**Reading Leo Tolstoy in Russian: Motivation, Hybrid Approaches, and Cultural Contexts**

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**Abstract**

This article provides a pedagogy practice report on a reading course for undergraduate learners of Russian, with a focus on teaching selected chapters from Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* in the target language. The theoretical framework is bridging various approaches to reading in L2 with motivation studies. The course presents Tolstoy’s novel in the context of essential historical and biographical information, film adaptations, and relevant Internet media content. The report gives examples of successful activities and assignments that create personal connections for students and build intercultural competence. The outcomes demonstrate that the strategic application of bilingual Russian-English instruction can be a very productive path to teaching critical thinking and fostering long-term motivation for autonomous reading.

*Keywords:* reading, motivation, Russian, Tolstoy

**Reading in L2 and Learner Motivation: Theories and Practices**

In the U.S., Russian literature courses are offered almost exclusively in English, particularly at the undergraduate level (Martinsen et al., 2014, p. 1; Comer, 2016, p. 4). Russian is a difficult language that belongs to category 3 (Foreign Service Institute, 2023). Mastery of this language at the advanced level is usually beyond the standard hours of instruction. This situation creates a serious dilemma because Russian classical fiction is essential for cultural competence in this field. In modern Russia, literature exists in the nexus of historical, political, and broad cultural discourses, as an “arbiter of national identity” (Emerson, 2008, p. 2). Consequently, Russian programs require extensive academic study of Russian literature in English and offer courses that are cross-listed with the general education curricula or other majors. Such arrangements create a baffling situation where Russian literature, being so central to the field, is frequently taught in English (Comer, 2016, p. 4). As a result, the methodology of teaching literature in Russian receives little scholarly attention in Russian studies.

I am offering a pedagogy practice report based on my experiments in teaching Russian literature in Russian to third- and fourth-year undergraduate students. I will discuss the 19th-century survey course, with a focus on the segment dedicated to Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* (1867), where students read a few chapters from the novel. This regular course is required for majoring and minoring students and is offered every other fall at our institution; it alternates with a similar survey course on 20th-century Russian literature. I will demonstrate the practical applications of several content-based approaches and present a detailed account of successful teaching practices. My goal is to contribute to the ongoing discussions on content-based instruction and the language-literature divide. For that purpose, I combine research in L2 reading with motivation studies.

Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021) state that “…a great deal of L2 learning takes place outside of class over a long period of time. Therefore, students also need some form of motivational boost that will have a lasting impact beyond the classroom” (p. 123). I maintain that bilingual instruction can be highly efficient in promoting long-term motivation for reading literature and, generally, autonomous learning. L1 (English) is necessary for developing intercultural competence at the early and intermediate stages of language learning. Among the scholars, Bernhardt (2011) bases her research on compensatory theory of reading. She emphasizes “idiosyncratic variables in reading” convincingly argues in favor of using learners’ “…L1 literacy capacity to the fullest.” (Bernhardt, 2011, p. 39).[[1]](#footnote-1) As teachers, we must remember that we introduce many of our students to the classical authors. I want to keep students engaged and demonstrate why this knowledge of fiction and history is essential for understanding today’s world. If this teaching intention is successful student may explore more literature independently and stay inspired to achieve linguistic and cultural fluency.

Students pursuing the study of Russian at our institution frequently express interest in government careers, especially in intelligence, and translation/interpretation. Occasionally, they express interest in video-game localization. Most jobs in these fields require not only speaking proficiency but also refined cultural competence, advanced or superior proficiency in listening and reading, and translation skills. In the discussed course, elements of L1 instruction and translation assignments are geared toward building those skills.

Some articles from the past 20-30 years specifically discuss teaching Russian literature (and other content) in the target language. However, continuous scholarly discussions are not extensive in this area. Ars Rossica (2014) is a collection of articles that engage with theories and practices of teaching Russian literature in English translation. In contrast, an earlier article by Rosengrant (2000) successfully advocates for teaching short authentic literary texts to intermediate-level students in Russian and provides many excellent ideas for interactive activities and language-building techniques. Overall, this scholar provides a rather isolated report with very brief discussions of methodologies or future directions in research and practices. Kulibina (2001) focuses on reading comprehension rather than contexts or vocabulary work and suggests that contemporary texts provide better motivation for students than classical fiction. This is a valid approach, yet I have received very enthusiastic reactions from students to the Russian classical authors. Keefe (2004) provides valuable ideas and a list of texts for intermediate-level students. Blech (2007) supports teaching short texts to intermediate-level students, and I concur with this approach. In addition to short stories, I suggest including short excerpts from the opening chapters of famous classical novels.

