Part I: Executive Summary and References List

Over the past eight years, I have successfully created a Russian language curriculum that makes space for my students to express their identities and equips them with the vocabulary to do so. They share their interests, hobbies, opinions, linguistic and geographic backgrounds, and people who are important to them. As my class is a first-year language course that meets every other day, it takes months before students can meaningfully communicate about their lives. By the time we get to that point, students who mastered the Russian alphabet early on and are proficient in reading can access the material. However, students who are not invested in the early-in-the-course, necessarily-rote alphabet acquisition lessons find themselves unable to engage in the material they might find interesting and relevant to their lives. When teaching the alphabet, the warning of "You will need this later!" works with most students but has proven to be an insufficient motivator for *all* students. Joe Feldman's *Grading for Equity* notes, "Motivating students is one of the most important elements of a teacher's work. Compulsory education laws get students in the seats, but we need students to engage intellectually with what happens there" (Feldman 152).

Beyond engaging intellectually, I want my students to express their identities, so my project will incorporate opportunities for students to share their identities earlier in class: while we are learning the alphabet. The project is simple in name and concept–Мой алфавит–in part because of my classroom context (see Part II Analysis), but also to make it easily replicable and customizable in other educational settings. In short, my project is a unit (with handouts and interactive lessons and activities) built around the creation of an individualized alphabet, where each letter of the alphabet stands for something or someone important to the student. In addition to giving students practice with the Russian alphabet, the project will develop students' technological skills. These will help them maneuver other Russian assignments throughout the year and in other academic settings.

In addition to gaining academic skills, students will build community by sharing their projects with other students. In bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress*, she remarks upon the importance of students listening to each other: "To hear each other (the sound of different voices), to listen to one another, is an exercise in recognition. It also ensures that no students remain invisible in the classroom" (hooks 41). In Russian 1, I struggle to have students meaningfully communicate about their lives in the target language. I hope this project will build community in my classroom by helping students recognize "the value of each individual voice." (hooks 40).

As an example of the project content, here are four words in alphabetical order that do not require students to know anything beyond the Russian alphabet but will allow them to learn about me:

Керамика
Лорен
Миннесота
Нельсон

They can learn my name, where I am from, and one of my hobbies. I chose керамика instead of глина because even if students can sound out глина, they will not know what it means. I will encourage students to focus on words they immediately understand so they can confidently read their own lists and other students' lists. However, I will not limit them if they feel strongly about learning and including vocabulary that does not sound like English or Spanish. Adding even more "real" Russian vocabulary could be a great addition to the project later in the year, but this project is primarily concerned with the first few weeks of school.

Here are some resources I found affirming, inspiring, and valuable throughout the creation of this project:

Dengub, Evgeny, et al., editors. *The Art of Teaching Russian*. Georgetown University Press, 2020.

Feldman, Joe. *Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms*. Corwin, a SAGE Company, 2019.

Garza, Thomas Jesús. "Here, There, and Elsewhere: Re-Imagining Russian Language and Culture Course Syllabi for Social Justice." *Russian Language Journal*, vol. 71, no. 3, 2021, pp. 41–63.

Gorski, Paul C. *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Strategies for Erasing The Opportunity Gap*. Teachers College Press, 2018.

Hammond, Zaretta. *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students*. Corwin, a SAGE Company, 2015.

hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. Routledge, 1996.

Lucey, Colleen. "Diversity, Equity, Access, and Inclusion: Lessons for the Russian Language Classroom." *Russian Language Journal*, vol. 71, no. 3, 2021, pp. 11–15.

Melnyk, Svitlana, and Veronika Trotter. "Rectifying Wikipedia Racial Bias in a Russian Language Classroom." *Russian Language Journal*, vol. 71, no. 3, 2021, pp. 65–87.

Nogueira, Violeta. *Ruso Para Hispanoparlantes: Libro De Curso 1*. Herder, 2003.

Stauffer, Rachel. "Addressing the Representation of Diversity in Russian Language Textbooks." *The Art of Teaching Russian*, edited by Evgeny Dengub et al., Georgetown University Press, Washington, DC, 2020, pp. 280–306.

