and replacing one sound with another can also affect phoneme recognition and further development of literacy skills which is discussed below.

Another important issue for young HL learners to be addressed at this teaching domain is phonological awareness. Phonological awareness can be defined as 'the ability to reflect and manipulate the phonemic segments of speech' (Tunmer and Rohl (1991), p.2). Many studies starting (Elkonin (1973), Liberman (1973), Goldstein (1976), Treiman & Baron (1981) support hypothesis that phonological awareness is important for acquisition of reading and writing. That is why different phoneme recognition and manipulation activities are essential part of Russian lessons for young HL learners. Older children developed reading skills in order to learn spelling need some phonetic analysis skills. For example, phoneme g in word луг (lug) 'meadow' is affected by final devoicing and is pronounced /luk/. So in order to spell the word correctly and do not confuse it with word лук /luk/ 'onion' pronounced similar but spelled different students need ability to differentiate between voiced and voiceless sounds as well as define root of word (which is grammatical ability).

Let us consider how these pedagogical need can be addressed in terms of the micro-approach and macro-approach. L2 learners need a micro-approach addressing particular pronunciation issues starting with minimal pair exercises (rama-lama 'frame'-'lama') and then implementing them in a broader context.

My teaching experience supports the macro-approach to HL classes as a whole, and much phonological training may be discourse based. For example, minimal pair words (also called metagrams) that develop phonological awareness can be presented to students in a story about a boy who did not care that he mistakes mistakes replacing one letter by another woke up one morning and found his *bulka* 'morning bun' has transformed into life *belka* 'squirrel', and when he wants to go skiing he sees only *luzhi* 'puddles' instead of his *lizhi* 'ski', and so on. (Mischenkova 2012, p.45-46). On the other hand, articulation problems are usually solved with micro-approach,

working on at each phoneme at a time. Also many word games are effective and fun by themselves and can be used without macro-approach.

3.2. Vocabulary

Kagan and Dillon (2001) state that vocabulary has to be taught to L2 students 'full range' starting with basics adding vocabulary consistent with their learning goal. HL learners have acquired extensive vocabulary though limited to home and community usage and need to fill the lacunae of academic, literary and formal words (pp.148-150). For example, HL learners who attend american school often have difficulty explaining in Russian their school news, as well as discussing subjects taught in school. This type of vocabulary can be learned through news sharing, reading or other media usage in class. Teaching in a HL class is more focused on dialogue, text comprehension and production than on the purposeful learning of assigned vocabulary lists.

L2 learners, especially adults, are more limited in their choice, and new vocabulary is usually defined by their course syllabus. For example, in Japan I taught conversational Russian to Japanese students who were going to study in Russia. Therefore vocabulary was organized around situations that could appear during their stay in Russia. The difference in vocabulary input between L2 and HL learners is apparent but the teaching strategy for both groups in this domain is similar (e.g. Duquette, L., Renie, D., & Laurier, M. 1998). First, new vocabulary appears in a text and in context, then in the case of L2 learners it is translated to L1, or explained in the case of HL learners. After, words are finally memorized and activated through meaningful usage in other contexts. Thus, teaching vocabulary using macro-approach is common for both L2 and HL learners; however, the language input of both groups and importance of this domain is different.

3.3. Grammar

Regarding grammar, Kagan and Dillon (2001) note that L2 learners are 'familiar with grammatical rules but cannot use them fluently nor comprehend them fully in real life' while 'HL speakers use much of the grammatical system appropriately' but 'not familiar with the rules', p.148. L2 learners need a micro-approach moving from more simple constructions to more complicated. This suggestion clearly right and my teaching experience supports this observation.

As L2 learners clearly need some instruction on grammar rules two questions arise regarding grammar teaching to HL students. First question is whether we need to teach any grammar to HL students if they can use it? I think that it depends on age and proficiency of HL learner. Without some grammar concepts such as morpheme, verb aspect, grammatical number, case etc. it will be impossible to explain some important spelling rules so I would follow necessity in this question. As far as students need knowledge of grammatical theory to advance it

should be taught.

