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University of Pittsburgh Language Teaching and Learning Research (LTLR) Grant Report

Project Title: “The Effects of Teaching Gestures on Learners’ Pragmatic Comprehension of L2 Russian”

## **1. Introduction**

Including pragmatics in the second language curriculum promotes learners’ comprehensive communicative competence by taking the interactive context into account. Since explicit instruction has proven to be beneficial for learners’ interlanguage pragmatics, my study seeks to investigate the role of L2 gestures in the development of pragmatic comprehension through comparing the benefits of three types of explicit instruction for Novice Russian language learners: (1) instruction on gestures with metapragmatic discussion, (2) instruction on gestures, and (3) metapragmatic discussion. The research questions of this study are the following:

1. Which method benefits learners’ listening comprehension most: explicit instruction on gestures, metapragmatic instruction, or a combination of both?
2. Which of the three methods improves pragmatic comprehension best?
3. How does instruction using these methods affect learners’ perceived difficulty of authentic L2 speech?


In order to address these questions, I have organized a pedagogical experiment with learners of Russian at the University of Pittsburgh Summer Language Institute and the University of Kansas as participants. The experiment follows the pretest-treatment-posttest structure. This project aims at providing evidence that teaching gestures in the language classroom leads to significant improvements of the pragmatically accurate comprehension of





authentic second language speech and to greater learners' comfort when dealing with authentic input at early language proficiency levels.

Since the construction of meaning in communication occurs through the interaction of verbal and visual signal, the practical purposes of my project are to suggest an effective and engaging way of introducing pragmatics at early stages of L2 learning and to alleviate the learners' struggle when listening to authentic speech. Through the instruction on gestures and metapragmatic discussion, this project aims at improving the learners' pragmatic comprehension at early proficiency levels. Pragmatic comprehension for language learners involves departing from a strictly bottom-up processing of linguistic input and understanding the speaker's intention based on a number of communicative features, including gestures.

## 2. Experimental Design

Seven gestures were selected from Krejdlin, Grigor'eva, and Grigor'ev's *Dictionary of Russian Gestures* (2018) to be the target features of this study. All of them are at least somewhat different from gestures used in the American culture, either in their form or meaning. The selected gestures are also searchable in the Multimedia section of the Russian National Corpus. Table 1 presents the images of the target gestures for this dissertation and their description based on Krejdlin, Grigor'eva, and Grigor'ev's dictionary.

	Gesture	Description
1	<p data-bbox="289 1558 376 1591">"Figa"</p> 	<p data-bbox="678 1558 1421 1843">Meaning: "No", "You will not get what you want". This gesture is known as "figa" (fig). It is informal and, in some contexts, rude, but not obscene in the Russian culture. It is used when the speaker wants to emphasize that the hearer will not get what s/he really wants or confidently expects. It implies a certain degree of satisfaction with the refusal or denial.</p>

2	<p>Turning the index finger at one's head</p> 	<p>Meaning: "Crazy".</p> <p>This gesture is similar to the one used in the American culture. There is a slight difference in its performance, however. In the Russian version, the index finger stays in place, while in the American one, the index finger makes circular motion. Usually it talks about a third person: 'he/she is crazy', because directly expressing 'you are crazy' is not polite. It is used to evaluate someone's personality or behavior as odd.</p>
3	<p>Bringing an open hand to one's neck</p> 	<p>Meaning: "Fed up", "Had enough", "Had it up to here".</p> <p>Using this gesture, the speaker expresses the loss of patience and the desire for the current situation to stop, to "cut it off".</p>
4	<p>Waving one's hand down once</p> 	<p>Meaning: "Not good enough, not important", "To hell with you/it", "Whatever".</p> <p>This gesture is used to express a dismissive attitude toward a person or an idea or a deliberate choice to disregard something or position oneself as superior.</p>
5	<p>Putting the hand over the heart</p> 	<p>Meaning: "I am sincere" (emphasis on personal emotions).</p> <p>This gesture is often used when the speaker feels that there are no words that would express his/her feelings completely. People use it to highlight their emotions and when they want to be believed. This gesture often appears with speech acts such as promises, arguments, and imploring.</p>
6	<p>Knocking oneself on the forehead three times</p>	<p>Meaning: "I am (we are) a fool", "My bad".</p> <p>This gesture is used when the speaker wants to take the blame onto him/herself or his/her own community. This is a symbol of self-punishment. It can be used jokingly or to</p>