Comer (2016) focuses on teaching vocabulary via authentic literary texts. He brings attention to the language-literature divide in Russian studies and points out the gaps in research on the subject (p. 3) He then proceeds to introduce the sequences of scaffolding techniques for reading, using the example of Pushkin’s short story *The Shot*. He notes that academic discussions in Russian around these texts are considerably above students’ language skills. For that reason, the historical and cultural contexts could be provided in English (Comer, 2016, p. 27), and I mostly agree with this solution. In my opinion, we should consistently apply intermediate-high and advanced-level practices in L2 that are much broader and often simpler than strictly academic discussions (see also Bernhardt, 1995). For example, we can ask interpretative how/why questions and assign narratives on plot summaries and characters’ profiles. We can also introduce key historical terms and concepts in both Russian and English, such as, “Decemberists” or “serfdom.”

In another engaging pedagogy practice report, Zheltoukhova (2022) describes an experimental content course in Russian. It is based on the non-fiction book *One-Storey America* by Il’f and Petrov (written in 1935) that is accompanied by a 21st-century book and a travel TV show, both of the same title. All these works explore the Russian perceptions of the U.S. culture. While the course is tailored to heritage and advanced learners, her practices offer very productive ideas for student engagement. Zheltoukhova develops activities that frame a teacher’s own cultural and linguistic identity, incorporates multimedia content, and links intercultural learning to students’ personal experiences. All these components are very important for my teaching philosophy.

We can also gain valuable perspectives on Russian studies from the extensive research on reading in English, French, and Spanish as foreign languages. Case studies and statistical reports reveal the challenges that are very similar for Russian studies and probably universal to teaching any foreign language: difficulty in achieving advanced proficiency; integration of language and content; having student-centered discussions in L2 (see also Byrnes & Kord, 2002). In French and Spanish, approximately half of the majors graduate with intermediate-level language skills (Darhower, 2014, p. 398). A considerable amount of scholarship on French and Spanish is dedicated to bridging the gap between language and content and building advanced language skills. Peasani and Allen (2009) summarize the following methodologies in reading that have been developed by various scholars: standards-based instruction – 5C; the 3R model: recognize, research, relate; cultural and technical literacy; and dialogic reading technique (pp. 66-68). Donato and Brooks (2004) study evaluations and conclude that teachers’ and students’ goals usually diverge: teachers emphasize linguistic and cultural competence, whereas students are frequently interested in authors’ life stories and broad relatable “situations in life” (p. 195). These findings perfectly correspond with Carter and Long’s (1991) approach to teaching literature in L1 than can be summarized as the textual, cultural, and personal growth model. In these terms, Donato and Brooks’ findings demonstrate that foreign-language teachers focus more on textual and cultural aspects. In comparison, students express high interest in the personal-growth aspect. Therefore, the personal-growth model may be borrowed from the theories on L1 teaching and adjusted to reading in L2.

The discussed scholarship offers many valuable ideas for developing the curriculum and teaching practices. However, the surveyed scholarly works do not fully explore students’ motivation to read literature, especially in the long perspective. “Motivation is seldom addressed explicitly in reading classes and teachers do not typically recognize the need to teach for motivation” (Grabe, 2009, p. 379). Several challenges are specific to teaching contemporary or classical fiction. First, students begin reading authentic works at the Intermediate Mid or High level when learners may experience a loss of motivation as the novelty of a foreign language wears off (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021, pp. 141-142). Second, language learners do not necessarily see classical and contemporary fiction’s relevance either to their cultural competence, their personal experiences, or the current global issues: “…less than half of the students rated being able to read and write texts as very significant, and less than one third rated cultural understanding as very significant” (Peasani & Allen, 2012, p. 64). Third, the communication media are undergoing fast-paced changes that modify the status of the works of art created in the pre-digital era. People consume large amounts of integrated textual/audial/visual content, which affects students’ and teachers’ cognitive abilities and processing habits.[[2]](#footnote-2) Finally, the global image of the target language and culture needs to be taken into consideration, and the Russian culture finds itself in a prolonged challenging situation.

