

INNOVATIVE TEACHING: THIRD-YEAR BUSINESS RUSSIAN

Richard Robin, 2009

QUICK OVERVIEW

What these materials do. The project you are now considering is a pilot packet of materials for CIBER BUSINESS RUSSIAN for use at the third-year level. I believe these materials represent a breakthrough for Business Russian in an undergraduate setting. The packet you will be examining has the following four goals and has produced these results:

Goal 1. Move students from ACTFL Intermediate Low in speaking (simple sentences) towards paragraphed speech (at least Intermediate Mid *with emerging paragraphs*).

Results. In 2008, four of ten students reached Intermediate High (paragraphs most but not all of the time). The rest reached Intermediate Mid as required. This is better than in previous years (typically 2 to 3 Intermediate High, 4–5 Intermediate Mid, 1–2 Intermediate Low).

Goal 2. Introduce simple business topics based on students' current everyday experience in areas such as jobs, travel, and media.

Results. Both last year and this students have demonstrated the ability in simulations to communicate meaningfully on assigned business topics. For example, Professor Gonglewski witnessed a semi-rehearsed negotiation on solutions involving internships in class.

Goal 3. Provide templates for real-life simple business correspondence to supplement traditional student academic composition.

Results. Last year, all students learned to write routine e-mails for the first time entirely in Russian. Those students who have since gone on to fourth year write basic correspondence accurately and crisply in a way that could not have been expected earlier.

Goal 4. Expose students to authentic monologue and dialogue speech on a wide range of business-oriented topics.

Results. Students expanded their listening repertoire to include a range of business topics. (The GW Russian program has been a nationally recognized path-blazer in audio comprehension since the mid-1980s.)

Goal 5. Provide opportunities for students to use their Russian in work-related environments.

Results. Of ten students last year, four have had jobs and or internships in Russian speaking environments. One student worked on a Smithsonian project involving Russia copyrights. Last year was our first that where students' proficiency in Russian was good enough to allow them to exist in the workplace after only 390 hours of classroom instruction.

THE MATERIALS

How are these materials different than others? These are the first (and so far only) business materials for undergraduate Russian based on authentic language from the world of business whose *communicative goals are carried out through business cases and business simulations based on those cases.*

What makes up the materials? The pilot phase of the materials consists of

1. Six written units, produced under a GW CIBER grant
 - Introduction to Russian Business
 - Human Resources
 - Business Travel
 - Business Technology
 - Media and Advertising
 - Medical Practice and Insurance
2. Pilot video unit plus Quia worksheet

These are the first materials based on authentic business language to use business cases and simulations as communicative vehicles.

In addition a new CIBER grant (supported by a sabbatical approved for spring 2010) foresees the addition of

3. Two units, **Trade** and **Investments** (2010)
4. Additional audio and video to accompany the units.

Professor Galina Shatalina contributed grammar exercises to all the existing units and is to be listed as a co-author. Oksana Prokhvacheva is to create basic input materials, dialogs, and to collaborate on the cases and simulation materials for “Trade” and “Investments.”

A detailed breakdown of a unit structure is part of the materials themselves as presented in this packet.

Course structure. The CIBER BUSINESS RUSSIAN materials are used in **Slav 010**, the second (spring) semester of the third-year course. The course runs five days a week at 50 minutes per day. The course is team-taught. Professor Galina Shatalina teaches the hours on Mondays and Fridays and covers “traditional” input: conversational non-business topics such as *education, the news, life at home*, etc. I teach the remaining three hours, which are devoted to Business Russian. In short, Business Russian constitutes 45 of the 75 contact hours (60%) of the second semester third-year course and a third of the entire 150 contact hours available in Intermediate (third-year) Russian.

Materials as used in the course. Currently, the Business Russian part of the course actively employs the units for **HR, Business Travel**, and **Business Technology**. While the actual units for additional topics are deployable right now, *the current course structure does not allow time for them to be used.* In addition, we *are meeting or exceeding basic goals*

under the current schedule. It is envisioned that CIBER BUSINESS RUSSIAN will be published when complete, and that third-year intermediate teachers of Russian will use the entire set of materials for a two-semester sequence (about 120–150 contact hours) or will pick and choose units for a one semester course (60–75 contact hours).

