

Creating an Online Assessment Test for Heritage Learners of Russian

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Abstract

This paper examines the differences between second-language learners and heritage learners of Russian in terms of their linguistic performance, a finding supported by current research (Andrews, 2001; Kagan & Dillon, 2001/2003), examines the implications of these differences for the creation of testing tools, and offers a sample of a test designed for the author's Russian for Heritage Learners course. Also discussed are the drawbacks of applying traditional grammar tests created for second-language classes to heritage-language-classroom settings and the inability of these types of tests to reflect the unique language strengths of heritage learners. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language proficiency guidelines are suggested as a starting point in creating an assessment test for heritage learners.

Background

Heritage Language Education

Over the past decade, the number of classes for heritage learners has steadily increased throughout the U.S. In my home institution, for example, separate HL courses in Spanish, Korean, and Russian have been offered for the last several years. Separate courses or, in some language programs, a separate heritage track, present the challenge of developing a distinct set of curricula, textbooks, and testing tools for this new group of learners.

Significant research advances have been made in our understanding of differences between heritage language (HL) learning and standard second-language (L2) learning. The Department of Education has recognized the growing importance of this new type of language learner in our education system by creating the National Heritage Language Resource Center at UCLA, which held the first International Conference on Heritage and Community Languages in 2010.

Kagan and Dillon (2001/2003) have argued that that heritage learners do not benefit from L2 beginner classes; rather, they stagnate. These speakers usually possess skills that a non-native speaker of the language would require hundreds of hours to acquire, including some that L2 learners may never acquire at a native-like level, such as native-like pronunciation, fluency in colloquial register and dialects, and sociocultural understanding (Kagan & Dillon, 2001/2003). In a program with no heritage class, they can to be placed at least in intermediate or advanced classes. In fact, HL learners' language skills often exceed even the skills of even the most advanced L2 students, particularly in tasks dealing with speaking and listening.

At the same time, however, HL learners have significant gaps in their knowledge of the heritage language since most of them have not studied the language formally. For example, the weaknesses shown by Russian heritage learners are typically not addressed in a standard L2

course regardless of level, since their spelling reflects Russian pronunciation and does not take into account the spelling rules that are reflected in the writing system.

Although many heritage learners are able to carry out the interactive face-to-face communicative functions in the language at least at the Intermediate level of proficiency on the ACTFL scale (American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), 1999), they are rarely able to maintain paragraph-length discourse on any abstract topic, which is one of the ACTFL requirements for proficiency at the Advanced level (ACTFL, 1999). This inability is the result of several factors: limitations in knowledge of vocabulary, of the cohesive devices that allow an educated native speaker to support and develop an argument and create smooth transitions within discourse, and of syntactic structures. Having taught many groups of heritage learners, I have found that even the most literate heritage learners enrolled in my class who can speak fluently on everyday topics and possess listening comprehension skills approaching those of native speakers have relatively undeveloped reading and writing skills. These empirical classroom observations are supported by research (see Kagan & Dillon, 2001/2003; Andrews, 2001).

Russian for Heritage Learners

At my institution I teach a year-long *Russian for Heritage Learners* course. The course textbook is *Russian for Russians* (Kagan, Akishina, & Robin, 2002), supplemented by readings from classical literature and contemporary materials. After completing this course, students are eligible to enroll in advanced Russian courses (Fourth-Year Russian or Russian literature in Russian or culture). Students entering the class are given a short Oral Proficiency Interview-like assessment and asked to write a short essay about themselves if they have writing skills. They also complete a short background questionnaire that asks them which language skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening comprehension) they would like to improve most, listing as many skills as they want in order of priority. Table 1 below summarizes biographical data from the *Russian for Heritage Speakers* course taught in 2010 -2011 and Table 2 shows the language skills these students indicate they want to improve.

Table 1

Background Information on Students

Name	Place of Birth	Age of Arrival in U.S.	School Grades Completed in Russia	Years of Formal Instruction in Russian	Primary Language Spoken at Home
Andrei	Moscow, Russia	11 months	none	studied at home with grandmother, a former Russian teacher	Russian

Katya	Kiev, Ukraine	4 years	none	None	Russian
Anya	US	n/a	none	two years at high school as a foreign language	Russian
Masha	US	n/a	none	none	Russian
Alexander	US	n/a	none	one year at a university as a foreign language	Russian
Marina	Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan	9 years	three grades of school in Russia	three grades of school in Russia	Russian
Dasha	St. Petersburg, Russia	8 years	three grades of school in Russia	three grades of school in Russia	Russian
Yurij	Moscow, Russia	2 years	none	none	Russian

^a n=8. ^b All names have been changed.

The heterogeneous composition of this class is typical of many HL courses.