- - -. "'Russian Is Hard, Spanish Is Easy': Reflections on Antiracism and a Common Ideology in the Field." *ACTR Letter, Newsletter of the American Council of Teachers of Russian*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2021, pp. 1–8.

Taranov, Andrey. *Ruso Vocabulario, Español-Ruso: Las Palabras Más útiles Para Expandir Su Vocabulario y Refinar Sus Habilidades lingüísticas*. T&P Books, 2019.

World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages. National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 2015.

Part II: Analysis

I teach at Pritzker College Prep in the Hermosa neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois. Pritzker is part of the Noble Network of Charter Schools, and acceptance is based on a lottery system. Most students are Spanish speakers and will be first-generation college students, but not all. Students at Pritzker take two years of Russian language. It is the only foreign language offering other than extracurricular AP Spanish. Students begin Russian in their junior years of high school and continue as seniors. After their junior years, some students (between 12-20 annually) take Russian classes in the summer through Pritzker's university connections (such as the Pushkin Summer Institute at the University of Wisconsin–Madison) and are enrolled in "Russian 3" during their senior years. Our Russian department has two full-time teachers and one part-time teacher.

I teach six sections of Russian 1 (around 185 students every year) with self-created materials. I shifted to my own material after using a textbook my first year that didn't fit my students' language goals and predominantly featured white students studying abroad, an experience that students who aren't interested in college or who can't travel abroad due to citizenship status might not ever experience. I found that the textbook limited the world of my students rather than opening it up to them.

This feeling was affirmed after participating in the CDIPS program and learning from colleagues across the country, as well as in readings I completed while forming this project. Stauffer writes, "The imagery of RL textbooks could be more inclusive. Students of non-socially-dominant identities are enrolled in RL classes in postsecondary institutions all over the United States, yet people of color rarely appear in textbooks" (Stauffer, *Representation of Diversity* 291). Further, as Garza points out, "As the student population of higher education in the United States begins to reflect the national demographic portrait in racial and ethnic terms, the need for more learner-centered, inclusive, and equitable learning opportunities is more significant than ever" (41). I intend to start this intersectional, inclusive foreign language education before my students get to college.

In my classroom last year, 95% of students were Latinx (with backgrounds in Mexico, Puerto Rico, Ecuador, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and the Dominican Republic), and 5% were Black. These demographics have been similar in other years (I don't have this year's data because classes have not started yet for the 2022-2023 school year).

13% of my students were diverse learners. They had Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) to give them learning support for a variety of disabilities ranging from ADHD, autism, traumatic brain injuries (TBI), or specific learning disabilities (SLD). These students have accommodations and modifications in the classroom, such as increased time on tests, audio supports, graphic organizers, and frequent one-on-one check-ins. In core content classes (math, English, science), there are Learning Specialists (other teachers who specialize in helping students with disabilities) present in the classrooms in addition to the core content teachers, but Russian is not a core content class, and I teach alone.

24% of my students are designated as Multilingual Learners (ML) (formerly described as English Learners). "ML" means they are still gaining proficiency in English, and their skill levels range from those who are new to the U.S. and speak little to no English to those who have an 8th-grade level command of English in reading, listening, speaking, and writing. They are learning English alongside Russian, so many will leave high school with proficiency in three languages! The vast majority of our ML students speak Spanish. I speak a little Spanish and emphasize my position as a language learner in my classroom by giving opportunities for students to use Spanish (and correct mine). For example, if students watch a Russian video and I want them to summarize what happened, I make it clear in the instructions that they can complete the task "in English o en español" (they aren't at the level where they can summarize in Russian). For what would usually be a Russian-to-English matching activity, I ensure my activities are Russian-to-English/Spanish. I do not want English to be a barrier for my students in the Russian language classroom.

When students start my class, they haven't taken any Russian language classes yet. Some have taken other foreign language classes in middle school, but they are true beginners in Russian. Many have siblings, cousins, and friends who have taken Russian at Pritzker and might have heard some Russian words. I have class sizes of up to 36 students, but usually around 32. My classroom is a relatively small room that houses 36 desks arranged in six tightly-packed groups of six, so, unfortunately, opportunities for movement and flexible seating are limited. I see my students every other day for approximately 70 minutes.

