

Using online projects to guide students' sociolinguistic and intercultural learning

Hope Wilson, The Ohio State University

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Introduction

There is more to learning a language than simply learning the grammar. Language classrooms, in general, tend to prioritize the acquisition of vocabulary and language structure over the communication of social information. Yet a strong command of a language's pragmatic system can be just as important as command of the linguistic system. A breakdown in the linguistic aspects of communication can result in information being misrepresented, which can occasionally be dire but which more frequently can be recognized and repaired. A breakdown in the social aspects of communication, however, can result in miscommunications of intentions and identities. This can come with real social consequences: for example, the tendency towards indirect politeness in American English can result in Americans coming across as wishy-washy and insincere when speaking Russian, while Russian-language tendencies towards direct politeness can result in Russian speakers coming across as blunt and rude when speaking English (Thomas, 1983).

Most language educators are fully aware of the importance of the social aspects of language use, of course. Yet they are also stuck at an impasse, because to thoroughly teach the sociolinguistics of a target language seems nearly impossible. After all, the sociolinguistic system of a target language is highly complex and *highly* contextualized, with social preferences and tendencies varying from community to community. And, at the end of the day, classroom time is quite limited. It is unsurprising, therefore, that many language teachers identify study abroad, rather than classroom time, as the best setting for sociolinguistic and cultural learning, given that

being immersed in the target culture seems as though it ought to be the best opportunity for this sort of learning.

Yet cultural learning on study abroad can be highly variable (Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009). What is more, study abroad is still relatively uncommon, with only approximately 10% of students studying abroad before they graduate (Institute of International Education, 2017a); of those, nearly 40% stay only for the summer term, while only 2.3% stay as long as a year (Institute of International Education, 2017b). Furthermore, obstacles like socioeconomic status (Lörz, Netz, & Quast, 2016) and disability (Institute of International Education, 2017c) appear to create barriers to going abroad. Sojourns abroad, therefore, are not a reliable source of cultural learning, and going abroad is not a practical solution for many language students. So how, then, can cultural and sociolinguistic learning be made both consistent and accessible?

This study examines whether it is possible to empower students themselves to investigate target communities and thereby engage in cultural and sociolinguistic learning. I guided participants drawn from the students of the Summer Language Institute through an online course training them in culture and sociolinguistics. After they completed this course, they carried out an investigation of an online culture, specifically paying attention to language use and identity performances within that culture. The participants in the project were periodically interviewed to explore their cultural attitudes; they also periodically filled out surveys measuring their sociolinguistic awareness and intercultural competence. This was done in order to answer the following questions:

1. Does participation in an online cultural training program with a subsequent qualitative investigative project increase sociolinguistic awareness?
2. Does participation in an online cultural training program with a subsequent qualitative investigative project increase intercultural competence?
3. Does participation in this program give students the tools necessary to investigate and learn about the target culture and target language independently?

Literature review

Culture teaching is often discussed as central to language teaching. The ACTFL standards for language identify culture as one of their “Five Cs,” meaning that it is one of the skills that must be acquired in order to produce a capable language speaker (The National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015). Yet these calls to teach culture often do not define what “culture” *is*. The Standards call culture the “products, practices, and perspectives” of a given group. Some scholars define culture narrowly, as in the following:

Culture is that residual realm left over after all forms of observable human behavior have been removed. It consists of the inner, invisible thought life of human beings either as individuals or in some difficult-to-imagine collective sense, as in notions of ‘collective purpose’, ‘shared values’, and ‘intersubjective realities’. What people actually do, how they behave, the institutions they construct [...] however, are not a part of culture. (Wuthnow, Hunter, Bergesen, & Kurzweil, 2012, p. 4)

Others, meanwhile, define it broadly: Hannerz (1992) defines culture, simply, as “meaning.”

Despite this diversity of approaches to culture, however, culture curricula tend to be quite similar across language classes. Textbooks often utilize a product-oriented and nationalist approach to culture, including perfunctory sidebars about great artists and writers that came out of particular dominant national groups or reproducing narratives of national heritage, while sidelining multiculturalism as narratives that stand apart from the dominant stories of particular linguistic and national groups (Kramsch, Howell, Warner, & Wellmon, 2007).

Recently, discussions of culture teaching have moved away from discussion of concrete knowledge and moved towards discussions of skills. Culture teaching is often now conceptualized as the teaching of intercultural competence (ICC), the ability to effectively and appropriately interact with members of other cultures (Deardorff, 2006, pp. 247–248). This is, of course, still a rather ambiguous description, and so a large number of theorists have attempted to concretize the

construct, leading to a diverse body of models of (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). While these models of ICC differ from one another in a number of ways, both minor and significant, there are certain consistent elements to their definitions of ICC: empathy, flexibility, tolerance of ambiguity, and curiosity are central in most of these models.