Table 2

Language Skills Students Want to Improve

Skills in Order of Importance	First Place	Second Place	Third Place
Writing	6	1	0
Reading	1	4	0
Speaking	1	0	2
Listening	0	0	0

The majority of students chose writing as the skill most needing improvement (six out of eight respondents), followed by reading (five responses) and speaking (two responses). No students indicated listening, which indicates that the students were aware that aural comprehension is

their strongest language skill and felt that it needed no improvement. The test results described below confirm that the students are largely correct but overestimate their listening skills to some extent.

In addition to working on their language skills, my heritage learners want to learn more about their cultural and linguistic heritage. For example, they often said that they wanted to understand the rich literary legacy of their parents and grandparents and to read works of classical literature, beginning with Pushkin. Research has shown that heritage learners have a strong emotional attachment to the language, which they need to reconnect with grandparents who frequently do not speak English fluently (Carreira, 2004). Grandparents often are the most invested in a heritage speaker's language education, and sometimes a grandparent teaches them to read and write in the language. The interest in one's literary heritage and the desire to strengthen family ties are examples of motivation that differ from those of traditional L2 learners, who may want to learn a foreign language for future career goals (Campbell & Rosenthal, 2000; see also Gardner, 2001; Kagan, 2005).

Both motivation and skills have to be taken into consideration in designing a curriculum for heritage learners. Research indicates that heritage learners already "have some grammatical intuition that will function effectively if supported by declarative knowledge of grammar, i.e. "explicit and conscious" knowledge of rules that "can be articulated by the learner" (Hadley, 2001 (as cited in (Kagan & Dillon, 2001/2003, p. 512))). They also need extensive work on orthography, unlike non-heritage learners who generally can write what they are able to say. While both groups need to be taught the spelling rules, many spelling mistakes made by heritage learners are not made by foreign language learners. Kagan and Dillon (2001/2003) point out that materials for college-level heritage learners should reflect their age and cognitive development.

Assessment for Heritage Learners

If a different curriculum is needed to accommodate the needs of heritage learners, then a different set of assessment tools is required as well. I have tried to design testing that targets each of the four skills as they are emphasized in the course and that aims at an assessment of proficiency as specified in the ACTFL guidelines.

The proposed multi-skill assessment test presupposes that the heritage learner who enrolls in the course already has at least solid Intermediate level proficiency in speaking on the ACTFL scale: he or she is able to communicate about day-to-day topics, ask basic questions, and handle requests. According to the ACTFL proficiency guidelines (1999), a characteristic of Advanced-level proficiency is the ability to maintain paragraph-length discourse, to describe in detail, narrate, and compare. My year-long course for heritage speakers of Russian, therefore, aims to take this student from the Intermediate to Advanced level of proficiency. The test is designed to be administered at the end of the two-semester course, and intends to show if the student is able to carry out the requirements of the Advanced level.

The language tasks on my test include: understanding two contemporary news excerpts dealing with current events, one in audio format and the other as a reading text; reading an authentic

literary text from classical literature; and narrating and describing in detail, which requires paraphrasing and elaborating in connected discourse, the appropriate style register, and lexical forms that are stylistically and grammatically appropriate to a given context. The final part of the test is a dictation exercise, to focus on accuracy in writing and cumulatively test orthography and the knowledge of basic grammar structures, including spelling rules, case endings for nouns and adjectives, gender agreement, and verbal conjugations.

The test combines the use of online materials and handwritten answers. One news item, in this instance an interview with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, is presented as a video clip, and the listening segment is presented as an audio file. The video and the audio can be played multiple times with no time restrictions. Students are asked to write their answers by hand.

Students are assigned to complete the test as homework. The test's online format allows greater flexibility since students may replay the segment as many times as they wish and complete the assignments at their own pace. This consideration is especially valuable for tasks like dictation, which requires more time and repetition for some learners than others.

Test Components and Test Results

A detailed description of the test components as well as a performance analysis of the test results from my 2010 class are presented below.

Listening

The first skill tested is listening comprehension. It has been noted that listening comprehension for this group of learners is generally high (Yokoyama, 2000; Kagan, 2005), and therefore the test includes a news segment in which prime minister Vladimir Putin talks about government assistance to banks. (For a complete transcript see Appendix A.)

The segment is about two minutes long and is difficult to understand since it uses a specialized vocabulary on financial markets and economics. This type of assignment would normally be given towards the end of a course, after students had worked with new lexical material and completed Chapter Six, on money and business, from the textbook. The first two questions test listening comprehension. The third question is open-ended and asks the students to state and support an opinion, which is a requirement for the Advanced level of proficiency (see *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines*). The questions were given in English, and the students were asked to answer in Russian if possible:

1. Do all Russians support government assistance to the banks?
2. Why do the banks need government help, according to Vladimir Putin?
3. In your opinion, should the government provide assistance to the banks? (Answer in Russian if you can.)

In answering the first two listening comprehension questions, all eight students gave the correct answer in Russian. This group included the three students who were born in the U.S. and the one who left Russia when he was eleven months old (for details on the students in the class, see

Table 1.) Given the linguistic complexity of the text, these results support the previous claim that heritage learners' listening comprehension is highly developed.