Students have access to school-issued Chromebooks that they can take home. Pritzker is a partner institution with Formative, an interactive learning platform that I started using during the remote 2020-2021 school year and have continued using as a platform to host homework and in-class assignments (Formative is where I'm hosting this project). All teachers at Pritzker set up a Google Classroom for each class section they teach and are expected to post assignments in a timely and organized manner. Teachers update gradebooks weekly to communicate student progress with students, families, and other stakeholders.

In my classroom, my primary struggle is developing an engaging Russian curriculum that is accessible *and* challenging for students at every ability level. To accomplish this, I focus on inclusivity and relevance. Students like mine have historically been excluded from Russian language classrooms and learning materials (though there have been significant positive changes even in the eight years I've taught), so I've found the most success with creating my own classroom materials that I precisely tune to my students' needs and interests. Here are some of my curriculum choices that support my students' learning and, hopefully, "reflect equity, inclusivity, and intersectionality for all learners (Garza 55).

- **Design:** My student-facing materials have unambiguous and underlined directions, bolded keywords, and clutter-free design. They follow the same progression every day (divided into three sections: a warm-up activity under the heading Сейчас, a review of the last class's topics under the heading Старая информация, and the new information under the heading Новая информация). I use the same serif-free typeface for all my materials (I found that when I used serif fonts like this здравствуйте, students wrote letters with serifs. Instead, now my students see здравствуйте.)

- **Vocabulary:** My curricular vocabulary represents the world my students see around them. During my first few years of teaching, I had an enlightening moment: a textbook taught the ordinal numbers so students could describe which floors of buildings they lived on, but I realized our school's neighborhood doesn't have buildings higher than four or five stories. You can see an unobstructed view of downtown Chicago from the bathroom on the third floor of our school, and it's miles away from the city center. (One could argue that it's important for students to know how to say the 14th floor of something, but there are things they (and I) think are more important, so those are the things I prioritize.) This passage affirmed my choice: "Instead of requiring heavily formularized workbooks and textbooks that predetermine the vocabulary to be learned, students and teachers could work together and decide what vocabulary they want to learn, in part based on how to fully represent all students in the course" (Stauffer, *Representation of Diversity* 297).

- **Language:** Many of my students have a valuable asset: knowledge of Spanish. They are familiar with how verbs conjugate and grammatical gender. They immediately understand certain Russian words that come from French (it was a student who pointed out to me the connection between пляж and playa). Students who enter my classroom with knowledge of Spanish are uniquely positioned to engage with the "Language Comparisons" standard from the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages: "Learners identify and use borrowed words and cognates in the language they are learning and their own, and hypothesize about their origins" (93). I make sure there are opportunities for students to use their multilingual skills in my assignments.

- **Representation:** Russian textbooks tend to focus on stories of students studying abroad in Russia or Russian-speaking countries. Some of my students go on to study Russian in college or study abroad in countries with Russian speakers, but the reality is that most will not. As mentioned earlier, some of my students won't have the opportunity to study abroad because of their citizenship status or financial circumstances, and some will pursue paths other than college. My class is for them too. I want all of my students to leave my class able to communicate in Russian. The most natural and authentic way I've found to achieve representation in my class has been to move away from fictional narratives entirely and instead have my students talk about their own experiences and aspirations.

I've spent the last few years developing Russian 1 materials that address inclusivity and relevance. This project focuses on my biggest "gap": reaching the students who aren't immediately invested in a class they didn't choose. The project comprises a series of lessons where students can use Russian to express their identities in the first few days of class rather than waiting until they can say complete sentences because, at that point, it's difficult for them to catch up.

Instructional goals:

1) **Generate student investment in learning the Russian alphabet** early in the first few class meetings.
2) **Build a solid base of alphabet knowledge** so students can engage with the more advanced curriculum.

3) **Address the issue of student representation and build community** through class materials by giving my students the resources and opportunities to express their identities.