As I strive to teach reading with a constant focus on student engagement, the following components are essential to my teaching practices and overcoming the articulated challenges:

* maintaining teacher’s motivation.
* 5C framework (Communications, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities). More specifically, I have the following components: communicative assignments and class activities; contemporary global issues and contemporary Russian culture; comparisons between Russian and American history and society; students’ personal experiences; and building community in the class.
* multimodal content: texts, in-class discussions, visual arts (painting, photography), film, and new digital media (YouTube vlogs and video essays, Reddit, the Internet humor).
* assignments aimed at developing advanced-level language skills (guided discussions, oral presentations, creative writing).
* L1 component: building superior-level skills in students’ L1, developing critical thinking, and fostering long-term motivation for future independent reading.

As a researcher, I initially specialized in literature, which stemmed from my lifelong passion for reading and studying fiction. Personal enthusiasm helps me immensely in creating a positive collaborative atmosphere in the classroom. I heavily rely on my accumulated academic knowledge in the fields of literature, theory and philosophy, cultural studies, art history, and social sciences. Learners’ motivation is closely linked to teachers’ motivation: “…research has consistently identified teachers’ dedicated passion and enthusiasm as a key facet of effective instruction as well as a strong determinant of students’ motivation and emotional experiences” (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021, p. 165). At the same time, I have been teaching teach all levels of the Russian language and several upper-level content courses in Russian and English for more than ten years. This experience has resulted in my growing interest in content-based instruction and the shift to SLA research.

Several case studies and statistical reports demonstrate that “…students learn best in classes that require a substantive and personal response to literature in both classroom interaction and in writing” (Nystrand et. al., 1997, p. 58). I strive to re-actualize 19th-century Russian fiction and demonstrate its importance for understanding our times. For example, we explore Leo Tolstoy’s political and ethical views and his celebrity status during his lifetime (Emerson 2008, p. 1). Students learn about his avid followers, the “Tolstoians,” who could be anachronistically described as a “fandom.” Such phenomena create familiar connections with the contemporary celebrity and fan culture and learners have consistently demonstrated high levels of engagement in these conversations.

Feedback from students provides encouraging testimonies to our collaborative achievement. I am proud of one particular response that reflects the success of my overarching goals: “I didn’t like reading fiction or studying history before this class” (Anonymous, 2020). I believe that the L1 component was extremely helpful for this outcome. Another student’s feedback succinctly summarizes the highly desirable outcomes of my teaching experiments [original spelling and punctuation preserved]:

My favorite of Irina’s classes was Russian Literature of the 19th Century. Her knowledge on the subject is astounding and her passion for the materials encouraged us to read more intentionally. Analyzing and dissecting any literature into parts regarding the author’s intent, cultural background, historical events, and other implications is a large undertaking. Irina was able to accomplish these things in a way that helped us to better understand what we were reading, even as the text was in a language not our own! Through this class, Irina helped me to understand Russian history in a way that allows me to better understand the political climate and cultural implications of Russia today. Irina’s class was not simply a study of books written over a century ago but rather a tool I still use to better understand the current world around me (Kubas, March 2023).

This student understands the importance of historical perspective and seeing cultural continuity, which I always emphasize in my literature courses. Exploration of the cultural links with our era always receives enthusiastic responses. The cited commentary provides excellent evidence in support of teaching history and authors’ biographies together with literary works.

**Framing Classical Fiction: Historical Contexts and the Diachronic Perspectives on Culture**

The majority of the texts we offer in the 19th-century literature course are well-known to any person who went through the education system in Russia. These works are formative for the Russian collective identity and serve as a source of references for various forms of high as well as popular culture. Belknap (2014) states the importance of teaching contexts but poses questions about their extent and the instructor’s expertise:

We should always investigate and always teach everything in its context, biographical, psychological, historical, political, economic, literary, linguistic, religious, etc., in our Russian literature, and, equally, in other subjects. … Our scholarly or pedagogical use of context is … either amateurish or dependent on the expertise of others (p. 33).

Regarding this issue, I propose a pragmatic, functional, approach: teaching contexts that summarize the key historical events and their impact on modern Russia and explain cultural references found in the specific literary texts.