Interestingly, language ability is not present in many of these models of ICC. Yet crucial to intercultural competence is the ability to effectively *communicate*, to use language in a way to appropriately position oneself in relation to others. Broadly speaking, the sociolinguistic elements of a given language are what allow a speaker to do this: a speaker who can control sociolinguistic aspects of the language can accordingly align or disalign themselves with certain social roles or identities. Therefore, some theorists have in fact placed sociolinguistic ability and awareness in their models of ICC (e.g., Deardorff, Byram).

In this project, I relied upon the process model of intercultural competence developed by (Deardorff, 2004, 2006) This model conceptualizes intercultural competence as an iterative process, in which individuals' attitudes and skills result in shifts in internal and external behavior, which in turn contribute to the development of further skills and attitudes. The model is presented below.

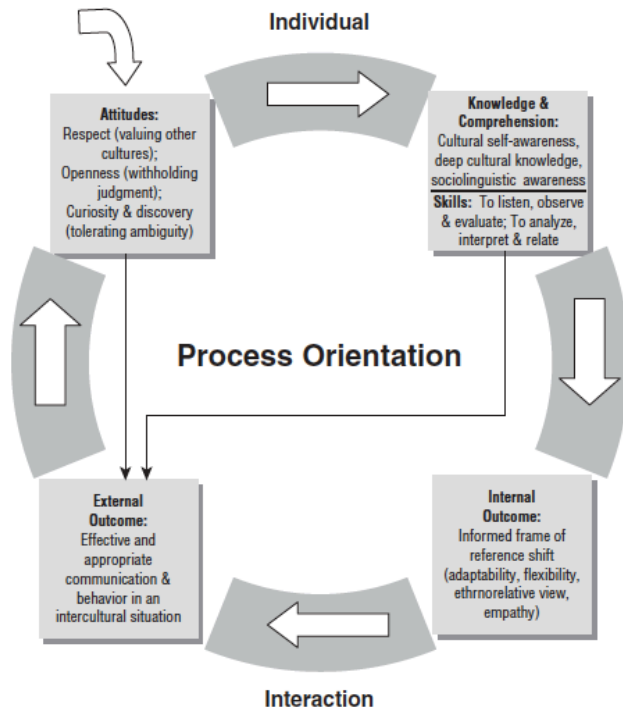


Figure 1. Deardorff's (2004, 2006) process model of intercultural competence

Defining sociolinguistic competence is similarly difficult. In this project, sociolinguistic competence is approached as a construct similar to intercultural competence: it consists of a blend of attitudes, skills, and knowledge which feed into internal and external outcomes. No models of L2 sociolinguistic competence that I was able to locate take into account all these facets of sociolinguistic competence; some, such as Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, & Thurrell (1995) account for knowledge, but minimize the role of skills and do not discuss attitudes at all. The following model, developed for and used in this project, accounts for the multiple components of sociolinguistic competence.

Attitudes	Knowledge	Skills
Curiosity and discovery Respect for diversity Desire for integration	Pragmalinguistic knowledge (knowledge of pragmatic forms in the L2) Sociopragmatic knowledge (knowledge of the social roles and rules that govern appropriate pragmatic usage) Knowledge of variation (knowledge of the rules that link pragmalinguistic forms to social information) Critical cultural awareness (awareness of own cultural identity and others' cultural identities)	Speech awareness Social awareness Linguistic and paralinguistic ability and fluency

Figure 2. Holistic model of sociolinguistic competence

A number of studies have examined the question of how these competencies can be taught. Some of the most promising literature on teaching intercultural and sociolinguistic competence suggests that project-based learning is an effective way to develop these competencies. In project-based language and culture learning, participants actively engage with the target language and/or culture in a goal-oriented, concrete way. In particular, certain studies have had students engage in qualitative studies of the target culture, observing and gathering data on naturalistic interaction; these projects have been beneficial for students' cultural and linguistic skills (Blattner & Fiori, 2011; Jackson, 2006, 2008; Roberts, 2003).

This study has students carry out a study of Russian speech culture. The nature of the study is grounded in linguistic anthropology, a field that looks at the function of language in cultural contexts. The participants in the study are taken through a course that introduces them to linguistic anthropology and to the principles of ethnographic inquiry, after which they carry out a small investigation of their own.

