

## Using Holidays to Build Language Skills

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外国語学習のプロセスの初期段階において、新しく学ぶ言語の基礎知識を習得するという側面、またその知識を活用するという側面から見ても、学習を継続することの重要性は言うまでもない。しかし、日本の大学の新年度は、4月中旬から学習期間が開始するものの、7月末から2ヶ月続く長い夏季休業に入ることで、春学期に習得したばかりの知識が根付いていないうちに学習にブランクができてしまい、習得した内容の大半を忘れてしまう。このことは、学習の次のステップへの移行を大きく妨げるものとなる。したがって、習得した外国語の知識と能力を、この長い休みの間にどのように保ち、活用するかという課題は極めて重要である。この課題を遂行するには、モチベーションの問題及び組織の問題を解決しなければならない。

本論文は、著者の長年の経験を活かし、上記の問題を解決に向けた方策の一環として議論を行うものである。学生が興味を持っている身近なテーマを次々ととりあげ、学習用のテキストと音声を作成し、現代の通信技術の能力を活かしてSNSなどを利用し、これらの資料を学生に配布し、学生がそれを基にして自習を行ない、学生からの申し出に応じて著者が必要な指導を行うという流れとなる。このような方法は数年にわたり、多くの学生達の間で好評を博し、これを利用した学生のロシア語学習の成績がはるかに改善したという事実がある。また、現在のコロナ禍の影響で授業形態の主体となっているオンライン授業にも、この教授法は非常に役立つものである。本論文では資料の作成方法及びその資料を用いた学習方法に関する提案も行っている。

## **1. The need to maintain language skills of first-year students during summer holidays**

The peculiarities of the academic calendar in Japanese universities cause unique problems in teaching a foreign language. The academic year in most educational institutions begins in mid-April. Shortly thereafter, in late July, students leave for a two-month long vacation. First year students, who started learning a foreign language “from scratch,” are unable to acquire systematic knowledge of any aspect of the language during this brief period of classes. Learning in the first semester is further complicated by the fact that this is a time when students adapt to university life; the novel circumstances cause significant stress, make it more difficult to absorb new material and reduce the effectiveness of the learning process.

Students, therefore, typically enter the summer holidays having, on the one hand, accumulated considerable fatigue, and on the other, not having an established knowledge base of the foreign language that they have started to learn. Thus, by the beginning of the second semester, many students simply forget most of the material they studied before the holidays. Therefore, a teacher is forced to devote substantial time at the beginning of the second term to restoring the knowledge and skills that students should have already mastered. It is important to note that students themselves are often surprised by this knowledge gap. The highly individualized pattern of knowledge retention makes the required recovery process difficult to navigate for an educator. This is especially true in Japanese universities, where large class sizes act as a significant barrier to organizing tailored revision sessions.

Maintaining and developing language knowledge and skills during long holidays is a relevant, substantial challenge that language educators must address. Devising a practical solution is especially important to help students who are in the initial stages of learning a foreign language (Shakirova, 2015). While students in their final years

of training can independently preserve their language expertise by referring to textbooks, using visual/audio materials which are widely available on the Internet, and actively communicating with native speakers, these options are ill-suited and impractical for beginners for three reasons. Firstly, students in the initial period of studying a language do not have sufficient training to work with most available materials in a foreign language: they require materials specially adapted to their level of knowledge, which are not always easy to find. Secondly, their limited command of the language, which makes them prone to making errors and forming undesirable habits, suggest that supervision may be necessary (Swan, 2012, 65). Thirdly, the students themselves have not yet understood their own unique strengths and weaknesses in regards to learning a language, thus making effective self-study near impossible.

The obvious need to provide additional support to students to help them maintain language skills over the summer comes with two challenges. The first challenge is motivation: since it is impossible to oblige students to take on additional work during the holidays, it is necessary for any supplementary sessions to be engaging and for students themselves to have the desire to sustain their learning. The second issue is logistical: any support measures must allow for flexible scheduling, as convening students and educators at a regular and rigorous time over a holiday is unrealistic. Subsequent sections of this paper present a methodology, which acknowledges and addresses the aforementioned challenges, that I developed to support first-year Russian language students' learning over summer holidays.

## **2. Creating and using materials for supplementary learning during summer holidays**

The idea of creating supplementary materials for classes during the holidays came from working with several motivated students who, after

the end of the first semester, asked me to provide recommendations for additional materials over the summer. The logistical problem of holding extra classes, described above, was solved using modern communication methods: specifically, LINE (a Japanese social networking platform). The advantages of using this platform for classes with beginner Russian language students were described in detail in a previous publication. (Latysheva, 2018).

Initially, these classes focused on pronunciation and intonation, conversation, and auditory comprehension. The lessons took the form of a conversation about topics that interested students at that moment in time. To consolidate the information covered during the sessions, I began compiling small texts, which included grammatical and other speech constructions, which were emphasized during the discussion. I audio-recorded this text and sent it to students, who then either listened to it or tried to transcribe the text. Students who chose the latter option sent their written text to me to mark. While marking, it was possible to draw a student's attention to common errors, point out their causes, and help students build necessary language skills. It is important to note that in order to allow each individual to progress most effectively, future texts were tailored to the grammatical structures and rules each student needed to review the most.

