

Title: Pushkin as a brand: Heritage speakers and cultural awareness

Authors: Nila Friedberg, Portland State University

Anna Kudyma, UCLA

Abstract:

Kagan (2012) noted that “far less attention has been paid to the intercultural side of heritage language learners’ circumstances either within or outside of the classroom” (Kagan 2012: 72). The situation is quite paradoxical. On the one hand, what Heritage language instructors clearly needs is a diagnostic tool that would reveal students’ cultural awareness. On the other hand, academics in the area of humanities typically view cultural literacy lists as prescriptive and limiting, and Hirsch’s “Cultural literacy: What every American needs to know” (1989) was widely criticized. Yet in some disciplines – including marketing, social work or cross-cultural nursing - factual culture questionnaires are commonplace (Simeon 2006, Vida and Plassman 1998, Bell 2008, Purnell 2013). In this presentation we argue that cultural awareness questionnaires are equally useful in heritage language instruction and research. More specifically, we propose a factual questionnaire for Russian, which measures respondents’ familiarity with specific Russian cultural figures and titles. We show that Kagan and Dillon’s (2003) classification of heritage speakers into various groups, which is based on the age of immigration and linguistic performance, can be justified culturally. We also contribute to genre-based heritage language pedagogy, more specifically, to the argument that heritage learners are more exposed to fairy tales than to children’s poetry while growing up (Jensen and Llosa’s 2007). This idea is fully supported by our Russian cultural assessment data. However, we extend Jensen and Llosa’s (2007) theory, and suggest that the categories examined on cultural awareness surveys should not be limited to textual genres alone, but also include literary periods and different art forms, such as cinema, popular and classical music, ballet and painting. Introducing these categories into the culture questionnaire leads to illuminating discoveries about the systematic nature of heritage speakers’ cultural gaps.