		make the hearer feel more comfortable in an awkward or tense situation.
7	A flick on the neck 	Meaning: “Alcohol”. This gesture can be used avoid talking about alcohol directly. It occurs in serious conversations and in jokes, but usually, it implies informal relationships. It creates a sense of a secret in-group code and signals that the speaker perceives him/herself and the hearers as one community or close people.

Table 1. The Target Gestures

The experiment involves three treatment groups: (1) instruction on gestures with metapragmatic discussion, (2) instruction on gestures, and (3) metapragmatic discussion. Below are the descriptions of the experimental procedures.

**1. Language background questionnaire.** This questionnaire asks the participants about their experience with the Russian language and languages in general, such as their first language, study abroad experience, duration of studying Russian, frequency of interaction with native speakers, etc.

**2. Listening proficiency test.** The listening proficiency test for this study is taken from the sample Test of Russian as a Foreign Language published on the Pushkin Institute website (<https://www.pushkin.institute/Certificates/CCT/tests-online.php>). The level of this listening test is A2 in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) standards, which corresponds to Novice-High in the ACTFL framework. The purpose of this procedure is to ensure the comparability of the participants’ level of interpretive proficiency. Additionally, the results of the listening proficiency test will be considered in the statistical analysis of the pretest-posttest data.

**3. Pretest and posttest.** The pretest and posttest include nine short authentic video clips from Russian films and TV shows: seven clips with the target gestures and two video clips without emblem gestures. After watching each of the videos, the participants answer the following questions in English:

*1. Which option is the closest to what the speaker is saying?* This is a multiple-choice question that aims at determining whether the participants understand the semantic meaning of the input.

*2. What factors contributed to your choice?* This open-ended question shows whether the participants took gestures into account when interpreting what the speaker said.

*3. Which option is the best description of the speaker's intention?* This multiple-choice question targets the participants' pragmatic comprehension of the speech act performed in the video.

Koike (1989), Garcia (2004), and Bucciarelli, Colle, and Bara (2003) have used similar multiple-choice tests to measure pragmatic comprehension.

*4. What factors contributed to your choice?* This open-ended question aims at showing whether the participants took gestures into account to understand the pragmatic intention in the audiovisual input.

*5. How difficult was it to interpret this video?* Rating scale: very easy; easy; moderate; difficult; very difficult. The responses to this question show if the learners' perceived difficulty decreased after the intervention.

After the collection of data, the following scale was used to assign numeric values to the open-ended questions (questions 2 and 4): 0 pts = no mention of gestures; 1 pts = general mention of gestures without naming the target gesture; 2 pts = mention of the target gesture.

Four Russian native speakers were consulted during the creation of these tests to formulate the answer options for the multiple-choice questions. Two versions of the test were

created with two different sets of videos. Half of the participants took version one as the pretest and version two as the posttest, and the other half – vice versa to eliminate the potential interference of the relative difficulty of the video clips and questions in the two tests.

**4. Treatment.** The treatment for the main experiment is a one-hour long synchronous class. The participants receive one of the three treatment types, depending on their group. The treatment for group 1 is a combination of instruction on gestures with metapragmatic discussion. It includes a close look at the speaker's intention and the ways in which gestures can aid its expression and interpretation. The participants discuss the discourse functions of gestures in the given contexts as they relate to intention and indirectness. At the end, the participants of the first group read short dialogues, match them with gestures and discuss the intentions in them. The instruction for the gestures group (group 2) includes watching and translating the same video clips with gestures, focusing on the meaning of gestures and their potential American equivalents, and matching the gestures with the short dialogues. The pragmatics group (group 3) is involved in watching and translating video clips without gestures but with single complete utterances. The students are invited to discuss indirectness and the speaker's intention in English before applying these concepts to what they see in the Russian video clips. Finally, this third group reads short dialogues and determines which intentions they might express.