I open my literature courses with a conversation about students’ reading habits. When I stir the conversation toward non-fiction and various online content, almost everyone is an avid reader. I frequently encounter responses about history books, biographies, psychology and self-help books, news and special-interest websites, and contemporary genre fiction. I also make inquiries about students’ previous knowledge of Russian literature and 19th-century history and culture. Occasionally, some students come to this course having read a few major works in translation. In the past few years, I have worked with students who had virtually no previous knowledge of the subject. Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, and Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* sometimes get recognition of their names and titles.

Introducing Russian classical fiction, I aim at providing a “road map,” in the form of historical summaries in English that combine texts and visual materials. For that purpose, I compile excerpts from academic books on history, tailoring them to the authors’ biographies and the historical references in their literary works. I use widely known cultural references as the anchors for students that grab their attention and help with memorization. For example, everyone knows “The Romanovs,” so my students learn about the five Russian emperors of the 19th – early 20th century and the major historical events during each of their reigns. Students study the social structure of 19th-century Russia, which introduces the essential vocabulary for the readings throughout the whole semester. Below is a small excerpt from my materials:

дворяне [dvoriane], the nobility, the landowning class;

крестьяне [krestiane], peasants, subsistence farmers;

крепостное право [krepostnoe pravo], serfdom law;

чиновники [chinovniki], administrative officials, bureaucrats.

Each of the listed words or phrases is an important cultural concept that belongs to the core vocabulary in 19th-century writing. They are loaded with meaning and specific cultural connotations. My supplementary materials provide further explanations with direct links to the authors and their works. For example, Leo Tolstoy was a wealthy aristocrat who owned lands and serfs before the abolishment of 1861. Later, the same freed peasants rented his lands, and his family kept running their large estate. Major characters in *War and Peace* (who live in the 1800s-1810s) have similar backgrounds, and many of them are directly inspired by Tolstoy’s ancestors and extended-family members (Zorin, 2020, p. 8).

Throughout my teaching career, I have observed consistently enthusiastic responses to social history, the accounts of the lived experiences of the past, and the social science materials, such as demographics. Russian Empire’s society preserved some feudal structural features and was profoundly different from contemporary American society. “Compare and contrast” activities occur inevitably and stimulate learners’ interest because they trace the connections with the history of their own country. A prominent example is the abolishment of serfdom in Russia which took place in 1861, very close in time to the abolishment of slavery in the United States. I moderate the discussions in English about the implications of these events, social classes and their shifts, the authors’ backgrounds, and the male-dominant narratives of the Russian 19th century. These theoretical frameworks and introductory discussions are essential for academic learning as well as student engagement. I think that teachers need to introduce these contexts when the students have their first experiences with reading Russian fiction, for situating the works chronologically and better cultural comprehension.

Students appreciate the guidance in the vast ocean of content, such as a short bibliography of good introductory books. Books by Orlando Figes, who is a scholar writing for the broader public, are my principal sources for the history summaries. I regularly assign chapters from his books, such ashis most recent *The Story of Russia* (2022). Some students become interested in these works and purchase them for independent reading, which is fulfilling one of my biggest aspirations as a teacher.

I want to emphasize the importance of multimedia content (texts, pictures, videos) for the introduction to long literary texts. This diversification reflects the integrated content of current media where we habitually consume audio-visual and textual information simultaneously. I use history, biography, clips from novel adaptations and biographical series, virtual museum exhibitions, and, occasionally, educational content from YouTube. We also explore the Internet popular culture, such as Russian jokes with references to stock characters and catchphrases that originate from Russian classical fiction.

**Biographical Contexts: From Personal Connections to Social Issues.**

At the beginning of each segment, one or two students do a biographical presentation on an author. I provide guidelines that list the most important and memorable facts (that often belong to the common knowledge in Russia) and tie the biographical events to major historical events. Initially, an author is merely a name that does not trigger any associations for students. The biographies flesh out an author as a human being, a person with both unusual and relatable experiences.

Students can write and narrate these presentations in Russian because they learn the core vocabulary (“born, raised, went to school, got married” etc.) at the elementary and intermediate levels. Leo Tolstoy’s long and productive life is remarkably suitable for opening discussions on Russian history and society, also serving as an excellent introduction to *War and Peace*. Before each in-class presentation, I ask a few or all the students in the audience (depending on the class size) to ask the presenter(s) one or two questions in Russian. This highly effective activity ensures active listening and often leads to discussions after the presentations.

