Title: Uncle Ivan Meets the Avatar: Teaching Russian Verbs of Motion Online
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This paper will demonstrate the Russian Verbal Laboratory (RVL), an online application funded by the Department of Education that enables students to train and evaluate their understanding of Russian verbs of motion. It will also discuss other related on-line language learning materials. Russian verbs of motion are difficult for native English speakers to grasp on a conceptual level, and difficult to train. In order to fully understand the semantic decisions they are making, students must use the verbs of motion in context. In traditional written exercises context is difficult to establish, and students cannot visualize the differences in meaning between related verb forms. The process can be contextualized in class with an activity whereby the instructor creates place locations (store, train station, Ivan's house) and has students direct their peers to those places by using proper forms of the verbs. The Russian Verbal Laboratory trains students via an online module which provides intrinsic feedback through a graphical environment. Students manipulate the environment through an avatar who is subject to the directional commands of the user, and by whose actions the student can immediately see the consequences of any verbal choice. The student can direct the avatar's movement to various destinations by building basic sentences. Once the commands are entered, the avatar moves as the student has directed. If the movement is contrary to the student's objective, the process can be restarted. The program will also work in reverse: the avatar's movement can be shown, and the student queried on how to best represent that movement in the target language. The primary goal is to enable students to see the consequences of verbs of motion choices. As far as we are aware, no existing application allows for this type of intuitive, visually reinforced training.