Why Business Russian? The initial push for the development of business materials comes from a U.S. Department of Education grant from the GW CIBER (part of the consortium of Centers for Business Education and Research). CIBER is funding projects in international business education with an eye on foreign-language preparedness. The GW CIBER grant targets critical languages: Russian, Chinese, Arabic, and Korean.

The inclusion of Russian under the CIBER umbrella is no surprise. Russia is a member of the G8 and G20; it is the world’s largest energy producer and a major exporter of other raw materials. Russia has moved from an economy that was smaller than Holland’s in 1990 to the eighth largest in the world (CIA Factbook, 2007).

Business in a third-year course? The CIBER BUSINESS RUSSIAN project targets the second semester of a regular third-year course. That means that students have had about 300–350 hours of face-to-face instruction. At this point, students are usually on the borderline of Intermediate Low and Intermediate Mid: they are able to “survive” in country without recourse to English, but topic areas are limited to immediate needs and interests. (Reading and listening levels are slightly higher.)

The inclusion of a “business” semester in the third year should raise concerns, and initially I was quite skeptical about such a prospect. In an all-skills Russian course, we can and should assume that the underlying goal, whether the topic is generic or specialized, *is to bring students from operations on the sentence level to the beginning of work on paragraphed discourse, that is, to set them on the road to Advanced proficiency.*

Any all-skills third year Russian course should set its sights on paragraph-level discourse.

The challenge is to cover business topics without losing the basics required to move proficiency forward in a classroom setting.

Oral proficiency levels aside, our students at the end of the Basic Sequence of 240 classroom hours (Slav 1 through 4 or Intensive 5 and 6) have yet to master core vocabulary, especially verbs of simple movement: *going, carrying, taking, sitting/ down, standing/ up, placing pouring*, etc. Where does that leave room to introduce discussions of, say, hiring practice? For these reasons, attempts to include business at the Intermediate level, whether measured by seat time or ACTFL descriptors, result all too easily in a shotgun marriage — a grafting of some exercises on business correspondence to an otherwise unchanged course. The challenge facing a materials writer for the Intermediate (third-year) level is to create content that covers the topic at hand without losing the basics required to move proficiency forward in a classroom setting.

With those limitations in mind, one might ask, *why do business in the third year?* The answer lies in Russian language enrollment patterns. The third-year population, usually over ten students in any university with a full-fledged Russian program is enough to support such a course. Furthermore, third-year is usually the last stop-off point before long-term stays in Russia, which routinely include business internships. In most cases, students poorly prepared for those opportunities come back with little to show for their efforts. In short, if we weigh all the factors — the numbers of students, their likely plans in Russia, as well as the potential proficiency springboard — the intermediate third year, starting with previous 240 classroom hours and ending at a cumulative 390 hours — is the optimal place.

Traditional course content and business. For years the Intermediate level (third year) was dominated not only by verbs of motion, but by the traditional topical staples of literature, culture/cinema, politics, and history.

Students of Russian had no reason to be concerned with business even on a basic consumer level. That situation continued past the fall of the Soviet Union. The tough day-to-day conditions in post-Soviet Russia required that handholding organizations guide students and researchers through the most basic “business” transactions. While in some European and Latin American study abroad venues students were (and are) expected to fend for themselves in a range of situations (housing, course sign-ups, transportation arrangements, medical care, etc.), American students in Russia could expect that day-to-day dealings would be largely taken care of for them. Other routine business involving banking, car rentals, and small property sale was largely irrelevant. As for common business terminology (‘stocks’, ‘bonds’, ‘compounded interest’, etc.) — that was a matter for specialists, not for run of the mill foreign language students.

Previous third-year books based content on literature, culture, politics, and science — but not business.

Business is one of many literacies: literature, film, art, or science.