What sets this project apart from other studies that have students carry out qualitative studies for the purpose of learning is that these investigations happen entirely online. While prior studies have relied on students living in the cultural context under investigation, the participants

in this study instead are classroom learners, engaging with social media in order to investigate the target culture.

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were all students of the Summer Language Institute (SLI) at the University of Pittsburgh, studying in the summer of 2018. The SLI is a “domestic immersion” language program. A domestic immersion program is one in which participants do not study the language in a cultural setting where the target language is spoken, which sets it apart from a study-abroad program. However, the domestic immersion program is constructed so that the number of contact hours with the language is dramatically higher than in a standard classroom setting; students generally study the language for upwards of four hours per day, have class multiple times per week, and have activities outside of the class that take place in the target language. The SLI is, therefore, a demanding and rigorous program, one which participants noted as being exhausting; however, it is also perceived by students as being more effective for learning the language, a perception that has been supported by measurements of students’ language outcomes (Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004).

Participants in this study were split into two groups: a focal group and a reference group. These two groups, it must be noted, were not perfectly matched, and as such comparisons between them are imperfect. Members of the focal group were self-selected: they volunteered for the longer study, which means that they were likely more motivated to learn culture. Additionally, they may have been more academically inclined, as they were willing to spend their limited free time on study beyond what they were doing in the classroom. The reference group consisted of those who

did not volunteer for the project; the reference group was also drawn from participants who were studying a wide variety of languages, rather than just Russian, and who were studying at all levels. Therefore, the reference group is not a true comparison group; rather, it is intended to give a general idea of SLI students' learning trajectories.

The focal group consisted of five participants. All five participants were studying Russian at the intermediate level or above. These participants were taken through an online course about culture and sociolinguistics prior to their participation in the SLI. After completion of this course, they carried out an online sociolinguistic investigation looking into topics of their choice. They completed surveys of their intercultural and sociolinguistic competence at three points; additionally, they were interviewed at three different points.

The reference group consisted of 12 other students in SLI, studying various languages at various levels. These students did not participate in the online course. These participants filled out surveys of intercultural competence at two points: once towards the beginning of SLI, and once towards the end. Their scores gave an idea of how SLI, without any additional interventions, contributed to students' intercultural competence and sociolinguistic competence.

Measurements of intercultural and sociolinguistic competence

ICC and sociolinguistic competence were measured using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods, as per the recommendations laid out by the ICC experts surveyed in Deardorff (2006).

These competencies were measured quantitatively by means of a survey measuring intercultural and sociolinguistic competence. The survey was administered online via the service

Qualtrics. Participants moved a slider to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with a statement; the scale ranged from -100 (maximum disagreement) to 100 (maximum agreement).

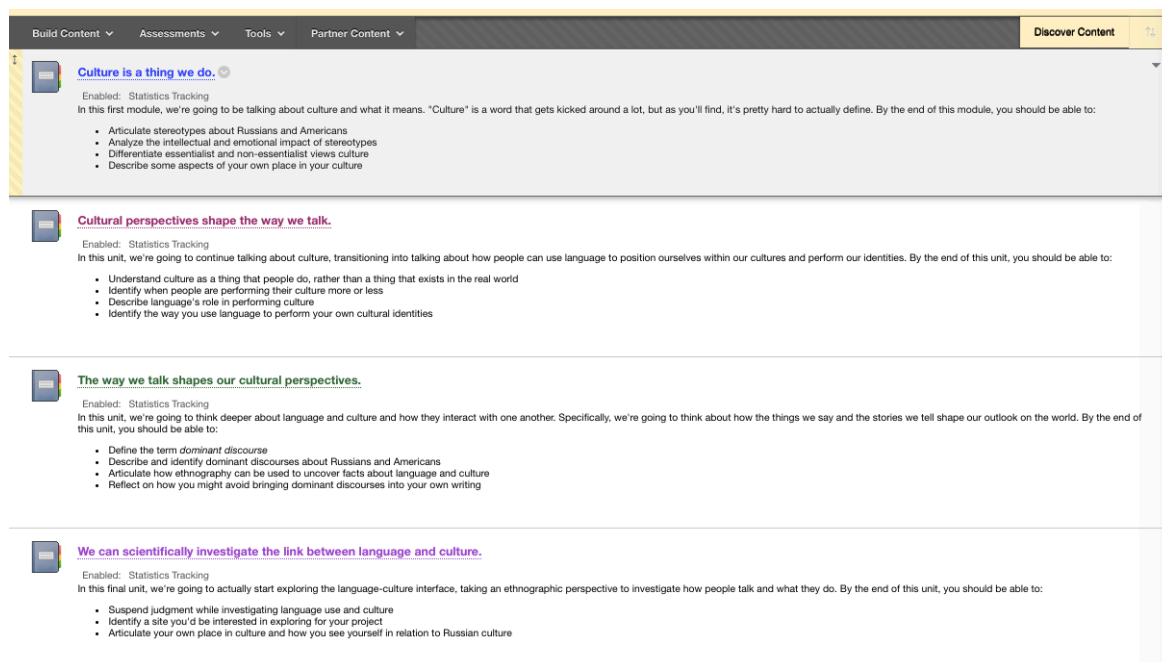
Qualitative measurements of sociolinguistic and intercultural competence were based upon data drawn from interviews and assignments. Deardorff's process model of intercultural competence was used as the primary framework for measuring ICC, while sociolinguistic competence was evaluated using the model of sociolinguistic competence presented in Figure 2. The program NVivo, a service designed to assist in analyzing qualitative data, was used during the analysis process.