Below are some examples from Tolstoy’s biography (Zorin, 2020) that opened successful in-class conversations on very acute social issues. As a military officer, Tolstoy served in the devastating Crimea War of the 1850s. This historical episode is closely linked to ongoing geopolitical conflicts, and the discovery of such links is very insightful. Tolstoy had a very troubled marriage, and his wife Sofia Andreyevna, arguably, demanded autonomy and accountability beyond the social conventions of her time. As a result of his spiritual search, Tolstoy re-wrote the four Gospels in an attempt to create his own version of Christian faith and ethics and was eventually excommunicated from The Russian Orthodox Church. His followers, the Tolstoians, propagated pacifism, vegetarianism, and living with minimal material possessions (that can be linked to much later anti-consumerism). Tolstoians became an international phenomenon and could be found in the United States. Tolstoy’s teaching of “non-violence” influenced Mahatma Gandhi and, subsequently, Martin Luther King Jr. After the discussions about Tolstoy’s life and work, I usually show a few selected clips from *The Last Station* (Hoffmann, 2009) that present a fictionalized account of Tolstoy’s last years and his struggles related to his family, his followers, and his ongoing internal ethical questioning.

This pedagogical direction has proved very efficient for students’ active in-class participation and created positive “emotional contagion” that helped build peer enthusiasm (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021, p. 166). Of course, the conversations on those complex issues had to be conducted in English but I found this class component necessary. Students tend to remember their own influential contributions to the discussions. By guiding learners through the highlights of Tolstoy’s personal story, I demonstrate his strong relevance to acute contemporary problems and his underlying legacy in our time.

**In-Сlass Activities: from IRE to Collaborative Discussions**

In the pilot course, I taught Tolstoy’s short story *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* and found the students not very engaged. Next time, I replaced that short story with the selected chapters from *War and Peace,* along withseveral clips from BBC’s eponymous mini-series released in 2016. This course segment was very successful and enjoyable to the students. *War and Peace* is a widely known seminal novel with a palpable presence in contemporary popular culture (Emerson 2008, p. 3). Students are invariably pleased to discover that they are able to read and understand Tolstoy’s writing, which helps them maintain their motivation.

The reading assignment for *War and Peace* totaled 15 single-spaced Word Document pages, which was studied over the course of four lessons. My basic criteria for selection were the introduction of the main characters and initial points in the plots and a representation of the novel’s typical settings. The opening few chapters of the novel take place at a semi-formal social gathering (a “salon”) and conveniently introduce many main characters. The guests engage in conversations about the ongoing war with Napoleon. These chapters have a detailed introduction to Pierre Bezukhov, one of the most important characters in the novel and a frequent mouthpiece for Tolstoy’s ideas. In the further chapters I selected, the scenes at the Bolkonskys’ estate present the three principal characters from this family: Andrey Bolkonsky, his sister Maria, and their dictatorial father. After that, I included a scene where Natasha Rostova has a warm conversation with her mother, in stark contrast to the hierarchical and reserved relations of the Bolkonskys. Finally, I selected the chapters that showcase Tolstoy’s observations on the chaos of war and narrate young officer Nikolay Rostov’s inglorious first-battle experience.

I regularly employ the IRE (Initiation – Response – Evaluation) techniques for assignments and in-class conversations. Scholars justly point out that sometimes instructors excessively rely on intermediate-level IRE (Darhower, 2014, p. 398). However, these activities can still be very useful, if planned with building language skills in mind. Rosengrant and Lifschitz (1996) provide many excellent ideas and templates for questions and discussion topics in their collection of Russian classical pieces that is designed specifically for learners of Russian. Darhower (2014) demonstrates that this type of classroom activity can be successfully upgraded: “Studies in both L1 and L2 literature classes point to the potential learning benefits of restructuring the IRE-type classroom discourse to a more collaborative format” (p. 399). I find regular IRE activities necessary for speaking practice in the content courses. Russian grammar is very complex, with constantly changing endings, and learners greatly benefit from repetition and paraphrasing. Reifman (2014) demonstrates the approaches to including more specific grammar activities. These activities allow them to practice familiar and new grammatical forms and syntactical structures.

