

Title: Virtual Space: Mastering Vocabulary through Contextual Learning in Intermediate Classroom

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Abstract:

Students who have successfully completed firstyear Russian typically arrive to our Intermediate I courses at the Novice High level, i.e. “they are able to express themselves within the context in which the language was learned, relying mainly on practiced material” (ACTFL 2012). While Intermediate Russian introduces students to expanding vocabulary (including culturespecific items), encouraging students to create with language (a sign of Intermediate proficiency) in a meaningful, authentic context can be a challenge, with many students resorting to previously learned vocabulary or retaining a limited new vocabulary applicable to their present context. To address this problem, I would like to present a collaborative Virtual Space project implemented in Intermediate I classroom at New York University that encourages students to expand and practice new vocabulary through contextual learning activities. For this project, students have chosen a Russianspeaking city to explore throughout the semester using Google Maps and other free, simple tools, and have created fictional Russian personas to “inhabit” (through text posts, conversation, and multimedia) their shared Virtual Space. This space was created using New Google Sites and set up as a Virtual Communal Apartment (Kommunalka). By navigating the daily life of a Russian city through the eyes of native speakers whose age, occupation, family situation and living conditions differ from their own, students actively explore culture, history, and living language while using the expanded vocabulary and grammatical constructions in a realistic, experiential way. To ensure continuity, regular classroom activities (discussions, minipresentations, scenarios) were also tied to the Virtual Space and its life. In this presentation, I will discuss the tools and planning steps involved in implementing this project and their relation to learning outcomes; present sample online and inclass activities; address challenges and potential shortcomings; and share the results of project assessment based on student performance and feedback.