

Project: Authentic Reading from Beginner to Advanced Fellows: Zarema Kumakhova and Shannon Spasova

Detailed description of project:

Reading unabridged authentic literature is the dream and motivation of many students who take Russian. Most of the reading materials that exist lack vocabulary assignments and do not teach reading strategies. Undisputedly, the main difficulty in reading comprehension of our students is the limitation of their vocabulary. Taking advantage of the uniqueness of Russian word formation, Zarema Kumakhova developed a system that teaches students to figure out the meaning of words without a dictionary based on classic works of Russian literature, and she has been using the paper-and-pencil version of these materials for several years. However, because the third- and fourth-level Russian classes are combined and have a mix of heritage learners, those who have been to Russia, and those who have not, each type of student has a very different level of need for scaffolding to understand the materials, and spending time on it in class is not efficient because of the difficulty in pitching to the correct level of difficulty with such a diverse group of students. Therefore, Zarema wanted to convert the activities to an online format in which students could get the help that was needed for each individually but not waste time on help that was not needed. She enlisted the help of Shannon Spasova, and we created part of a pilot lesson based on the short story "The Shot" by Alexander Pushkin. We have used Adobe Captivate to create an interactive version of the text that allows students to click on words and get help corresponding to the words. The series of lessons that houses the text also includes a large number of exercises aimed at helping students to improve their understanding of vocabulary through word formation and their retention of the new vocabulary that they encounter in the text through a set of vocabulary assignments based on current life and contexts. They also include comprehension assignments and discussion questions.

The main part of the project aimed to complete a set of lessons based on two stories from classic Russian literature: "The Shot" by Alexander Pushkin, and "Taman" by Mikhail Lermontov. These will then be able to be used by students in the third- and fourth-level Russian courses at MSU.

Another part of the project aimed to create lessons that would include some of the same strategies for students in the lower levels, focusing first on second year.

Outcomes of project and transferability:

Once the money designated for student workers has been depleted and the project has been finished and polished, we will have 2 series of lessons based on works of Russian literature. This will be a total of 30-40 lessons (Pushkin: 6 parts, and 3-4 lessons per part; Lermontov: 5 parts, and 3-4 lessons per part) that can be used in the higher levels of the Russian courses. The second-year Russian courses will have a lesson series of 6 lessons that are aimed at an awareness of various topics that help students with their comprehension of vocabulary encountered in authentic reading texts as well as retention of that vocabulary, including on topics like recognizing cognates, how to use a dictionary, and word formation basics. This lesson series will be expanded to include more authentic texts as a continuation of these introductory lessons. In addition, some preliminary materials for the first year will also be added to the collection.

Impact on own professional development/teaching/research/curriculum development/outreach, department, and language teaching and learning community at MSU and beyond:

The impact on Zarema Kumakhova's third- and fourth-level Russian courses will be profound because she will be able to use these materials with students for years to come. Many students of Russian have the goal of reading Russian literature in the original, and this series of lessons gives them the experience of doing that, and as a result, a great sense of accomplishment. The lessons developed by Shannon Spasova will be used for second year students, and this will help them prepare for the activities that they will complete in Dr. Kumakhova's class. There are plans to continue to develop the second-year materials, as well as include some materials on the same theme in first year in the future. The lessons will be able to be housed on the internet and can be made available to the larger Russian teaching community, raising MSU's profile as a major contributor to a greater wealth of reading materials for students of Russian. Zarema Kumakhova and Shannon Spasova would also be glad to consult with any faculty in other languages who might be interested in pursuing a similar project, and would be happy to provide training in the use of Adobe Captivate or H5P for this purpose.