In my analysis, I focused on individual growth in ICC and sociolinguistic competence from the beginning of the program until the end of the program. As such, in the qualitative analysis, I compared pre-test scores to post-test scores. In the qualitative analysis, meanwhile, I focused on the ideas and perspectives that had changed over the course of the program.

Online course and project

The students in the focal group carried out an online course before their participation in the Summer Language Institute, then carried out an online investigation over the course of the SLI.

The online course was built in CourseWeb, University of Pittsburgh's learning management system. It lasted four weeks overall, with each week grouped into a separate model that explored a particular theme.



Build Content ▾ Assessments ▾ Tools ▾ Partner Content ▾ Discover Content

Culture is a thing we do.
Enabled: Statistics Tracking
In this first module, we're going to be talking about culture and what it means. "Culture" is a word that gets kicked around a lot, but as you'll find, it's pretty hard to actually define. By the end of this module, you should be able to:

- Articulate stereotypes about Russians and Americans
- Analyze the intellectual and emotional impact of stereotypes
- Differentiate essentialist and non-essentialist views culture
- Describe some aspects of your own place in your culture

Cultural perspectives shape the way we talk.
Enabled: Statistics Tracking
In this unit, we're going to continue talking about culture, transitioning into talking about how people can use language to position ourselves within our cultures and perform our identities. By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Understand culture as a thing that people do, rather than a thing that exists in the real world
- Identify when people are performing their culture more or less
- Describe language's role in performing culture
- Identify the way you use language to perform your own cultural identities

The way we talk shapes our cultural perspectives.
Enabled: Statistics Tracking
In this unit, we're going to think deeper about language and culture and how they interact with one another. Specifically, we're going to think about how the things we say and the stories we tell shape our outlook on the world. By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Define the term *dominant discourse*
- Describe and identify dominant discourses about Russians and Americans
- Articulate how ethnography can be used to uncover facts about language and culture
- Reflect on how you might avoid bringing dominant discourses into your own writing

We can scientifically investigate the link between language and culture.
Enabled: Statistics Tracking
In this final unit, we're going to actually start exploring the language-culture interface, taking an ethnographic perspective to investigate how people talk and what they do. By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Suspend judgment while investigating language use and culture
- Identify a site you'd be interested in exploring for your project
- Articulate your own place in culture and how you see yourself in relation to Russian culture

Figure 3. Landing page of online course

The first week of the course focused on discussing culture as a whole, particularly asking the participants to engage in reflection upon their cultural identities and understandings about the nature of culture. The assignments this week focused upon stereotypes, asking students to analyze stereotypes about Russian and American culture and reflecting upon the personal and emotional impacts of stereotyping.

The screenshot displays a course interface with a 'Table of Contents' sidebar on the left and a main content area. The sidebar lists units 1 through 8, with unit 1 expanded. The main content area is titled 'Culture is a thing we do.' and contains several sections:

- Read me first:** A welcome message for unit 1, asking students to introduce themselves on a discussion board and work through links in the folder.
- Unit 1: Introduce yourself:** A prompt for students to introduce themselves to classmates.
- Unit 1: Reflection: What's your culture?:** A reflection prompt asking students to answer questions about their cultural identity, such as 'How would you define the term "culture"?' and 'What is your cultural background?'. It includes a list of five questions and a note to write as little or as much as they like.
- Unit 1: Examining big-picture views of culture:** A section with an 'Adaptive Release' status and a prompt to think critically about big-picture conceptions of culture.
- Unit 1: Essentialist and non-essentialist views of culture:** A section with a 'Statistics Tracking' status and a prompt to read a handbook document and respond to questions.
- Unit 1: Thinking about self-stereotyping:** A section with an 'Attached Files' status and a prompt to read a cross-cultural encounter and discuss questions about Confucianism, Russian culture, and American stereotypes.