I develop content questions in Russian and assign them as homework, posted a week or more ahead. Some questions check basic comprehension and require paraphrasing, whereas others are open-ended “how” and “why” interpretative questions that require close reading and short-paragraph responses. Another excellent assignment is compiling character profiles, describing their looks, character traits, relationships, and opinions. *War and Peace* revolves around the stories of a few families, which is excellent material for language practice. Family relationships, friendships, and personal conflicts are infallible, eternal themes that readers are universally enthusiastic about, even at rigorous and theoretically oriented undergraduate seminars that are taught in L1 (Belknap, 2014, p. 39).

Importantly, I confine the evaluation part of the IRE activities to the written assignments. The graded rubrics in the syllabus explicitly state that a student must answer each listed question and write one-paragraph-long replies when prompted, for a full score. Any participation in L2 is welcome in class and counts positively for each student. I aim to create “…situations in which students can demonstrate their particular strengths and make a useful contribution” (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021, p. 165). Learners’ ability to participate in the in-class discussions is dependent on their completion of the reading and writing assignments.As a sample, I am providing a translated excerpt from homework that was assigned in Russian:

1. Read this passage: “Each visitor performed the ceremony of greeting this old aunt whom not one of them knew, not one of them wanted to know, and not one of them cared about... The aunt spoke to each of them in the same words, about their health and her own, and the health of Her Majesty, “who, thank God, was better today.” And each visitor, though politeness prevented his showing impatience, left the old woman with a sense of relief at having performed a vexatious duty and did not return to her the whole evening” (Tolstoy, 2022, Book 1, Part 1, Chapter 2).

How does Tolstoy describe “the ceremony of greeting [the] old aunt”? What is Tolstoy’s opinion on the high society customs and rituals? Write your analysis of this passage (8-10 sentences).

2. Pierre Bezukhov. Describe his physical appearance and social background. How do the other guests perceive him? Does the salon hostess like him? Why or why not? Provide 2-3 or more quotes from the text to show the evidence for your answers.

3. Andrey Bolkonsky. Describe his physical appearance and social background. What are his plans for the near future? What is his attitude toward high society? How is he treating his wife? What does it say about the state of their marriage? Cite 2-3 or more passages from the text to support your argument.

4. Which character interests you the most and why? (Write 5 or more sentences).

Such assignments have proved manageable for any student who is at the Intermediate-Mid level or above. If a learner struggles to understand some parts of the text, they may choose to work with parallel texts in Russian and English. In accordance with the principles of differentiated instruction, students’ individual proficiency level and reading/writing fluency determine the varying amount of time needed for task completion.

The class discussion begins in Russian, and I ask the exact questions from the homework (as cited above). Even though students begin by reading their replies aloud, this activity is a good pathway to more spontaneous conversations in the L2. This IRE activity checks reading comprehension and functions as vocabulary and grammar practice. Less proficient students can make contributions thanks to their conscientious preparation. For the interpretative reader-response questions, I may address the same question to a few students. They should listen to each other and comment on each other’s replies, adding information, agreeing, or disagreeing. After that, we proceed to more open-ended questions that are not part of the homework assignment. Sometimes I distribute worksheets with short parallel passages in Russian and English for close reading and making observations in Russian.

More complex conversations that go beyond reading comprehension are off limits for most undergraduate learners of Russian: “The discussion of motivations is often stymied because the students lack even the most elementary vocabulary to describe the character’s feelings and grammatical constructions to express cause” (Comer, 2016, p. 24). I suggest switching to the student’s native language, after the Russian segment, in order to fully integrate students’ responses and thoughts into the classroom activities. Based on my experience, if students develop any interest in an assigned literary text, they accumulate quite many ideas that they are unable to express in L2. If we strictly adhere to Russian these ideas will not be expressed, which may lead to learners’ frustration and falling enthusiasm. Besides, a teacher’s feedback and responses to students’ observations may sometimes be above the group’s proficiency in listening. I overcome this limitation by the regimented usage of L1. I have always found those end-of-class discussions in English very insightful and rewarding for every participant. Based on students’ responses in the evaluations, I strongly believe that these conversations in English helped in building long-term motivation in class throughout the semester as well as encouraged independent reading and research.