Only after the beginning of relative economic and social calm, aided by the ensuing oil boom, did Business Russian begin to look like a realistic pedagogical venture. In the twenty-first century, an American resident in Russia, even someone casually connected to business and finance, can expect to have to talk about business as much as about Balabanov’s films, Glazunov’s paintings, or Bulgakov’s novels. Business has become just another of many literacies.

The third year business context. In a third-year context, business should not be taken to mean failed financial markets or toxic assets. Realistic intermediate Business Russian starts with transactional situations just beyond booking a hotel room or buying dinner. That level provides a springboard for topics that involve explanations, narrations, specific formulations, scripted dialogs and text — all those things that are inherent in ACTFL Advanced level interaction that characterizes the ability to carry

Business topics are sometimes familiar topics with a business twist: “Movies” becomes intellectual property.

out some discourse related to work. For that reason appropriate topics are things like, human resources and employment decisions, office technology, business travel, and so on.

In fact, because our students are undergraduates but not necessarily business majors, the topics we cover represent a range of “soft business” subjects. In many cases, the topics originated in what had been general third-year topics. For example, **Human Resources** in a previous existence was “My day at work.” **Business Travel** was “Taking Trips.” **Medical Services and Insurance** was “At the Doctor’s,” and so on. The reorientation of these topics towards business not only brings the topics more up to date and livens them up; it provides students with an additional sociocultural layer of information about the target country.

Previous materials. Despite the arrival of business as a content area in the undergraduate Russian language curriculum, the appearance of business-oriented materials has lagged behind the growth of Russian business. Hastily assembled textbooks, almost always out of date on the day of publication because of the rapid changes in Russia of the 1990s, added little value to traditional course content.

Previous business books were obsolete on the day of release.

The business book that came closest to filling a third-year niche is ACTR’s *Russian Language for Business Communication* (Klobukova, et al. 1997) with a wide range of reading input with and realistic communicative tasks. Missing were audio/video ancillaries and any material *about* information technology. But most importantly, the book forced a hard choice on teachers: teach *either* the rudiments of Business Russian *or* the rest of the language: traditional grammar and vocabulary.

A different approach. The CIBER BUSINESS RUSSIAN packet represents a different approach to all the problems mentioned thus far.

- We cover a variety of topics within the repertoire of third year students *from a business orientation* but in a way that promotes general-language paragraphed discourse.
- We “cover” and practice the standard third-year grammar.
- We base communicative activities on semi-authentic business cases and simulations.

Rehearsed speech and Islands of Proficiency. Topics may change. The basic communicative goal remains. And that goal, stated before and worth re-emphasizing, is the beginning of the transition from production at the sentence level to paragraphed discourse. For this reason, the exercises suggested in CIBER BUSINESS RUSSIAN are heavily oriented towards rehearsed (but not memorized verbatim) paragraphed presentations. Students are asked to prepare reports (presented with sparse notes) on their jobs, their travel plans, their use of technology, their view of the viability of Russian films in the American market, and so on.

Rehearsed speech is the highway leading to paragraphed discourse.

Initial attempts at such discourse are often rough and mechanical. Additional rehearsals (for example a re-presentation during a case simulation) eventually lead to the addition to a reusable piece of discourse as part of a student's permanent repertoire — expandable to other topics.

Boris Shekhtman, a national authority on teaching paragraphing skills in Category 3 and 4 languages, calls such rehearsed bits of discourse “islands of proficiency.” In most cases, the formation and expansion of such islands of proficiency is a haphazard process. For me the Islands of Proficiency philosophy is the driving principle behind CIBER BUSINESS RUSSIAN, and indeed, the entire intermediate experience. I attribute the fact that *most* of our students who complete four years of Russian reach either ACTFL Intermediate High or Advanced (far beyond the national average) to Islands of Proficiency approach to teaching Russian.

In short, our students meet the goals set before them and at the end of the year are in a position to begin using their Russian in a professionally meaningful way, whether in U.S. based internships, individual work for hire, or in internships in Russia.