Figure 4. Week 1 of online course

The second week of the course had participants reflect upon the role of language in shaping culture, as well as the way in which culture shapes language. The central assignments this week involved taking a linguistic-anthropological approach to analyzing Russian language; for example, the students analyzed the relationship between Slavic cultural history and kinship terms. The students also analyzed two Russian YouTube celebrities' performances of Russian culture, thinking particularly about how they used their Russian identities for humor.

The screenshot shows a course interface with a sidebar 'Table of Contents' and a main content area. The main content area is titled 'The way we talk shapes our cultural perspectives.' and contains several units:

- Unit 3: Read me first**: In Unit 3, we're going to spend our time looking at ways in which people have investigated and written about culture. First, we'll be talking about ways in which our unconscious thoughts can influence the way we think about culture (something you'll have to struggle with as you go through your projects), and then we'll read about ethnography - a methodology used to investigate cultures as impartially and thoroughly as possible. Like before, progress through the assignments in order. I'll have virtual office hours on Thursday and Friday at 1 pm EST. Email me if you have any questions at all.
- Unit 3: Socially-constructed ideas and dominant discourses**: For this assignment, read this document: [IC_dominant discourses.pdf](#). Then do the following tasks from that document:
 - Task A3.2.1: Looking at dominant discourses
 - Task B3.2.1: Examining how art/literature are divided into categories
 - Task B3.2.2: Thinking about how people are divided into categories
 - Task B3.2.3: Thinking about your own group(s) and how social responses have changed over time
- Unit 3: Analyzing dominant discourses**: This is a discussion board posting for watching a movie clip and thinking about the way they depict Russians - to what extent they seem to be drawing on dominant discourses.
- Unit 3: Reflection paper: How to avoid dominant discourses?**: In this reflection paper, think about how you might avoid reproducing dominant discourses in your own writing. Specifically, answer the following question: Imagine you're a writer or movie-maker, and you need to depict some group other than yours. You don't want to just reproduce dominant discourses when you're creating your art. How do you avoid falling into that trap? How can you check yourself to make sure you're not unconsciously reproducing the images you've seen in the past? As ever, don't worry about formality or polish when writing this.
- Unit 3: Ethnography**: This chapter introduces you to a research approach called the ethnography of communication - a specific methodology focused on examining the links between groups, cultures, and language use. It's widely used in anthropology, and in the next few weeks, you're going to be using it yourself to investigate an online culture. Read this chapter here: [Language Files - Ethnography.pdf](#). Then answer the following questions:
 - How would you define "ethnography"?
 - If you were interested in ethnographically researching the speech patterns of, say, a group of Russian immigrants to the United States, what kinds of questions might you investigate? For example, you could investigate their patterns of code-switching (when they use Russian and when they use English and under what circumstances). What other things could you investigate?
 - If you were writing an ethnography, how could you avoid bringing dominant discourses into your work? Remember, we're not conscious of introducing these stereotyped narratives/descriptions - our brains just habitually fall into these patterns of thought. So what strategies could you use to eliminate them from your work, so you can provide a piece of writing that isn't influenced by stereotypes?
- Unit 3: "Russian Talk During Perestroika"**: Attached is a chapter from the book "Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation During Perestroika." It's an ethnography of communication written using data collected during the 1980s-1990s, when the Soviet Union was on the brink of collapse and things were starting to (chaotically) transition into a market economy. This chapter is the introduction, where the author lays out her justification for her work and some of her methodological decisions. Read the chapter here: [Ries_1997 - Russian talk - Introduction.pdf](#).

Figure 4. Week 2 of online course

The third week of the course had participants think about how language and culture might be explored. The central assignments this week consisted largely of reading, in which the students read a chapter from an ethnography of Russian speech in the late 1980s and reflected upon the researcher's methods. Additionally, they read about ethnography as a methodology, and they considered how their own unconscious biases might affect their writing and thinking.

Table of Contents

- 1. Unit 3: Read me first
- 2. Unit 3: Socially-constructed ideas and dominant discourses
- 3. Unit 3: Analyzing dominant discourses
- 4. Unit 3: Reflection paper: How to avoid dominant discourses?
- 5. Unit 3: Ethnography
- 6. Unit 3: Russian Talk During Perestroika
- 7. Unit 3: Reflection
- 8. Unit 3: Wrap-up

The way we talk shapes our cultural perspectives.