Because the third question asks for a written response, it is discussed below, in the section on writing.

Responses to the first two questions testing listening comprehension confirmed that all students were able to understand the factual information presented in the video segment despite its complexity.

Reading

The second skill tested is reading comprehension. Generally heritage learners' reading comprehension is considerably lower than their listening ability, since they have had lifelong exposure to spoken language but much less exposure to reading. For this reason the reading segments selected were less advanced than the first audio segment. Two reading texts were included. The first was taken from classical literature – the opening of Chekhov's story *A Lady with a Dog* (see Appendix B for the original text and a translation). The students had not read it previously. The text was chosen because while Chekhov's works are part of Russian classical literature, his prose style is more accessible to beginners than that of other classical Russian writers. The format of the questions is open-ended and the students are asked to answer in English.

The questions are as follows:

1. Where is the story taking place?
2. How did Gurov first meet the lady with a dog?
3. Indicate three details of Gurov's biography.
4. What is Gurov's opinion of his wife?
5. What is his opinion of women in general?

This segment posed no difficulty for comprehension. All students were able to answer the questions correctly and report the factual information accurately.

Since the language of media and news is different in style and syntax from a literary text and employs a separate register of the language, the second reading comprehension segment was an excerpt from an authentic news article (see Appendix B, Part 2). Like the news segment chosen for listening comprehension, the print excerpt included unfamiliar vocabulary and syntactic structures. The questions for this text were multiple-choice. Whereas in the listening section on current events all students were able to understand the main facts and answer open-ended questions, in the reading section only three out of eight students were able to identify the main topic of the article. A student who was born in the U.S. and had studied Russian as a foreign language in a U.S. high school chose two out of three multiple-choice answers incorrectly, and another student left the answers blank. The latter student started the class without any literacy skills and the text was too complex for her. This result suggests that the students' ability to

understand reading texts differs across genres; they were not only unable to discuss current events but also to process a written text from a newspaper.

Since listening comprehension is a more highly developed skill than reading for heritage learners, one possible way to capitalize on that strength would be to prepare the students for reading print material by presenting it in audio format first. This strategy could be especially fruitful for linguistically complex texts on unfamiliar subjects.

Writing

Three written assignments were included in the test: the open-ended question that followed the audio segment discussed earlier, an essay asking students to provide a description, probing for Advanced level on the ACTFL scale, and a dictation. The open-ended question asked if the government should provide assistance to banks. For the essay, students were asked to “describe the character of your best friend/relative.” The students had acquired vocabulary for character descriptions from Chapter Two of their textbook (Kagan, Akishina, & Robin, 2002). The cloze-type dictation focused on spelling and grammatical endings.

Open-ended Question on Audio Segment about Russian Banks

The third question based on the audio segment about the Russian government’s assistance to banks, (“ In your opinion, should the government provide assistance to the banks? (Answer in Russian if you can.)”) builds on students’ listening comprehension and to transition to a different task, namely asking students to support an opinion, probing for the Advanced level of proficiency. Several students, particularly those born in the U.S., did not complete this task successfully. These students’ writing showed difficulties with word choice, register, the ability to support an argument through appropriate linking devices, and spelling. Representative responses are shown below¹:

- (1) Да, нимножко, потому что мы должны защитить наши деньги
[Da, nimnožko, potomu čto my dolžny zaščitit’ naši den’gi]
//
Да, немножко, потому что мы должны защитить наши деньги
[Da, nemnožko, potomu čto my dolžny zaščitit’ naši den’gi
(‘Yes, a little, because we should defend our money’).

This student was born in the U.S. The expression “защитить деньги” is not used by native speakers of Russian.

- (2) Нет, банки должны менять свою инфраструктуру, чтобы поддерживать свои расходы
[Net, banki dolžny menjat’ svoju infrastrukturu, čtoby podderživat’ svoi rasxody
(“No, the banks should change their infrastructure to be able to maintain their spending”).

This student completed five grades in Russia. Поддерживать расходы [podderživat’ rasxody] (maintain) is a non-nativism, but the answer can be understood, and this student makes a more sophisticated lexical choice (e.g., инфраструктуру, расходы).

- (3) До поры до времени да, но какой-то момент нужно пускать деньги и в другие секторы и как-то иначе стимулировать экономику
 [Do pory do vremeni da, no kakoj-to moment nužno puskat' den'gi i v drugie sektory i kak-to inače stimulirovat' èkonomiku]
 ('Up to a certain point yes, but eventually it's necessary to put money into other sectors and stimulate the economy by different means')

The student left Russia at age 11 months. The sentence shows some feeling for the register of speech required in the response, but register is not maintained throughout, as indicated by the usage of the conversational verb пускать [puskat'] (to launch, set off); a better verb to use with funds is направлять [napravljat'] (to direct), or выделять [vydeljat'] (to allocate).