### **3. Experimental Materials**

The funds of the LTLR grant were used to digitize all the experimental procedures and enable remote participation. The recruitment flyer was created via Canva. Google Forms were used for the consent form and language background questionnaire. The listening proficiency test was created via Qualtrics. The creation of the listening proficiency test required recording six

dialogues in Russian and uploading them to Qualtrics alongside multiple-choice questions. The listening test has a time limit, 25 minutes, and it cannot be paused.

A website was created on the platform Netlify that holds the pretest and posttest. The website opening page provides the instructions for taking the test. Following that, the participants view video clips, which play twice, and answer the questions. Answers to all the questions are required to submit the test. The time limit for the pretest and posttest is 40 minutes. The order of options in multiple-choice questions is randomized, as well as the order of videos.

The treatment sessions are conducted synchronously via Zoom. The videos, the discussion questions, and the information are compiled in PowerPoints which are used as the primary materials for the treatment. Each of the three treatments includes an introduction, a short information statement from the instructor/researcher, activities that focus on the target features using video clips, and a review.

#### **4. Data Collection**

The experiment targets learners of Russian who are at the end of their first year of language study or at the beginning of the second year. In Summer 2020, the experiment was conducted remotely at the University of Pittsburgh Summer Language Institute intensive first-year Russian program at the beginning of the seventh week of the program. Following that, the same experimental procedures were conducted in the early Fall 2020 semester at the University of Kansas second-year program. A total of 10 students have participated so far. The participants were randomly divided into three treatment groups. Half of the participants took test A as the pretest and test B as the posttest, and the rest – vice versa. The LTLR grant paid \$40 to each participant.

## 5. Preliminary Results

The data collection has not been completed yet, and the statistical analysis has not been conducted due to a small number of participants in the dataset so far. Some rough calculations of means, however, are presented in Table 2. To answer the research questions, three parameters were taken into account when analyzing the results of the pretest and posttest: listening comprehension, pragmatic comprehension, and the rating of the video's difficulty.

	(1) Gestures and Pragmatics Group	(2) Gestures Group	(3) Pragmatics Group
Pretest listening comprehension mean (maximum: 9)	2.5	2.25	2.33
Posttest listening comprehension mean (maximum: 9)	5.5	6.5	3
Pretest pragmatic comprehension mean (maximum: 9)	3.5	4.25	3.33
Posttest pragmatic comprehension mean (maximum: 9)	5.75	6.5	4
Pretest difficulty rating mean (maximum: 45)	29.75	30.75	29.7
Posttest difficulty rating mean (maximum: 45)	24	26.75	27

Table 2. Preliminary Calculations of Means

According to the calculation of the means, the participants of the first two groups improved their performance on both listening comprehension and pragmatic comprehension questions to a greater degree than the third group. The perceived difficulty of the videos in the tests decreased in the first two groups more than in the third group. To determine the statistical significance,



especially between the first and the second groups, more participant data needs to be obtained and a statistical data analysis should be conducted.

## **6. Further Directions**

According to the consultant from the University of Pittsburgh Statistics Consulting Center, data from at least 40 participants needs to be collected to ensure the accuracy of the results of this research project. Using the LTLR grant funds, I plan to recruit the remaining 30 participants in Spring 2021 in regular Russian language programs and in Summer 2021 at the University of Pittsburgh Summer Language Institute intensive Russian program. Following that, a comprehensive statistical data analysis will be conducted with the help of the University of Pittsburgh Statistics Consulting Center or an external professional to answer the research questions. The performance on the pretest and posttest will be compared among all the treatment groups. The data from the background questionnaire and the listening proficiency test will be considered in the statistical analysis to discover any potential correlations.

Finally, as a practical application of this research project, I plan to create an open-ended online resource for students and instructors of Russian, which will be based on the experimental materials. The conclusions of this research experiment will be considered for the creation of the materials. The online resource will include videos, transcripts, information, exercises, and lesson plans that aim at developing the pragmatic and non-verbal competence of Russian learners.