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Unit 3: Read me first

In Unit 3, we're going to spend our time looking at ways in which people have investigated and written about culture. First, we'll be talking about ways in which our unconscious thoughts can influence the way we think about culture (something you'll have to struggle with as you go through your projects), and then we'll read about ethnography - a methodology used to investigate cultures as impartially and thoroughly as possible.

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Unit 3: Socially-constructed ideas and dominant discourses

For this assignment, read this document: [IC_dominant discourses.pdf](#)

Then do the following tasks from that document:

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Unit 3: Analyzing dominant discourses

This is a discussion board posting for watching a movie clip and thinking about the way they depict Russians - to what extent they seem to be drawing on dominant discourses.

Unit 3: Reflection paper: How to avoid dominant discourses?

In this reflection paper, think about how you might avoid reproducing dominant discourses in your own writing. Specifically, answer the following question:

Imagine you're a writer or movie-maker, and you need to depict some group other than yours. You don't want to just reproduce dominant discourses when you're creating your art. How do you avoid falling into that trap? How can you check yourself to make sure you're not unconsciously reproducing the images you've seen in the past?

As ever, don't worry about formality or polish when writing this.

Unit 3: Ethnography

This chapter introduces you to a research approach called the *ethnography of communication* - a specific methodology focused on examining the links between groups, cultures, and language use. It's widely used in anthropology, and in the next few weeks, you're going to be using it yourself to investigate an online culture.

Read this chapter here: [Language Files - Ethnography.pdf](#)

Then answer the following questions.

1. How would you define "ethnography"?
2. If you were interested in ethnographically researching the speech patterns of, say, a group of Russian immigrants to the United States, what kinds of questions might you investigate? For example, you could investigate their patterns of code-switching (when they use Russian and when they use English and under what circumstances). What other things could you investigate?
3. If you were writing an ethnography, how could you avoid bringing dominant discourses into your work? Remember, we're not conscious of introducing these stereotyped narratives/descriptions - our brains just habitually fall into these patterns of thought. So what strategies could you use to eliminate them from your work, so you can provide a piece of writing that isn't influenced by stereotypes?

Unit 3: "Russian Talk During Perestroika"

Attached is a chapter from the book "Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation During Perestroika." It's an ethnography of communication written using data collected during the 1980s-1990s, when the Soviet Union was on the brink of collapse and things were starting to (chaotically) transition into a market economy. This chapter is the introduction, where the author lays out her justification for her work and some of her methodological decisions.

Read the chapter here: [Ries_1997 - Russian talk - Introduction.pdf](#)

Figure 6. Week 3 of online course

The fourth week of the course had participants begin to explore language data, analyzing it from a linguistic-anthropological perspective. There were several reflective essays in this unit. Additionally, participants carried out one assignment in which they gathered data from the

comments section of YouTube videos that featured Eurovision performances, concentrating on discourses of nationality from commenters and reflecting on why these discourses emerge in this context. Finally, they also began their investigation of an online space of their choice, which became their project.

We can scientifically investigate the link between language and culture.

Unit 4: Read me first

This is the final unit before you launch into your own investigations of a Russian-speaking online space. So the point of this unit is mostly to get you thinking about investigating online spaces and the way people talk there. We'll be doing a bit of group data collection focusing on construction of nationality in an online space just for practice, and then you'll have some time to think about what you want to investigate and get some feedback from me.

As ever, go through these units roughly in order. And please do ask any questions you might have. I'll be holding (real!) office hours in the Starbucks at 5th and O'Hara on Thursday and Friday from 3-5 pm. Please feel free to stop by if you're like lol!

Unit 4: Things you can investigate ethnographically

This page is a place to think "out loud" about potential features of language you could look into if you were doing a linguistic-anthropological investigation.

Unit 4: Starting to collect data

For this assignment, you're going to start collecting data in one of the most dangerous areas of the internet: the comments section on YouTube. (Terrifying!) Specifically, you're going to collect and analyze data regarding the recent Eurovision song contest.

Eurovision is an interesting example, because it's an event in which people seem to be representing their countries, and so conversation around nationality often seems to occur. For this, go to YouTube and pick one of the recent Eurovision song performances (from this playlist here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OshC7onQkPI&list=PLmWYEDTNOGUKg8BT9FOiOy817NBCxoGp>), then look through the comments section. Answer the following questions about what you find there.

Please replace all usernames with pseudonyms when you're answering these questions.