The students' answers to this question revealed that heritage learners continue to need orthographic work as well as exposure to collocations and different registers of speech in reading, writing, and speaking for longer than one year of study.

Heritage students' skills show a large gap between the conversational Russian employed in interpersonal face-to-face communication at the Intermediate level of proficiency and the Advanced level, which is characterized by the ability to "participate actively in most informal and some formal exchanges on a variety of concrete topics relating to work, school, home, and leisure activities, as well as to events of current, public, and personal interest or individual relevance," (American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages, 1999). To accomplish that goal, which includes acquiring genre-specific vocabulary and collocations, heritage students benefit from regular exposure to authentic media broadcasts and newspapers dealing with current events of public interest in audio, video, and print formats. News analysis is a valuable activity because it allows students to familiarize themselves with the language of the media and practice the presentational mode of discourse to which they are rarely exposed at home (Kagan & Dillon, 2001/2003).

Essay Results

The essays ranged widely. An example of minimal language skills was provided by a student who came to the U.S. at age four and had no literacy skills before taking the course:

- (4) Моя подруга зовут Сара и она очень весёлая девочка. Мы всегда имеем хорошая время
 [Maja padruga zavut Sara i ona očen' vesělaja devočka. My segda imeym хорошaja vremja
 //
 Моя подруга зовут Сара и она очень весёлая девочка. Мы всегда имеем хорошая время
 ('My girlfriend's name is Sara and she is a very cheerful girl. We always have a good time together.)

Errors in this essay are shown in Table 3; underscores show incorrect or missing characters.

Table 3*Errors in Example 4*

Error characteristic	Form as Written	Form in Standard Russian
[o] written as [a]	па <u>д</u> руга [padruga] (‘girlfriend’)	подруга [podruga]
[o] written as [a]	за <u>в</u> ут [zavut] (‘they call’)	зовут [zovut]
Devoiced <i>в</i> missing	_с <u>е</u> гда [segda] (‘always’)	всегда [vsegda]
[e] written as [ы]	им <u>е</u> ым [imeym] (‘we have’)	имеем [imeem]
Case error	Моя подру <u>г</u> а за <u>в</u> ут [moja podruga zavut] (‘my girlfriend is called’)	Мою подру <u>г</u> у зовут [Moju podrugu zovut]
Gender error; non-nativism resulting from literal translation from English	Хоро <u>ш</u> ая время [horošaja vremja] (‘good time’)	Хоро <u>ш</u> ее время In Russian it is more typical to say “нам всегда весело” (‘we always have a good time’)

In this example of 14 words there were eight errors, but this response was at an exceptionally low level compared to the rest of the students, since this particular student learned to write and read in this class.

An example from a student also born in the U.S. but with a somewhat higher proficiency level is provided below:

(5) Мой отец необычно настойчивый человек. Он жил во время Сталина, но по принципу отказался вступить в коммунистическую партию. Из-за этого решение ему не позволяли продвигаться на химическом заводе. После как он в химии проработал несколько лет, он решил поменять свою профессию и начал учиться на мастер спорта. [Moj otec neobyčno nastojčevyj čelovek. On žil vo vremja Stalina, no po prinsypu otkazalsja vstupit' v kommunističeskaju partiju. Iz-za etogo rešenije emu ne pozvoljali progvegat'sja na ximičeskom zavode. Posle togo, kak on v ximije prorabotal neskol'ko let, on rešil pomenjat' svoju professiju i načel učit'sja na master sporta.]

//

Мой отец необычно настойчивый человек. Он жил во время Сталина, но по принципу отказался вступить в коммунистическую партию. Из-за этого решения ему не позволяли продвигаться на химическом заводе. После как он в химии проработал несколько лет, он решил поменять свою профессию и начал учиться на мастера спорта.

[Moj otec neobyčno nastojčivij čelovek. On žil vo vremja Stalina, no po principu otkazalsja vstupit' v kommunističeskuju partiu. Iz-za etogo rešenija emu ne pozvoljali prodvigat'sja na ximičeskom zavode. Posle togo, kak on v ximiji prorabotal neskol'ko let, on rešil pomenjat' svoju professiju i načal učit'sja na mastera sporta.]

(‘My father is an unusually persistent man. He lived during Stalin's time and on principle refused to join the Communist Party. Because of that decision he was not allowed to advance at his chemical plant. After working in chemistry for several years, he decided to change his profession and began to study to become a master of sports.’)

In this sample of 47 words, there are 11 spelling errors that appear to show vowel reduction, consonant assimilation, or incorrect case endings.