The second question is whether teachers should correct grammar mistakes of HL student in any way. Similar question was raised a lot for L2 instruction and the most popular answer is 'yes if it does not interrupt student's discourse and do not get in the way of speech production process'. Corrections can be made after student finished his discourse. It has been noted that immediate corrections and interruptions can form a language barrier for L2 learner. So what about HL students? On the one hand, they are more confident speakers and they are not easily confused. On the other hand, with active language exposure, some grammatical errors can disappear naturally, thus there is no need to correct every mistake. The macro-approach is the best answer in this regard as well. Discourse of HL learners can be the best starting point for tracking their frequent grammatical errors. After a recurring mistake is spotted, a teachers can prepare exercises to address this issue.

For example, at some point I noticed that my advanced Russian HL students (ages 9-15) were making the same mistake calquing indirect yes/no question construction from English to Russian.²

Я	не	знаю,	если	он	придёт.
---	----	-------	------	----	---------

Ya	ne	znayu	yesli	on	prid'ot.
-----------	-----------	--------------	--------------	-----------	-----------------

I	not	know	if	he	comes.
---	-----	------	----	----	--------

'I do not know if he comes'.

While in correct construction requires conjunctive 'li' particle and other word order.

Я	не	знаю,	придёт	ли	он.
---	----	-------	--------	----	-----

Ya	ne	znayu	prid'otli	on.	
-----------	-----------	--------------	------------------	------------	--

I	not	know	comes	whether	he.
---	-----	------	-------	---------	-----

I explained their mistake, introduced the correct structure, and the next time when the students read a news articles in class, I asked them to construct as many indirect yes/no questions as possible about the content.

3.4. Reading / Writing

Kagan and Dillon (2001) point out that HL classes require a macro-approach because students can read 'fairly large and complex texts almost from the very beginning', and 'high degree of internal grammar allows expansive writing assignments at early stages of instruction', p.150. L2 students follow a bottom-up approach starting with learning the alphabet and moving to words and

² Interestingly enough, the same error is typical for adults, primarily L1 Russian speakers, with deep English language immersion.

simple sentences and gradually up to text level.

Young HL speaking children (ages 4 to 12) are similar to L2 learners in this domain, as they need a micro-approach in acquiring literacy skills. Moreover, they typically start to read and write more slowly than adult L2 learners. Children's cognitive skills are still developing while L2 adult learners are cognitively mature and they have already developed reading and writing skills in their first language. However, as young HL learners have more proficiency than L2 learners in the other teaching domains, as soon as they develop basic literacy skills, they start to move faster in language acquisition. Thus, developing literacy skills in young HL learners is one of the priorities in heritage language instruction. Valdés et al. (2006) found that HL programs that included extensive reading were very successful.

The reading and writing instructional approaches are the most prominent differences between teaching adult and young language learners.

3.5. Speaking / Listening

In speaking and listening, young and adult HL learners are on the same page: they need a content-based instruction as they already can comprehend and produce spoken language. L2 learners gradually develop their speaking and listening skills. They start with recognizing simple words and phrases and through extensive training learn to comprehend spoken language. D'Ambruso (1993) outlines a Spanish program for heritage language Spanish speakers that has goals similar to those for Spanish as a foreign language. But the goals are approached in reverse order. The program prioritizes reading and writing over listening and speaking while for L2 learners spoken language comprehension and production come first.

I had a similar experience in my classes. With L2 learners we focused on speaking and listening, and in HL classes we prioritized literacy skills. However, we cannot undermine the importance of speaking and listening for HL classes as they are efficiently used for building a discourse-based learning even for those areas that require a bottom-up instructional strategy.

