# REVIEW OF RUSSIAN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTIONAL SITES ON THE WEB (BASED ON SHER'S RUSSIAN INDEX)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sites reviewed</th>
<th>Russian language instructional sites on the Web (based on Sher's Russian index)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Platform</td>
<td>all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum hardware requirements</td>
<td>IE 6.0, Safari, Mozilla Foxfire 1.0 with Cyrillic encodings: Unicode, Windows Cyrillic (1251), KOI8r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support offered</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target language</td>
<td>Russian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target audience</td>
<td>Beginning, intermediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price</td>
<td>Free</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Reviewed by Richard Robin, George Washington University**

You are your institution's Web guru on less commonly taught languages. The part-time teacher of Russian, relatively unschooled in second language acquisition (SLA), whose Web skills end at ordering a book from Amazon, asks you for recommendations on sites for students of the language. You can Google your way to a cumbersome list or check a comprehensive megalist of Russian sites, such as Sher's Russian Index. But will you find anything worthwhile? The answer is a cautious and very limited yes, as this review shows. But first, let's establish some ground rules.

1) All the sites mentioned come from Sher's Index, probably the most comprehensive of the Russian megasites. They are all free.

2) Sites tightly based on individual textbooks or school syllabi are not scrutinized. This frees the reviewer of a number of conflicts of interest. It also takes in all potential users, regardless of whether they are enrolled in intensive instruction or engaged in casual independent study.

3) Sites are examined in terms of methodological direction, learner strategies, interactivity and feedback, ease of use, and, where applicable, audibility. On all of the sites reviewed, successful feedback is programmed mostly through Javascripts. The more sophisticated RusNet site uses php. The most primitive type of feedback substitutes the right answer for a wrong one, or invites the user to try again. None of the sites add a significant second layer designed to trap nonsense responses, warn of repetitive errors, or provide information on what part of the answer might have been right. Such an additional layer requires a few additional lines of script for each validation.

4) This review excludes "raw" or "authentic" sites (i.e., those not specifically created for Russian language instruction). This leaves out the plethora of sites with multimedia content that constitute the most precious resources for learners approaching the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) Advanced threshold in the receptive skills, especially in listening comprehension.

5) Finally, I have left out my own independent contributions through the National Capital Language Resource Center (NCLRC).
EARLY GRAMMAR-BASED SITES

With the rules set out, let's answer the question at the top of the screen: "What will a reliable connection bring you?" The quick answer is that learners will not master Russian from scratch or even make significant progress from looking at available computer screens. Why should this be, given the Web's enormous potential for the delivery of language materials? To begin with, few sites pass Ushi Felix's (2003) "best practice" test, namely, they are mostly not "the most appropriate tools to their best potential to achieve sound pedagogical processes and outcomes" (p. 8-9). This means that most sites set good goals, but exhibit wrong practices. Even fewer sites map instructional delivery practices to legitimate goals.

Still, learners will, even at the ACTFL Intermediate level, find occasional instructional materials of some value, especially in the receptive skills (after they make their way past the links leading through the great Cyberian graveyard dotted with the tombstones of projects from the halcyon days of the 1990s when technologists experimented with their brand new toys). The fact that things worked at all (you clicked on a link and saw something in Cyrillic!) produced such a sense of giddiness that methodological considerations received short shrift. However, the field owes a debt to some of the older pages of the earliest Russian language Web warriors (e.g., Mitrevski's Russian Web Tutor, and Beard's Russian Online Interactive Reference Grammar). Their simple Javascripts provided templates for others. In addition to writing on-line tutorials, they provided copious notes on the writing of Javascripts for Russian-language instruction, which laid the basis for more sophisticated pages that were developed later on.

However, as instructional materials, the early tutorial pages are limited to grammar-based expositions with minimal interactivity. In many cases, the grammar instruction is more linguistic description than pedagogy. In short, such sites feature end-of-the-millennium technology wedded to 1970s pedagogy. For example, Beard's coverage of verbs is based on a dumbed-down generative analysis, which has at long last fallen out of favor. Sher, Beard, and Mitrevski each take a stab at explaining Russian verbal aspect. All three try to present a linguistically accurate picture rather than rely on short-cut generalizations that produce the least number of errors on the part of learners.

Most symptomatic of the linguistic approach to Web-based language pedagogy comes in the tried-and-failed theoretical coverage of transitive verbs of motion. It assumes that mastery of the non-prefixed verbs of motion must precede coverage of the prefixed verbs. This leads to exercises with near-nonsense sentences such as "Молодой человек несёт девушку на пляж" (The young man is carrying his girlfriend to the beach), with the learner being asked whether this scene is repetitive or continual.
The Cornell Russian page is another "tombstone" site featuring broken links, non-functioning Cold Fusion scripts, Lora's dialogs, nonsensical and poorly recorded snatches of Russian, and theoretically bound explications of the grammar, unsuitable for beginning learners.

A great many other sites are non-interactive descriptions of the language (e.g., Pacheco's Grammar review, a PowerPoint demo; an audio-supported Friends and Partners alphabet site, limited to the names of the letters, to name a few).

Of some interest is Zumbach's puzzle site, which offers a series of gif images of Russian crossword puzzles and other word games meant for beginners. A Google search turns up scores of authentic crossword puzzles for the advanced learner.

Looking beyond the Cyberian graveyard, we find three sites that are active, fully interactive, and largely pedagogically correct.