Table 4

Errors in Example 5

Error Characteristic	Form as Written	Form in Standard Russian
[i] written as [e]	настойч <u>е</u> вый (nastojčevuj) (‘persistent’)	настойч <u>и</u> вый (nastojčivuj)
Incomplete case ending	комму <u>н</u> ести <u>ч</u> еск <u>а</u> ю [kommunističeskaju] (‘communist’)	коммунистическую [kommunističeskuju]
ц (ts) written as с (s); и (i) written as ы (y)	прин <u>с</u> ы <u>п</u> у [princypu] (‘principle’)	принци <u>п</u> principu
Incorrect case ending	реш <u>е</u> ние [rešenie] (‘decision’)	реш <u>е</u> ния [rešenie]
Unstressed [a] written as [e]	нач <u>е</u> л [načel] (‘began’)	нач <u>а</u> л [načal]
И [i] written as е [e]	пр <u>о</u> д <u>в</u> е <u>г</u> а <u>т</u> ь <u>с</u> я [prodvegat'sja] (‘advance’)	пр <u>о</u> д <u>в</u> и <u>г</u> а <u>т</u> ь <u>с</u> я [prodvigat'sja]
Incorrect case ending	хим <u>и</u> е [ximie]	хим <u>и</u> и [ximii]
Missing soft sign	нескол_ <u>к</u> о [neskol'ko] (‘a few’)	нескол <u>ь</u> ко [neskol'ko]
Incorrect case ending	ма <u>с</u> т <u>е</u> р_ [master] (‘master’)	ма <u>с</u> т <u>е</u> р <u>а</u> [mastera]

The essay also shows some lexical inaccuracies: необычно [neobyčno] ('unusual') should be необычайно [neobyčajno] ('extraordinarily'), and по принципу [po principu] contains an incorrect preposition and should be из принципа [iz principa] ('on principle'). In addition to the missing ending in на мастер спорта [na master sporta] ('for the Master of Sports'), the sentence could be rephrased by saying учиться чтобы получить звание мастера спорта [učit'sja čtoby polučit' zvanije mastera sporta] ("to study to get a Master of Sports degree"). However, the student's overall sentence structure is appropriate. Moreover, this description attempts paragraph-length discourse. This performance is more typical than the previous example of the heritage students enrolled in my course, the majority of whom have the potential to attain Advanced proficiency as long as extensive remedial work in spelling and grammar is undertaken. Finally, there were examples from more literate learners. The student who composed the response below completed three grades in Russia:

- (6) Моя соседка по комнате очень целеустремленная и веселая. У нее совершенно не обидчивый характер и несмотря на то, что она всегда очень занята она щедрая и ее юмор всегда легкий

[Moja sosedka po komnate očen' celeustremlennaja i veselaja. U nee soveršenno ne obidčivuj karakter i nesmotrja na to, čto ona vseгда zaneta, ona ščedraja i ejo jumor vseгда legkij]

//

Моя соседка по комнате очень целеустремленная и веселая. У нее совершенно не обидчивый характер и несмотря на то, что она всегда очень занята, она щедрая и ее юмор всегда легкий.

[Moja sosedka po komnate očen' celeustremlennaja i veselaja. U nee soveršenno ne obidčivuj karakter i nesmotrja na to, čto ona vseгда zanjata, ona ščedraja i ejo jumor vseгда legkij]

('My roommate is very motivated and happy. She is not quick to take offense, and despite the fact that she is always very busy, she is very generous and her humor is always light.')

While the link between being busy and being generous may be questionable, in my view this is still a successful description because the response exhibits sophisticated vocabulary choice (e.g., целеустремленная [celeustremlennaja] ('motivated, goal-oriented')), an attempt to use cohesive devices to create a paragraph, and only one spelling error in the text of 30 words in length (the correct spelling of занета [zaneta] ('busy') is занята [zanjata]).

Another example on the higher end of the spectrum comes from a student who came to America at the age of eleven months:

- (7) Моего прадедушку по маминой линии официально звали Кириллом, но все в семье к нему обращались как к дяде Кирюше. Это исходило от того что у дяди Кирюши был уникальный характер. Он был очень тёплым и добрым человеком, и в какой бы компании он ни появлялся, вокруг себя он создавал радость и ощущение чего-то родного.

[Moego pradedušku po maminoj linii oficial'no zvali Kirillom, no vse v sem'e k nemu obraščalis' kak k djade Kirjuše. Eto isxodilo ot togo, čto u djadi Kirjuši byl unikal'nyj karakter. On byl očen' tēplym i dobrym čelovekom, i v kakoj by kompanii on ni pojavljalsja, vokrug sebja on sozdaval radost' i oščuščeniye čego-to rodnogo.]

(My grandfather on my mother's side was officially named Kirill but everyone in our family called him Uncle Kiriusha. This was due to the fact that Uncle Kiriusha had a unique character. He was a very kind and warm person, and no matter where he would show up, he would always create a sense of joy and home.)

This 54-word text, although there is an error in punctuation (no comma before что [čto] and one spelling error (missing и [i] in официаьно [ofical'no] which should be spelled официаьно [oficial'no]), is an example of a satisfactory description that features paragraph-length discourse, several compound clauses, and appropriate vocabulary choices fitting the written register. This example is especially interesting to analyze because it was written by the student who left Russia at the age of eleven months. Typically, one would not expect such a high level of language development from someone who emigrated at such a young age.