Part III: Design

Performance Objectives:

1) **Students will demonstrate knowledge of the Russian alphabet** by creating a customized alphabet resource (the Мой алфавит project) specific to their identities and interests.
2) **Students will analyze linguistic connections** between English and Russian (and, in the case of some students, Spanish and Russian).
3) **Students will learn to pronounce at least one Russian word for most letters of the alphabet** (except ь, ъ, щ, ы, й, or ё), increasing their alphabet proficiency.
4) **Students will thoughtfully navigate online resources** such as Google, Yandex, and Wikipedia to find the Russian vocabulary they intend and need.

Learning Assessments:

1) **Students will create visual documentation of their Мой алфавит alphabet lists** using Formative (or student choice of another medium).
2) **Students will read Russian letter combinations and words out loud** during a reading assessment.

Performance Objectives	Learning Assessments	Strategies/Activities/Methods
Demonstrate alphabet knowledge	Formative Project (Мой алфавит) Reading Assessment	Series of lessons on creating a personalized alphabet list Peer collaboration and preparation for reading assessment (students test each other with letter combo/word lists)
Analyze linguistic connections	Formative Project (Мой алфавит)	Peer collaboration, work time in class
Learn to pronounce one word in Russian for most letters of the alphabet	Formative recordings Formative Project (Мой алфавит)	Independent studying, work time in class, peer collaboration
Navigate online resources	Formative Lessons about Google Translate and Wikipedia	Work time in class

Our gradebooks are required to be divided into Effort Toward Mastery (ETM, 30% of grade) and Mastery (M, 70% of grade). The Formatives that teach students how to navigate the technology necessary to complete the alphabet project will go in the ETM category. The final Мой алфавит project (referenced in the grid above) will go in the Mastery category. I will grade the Мой алфавит Formative very simply: is there an accurate word in Russian and accompanying visual for each letter (except ь, ъ, щ, ы, й, and ё)? Students will have opportunities to adjust and refine their projects if they don't score 100% the first time. The project's purpose is for them to learn how to find the words they need and increase their alphabet mastery, so providing multiple opportunities to do so is vital. In *Grading for Equity*, Joe Feldman asserts, "The way we grade should motivate students to achieve academic success, support a growth mindset, and give students opportunities for redemption" (160).

The Reading Assessment will also go into the M category. Students can retake this as often as they want throughout the semester (with a final deadline of the Friday before Semester 1 final exams). I will have at least four versions of the assessment. Each version will include letter combinations, entire words, and Russian sentences. Students will come up to my desk and read through the list. When I grade these, I will give students clear feedback on what they need to do to improve. In our gradebook, there is a spot for notes, and I will leave comments about the letters that students missed and which version of the exam they took so they can study them and attempt another version of the assessment later. I offer retakes during class in case students can't come to "office hours" after school. (Note: during the CDIPS program and various other workshops focusing on equity, I saw the trend emerge to rename office hours "student hours" or something similar. I don't have the authority to change the name of office hours since it's a school-wide naming convention, but even if I did, I am not sure I would. Not all of my students will end up in institutions where the professors have revamped their curricula with an eye toward equity, and I want to equip them with the vocabulary to navigate higher education terminology. However, I am excited to see the changes happening in higher education.)

Part IV: Development

Most of this project is hosted on Formative, an interactive learning platform. The links below will lead you to the assignments where you (the reader) can see and engage with the lessons as if you were a student. Please feel free to try them! I think it's important to let you know that it does save your responses (I can see them).

You do not need to sign up for an account to access these Formatives. You can simply type your name in the name fields (as depicted in the image to the right):

Join

CDIPS Copying and Pasting Text, Images, and GIFs

First Name

Last Name

Join

Already have an account? Log in here.

- **(Formative) [Typing in Russian](#)**
  This Formative will help students learn how to use a phonetic Russian keyboard. Every year I have students who misunderstand the keyboard and turn in сентенцес лике тчис (they type complete English sentences using the Russian keyboard), so this Formative will help them practice "real" typing.

- **(Formative) [Copying and Pasting Text, Images, and GIFs](#)**
  This Formative will develop students' technical skills on their Chromebooks: they will learn how to navigate Formative and copy and paste text, images, and GIFs. These skills will be useful all year in my class (and in their other classes too).

