

Title: Fluency at the Advanced Level Without Emphasis on Vocabulary?

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Abstract:

I would like to present a paper at the 2017 AATSEEL conference which addresses an approach to pedagogy to be applied at the intermediate high level. The groundwork for the approach should be laid, however, at the beginner levels. This approach, which could help our students achieve better and faster speaking fluency in the Russian language, eschews, especially at the aforementioned intermediate high level, an emphasis on the accumulation of new words (specifically nouns). For the approach to be effective, however, the student must already possess a solid understanding of both the Russian case system and of the nuances of verbal aspect.

It seems that in North American institutions of higher learning, we teach some of the most basic, albeit informal, constructions in a Russian speaker's arsenal only at the advanced (ACTFL) level of study, or even higher. These constructions, often because of their impersonal nature and lack of a nominative case, seem to be considered too difficult or "foreign" for a native English-speaker to handle and are avoided at the intermediate high level. This avoidance only serves to delay a student's progress towards increased, specifically colloquial, fluency.

There will certainly be obstacles to this approach, first and foremost being the difficulty native English speakers have with any construction that lacks a nominative case. One of the possible ways to overcome these obstacles is to emphasize, at the very earliest levels, the frequency with which Russian sentences begin with "мне" and "меня" or "нам" and "нас." In this sense, we could introduce these words to students as not merely the personal pronouns "я" and "мы" in the dative and accusative cases, but as *true and authentic alternatives* to beginning almost every sentence with "я," something our students are constantly trying to do. We should also introduce constructions (both negative and positive) consisting of infinitives (with no conjugated verbs) at an earlier level, with sufficient attention paid to the differences in aspect in these sentences.

To be more specific, some of the impersonal constructions and Syntactic Phraseology (as defined in the handbook of the same name--Синтаксическая Фразеология—by A. V. Velichko) I have in mind are:

Эти туфли не купить за такие деньги (невозможность)

Куда мне с ним спорить (бесполезность)

Нам не до этого (равнодушие, нежелание, некогда)

Не сидеть же здесь до утра (ненужность)

To my mind, a student who is able to use constructions such as these, even BEFORE he has a firm grasp of the Russian words in parentheses is on a faster track to fluency than a student who knows only a lot of vocabulary words.

I call this a pedagogical shift in emphasis, not a method, but I assume this shift in emphasis would necessitate less attention paid to some other aspect of teaching the language. For me, that area would be nouns.