Dictation

In my experience, dictation is a useful assignment for heritage learners because for this group of students errors in spelling are typically based on aural cues and fall into the aural interference category (Loewen, 2008). Regular dictation practice allows learners to solidify rules of grammar and spelling governing unstressed vowels/endings, consonant devoicing and assimilation. As mentioned earlier, heritage learners' reading and writing skills need the most improvement and are the skills that students themselves are most eager to improve (see Table 2). At the same time, learning to spell in Russian requires learning the morphophonemic principles of writing and the features of Russian pronunciation, namely unstressed vowels, consonant assimilation, and devoicing of final consonants, all of which influence the writing of someone who has grown up listening to Russian but not reading it. Assigning dictation is a strategy to draw students' attention to accurate spelling and also can be used as a diagnostic throughout the year.

In my class I give weekly a short dictation or cloze exercises. Cloze exercises are given early in the course and dictations are given later; the latter are several sentences long and are chosen to test cumulatively all the rules of grammar/spelling that the students were expected to master in the course, including rules for unstressed vowels, adverb endings, adjective endings, agreement in gender and in case, and verbal endings.

Numerous researchers (e.g., Carreira, 2004; Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003; Fishman, 2001) argue that heritage speakers have an emotional tie to their own culture, which is factored into their motivation for learning the language. With this in mind, the text selected for the dictation task is taken from a Russian cartoon series *Čeburashka* (Kachanov, 1969-1983), which is well-known to most Russian children. The task involved listening to a song from one of the episodes and filling in missing vowels (see Appendix C for the text). This exercise proved to be difficult for some students since it tested spelling and grammar simultaneously. The errors in dictation included misspellings of unstressed vowels in prefixes, roots and unstressed endings. These

errors fall into the oral interference category and were common among students born in the U.S. who had little or no formal instruction in the language (see Table 1).

Representative errors made in this exercise are below:

Table 5

Errors in Cloze Exercise

Error Characteristic	Form as Written	Form in Standard Russian
unstressed e [e] written as и [i]	пи <u>ш</u> иходы [pišixody] ('pedestrians'), прилитит [prilitit] instead of прилетит [will arrive by plane], виртолёте [virtolate] ('helicopter')	пешеходы [pešexody] прилетит [will arrive by plane], вертолёте [vertolate]
unstressed o [o] written as а, [a],	пра <u>х</u> ожих [praxožix] ('passersby'), к са <u>ж</u> аленью [k sažalen'ju] ('unfortunately')	прохожих [proxožix] к сожаленью [k sožalen'ju]
incomplete adjectival endings,	е.g. непо <u>ж</u> и_ [nepogoži] ('cloudy'), весё <u>л</u> ы_ [vesěly] ('cheerful')	непогожий [nepogožij] весёлый [vesělyj]
wrong case endings,	на гармош <u>к</u> и [na garmoški] ('on the harmonica'), день рожд <u>е</u> нье [den' roždenje] ('birthday')	на гармошке [na garmoške] день рожденья [den' roždenja]
incorrect adverb endings,	неясн <u>а</u> [nejasna] ('unclear'), нав <u>е</u> рна [naverna] ('probably')	неясно [nejasno] наверно [naverno]

incorrect verbal endings,	оставѐт [ostavet] (‘will leave’), поздравѐт [pozdravet] (‘will congratulate’)	оставит [ostavit] поздравит [pozdravit]
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Summary of Results

The following table summarizes the results of the 2010 test and gives a breakdown by age of students’ arrival in the U.S.

Table 6

Test Results

Results by skill tested; text genre in parentheses	<i>Listening</i>	<i>Reading (literary text)</i>	<i>Reading (newspaper excerpt)</i>	<i>Writing (essay on a personal topic - description)</i>	<i>Writing (dictation)</i>
<i>Dasha</i> arrived in U.S. at age 9 years	100%	100%	100%	90%	96%
<i>Andrei</i> arrived in U.S. at age 11 months	100%	100%	100%	98%	90%
<i>Katya</i> arrived in U.S. at age four years	100%	100%	66%	25%	58%
<i>Masha</i> born in U.S.	100%	100%	33%	80%	78%
<i>Anya</i> born in U.S.	100%	100%	33%	84%	74%
<i>Yurii</i> arrived in U.S. at age two years	100%	100%	0%	90%	76%
<i>Alexander</i> born in U.S.	100%	100%	66%	85%	68%

<i>Marina</i> <i>arrived in U.S.</i> <i>at age nine</i> <i>years</i>	100%	100%	100%	96%	97%
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It should be noted that results for the essay component of the test are approximate since several more-difficult-to-measure factors, such as appropriateness of the style register, sentence and paragraph structure, use of cohesive devices in subordinate clauses, and level of sophistication in vocabulary choices, were taken into consideration along with specific grammar and spelling errors.