- **(Formative) [Google Translate and Wikipedia](#)**
  This Formative will guide students through how to find the words they intend rather than the first ones they find. It is inspired by many years of correcting students who told me their favorite artist is Селезень (instead of Дрейк) and seeing the need for lessons that teach students how to use online translator tools effectively. The examples are particular to my students' interests and location.

- **(Google Docs) [Worksheet for Мой алфавит](#)**
  This packet is meant to "bookend" the Google Translate and Wikipedia Formative. I will have students complete the English side, then collect their packets. After they learn to look up words in Russian, they will get the packets back. There are columns on the right side of the pages for them to put the Russian words they find. Students will look at their peers' lists and find similarities (or differences) to add to their lists.

- **(Formative) [A long list of places in Russian](#)**
  The title of this is pretty self-explanatory. It's a list of places in Russian that my students requested to know how to say in Russian throughout the 2021-2022 school year. I'm linking it here because I will use it for them again in class this year (and add this year's students' requests to the list). I will also encourage students to look at the Russian-language maps on Google and Yandex and zoom in on the places they want to say. (I'm also considering giving students access to online word lists like [this](#), but this might be overwhelming.)

- **(Google Docs) [Мой алфавит Rough Draft](#)**
  This handout is a place for students to make a rough draft of their projects. It's a list of the letters included in the final project Formative with blank spaces for student word choices.

- **(Formative) [Мой алфавит](#)**
  This Formative is where they will finalize their alphabet lists. (If students prefer to do this on paper or in some other format, that's acceptable.) In the Formative, I gave four examples with videos/images for my students to reference. Students will type their Russian words and find corresponding visual representations of those words. Last year,

students thought it was fun to find GIFs to represent new vocabulary, so I'm continuing that here. I hope to reinforce their learning by incorporating both words and images: "According to research, knowledge is stored in two forms: linguistic and visual. Recently, neuroscience has confirmed that the use of nonlinguistic representations increases brain activity and aids information processing. Drawing pictures, flowcharts, or any type of visual is consistent with culturally responsive ways to process information" (Hammond 135). Before assigning this project, I will show and describe my own alphabet list, which is below:

А апельсин
Б банан
В ваза
Г Грузия
Д Дайан
Е **Его зовут*** Тедди
Ж Жюльен Бейкер
З "Здравствуйте студенты!"
И Исландия
К керамика
Л Лорен
М Миннесота
Н Нельсон
О октябрь
П пицца
Р Россия
С Скотт
Т такос (Чингон, Рубис)
У **улица*** Армитаж
Ф Фиби Бриджерс
Х "Хорошо!"
Ц **цвет*** серый
Ч чизбургер, Чикаго
Ш Швеция, школа Прицкер Колледж Преп
Э Элизабет
Ю юмор
Я Япония

*When I went through this project to create my own list as a student, I struggled to find words that started with е, у, and ц. If my students have the same issue, I will suggest using Его/Её зовут + the name of someone important for е, улица + a street relevant to their lives for у, and цвет + a favorite color for ц.

While preparing the assignments above and the arc of the Мой алфавит project, I was inspired by Zaretta Hammond's Academic Mindset Cycle:

1. "Academic Mindset: Student begins with belief that learning is relevant and worth paying attention to. His belief is reinforced by evidence of progress.

2. Engagement: Brain's attention is captured by positive emotion, physical energy, curiosity or a puzzle, signaling the brain to engage.
3. Effort: Engagement gives way to assessing, managing, and regulating mental energy needed to complete the task, understand the concept, or solve the puzzle.
4. Task Performance: Student applies various cognitive routines to complete the task or to understand the concept based on mental energy assessment. Student willing to adjust perseverance and tenacity (effort and grit).
5. Feedback on Progress: Self-assessment and external feedback help brain go back and adjust misconceptions or revise the task, which deepens learning and builds a sense of accomplishment and competence. This strengthens academic mindset" (Hammond 111).

I also reviewed the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages and aligned my assignments to those. In particular, the Мой алфавит project aligns with the targeted standards of Interpersonal Communication (50), Interpretive Communication (55), Presentational Communication (59), Making Connections (82), Acquiring Information and Diverse Perspectives (86), Language Comparisons (92), School and Global Communities (102), and Lifelong Learning (106).