Such an approach proved to be very effective: students who participated in these sessions were not only able to retain the knowledge received during the first semester, but also were able to make significant progress in learning Russian, which helped them in further studies. I believe that these sessions were successful for two reasons. Firstly, the topic of conversation was closely tailored to students' needs and interests. In fact, the students themselves defined these topics by asking certain questions or drawing my attention to those aspects of the language that they found challenging or confusing. Secondly, this method assumes a comprehensive approach to language learning. Communication with the teacher targets and improves

listening and speaking skills and provides an opportunity to correct the pronunciation and intonation of students in real time. Transcription of text is not only a good listening exercise, but also requires students to actively use and strengthen their knowledge and application of complex grammatical rules.

Given the successful experience and popularity of these classes amongst students, I decided to create materials and develop methods that could be used with larger class sizes, in which there is typically a wide spread of language skills. I am currently in the process of completing the fourth iteration of this course.

In the first version of the course, I focused on creating materials for first-year students. Experience showed that first year students benefit most from materials that facilitate repetition of already-studied concepts. Thus, the texts created exclusively for this course were quite simple. They consisted almost entirely of words and expressions studied during the first semester and excluded the use of unfamiliar grammatical structures and lexical turns. The main goal was to consolidate the studied grammar and vocabulary and foster the ability to recognize the learned words and expressions in unfamiliar contexts. Students were encouraged to listen to the given text several times and then attempt to transcribe it. I recommended against using a dictionary or textbook while working through this exercise, and instead to do their best, relying on the grammatical rules already studied. I then sent a transcript of the text to my students such that they could check their work. Some students asked me to perform an additional check of their writing and explain reasons for certain errors. Other students chose to use the texts as an opportunity to improve their communication skills: they read the text themselves and asked me to listen and correct mistakes in pronunciation and intonation. The benefits of this methodology were visible both in students, who fully engaged with the supplementary materials, and those who chose to engage with the material selectively. In both cases, students returned from the holiday

having retained most knowledge acquired in the first semester.

Challenges, which had to be addressed in developing these supplementary materials, allowed us to cover only a very narrow range of topics such as situations from the daily life of students, descriptions of the educational process, life in Russia and Japan, weather and climate. Thus, these materials did not differ significantly from the texts of textbooks and may not have piqued the interest of a wider audience with a higher variance of skill levels in the Russian language.

Thus, in preparation for the summer of next year, I tried to make subsequent versions of this material more universal. These courses were deliberately designed for students in different years of study, as more students began to show interest. While it was more difficult to ensure that the created texts met the individual needs of each student (which was possible for a smaller group), the loosened restrictions on range of grammar and vocabulary used, which I strictly observed in the first version, made it possible to develop texts that were interesting for the majority of students in their first two years of language study. For example, I was able to use relevant new vocabulary and phrasing that are not presented in textbooks. Thus, I developed materials for all subsequent versions of this course primarily based on current events as covered by the common media.

Over the four iterations of this course I have developed 1) a set of strategies for writing the texts circulated to students and 2) recommendations to students about how to work with the developed learning materials. Below, I provide key insights on both of these aspects.

### **3. Principles of writing texts**

This section details a set of strategies for writing texts that serve as supplementary materials for students to work with over summer holidays. I consolidate my insights into ten points, presented below.

1. Texts should be relevant, capturing news or recent events that will be of interest to most students (Matveeva, 2014). An interesting topic elevates the level of motivation for students. However, this approach creates a problem for the educator: there was a rapid turn-around time for new texts (I created one text every day, because the old ones quickly lost their relevance). The strong connection to recent events makes it quite difficult to later consolidate the created texts into a textbook.
2. Texts should be short, capped at 250 words or 3 minutes of audio recording. This is because these materials are designed for students to use during holidays and should not be too difficult or burdensome. Since the topics covered are usually broad in scope, it may be tempting to create longer texts of 5 minutes or so. However, based on feedback from students, even such an addition of two minutes discouraged them significantly during the holiday season. In the case of larger topics the text can be broken up throughout two or three sessions.
3. The beginning of each text should, preferably, include colloquial phrases such as greetings, date, time, weather. These phrases are necessary for students in the initial learning stage, since they allow one to consolidate the material which was just studied. Especially in the Russian case, variations in the presentation of the date allow for the “wrapped” review of basic and common grammatical structures. Furthermore, the inclusion of such quick expressions also proved to be useful refreshers for students in their final years of study.
4. Texts should not be very difficult and should closely reflect colloquial speech: long sentences with complex grammatical constructions should be avoided. At the same time, however, the difficulty of the texts should incrementally increase over the duration of the course. This will, in part, help keep the text interesting, useful and engaging for students of all levels.