As Table 6 shows, this group of students was heterogeneous in terms of background and results. The results confirmed the expected outcome: the discrepancy between aural and writing skills is high, the aural being the most developed. The task of reading and comprehending a classic literary text produced considerably better results than reading a newspaper article. There was one unexpected finding: in general the older the age of arrival in the U.S. the higher the level of predicted HL proficiency. However, this is not always the case. For example, Andrei, who left Russia when he was 11 months old, demonstrated unexpectedly strong language skills, sometimes equal to or better than those of students who had completed several grades of school in Russia. He explained to me that his grandmother was a Russian language teacher in Russia, and after the family moved to the U.S. she devoted a great deal of time and effort teaching him Russian. This example suggests that an early age of immigration, however influential in general, can be compensated for by exposure to reading and writing. The level of parents' education and students' amount of schooling in general has been shown to have a critical role in language maintenance, as pointed out by Bermel and Kagan (2000) and Valdés (2000), and my findings are consistent with these studies.

Curricular Implications and Conclusion

The analysis of the test results confirms the heterogeneity of the students' skills, which are characteristic of HL students in general. The results provide evidence that for these types of students most attention needs to be paid to improving writing and reading skills, which includes working on expansion of vocabulary and register awareness. Since literacy is typically the weakest area for beginning heritage learners, many of whom enter the classroom with minimal or no literacy, an extensive range of writing assignments involving a variety of genres and text length, from dictations and cloze exercises to essays, should be a regular component of the HL language course.

In refining the test, in the future I would like to add an online component that would record the students' oral answers to the open-ended questions. The recordings would provide data for analysis, comparison with their results on other skills, and the testing of teaching strategies used in future classes.

As more heritage-specific programs are created for Russian speakers, appropriate testing tools for them are also needed. I hope that the online test described here can serve as a useful example

of assessment for heritage learners and will encourage the development of other forms of assessment for heritage speakers.

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Appendix A

Sample Listening Comprehension Item (unabridged transcript from *Vesti* [news])

Корреспондент: Стоит ли помогать крупным банкам? Банки деньги у государства берут по 5 % годовых, а выдают под 25%, в том числе малому и среднему бизнесу. А может быть, напрямую помогать реальному сектору?

Путин : Прежде всего, по банкам. Банки – это кровеносная система любой экономики. Мы должны напомнить негативные последствия прежних лет, например, кризиса 1998 г., когда рухнула вся банковская система, и мы, конечно, такого допустить не можем. Потому что за банками стоят не только предприятия реального сектора, за банками стоят миллионы вкладчиков, граждан Российской Федерации, которые заинтересованы в том, чтобы банки работали ритмично и у них было бы достаточно ликвидности для того, чтобы обеспечить интересы граждан. Именно для этого мы направляем огромные средства в банковский сектор. Мы уже называли эту цифру – примерно около пяти триллионов рублей.

Reporter: Should the government be helping large banks? Banks borrow money from the government at 5%, but give loans at 25% to small and medium businesses. Maybe it would be better to help the real sector directly?

Putin: First of all – regarding the banks. The banks are the circulatory system of any economy. We should remember the negative consequences of the previous years, for example, the crisis of 1998, when the entire banking system collapsed, and we certainly cannot allow that to happen. Because behind the banks there are millions of investors, citizens of the Russian Federation, who are interested in the regular work of the banks and in the banks having enough liquid assets to protect the interests of the citizens. It is precisely for that reason we have been allocating enormous means to the banking sector. We already mentioned this amount – it is about five billion rubles.

Appendix B

Sample Reading Comprehension Items

Part 1

Говорили, что на набережной появилось новое лицо: дама с собачкой. Дмитрий Дмитрич Гуров, проживший в Ялте уже две недели и привыкший тут, тоже стал интересоваться новыми лицами. Сидя в павильоне у Верне, он видел, как по набережной прошла молодая дама, невысокого роста блондинка, в берете; за нею бежал белый шпиц.

И потом он встречал ее в городском саду и на сквере, по несколько раз в день. Она гуляла одна, все в том же берете, с белым шпицем; никто не знал, кто она, и называли ее просто так: дама с собачкой.

"Если она здесь без мужа и без знакомых", - соображал Гуров, - то было бы не лишнее познакомиться с ней".

Ему не было еще сорока, но у него была уже дочь двенадцати лет и два сына гимназиста. Его женили рано, когда он был еще студентом второго курса, и теперь жена казалась в полтора раза старше его. Это была женщина высокая, с темными бровями, прямая, важная, солидная и, как она сама себя называла, мыслящая. Она много читала, не писала в письмах "ъ", называла мужа не Дмитрием, а Димитрием, а он втайне считал ее недалекой, узкой, неизящной, боялся ее и не любил бывать дома. Изменять ей он начал уже давно, изменял часто и, вероятно, поэтому о женщинах отзывался почти всегда дурно, и когда в его присутствии говорили о них, то он называл их так:

- Низшая раса!