For example, I actively use the spoken language proficiency of my students when I teach them reading. In my course called 'Let's Play with Letters' I design each lesson around a new letter. Each letter has its own story, profession, likes and dislikes. All reading and writing exercises, and phonological training are part of the tale. Students love to make their own stories about letters, suggest a lot of details for characters, and invent new games with letters and words.

4. Conclusion

In this article I have studied the differences between approaches to foreign language (L2) and young heritage language (HL) teaching. Kagan and Dillon (2001), and other authors argue that

L2 learners need a micro-approach while a macro-approach is more sufficient for HL learners. As almost all observations for these theory were made for adults, I revised the suggested strategies for young HL learners.

The macro-approach to HL teaching worked the most effectively in my experience. Many teaching domains such as grammar, vocabulary, speaking/listening are best learned in a top-down manner moving from text to particular topics. However, I showed that other areas such as reading/writing and pronunciation/phonological awareness require a micro-approach when instruction starts with basic units and moves up to more complex ones. These observations highlight the fact that young HL teaching strategies fall between those of adult L2 and adult HL learners, and require a combined approach. Language programs for young HL speakers have to take into account all of these features.

References

Akishina A.A., Akishina T.E. 2007. *Uchimsya uchit' detei russkomu yazyku. 111 otvetov na voprosy roditelei.* (Learning to teach children Russian Language. 111 answers to parent's questions). Moscow: Russkiy yazyk.

D'Ambruoso, L. 1993. Spanish for Spanish speakers: A curriculum. In B. J. Merino, E. T. Trueba, & F. A. Samaniego (Eds.), *Language and culture in learning teaching Spanish to native speakers of Spanish*. Washington, D.C: Falmer Press, pp. 203-207.

Duquette, L., Renie, D., & Laurier, M. 1998. The evaluation of vocabulary acquisition when learning French as a second language in multimedia environment. In *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 11 (1), pp. 3-34.

Efimova, Zoya. 2015. *Knizhnyi klub kak effektivnaya forma obucheniya unasledovannomu russkomu yazyku.* (Book Club as Effective Way of Heritage Russian Language Learning). in Kono W. (Ed.) *Literature and History: Representation and Narrative. Chiba University Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences Research Project Reports* No. 289, pp.100-110

Elkonin, D.B. 1973. U.S.S.R. In J. Dawning (Ed.), *Comparative Reading*. New York: MacMillan.

Goldstein, D. M. 1976. Cognitive-linguistic functioning and learning to read in preschoolers. In *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 68, pp. 680-688.

Kagan, Olga. Intercultural Competence of Heritage Language Learners: Motivation, Identity, Language Attitudes, and the Curriculum. In *Proceedings of Intercultural Competence Conference*, September 2012, V.2, pp. 72-84.

Kagan O., K.Dillon. 2001 A New Perspective on Teaching Russian: Focus on the Heritage Learner. *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (Autumn, 2001), pp. 507-518.

Liberman, I. Y. 1973. Segmentation of the spoken word and reading acquisition. *Bulletin of the Orton Society*, 23, pp. 65-77.

Lynch, A. 2003. Toward a theory of Heritage Language Acquisition: Spanish in the United States. In A. Roca & C. Colombia (eds.), *Mi lengua. Spanish as a heritage language in the United States*. Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, pp.25-50.

Mischenkova, L. 2012. Znimatel'nyi russkii yazyk. Metodicheskoe posobie. Moscow: Rost.

Polinsky, M. 2013. Heritage languages. In Oxford Bibliographies Online: Linguistics, ed. Mark Aronoff. New York: Oxford University Press.

Treiman, R. A., Baron, J. 1981. Segmental analysis ability: Development and relation to reading ability. In G. E. MacKinnon & T. G. Walker (Eds.), *Reading research: Advances in theory and practice*, 3. New York: Academic Press.

Valdés, G., Fishman, J. A., Chávez, R., & Pérez, W. (2006). Secondary Spanish heritage programs in California. In *Developing minority language resources the case of Spanish in California*. Buffalo: Multilingual Matters, pp. 140-186.