5. Texts should contain well-established figures of speech of the Russian language, as well as translations of stable grammatical structures and speech turns of the Japanese language. Russian turns of phrase and idioms will be interesting for senior students, and beginners can simply remember them for later use in their language practice, since the skill of translating Japanese constructions is absolutely necessary for students of all levels. However, it should be noted that students should take care to use these phrases in the correct context, since these expressions are easy to misuse.
6. It is highly desirable to include new words and expressions related to the discussed topic. This helps update a student's knowledge of the language and, in addition, increases the interest and motivation of students of all levels.
7. New texts should contain words, expressions, and grammatical and lexical constructions that were already used in previous texts and proved difficult to students. This repetition will allow students to consolidate the studied material and see how such phrases can be applied to different contexts.
8. It is necessary to attach a glossary of new/ difficult words and expressions to the text with their translation to Japanese. This will help students of different levels to understand the text and enable them to expand their vocabulary. For first-year students, it is important to note that such a glossary should not solely include the infinitive form of the new word, but rather, include the word as it is used in the context of the text. This will allow for an easier acceptance and comprehension of harder texts by newer pupils.
9. When reading the text for audio, you must speak at a natural pace of a native Russian speaker, without deliberately speaking slowly. Words must be pronounced clearly, but without special emphasis on cut-offs, unstressed vowels or endings. Prepositions, conjunctions, and negative participles should also be read without

emphasis. These strategies help better train listening skills and improve students' knowledge of grammar and vocabulary.

10. It is also interesting to note that when creating a title for the texts, I first used the word "Dictation" (聞き取り in Japanese), which has connotations to the examinations these students take. However, after transitioning to the use of "Text" or "Story", students seemed to feel less pressured with these "assignments" and approached them with an air of calm and of wanting to personally learn and advance their skills, which is crucial at these early stages of language study.

#### **4. Recommendations for students working with texts**

Here I present methodological recommendations for students of different levels working with such texts, which I devised based on experience. I believe that following these recommendations will enable students to use the materials most effectively.

Beginner students, who have been studying Russian for 2-3 months, are recommended to listen to the proposed text a few times, during which they should try to identify words and expressions they have already learned. Then, I recommend students to repeat the text one sentence at a time, after listening to teacher's recording. Students should aim to imitate the educator's pronunciation and intonation. I encourage students to work to remember new words encountered in the text and, if possible, any grammatical constructions. I highly recommend that students try transcribe at least the beginning of the text, which refers to the date, day of the week, and compare their notes with the transcript received from the teacher. Furthermore, even if a student is behind or is so early into their studies that they do not have the skills to transcribe or understand the text, simply "shadowing" the professor – reading along with the professor, can prove to be a very helpful exercise.

For second-year students, who have been studying the language for about a year and a half, I recommend listening to the text several times and trying to fully understand the content, including the meaning of all words and expressions. I encourage students to transcribe the text beginning to end using the provided recording, and then to compare notes to the transcript received from the teacher. Then, I advise that students first retell the text in Russian and then translate it to Japanese, relying on the attached glossary where needed. Continue to take note of and memorize any new / challenging words and phrases. I also encourage students to listen to a couple of previous recordings every day to consolidate knowledge.

I highly recommend that students in their final year, and those returning from exchange programs, listen to these texts to sustain the ability to easily comprehend Russian speech. After listening, I advise students to retell the text in Russian without relying on the glossary. This will help pinpoint gaps in vocabulary and identify areas of improvement. Then, I recommend that students attempt a simultaneous interpretation of the text in Japanese. Additional exercises included researching and engaging with articles and other audio/visual materials that touch on the same topic. It is also advisable to discuss the covered topic with friends, and if possible with native speakers, to check whether the student can apply vocabulary included in the text in their casual conversations.

## **5. Conclusion**

Long holidays, which begin just three months after students start learning Russian, pose significant challenges for both students and teachers; students return with significant knowledge gaps after the break, and educators are forced to facilitate an often-inefficient process of recovering lost skills. Motivated students in my classes have previously asked me to work with them in order to maintain their

knowledge and skills over the holidays. However, the organization of such classes is associated with numerous motivational and logistical problems. One practical solution to this problem is the use of modern communication technologies in the learning process.

Based on the experience of providing supplementary teaching sessions to students over the summer, I have developed materials and guidelines that allow students with different levels of training not only to maintain, but also to deepen their knowledge of various aspects of the Russian language over the holidays. This includes improving listening and speaking skills, as well as enriching their vocabulary bank. This methodology proved practical and successful especially during the Coronavirus pandemic, when teaching online became the new normal.

Results shown by students who studied according to the developed methods, as well as student feedback, indicate that the devised methodology is effective in terms of maintaining the knowledge of Russian language over the holidays. Moreover, the materials have proved as interesting and useful for students. I plan to continue using such materials in the future, incrementally improving them based on experience and student suggestions.

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