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NCOLCTL Conference Abstract and Proposal

“Exploring Russian-Speaking Cities with Virtual Field Experiences (VFEs)”

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the significant role of technology in education (Villar-Onrubia et al., 2022). Today, digital literacies have become one of the top priorities in education as they provide students with competencies and skills that are crucial to thrive in a modern technology-driven environment (Ng et al., 2023). One way to cultivate digital literacies is to engage learners in Virtual Field Experiences (VFEs). VFEs are diverse immersive digital multimodal experiences that foster the creation of digital learning environments (Oguilve et al., 2022), which will address such important issues such as:

- Inability to travel and lack of immersive cultural experience and cultural learning on site;
- Scarcity of active exploration of the world beyond the classroom.

In this project, I am going to demonstrate an example of the teacher-created VEF for learning Russian. Russian is one of the less commonly taught languages, and thus, there are less resources available to educators to create a diverse learning experience. Besides, Russian textbooks are usually Western-side-of-Russia-oriented and have very little to no reference to underrepresented Russian regions, or Russian-speaking countries. In addition to that, Russian is a synthetic language, which is very morphologically rich, and thus, difficult for American students. Using VEFs, I provide examples of how educators can connect learning of intricate language with the investigation of the culture through virtual immersion, active exploration and engagement.

References:

Ng, D. T. K., Ng, R. C. W., & Chu, S. K. W. (2023). Engaging students in virtual tours to learn language and digital literacy. *Journal of Computers in Education*, 10(3), 575–602. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40692-023-00262-2>

Oguilve, V., Wen, W., Castek, J., Sanderson, C., & Pineda, Z. (2022). *Participatory Learning: Educators Designing Media to Expand Global Perspectives*. New York City.

Villar-Onrubia, D., Morini, L., Marín, V. I., & Nascimbeni, F. (2022). Critical digital literacy as a key for (post)digital citizenship: An international review of teacher competence frameworks. *Journal of E-Learning and Knowledge Society*, 128-139 Pages. <https://doi.org/10.20368/1971-8829/1135697>

Proposal

This poster is part of a larger digital literacy project under development, and it is intended to demonstrate parts (several tasks) of the instructional unit on the topic "Traveling. Путешествия", which is introduced in the fourth semester of Russian (Intermediate Russian II, 202).

Digital literacies have become one of the top priorities in education as they provide students with competencies and skills that become crucial to thrive in a modern technology-driven environment (Ng et al., 2023). Digital literacies involve using, creating and recreating as well as communicating about digital artifacts (Spires et al., 2018, as cited in Kerkhoff & Makubuya, 2022). It is increasingly presented through multimodality, making it an integral part of our everyday entertainment, research and study. Digital literacies entail the use of different modes to comprehend and communicate ideas as well as to create digital texts with the help of digital tools (Kerkhoff & Makubuya, 2022) Fast-paced, multifaceted information is all around us, and, therefore, problem-solving and analytical skills, ability to leverage technologies as well as communicate one's ideas are desired skills on the current job market (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2024).

Since Russian is considered a less commonly taught language, the teaching materials are not as diverse and progressive as the ones for learning English and Spanish, for example. Some textbooks are outdated both in terms of their content and the ways to present information. According to Boyle (1994), the Russian curriculum has always been grammar-oriented, and it is also complicated by such factors as teaching traditions and lack of fruitful materials. She also emphasized the necessity to "bring grammar alive" and give it real-life purpose and application.

Another big problem of the Russian textbooks is that a typical Russian speaker is represented by a white Orthodox Russian living in Moscow or St. Petersburg. There is a huge number of Russian-speakers outside of Russia as well as peoples in Russia representing diversity in culture and traditions, native languages, religions and nations.

I argue that the proposed interactive (VFE) instructional unit is effectively addressing multiple areas often lacking in teaching less commonly taught languages, such as Russian. It provides learners with opportunities to:

- 1.) Explore different Russian-speaking areas within and outside Russia;
- 2.) Dive into the atmosphere of various Russian-speaking cities and have a virtual immersive tour around them;
- 3.) Review vocabulary and grammar in a fun and engaging way;
- 4.) Develop digital literacies crucial in the modern digital era;

- 5.) Use authentic materials and real-world tasks to develop their language skills;
- 6.) Raise motivation and desire to learn, explore, interact and create.

The poster includes the theoretical underpinning of task-based and project-based learning as well as the concept of Virtual Field Experiences and their benefits in learning, such as connecting curriculum to issues of global relevance, having a meaningful, immersive experience to enhance motivation and creativity (Villar-Onrubia et al., 2022). The tasks and the procedures as well as the possible outcomes are outlined in detail. The poster will include QR codes for the audience to have a first-hand experience with the digital tour as well as to see used resources, websites, articles and other artifacts. Furthermore, with the use of a personal laptop, I will demonstrate the sequence of tasks and expected outcomes in more detail.

References:

- Boyle, E. M. (1994). "This is the dictionary of Ivan Petrovich": Balancing the role of grammar in the Russian communicative classroom. *Theory Into Practice*, 33(1), 10–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405849409543609>
- Kerkhoff, S. N., & Makubuya, T. (2022). Professional Development on Digital Literacy and Transformative Teaching in a Low-Income Country: A Case Study of Rural Kenya. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 57(1), 287–305. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.392>
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- Oguilve, V., Wen, W., Castek, J., Sanderson, C., & Pineda, Z. (2022). Participatory Learning: Educators Designing Media to Expand Global Perspectives. *New York City*.