In the last part of the discussed lesson, I announced the transition to English, asked for any additional thoughts and comments, and posed more complex questions, for example:

As you noticed, the characters’ speech mixes French and Russian. What does it say about the nobility culture in Russia in the early 1800s? Why are Pierre’s opinions on Napoleon controversial and even scandalous?

Below is an example of the pedagogical procedure moving from reading comprehension to more theoretical discussion. During the described lesson, the students initially provided the following paraphrasing replies about the old aunt, in Russian: “The guests are polite. They think that the old aunt is boring. They do not notice her afterward. They greeted her because they had to.” By saying these replies, the students practiced the known words (such as “polite” or boring”) as well as the new vocabulary, such as “to notice” or “a duty.” Later, the conversation in English evolved into a discussion of the universal unwritten social rules and rituals. One student observed that Tolstoy often made astute and ironic comments on social etiquette. In response to that, I introduced the literary technique of “defamiliarization” [ostranenie] that is perfectly encapsulated in the passage about the old aunt and, generally, essential for understanding Tolstoy’s writing style (Shklovsky, 2016, p. 16). We found two other examples of this narrative technique in the discussed chapters, and the students received an assignment to find more “defamiliarization” examples in the upcoming chapters. Thus, the group learned about the importance of attentive reading and close analysis of the text. We practiced a reader-response approach where the learners invoked their personal experiences to connect with the story. Additionally, recognizing irony in fiction and experiencing humor and laughter together is highly efficient for student engagement and building the community.

At the end of the lesson, we watched a clip from BBC’s mini-series *War and Peace* (2016). Even though it is a British adaptation, I find it to be an excellent introduction to Tolstoy on film. The older Russian adaptation directed by Sergei Bondarchuk is grand and somber, whereas the British series focuses more on character development and relationships. After watching the opening scenes at the salon, the students noticed (before I did) that Pierre Bezukhov’s suit did not look as well-fitted as the other character’s clothes, which visually emphasized his awkwardness and outsider status. In some scenes, the direction accurately rendered angles and close-ups described in Tolstoy’s text. This activity perfectly served my purpose of demonstrating the cinematic quality of Tolstoy’s writing style and creating a memorable reading and learning experience.

**Assessment: Tests, Recordings, and Writing Assignments.**

Scholars provide many excellent ideas for vocabulary-building activities that incorporate narration and interpretation in Russian (Rosengrant, 2000; Katz, 2002; Comer, 2016). Combining the practices of fellow scholars and my own ideas, I regularly diversify in-class activities with the following exercises:

1) reconstruct the correct order of the story from the synopsis sentences on paper cards.

2) match the quotes with the characters; name their prominent character traits.

3) identify a character from the description (listening comprehension).

4) compare two families in the novel: The Bolkonskys and The Rostovs.

I have successfully tested another type of written assignment for building vocabulary. Each student creates a vocabulary list for a work we read. After that, they compose sentences using any 15 words from their lists. If a group has higher levels of proficiency, I may assign writing a coherent story or a dialog using at least 15 words from their lists. Alternatively, students may choose to compose a story or a dialog as an extra-credit task. I find this task highly efficient because students must produce texts using the new vocabulary, and many of them enjoy the creative aspect of this assignment.

Several listening and conversation exercises are also very effective. Students choose a character, summarize their storyline, and talk about their personality traits and relationships with the other characters. A variation of this assignment can be a plot summary in Russian. First, students submit their written texts. After receiving the edited and proofread texts, they prepare in-class oral narrations or post their narratives on Flip. In class, peers provide questions and comments for each other. On Flip, they can do the same by posting comments on each other’s videos. In addition, I ask them to explain the choice of a character. The reasoning may stem from entirely personal reasons as long as it is expressed in Russian. For example, one of my students compared Prince Nikolai Bolkonsky with her own strict parents.

Classical fiction provides excellent opportunities to teach writing. Besides the discussed summaries, my students write compositions. Rather than academic essays displaying structured arguments, I assign more flexible “response” papers at the intermediate level. Assessment rubrics include two separate grades for content and language. The language section includes grammar, syntax, spelling, and appropriate writing style. Creative-writing assignments are very beneficial for fostering motivation in students. Even at the intermediate level, language learners are capable of writing short stories or converting a third-person text into a first-person narrative. For example, based on the *War and Peace* chapters, students can describe the evening in the salon from one of the character’s points of view and use first-person narration. Tolstoy’s narrator is omnipresent, and the author habitually uses free indirect discourse. If a student chooses, for instance, Pierre Bezukhov, they can explore his family history and his admiration of Napoleon.

