

Title: Linguistic Research Project in Russian Heritage Classroom: Moving from Intermediate to Advanced Proficiency Level

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Abstract:

The Linguistic Research Project “The Life of Words in Another Language” is designed for Russian heritage learners of high school and early college age to help them move from Intermediate to Advanced proficiency level in all modes of communication by focusing on academic language and sharpening their critical thinking and academic (research) skills.

The project was a significant part (about 20 hours, 1/5 of total instructional time) of an elective projects unit in the Russian Summer Startalk Program at the University of Washington each summer from 2012-2016. Following the Startalk-endorsed principles for effective teaching and learning, the project learning experience is framed by a standards-based and thematically organized curriculum that integrates culture, content, and language and is run entirely in Russian.

The project-based curriculum takes into account heritage students’ background and knowledge and makes learning both comfortable and challenging (macro approach to heritage teaching by Olga Kagan). During the project students read and understand authentic texts: Russian dictionaries, linguistic articles and technical descriptions (working with corpora, PowerPoint, and MOODLE), listen to and understand video lectures and other students’ presentations (Interpretive Communication). They discuss ideas and opinions related to their research topics with the instructor and their peers and participate in after-presentation discussions with peers and experts (Interpersonal Communication). At the end of the project, the students each write a PowerPoint Presentation and present their findings from their research projects orally with presentation slides in front of their parents, instructors, classmates, and experts in the Student Conference (Presentational Communication).

Students’ interest in the project is driven by linguistic problems, for example: How many words have been borrowed from Russian into English? Why did the other language borrow them and how did they change? When did the Russian word “sputnik” enter into other world languages? What is the difference between the Russian word “troika” and the English equivalent? In order to resolve these questions, the students read linguistic articles in Russian, compare word meanings from Russian and English dictionaries, learn how to work with online corpora, implement their knowledge and skills to search one (by students’ choice) of almost 170 words which have come from Russian into English.

During the session, detailed descriptions of the project designs and implementations will be provided, project curriculum, lesson plans, and resources shared, and videos of students’ presentations and post-project interviews shown. The project curriculum, materials, and instructions can be easily adapted to meet the needs of second language learners and mixed group of students.