The student-facing content is primarily accessed online due to logistical realities and pedagogical choices: it's the easiest way to organize many assignments and make real-time adjustments, and part of language acquisition should include technology. According to the World-Readiness Standards, "Learners should be given the opportunity during their school careers to take increasing advantage of new technological advances. Access to a variety of technologies ranging from computer-assisted instruction to interactive video, DVDs, the Internet, email, social media, text messages, and apps will help learners strengthen linguistic skills, establish interactions with peers, and learn about contemporary culture and everyday life in the target country" (31).

While the Wikipedia-article-creation project detailed by Veronika Trotter and Svitlana Melnyk is too advanced for my classes, it was refreshing to see one of my favorite classroom resources (Wikipedia) uplifted in an academic publication: "Wikipedia is widely used as a reference source not only by students but by academics and educators as well. In fact, attitudes toward Wikipedia in academia have slowly shifted from more negative views in the 2000s to more favorable ones in the last few years. More educators use Wikipedia in teaching, and a significant number of academic publications address various pedagogical applications of Wikipedia" (Melnyk and Trotter 70). As you will see in the lesson "Google Translate and Wikipedia," Wikipedia is a crucial research tool for students to find Russian-language information in my classroom.

I do not foresee any controversy with this project and expect my school's administration will enthusiastically support it.

Part V: Implementation

This project is a unit, not a course, and my classroom policies and procedures are determined by administrators and those in leadership positions. Our school has a Noble Community Pact, an agreement between students, families, and educators at our school. Students and staff are

accountable to the behavior expectations outlined in our Student Handbook and Community Pact.

A logistical consideration that guides many of my decisions is the vast number of student projects I have to grade. Something that alleviates that is hosting my project on Formative, where I can easily see student submissions arranged by class. I can give both written and audio feedback through Formative. If I had fewer students, I would be more likely to move this project offline and encourage more artistic interpretations of the project. I am giving that as an option, but the default option for my students is to complete this project online.

Part VI: Evaluation

I will seek qualitative and quantitative feedback from my students. This will be my first time seeking quantitative feedback, but I have sought qualitative feedback from my students in the past. On my classroom assignments on Formative, there is always an optional feedback question with sentence starters: *"What questions do you have about today's assignment? Did you struggle with anything (if yes, please tell me which part and why: "I struggled with _____ because _____")? Did you find anything especially helpful?"* After students complete assignments, I read through the comments and make adjustments (or write notes to myself for next year).

For this project, I was inspired by the feedback questions asked by Veronika Trotter and Svitlana Melnyk (78). Here are the quantitative questions I intend to ask my students after they complete this project:

Working on this project increased my knowledge of the Russian alphabet
Disagree   Somewhat Disagree   Somewhat Agree   Agree

Working on this project improved my skills in navigating Formative and the Internet
Disagree   Somewhat Disagree   Somewhat Agree   Agree

Working on this project increased my technology skills (copying and pasting images and text, navigating the Russian-language internet)
Disagree   Somewhat Disagree   Somewhat Agree   Agree

Working on this project helped me learn how to find the Russian words I need
Disagree   Somewhat Disagree   Somewhat Agree   Agree

During this project, I was able to share things that are important to me
Disagree   Somewhat Disagree   Somewhat Agree   Agree

During this project, I learned new information about my peers and teacher
Disagree   Somewhat Disagree   Somewhat Agree   Agree

During this project, I learned about connections between Russian words and English and/or Spanish words
Disagree   Somewhat Disagree   Somewhat Agree   Agree

Here is the qualitative question I will ask students *before* they complete the project:

- How do you feel looking at the Russian alphabet for the first time?

Here are the qualitative questions I will ask students *after* they complete the project:
- What did you **like most** about this project?
- What **didn't you like** about this project?
- What **challenged you** throughout the creation of your project?
- What ideas do you have to **make this project better**?
- How do you feel looking at the Russian alphabet now?

I will complete this project with my students this quarter (September or October 2022). I would love to update this document with student examples and my qualitative and quantitative survey results. Additionally, I would include ideas for improving and adapting this project for the future. To that end, here is a placeholder for the future:

Part VII: Student Examples, Feedback, and Adjustments for Next Year