I include regular translation quizzes. Students receive a paragraph in Russian *in advance* and prepare the translation from Russian into English that they need to complete during the quiz without dictionaries. I select a paragraph from an actual literary work or compose a stylized text myself, using the relevant vocabulary. I use frequency dictionaries to develop the vocabulary lists. The translation task checks new vocabulary and reading comprehension. Besides, it prepares learners for possible future careers that require translation skills.

**Art Projects and Content Creation.**

I assign creative projects at the end of the semester after the students accumulate new knowledge of literary works, authors’ biographies, and major historical concepts. Even though students strongly prefer engaging with the Internet culture rather than reciting poetry or pursuing traditional art projects, this activity still allows them to demonstrate their growing knowledge of the materials. The ideas include but are not limited to the following:

* Learn a poem by heart and recite it in class.
* Create an art installation inspired by the class materials.
* Paint a picture based on the class materials.
* Draw a page in the graphic-novel style that reimagines a few scenes and dialogs.
* Create a playlist of Russian songs for a character or a story; present your playlist and explain your choices of music in class.
* Create 10 or more memes based on the class materials, with captions in Russian.

I have added memes and playlists to the list of options only in one most recent course, and they turned out to be the students’ most popular choices. Because of that, I will continue including these options for end-of-semester projects. Memes are an extremely versatile form of the Internet culture, and the students can be very creative and very funny. We looked at the memes together in class, and some of them were created using recognizable viral “meme templates.” Besides sheer entertainment, the memes showcased remarkable knowledge of the course material and functioned as inside jokes for all the classmates. Environments that are open to new forms of popular culture and encourage humor are excellent for building the learners’ community.

**Concluding Remarks.**

Teaching classical fiction to intermediate-level learners of Russian is a task that requires extensive preparation, strategic planning, and constant adjustment. Reading long literary texts in the era of the fast-paced digital revolution is another unprecedented challenge for educators. Scholarship on reading in foreign languages poses many profound questions and provides many excellent practical ideas. However, it does not always explore the long-term motivation that is integral to becoming a proficient reader in L2: “Fluency instruction is almost nonexistent in many L1 and L2 classes, and many teachers do not know how to include a fluency component into the instruction” (Grabe, 2009, p. 379). First, students do not always realize the importance of independent learning, beyond classroom participation and completing homework assignments, which is why teachers should explicitly articulate this message on a regular basis. Second, instruction times are insufficient for building fluency, which is why teachers should constantly focus on fostering long-term motivation for independent reading. As a scholar and a practitioner, I aim at bringing together reading pedagogy and motivation studies in content-based instruction.

As I demonstrated, classical fiction, authors’ biographies, historical contexts, and social histories offer great potential for discussing acute current topics, such as social conflicts, wars, gender relations, shifting moral values, etc. Students consistently demonstrate high degrees of involvement when materials are presented via these frameworks. I maintain that these contexts and the opportunities for college-level discussions and debates should be introduced simultaneously with the works of literature. Consequently, I advocate for bilingual instruction. Students read short stories or selections from novels in Russian and complete intermediate written and oral assignments in Russian. At the same time, students can acquire nuanced intercultural knowledge and develop their critical thinking with the help of L1. The most important area of improvement for my future teaching practice should be the development of more structured policies for using L1 and L2 and maximizing L2 learning. My teaching practice report points at possible directions for bridging the chasm between language instruction in Russian and content instruction in English, which is so characteristic of Russian studies in the United States. Hopefully, such hybrid practices result in the creation of positive emotional imprints that are necessary for long-term motivation and autonomous learning aimed at achieving advanced and superior proficiency.

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1. In further support of my argument, Coyle, Hood, and Marsh, D. (2010), Lin (2015), and Cenoz (2015) discuss the importance of bilingual instruction and the applications of L1 in K-12 education. While college-level learning is considerably different, it has a similar overarching goal of building and maitaining fluency in two or more languages. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Libschner (2017) describes some approaches to teaching media via multiliteracy framework. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)