**RUSSIAN LANGUAGE MENTOR**

Bogdan Sagatov's Russian Language Mentor is, in the author's words, "a different kind of website ... a self-paced Language Maintenance and Development Curriculum intended for intermediate to advanced Russian linguists" [reviewer's emphasis -- this usually is the U.S. government's word for foreign language learners and/or users]. The site's strength is its proficiency-based exercises based on authentic written texts and audio scripts. The audio recordings, all taken from late 1990s SCOLA materials, while not crystal clear, are acoustically accurate for over-the-air reception with cheap analog receivers. The exercises are modest: They consist of a vocabulary preview plus scanning-type comprehension questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word in the Movie</th>
<th>Type of Action</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explain the use of each of the verbs in the subtitles of the movie. Choose the aspect of the motion which is repeated (Iterative), which is continuing (Progressive), or whose completion is implied.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 1. Молодой человек несет девушку на плече. The young man is carrying his girl to the beach. | Repeated  
Continuing  
Completed |
| 2. Другой человек никогда не носит свою жену. The other man never carried his wife. | Repeated  
Continuing  
Completed |
| 3. Он уже понес её на плече. He already carried her to the beach. | Repeated  
Continuing  
Completed |
The setup for reading is similar. Users look through the vocabulary, read the passage, and then answer comprehension questions. A more logical progression would be to place the questions up front and explain what to look/listen for. The material could also use some notes to the learner on other receptive skills strategies, such as prediction and contextualization. That said, the materials presented, especially in audio, are selected carefully, and dedicated users can legitimately hope that diligent practice (a point emphasized on the site) will lead them from ACTFL Intermediate to Advanced.

The site features a concise grammar review plus exercises. The exercise feedback loop rejects attempts to get at the answer without trying ("Write something") but does not distinguish between nonsense answers and real attempts.

A separate page gives users a grammar mailbag that covers some of the more esoteric topics of Russian, such as the use of quotation marks. Some of the coverage (e.g., verb aspect) is too much invested in linguistic precision, but the lively prose, a relief from the overly cautious scholarly style on most other sites, goes a long way in mitigating too much reliance on theory.

The site also includes some static print-out games and puzzles, and the *Boris and Gleb Tea Room*, containing fun tidbits, and a section, in lively English, on cultural literacy.

RUSSNET

American Councils' *RussNet* provides a wealth of interactive material for Novice, Intermediate, and Advanced levels, grouped in three categories: (1) a Cultural Map of Russia; (2) Modules for the High School to College Articulation Project; and (3) Business Russian. Registration (anonymously) is required so that users can keep track of their scores over a number of sessions.

The Cultural Map of Russia provides texts, minimal vocabulary support, and modest post-text exercises. A separate page provides video clips, mostly from Soviet-era shorts. They make nice postcards, but the accompanying soundtrack is unscaffolded and often cut off in mid-sentence.

The Business site has a more complete set of exercises on all three levels, in multiple choice, direct text entry, matching, and ordering formats, and with a greater variety of feedback, including persistence of
partially correct errors up until the first mistake. So an incorrect answer мама for correct маму appears as "wrong" but persists as мам_.

The Intermediate portion of the site contains six listening texts, all accompanied by cloze dictation. Unfortunately, there is only one voice, and some of the recordings suffer from clipping and popping p’s.

The greatest riches on the site are in the high school to college section, meant to serve as part of American Council’s Advanced Placement packet. Here learners will find a wide range of modules covering history and literature. Each topic is based on both reading texts and video clips, mostly at the ACTFL Advanced level. Both scripts and texts are well scaffolded with massive amounts of pre- and posttext activities. This is the one site of those reviewed where receptive skills strategies are built into the surrounding materials. The care with which this material has been assembled and deployed suggests massive amounts of grant dollars well spent.
RussNet has a few glitches, mostly in the way of occasional dead links, including one to the site map. However, the main lacking of the site is cosmetic. Users must download and use ER-Universal, one of the ugliest Cyrillic fonts available. The non-standard encoding loosely follows Russian-English transliteration and was obviously an attempt to get around Mac-related problems with Cyrillic, especially in earlier OSs. But any computer bought within the last 3 years should easily handle any of the existent encodings, thus ending the need for in-house fonts. In addition, students who have mastered the native Russian keyboard will be frustrated at having to remember differences in keyboard layout. This might seem like a small inconvenience, but in fact, for the Business part of the site, it represents a hole in the pedagogical framework. Anyone with pretensions of operating in the business world in Russia must learn the native Russian keyboard. RussNet business site should at the very least not hamper attempts at mastering it.

RUSSIAN LANGUAGE LEARNING ON THE WEB

Russian Language Learning on the Web is a joint project of Sussex University and the University of London School of Economics. This unique site presents texts and audio on Russian classical authors, such as Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy, and Blok. The literary texts are scaffolded with comprehension questions. Grammar exercises are provided for issues that come up in the texts themselves. Quite a bit of material addresses the prevalent system of participles and verbal adverbs. The site authors add critical commentary in English as background. Smaller texts are accompanied by fairly good audio (http-based Real media).
An unusual feature of the site is the supplementary video clips. There are two clips for each author: Level 1 (Intermediate) and Level 2 (Advanced). The clips feature young people talking about the works treated on the site in interview format. The camera work is somewhat shaky, but the speech is clear and natural and the compression rate low enough to provide a rather sharp, if demanding picture (320x240 at 15 fps and, as per my calculation, about 840 kbps). Unfortunately, the video, by far the most dynamic feature of the site, lacks the required scaffolding.

In short, users in the Intermediate range are likely to find some useful materials in the receptive skills. Advanced readers and listeners should know enough about language learning to go directly into the raw Russian Internet (Runet). And the great killer site has yet to be assembled.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Robin is Associate Professor, Russian Program Director, and Language Technology Specialist at the George Washington University. He holds a University of Michigan Ph.D. in Slavic linguistics. His textbook projects include Golosa, a leading introductory program, and he coordinates many Russian-language Web projects. He serves as senior researcher at the National Capital Language Resource Center.

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REFERENCES