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Paavo Husen

Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, paavo@imsa.edu

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Paavo Husen (paavo@imsa.edu)
Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy (IMSA)
Aurora, Illinois

Peer Teaching in a Thematic Unit on Russian Fairy Tales

Context

The third-year Russian curriculum at Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy is devoted to reading authentic Russian literary and non-literary texts. Students are expected to develop strong reading skills, to increase and broaden vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, to advance oral communication skills, and to improve writing skills. With this in mind, I develop integrative performance assessments that include the three modes of communication (presentational, interpretive, and interpersonal).

Russian Fairy Tales

Over the years my upper-level students (third-year) and I have developed a thematic unit on Russian fairy tales that should be beneficial and adaptable for third and fourth-year high school Russian programs.

The fairy tale unit consists of many parts. Briefly, students are expected to: complete the Russnet language module *Russian Fairy Tales* (<http://modules.russnet.org/modules/cgi-bin/sql/templates/splashPage.php?projectKey=MODAnILmH0&rd=Modules>) in order to become familiar with the structural components, characters, and linguistic conventions of Russian fairy tales; read a teacher-selected Russian fairy tale with a partner; meet with the teacher in order to both confirm comprehension of the fairy tale and to identify pertinent details and vocabulary necessary for a presentation; prepare a lesson plan and peer teach the fairy tale to classmates; write summaries of the fairy tales taught in class; and write an original fairy tale based on characters, motifs, and new vocabulary learned in class.

Introduction to Russian Fairy Tales

The Russnet language module *Russian Fairy Tales* provides an outstanding introduction to this topic. Within this module are contained the fairy tales *Гуси-Лебеди*, *Марья Моревна*, and *Малахитовая шкатулка*. I always have my students work with *Гуси-Лебеди*, because the pre-reading and post-reading materials written to support this text are the most fully developed in the module. Pre-reading materials consist of the introduction and use of new vocabulary, typical fairy tale adjective-noun epithets, fairy tale characters, and phrases common to most fairy tales. Post-reading materials focus on understanding the text and sequence of events, retelling the fairy tale, and work with diminutives. After satisfactorily completing this module, students have a solid background for reading and discussing a Russian fairy tale with a partner.

Preparation for Teaching a Russian Fairy Tale

The next step is to select fairy tales for pairs of students to teach. Currently, I choose and color-copy fairy tales from *Чудо чудное, диво дивное: Русские народные сказки от А до Я* (Москва, 2010, ЭКСМО-Пресс. ISBN 978-5-699-15585-9) This collection is widely available in Russian book stores and on the internet. The marvelous color illustrations by Ковалёв in this collection significantly aid students to comprehend the complicated narrative in each fairy tale.

Selection of fairy tales is based on both student interest and ability; I choose the longest and most complicated fairy tales for students with the most advanced reading abilities.

Peer teachers read the selected fairy tale outside of class and then meet with me to confirm their understanding of the chosen fairy tale and to present their ideas for a lesson plan to teach the fairy tale. A one-hour meeting is usually sufficient to accomplish these tasks. While it is truly a challenge for third-year students to wade through the unknown vocabulary, colloquial language, and cultural references of a fairy tale, most students manage to acquire a general idea of the sequence and importance of events before we meet.

When I am satisfied that the peer teachers understand the plot of the fairy tale, I ask them for the list of new words (no more than ten) they intend to use in their presentation. New words are to be written and defined in English on the blackboard in the classroom before the presentation begins. Student learners are to write down the new vocabulary and use it as a reference when listening to their peers teach the fairy tale. Peer teachers often choose a list that contains more verbs than nouns. However, I advise students that they already know enough verbs to communicate effectively on almost any topic, and furthermore, it is really new nouns that must be taught in order for classmates to understand the fairy tale.

Next, I ask peer teachers to retell the fairy tale in Russian, using the new vocabulary they selected. If a new vocabulary word is not critical to retelling the fairy tale, it is discarded. The final task during consultations is for peer teachers to share a specific plan for their teaching of the fairy tale. Peer teachers must retell the fairy tale in a way that classmates will be able to understand. In order to accomplish this task, peer teachers always supplement their oral narrative with props of some sort, such as finger puppets, dolls, drawings, and PowerPoint presentations. In addition, peer teachers are to prepare five questions to ask the class after the retelling of the fairy tale in order to check for understanding. The final component of the teaching is to create an oral activity based on the content of the story that will reinforce student-learner understanding of the fairy tale. This is very important because the homework assignment for student learners is to write a detailed summary of the fairy tale taught by the peer teachers in class.

Teaching of the Fairy Tale

Before the class begins, peer teachers write both the name of their fairy tale and the new vocabulary words on a blackboard. As students enter the classroom they are given a large piece of paper used for taking notes, drawings, and of course, the new vocabulary. The peer teachers start the retelling by explaining all the new vocabulary, using known Russian synonyms if possible. While the peer teachers retell their fairy tale in class, student learners take notes in Russian (no English!) and ask clarifying questions so that they will be able to write an accurate summary of the fairy tale as homework. Student learners quickly discover that if they do not ask a question when something is ambiguous, they will not be able to write a detailed, accurate retelling. The student learners know that they are expected to participate actively, and are further motivated by the fact that I note all student participation on a chart. A significant part of a student's grade for this unit is based on class participation. When the peer teachers finish telling their fairy tale, they pose questions about characters and plot to the student listeners, and then introduce the final oral activity. The final oral activity usually involves groups of students acting

out episodes from the fairy tale, or putting the episodes of the fairy tale into proper order. Experience shows that all students actively and eagerly engage in this final activity.

Homework

In order to determine whether or not students understood the fairy tale, student learners are asked to write in Russian a summary of the fairy tale presented in class. There is no minimum or maximum length for this assignment. However, fairy tale summaries become more accurate and detailed as fairy tale literacy increases with each presentation. I read and grade the fairy tale summaries.

Assessment of Teaching Fairy Tales

In order to encourage and cultivate student ownership of the learning (and teaching) process, I often ask students to write rubrics to be used to assess their work. The rubric writing process is a whole-class activity in which groups of students write a rubric based on the criteria they consider appropriate for a particular project. In the next step of the process, all rubrics are read and peer edited by each group of students. I then collect and read all rubrics and commentary and assemble a single rubric that represents the thinking of the class. I present the finished assessment rubric to the class for approval.

The assessment rubric used for the fairy tale unit is adapted from a rubric students wrote for a different peer teaching unit. The process of assessment is straightforward and simple. Peer teachers use the teaching rubric to self-assess their work after teaching their fairy tale to the class. Student learners use the same rubric to assess the teaching of their peers. Peer teachers then read all peer assessments compare the self-assessments they wrote with the peer assessments. I read both peer and self assessments and assign grades.

Conclusion

The goals of the Russian fairy tale unit are to increase presentational, interpretive, and interpersonal communicative Russian skills by encouraging peer teachers and students to speak spontaneously in Russian, to express personal opinions, and to ask clarifying questions. This unit addresses reading, speaking, listening, and writing; truly an integrated task that can help to prepare students for the NEWL Russian (Prototype AP® Russian). Still another benefit of this unit is cultural; students become aware of and familiar with the characters, structure, and vocabulary of Russian fairy tales.

A final note on the pacing of this unit. World Language classes at IMSA meet four times each week for fifty-five minutes. The fairy tale unit takes place in the second semester, and one or two class periods are devoted to it per week over the course of about two months. Russian III usually has between 15-24 students.