1. Describe the circumstances of when you're looking at this video and its comments section. How long after the contest is it?
2. Describe the video and the song.
3. How many views has this video gotten? What's the ratio of likes to dislikes?
4. Look at the comments section. How active is it? How frequently do comments seem to be posted? (You can sort comments either by top comments or by how recent the comments are. Switch to recent view to get an idea of how frequently comments have been posted lately.)
5. Look through the first page of comments. Are there conversations? I.e., do people respond to each other, or are the comments posted without responses?
 - a. If there are responses, what sorts of comments get those responses? Copy/paste at least two examples, if you can find them.
6. What languages get used? Is it the official language of the country in the video?
7. How do people identify themselves, if they do? Copy-paste at least three examples of comments where people mention their identity.
8. How do people talk about nationality or culture, if they do? Copy-paste three examples.
9. Are there fights? Is there positivity?

Unit 4: Choosing a space to investigate

Over the next few weeks, you're going to be visiting one particular (Russian-language) web space and looking into and thinking about how people talk about things in that space. Note that in this training, we talked about discourses of national identity, but you certainly don't have to talk about that or focus on it. Alter all: questions of national identity show up in spaces like the Eurovision Song Contest comments section, but they aren't necessarily going to show up in a gardening website. So think about things you might be interested in investigating - things you're passionate about - and think about where people might talk about that sort of thing. For example, you might be interested in topics like:

- How do (Russian-speaking) people talk about Russian movies versus American movies? (You should go, then, to a blog/vkontakte site where people talk about movies.)
- When do Tatar people online use Tatar, when do they use Russian, and when do they use English? (You should go to a vkontakte group/vejournal group dedicated to discussion about/networking in Tatar.)
- Do Russian speakers use friendly or formal language on an official university webgroup? (Go to that webgroup and start lurking around.)

And so on.

Once you've thought about interesting topics, you need to pick a space to investigate. (If you're at a loss for topics, too, it can help to pick the space first, then figure out the topic from there.) You can go pretty much anywhere you want to online (as long as it's not a site that's illegal or pornographic, please don't get me in trouble!). A good starting place can be the following:

<http://9net.ru/53-public-vk.html>: A list of the most popular public groups on VKontakte.

<https://themoscowimes.com/articles/youtube-the-top-russian-youtubers-you-need-to-know-45705/>: A list of popular Russian vloggers

<https://www.livejournal.com/stats/community?country=cy>: A list of the most popular Cyrillic livejournal communities

Figure 7. Week 4 of online course

This online course was intended to be completed by the first week of SLI, with most participants succeeding in completing it in that timeframe. During SLI, the participants carried out an online investigation. They were able to semi-freely choose the topic of their investigation; the only conditions were that they had to work with Russian-language data, that they had to look directly at interactions amongst internet users, and that they had to focus their investigation on some aspect of Russian language use. Their goal in these projects was to collect authentic Russian

data and contextualize it in the internet space they were investigating, and use that to encourage reflections on the sociolinguistic and cultural patterns visible in interaction over Russian-language social media. This data collection and subsequent reflection was intended to raise the participants' awareness of the arbitrariness of culture, but also about the possibility of cultural participation, given sufficient observation and information-gathering.

The participants' project topics are listed in Table 1.

Participant 1	Diminutive use amongst fashion vloggers on YouTube
Participant 2	Discourses of nationalism amongst advocates of Russian reclamation of Alaska
Participant 3	Terminology describing LGBTQ+ individuals used by Russian-language speakers online
Participant 4	Styles of humor amongst late-night hosts in Russia
Participant 5	Discourses of militarism in military journalism

Table 1. Focal group's projects

Results

First, quantitative analysis of the reference group's survey data showed that participants in the Summer Language Institute saw at least one significant benefit. There was a statistically-significant increase in sociolinguistic awareness between the beginning and the end of participation in the SLI: the students saw an average increase of 16.22 points between pretest and posttest ($t = -2.259$, $p < .05$). There was not, however, a statistically-significant growth in ICC; there was an increase of 8.63 points between pretest and posttest, which was not enough to reach significance ($t = -1.739$, $p > .05$).

The focal group was too small to reliably run inferential statistics on. However, the focal group saw an average increase of 24.02 points between the pretest and the posttest on their measurements of sociolinguistic competence. They also saw an average increase of 15.37 points on their measurements of intercultural competence between the beginning and end of the study.

Because of the different sizes of the two groups and the non-random assignment into one group or the other, a statistical comparison between the reference group and the focal group would not be appropriate. Summary statistics are provided instead below, with the caveat that the conclusions that can be drawn from them are limited.