[People were telling one another that a newcomer had been seen on the promenade--a lady with a dog. Dmitri Dmitrich Gurov had been a fortnight in Yalta, and was accustomed to its ways, and he, too, had begun to take an interest in fresh arrivals. From his seat in Vernet's outdoor café, he caught sight of a young woman in a toque, passing along the promenade; she was fair and not very tall; after her trotted a white Pomeranian.

Later he encountered her in the municipal park and in the square several times a day. She was always alone, wearing the same toque, and the Pomeranian always trotted at her side. Nobody knew who she was, and people referred to her simply as "the lady with the dog."

"If she's here without her husband, and without any friends," thought Gurov, "it wouldn't be a bad idea to make her acquaintance."

He was not yet forty but had a twelve-year-old daughter and two sons in high school. He had been talked into marrying in his third year at college, and his wife now looked nearly twice as old as he did. She was a tall woman with dark eyebrows, erect, dignified, imposing, and, as she

said of herself, a "thinker." She was a great reader, omitted the "hard sign" at the end of words in her letters, and called her husband "Dimitry" instead of Dmitry; and though he secretly considered her shallow, narrow-minded, and dowdy, he stood in awe of her, and disliked being at home. He had first begun deceiving her long ago and he was now constantly unfaithful to her, and this was no doubt why he spoke slightingly of women, to whom he referred as *the lower race*.]

1. Where is the story taking place?
2. How did Gurov first meet the lady with a dog?
3. Indicate three details of Gurov's biography.
4. What is Gurov's opinion of his wife?
5. What is his opinion of women in general?

Part 2

Президент России Дмитрий Медведев заявил, что для борьбы с терроризмом необходимо увеличивать полномочия правоохранительных органов и судов. «Меры недостаточны, потому что ситуация на Кавказе беспокойная», – заявил глава государства журналистам в Улан-Баторе. Он отметил, что ухудшение положение дел на Северном Кавказе – это результат как активизации бандитского подполья, так и просчетов правоохранительных органов.

Сейчас правоохранительные ведомства, по поручению президента, разрабатывают новые организационные формы борьбы с преступностью. Они занимаются подготовкой нормативных актов, которые помогут изобличать преступников и привлекать их к ответственности. «Зачастую происходит так – бандитов ловят, а после отпускают на свободу», – посетовал Медведев. «Мы демократическое государство. Хотя процедуры у нас проходят также как везде. Мы, естественно, должны менять законы», – заявил он. Президент пояснил, что необходимо дать дополнительные возможности и следствию, и суду по привлечению к ответственности и и судебному возмездию. «В некоторых случаях реакция должна быть жесткой и неотвратимой», – заключил президент.

Russian president Dmitry Medvedev has declared that for the fight against terrorism it is necessary to increase the powers of law enforcement agencies and courts. "The current measures are insufficient, because the situation in the Caucasus is worrisome", the head of the state declared to journalists in Ulan Bator. He has noted that the deterioration of the situation in the Northern Caucasus is as much a result of activation of a criminal underground as miscalculations of law enforcement authorities.

Now law enforcement departments, on behalf of the president, are developing new organizational forms for fighting crime. They are engaged in preparation of statutory acts which will help to expose criminals and to make them answerable before the law. "It frequently happens that the bandits are caught and then they are released" Medvedev complained. "We are a democratic state. We follow procedures as everywhere else. We, naturally, should change laws,"

he stated. The president has explained that it is necessary to give additional powers to police investigators and to the courts in order to be able to prosecute and determine due punishment. "In some cases reaction should be rigid and inevitable," the president concluded.

- 1) The main topic of the article is
 - a) fight against terrorism
 - b) situation in Northern Caucasus
 - c) reform of the judicial system

- 2) The new measures proposed as part of the fight against terrorism are
 - a) changes in the law
 - b) increase in the staffing of the anti-terrorist units
 - c) better surveillance

- 3) According to President Medvedev, the power of the Russian courts should be
 - a) decreased
 - b) increased
 - c) left unchanged

Appendix C

Sample Cloze-type Dictation Item

Пусть б_гут н_уклюже
П_ш_ходы п_лужам,
А в_да п_асфальту р_кой,
И н_ясн_пр_хож_м
В эт_т день н_п_гож_й,
П_чему я в_селый т_кой.

А я играю на г_рмошк_
У пр_хож_х на в_ду.
К с_ж_ленью, день р_ждень_
Тольк_ра_в г_ду.

Пр_л_тит вдруг в_лшебн_к
В г_лубом в_ртолет_
И б_сплатн_п_каж_т кино.
С днем р_ждень_п_здрав_т,
И н_верн_остав_т
Мне в п_дар_к п_тьсот эскимо

from *Čeburaška* (Kachanov, 1971)

Note

- [1.](#) In all examples the original spelling is maintained, and the standard version is presented below, following double slashes. Underscores indicate incorrect or missing characters.