	Reference group	Focal group
Sociolinguistic awareness	16.22	24.02
Intercultural competence	8.63	15.37

Table 2. Quantitative measurements of growth in sociolinguistic awareness and ICC for two groups of participants

Qualitative analysis of the focal participants' data is ongoing at this time. However, the analysis that has been carried out so far seems to support the dual role of SLI and the online course/project in supporting sociolinguistic growth, accompanied by the importance of the online course/project for cultural growth.

In particular, the online course appears to support growth in cultural self-understanding. While intercultural competence is often conceptualized as the ability to engage with and understand a cultural "other," a number of theorists (e.g., Byram, 1997, 2012) have indicated that self-understanding is necessary for this to occur. Individuals must be able to understand themselves in the context of their culture, must be able to understand the arbitrariness of culture, and must be able to use that self-understanding to assist in taking others' perspectives. As such, the considerable growth in cultural self-understanding shown by the qualitative data seems to be one of the central ways in which this project supports ICC growth.

Additionally, participation in this project appears so far to foster increased understanding of the links between culture and language. While this project does not seem to increase participants' specific knowledge of Russian sociolinguistics, there is a growth in understanding of the existence of variation as part of the Russian language, as well as a growth in understanding of the role of variation in creating social meaning. Understanding of this fact is crucial both to increasing ICC and to increasing sociolinguistic awareness.

Conclusions and future directions

As mentioned above, data analysis from this project is still ongoing. However, certain conclusions can be drawn from the analysis that has been carried out so far.

Immersion programs

First, a few generalizations can be made about domestic immersion programs. Participation in domestic immersion programs seems to be tied to increased sociolinguistic competence, although there is not a corresponding increase in intercultural competence. This seems to indicate that participation in SLI, at the very least, increases awareness of and competence in the linguistic aspect of culture — a logical outcome, given the SLI's emphasis on improving linguistic skills in communicative contexts. However, in accordance with the predictions of scholars such as Kinginger (2010), the limited opportunities for critical engagement with cultural difference mean that ICC development do not rise to the same levels. It is worth investigating whether similar results might be found at other domestic immersion programs, or whether the growth of sociolinguistic competence is fostered by the individual curriculum of the domestic immersion program.

Also worth noting is students' perceptions of domestic immersion programs. Students consistently evaluated the SLI as better for language learning in comparison to standard classroom settings. Measurements were not taken to see whether this perceived advantage was reflected in actual linguistic outcomes, but SLI participation clearly increased self-confidence and attitudes towards the L2.

Online investigations

Participation in online culture classes and online investigations seems to develop participants' intercultural competence and sociolinguistic competence. Strong gains in quantitative measurements indicates growth in both areas. This is supported by analyses of qualitative data. In this data, participants show considerable development of cultural self-understanding in particular; this contributes to a development of intercultural competence, as participants become more able to articulate their own culture and understand its role in shaping their perspectives, which in turn fosters the ability to take others' perspectives. Additionally, gains can be seen in participants' understanding of sociolinguistic variation and critical cultural awareness, which contributes to their sociolinguistic skills.

The third research question is whether or not the participants in this study will be able to continue to learn independently. Participants indicated that they did not gain quite enough experience that they would be confident carrying out another, similar investigation without academic supervision. As such, another iteration of this study will provide more support for independent work, suggesting future directions and providing a framework by which participants can engage with target-language speech cultures.

Future directions

The ultimate goal of this research is to develop a course that can be made available to all language students that will give them the tools to investigate language and culture independently. As such, this course will continue to be increasingly refined and developed; in particular, it will be developed to be more automated, with less instructor intervention, with the ultimate goal of eliminating the instructor altogether. Once the course is able to “run itself,” it can be released to all students in order to give them the tools to learn about culture without having to pay for instructor hours or pay to go abroad, increasing access for all students.

The next iteration of this course is being run in Fall 2018, this time in a standard classroom setting. This version of the course is being run with a larger number of participants; it also has a more traditional control group. This is being in order to provide stronger and more generalizable quantitative data. The course was developed and refined using data from the focal participants from the SLI, with ineffective assignments eliminated and others developed further. Additionally, this version of the course has reduced researcher intervention.

Ultimately, students of languages need to be able to access cultural and sociolinguistic information independently, and need to be able to study it on their own. There will never be enough classroom time to train students to function precisely how they themselves want to function, and it is highly unlikely that there will ever be a situation in which all students will be able to travel to their target community to participate in it and learn there. Further development of toolsets and trainings such as this might bring students closer to being able to support their own learning and tailor it to their own needs.

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