

Russian for Russians
**A Textbook for Russian Heritage Speakers and
Other Advanced Learners**

NEED

The rapid growth in the numbers of Russian heritage students in our high schools and colleges represents an underserved and underutilized national language resource. By “heritage speaker” we mean those who grew up with Russian in this country without a native Russian’s full educational or cultural background.

Heritage speakers typically have the fluency and grammar base that exceeds that of even intermediate non-native learners. But they need to work on reading and writing skills. Once they have sufficient reading and writing proficiency they can move into the advanced language and literature classes.

Because of their different proficiency profile, heritage speakers have special *learning* needs, which go un-addressed in both Russian language textbooks for English speakers and textbooks for Russian children in Russia.

We hope that the textbook *Russian for Russians* will fill that gap. *Russian for Russians* takes into consideration our students’ linguistic needs, their cultural background, and their knowledge of (and lacunae in) grammar and vocabulary. The approach of *Russian for Russians* is based on both theoretical research into bilingualism in general, and theoretical and pedagogical research into Russian émigré language attrition. It is the result of our own teaching experience in the Russian programs at UCLA, USC, and GWU.

Website

The *Russian for Russians* website (<http://www.gwu.edu/~slavic/rdr>) hosts the entire audio accompaniment, along with those selected exercises that lend themselves to automatic correction and feedback. The site also features links to outside Web resources required to complete some of the assignments in each chapter. Additional texts for reading are also available. In the textbook, exercises which may also be found on the website are marked with the symbol ♠ in the outside margin, and audio recordings are indicated by the symbol 🎧.

It is our experience that the textbook allows speakers with home knowledge of Russian to proceed from no literacy to the level of competency that typically exceeds that of students in third or fourth year Russian classes.

Even though intended for heritage speakers, *Russian for Russians* can also be successfully used for more traditional students at the Intermediate and Advanced levels of language profi-

ciency. The grammar exercises can be used for review while the texts and the accompanying exercises will guide the student through a variety of thematically arranged texts.

PEDAGOGY

Russian for Russians addresses the following skills and competencies:

Essential Literacy

Students using *Russian for Russians* will first master basic reading and writing skills (e.g. script and sound-to-letter fit, including reduced vowels and voicing/devoicing issues). The accompanying web page, designed as a pedagogical supplement, also leads to basic Cyrillic computer literacy.

Reading

Further chapters contain graded (but at all times authentic) selections of both fiction and non-fiction. The modularity of the book allows students and teachers to pick and choose material, starting from the alphabet chapter itself, depending on the students' entry proficiency level.

Grammar

Unlike their non-Russian speaking American peers, heritage students have an internal rudimentary if incomplete “grammar chart” which can serve as a basis for further development. For that reason, grammar is introduced in broader categories than is customary in textbooks of Russian as a foreign language. For example, whole declensions are introduced at once instead of case by case. Our experience shows that even though students have a good understanding of Russian from the very beginning, many of them need the support of explanations in English. For that reason most of the grammar explanations are given in both languages so that students could understand the concept fully while also learning the Russian terminology. This helps to put heritage speakers on an equal footing with their non-heritage peers in terms of explicit grammatical competence. That in turn allows the two groups to work together at higher levels of instruction.

Vocabulary Expansion

Heritage speakers typically bring to the classroom “around-the-house” level of vocabulary that non-heritage American learners lack. However heritage learners must expand their vocabularies in those areas traditionally beyond the scope of home use. Therefore topics in the textbook include broad swaths of the humanities and social sciences (education, history, geography, etc.). *Russian for Russians* pays special attention to typical heritage issues of register, both interpersonal (**ты/вы, привет/здравствуйте**, etc.) and vocabulary and diminutives (e.g., **книжка/книга, парень/человек**).

Cogent Speech and Writing

Filling in gaps in literacy, grammar, and vocabulary are all steps on the road to cogent discourse. However, cogent paragraphed speech is organized not only from the bottom up, but from the top down as well. Users of *Russian for Russians* will be challenged to organize their language into connected paragraphed discourse, putting them on the fast track to proficient language performance as well as competence.

Single Textbook and Workbook

Russian for Russians is a self-contained book with presentation and exercises included in one volume.

Modularity

Heritage speakers are a diverse lot. Many start their formal study with no prior exposure to the alphabet. Others come to class with basic literacy. Still others start out with a more complete, if insecure, scaffolding. Heritage speakers also vary in their own linguistic critical awareness. Finally, all language learners bring to their study a breadth of learning styles. Such variety demands a degree of modularity that allows students and teachers to choose the most suitable activities. *Russian for Russians* differs from many other language textbooks in the loose interlace of materials. Dropping one item does not bring about the collapse of the others.

STRUCTURE

Russian for Russians consists of eight chapters. Chapter 1 teaches students to read and write as well as introduces the main spelling rules. The structure of this introductory chapter differs from that of the remaining chapters.

Chapters 2 through 8 all have the same structure. Each chapter is broken into six parts.

Part 1 introduces the theme and vocabulary in several simple texts. Our goal is to activate students' prior knowledge and have them talk about an experience, attitude or an event with which they are familiar. For example, Chapter 3 introduces the topic of childhood experiences. Even though students can understand the texts easily enough and relate to them, they are not familiar with all of the vocabulary and find it difficult to express themselves when narrating or describing. In this part of the chapter, students produce paragraph length discourse, use the past and present tense and try to use some cohesive devices that they typically lack.

Part 2 of the chapter contains spelling exercises to reinforce what students learned in the Alphabet chapter. Teachers can rely on these spelling exercises to help cut down on the time on spelling rules in the introductory Alphabet chapter.

Part 3 contains more difficult texts on the same topic that require interpretation and lead to discussion. The amount of time spent on Part 1 as opposed to Part 3 depends on the students' initial competency.

Part 4 is grammar. The presentation of grammar is more global than in typical American textbooks and relies on some native-speaker "intuition." For example, students are taught to identify cases by their corresponding interrogative pronouns and go from the question to the name of the case. However, since these students are not true native speakers, they are also provided with an explanation of case use that would not be necessary in a textbook for native speakers. Our multi-pronged approach to grammar is designed to play to the individual strengths and weaknesses typical of heritage learners.

While **Part 3** is structured to provide practice with the interpretive mode, **Part 5** provides students with assignments aimed at the presentational domain. These include texts for translation to and from Russian. Students are taught how to translate avoiding word-for-word translation and are asked to compare the original text and the resulting texts for the differences between the Russian and English word order.

Other assignments in **Part 5** require students to conduct interviews with family members and write essays. The interviews provide a cultural link that encourages students to talk to their parents and grandparents about subjects other than the home domain. It is our experience, that as a result of such interviews students find out more about the family history and are further motivated to continue the language study.

In **Part 5**, students are also exposed to Russian culture through film: at least one film per topic in each chapter. Assignments range from questions on plot and character development to entire film reviews or essays. The goal of these exercises is to teach students to (1) use complex structures such as subordinate clauses thus building a more sophisticated discourse; (2) organize ideas into a cogent stream both on paper and in group discussion; (3) present opinions cogently.

The use of film also expands the heritage learners' listening comprehension. Unlike their non-heritage peers, heritage learners can understand most of the events in a two-hour long movie. The material in **Part 5** helps these students fill in the gaps created by limited vocabulary and the lack of cultural schemata.

Since the presentational mode requires oral presentation and writing, **Part 5** also has information on punctuation.

Part 6 closes out each chapter with texts for **Timed Reading** and **Reading for Pleasure**, which introduces students to Russian literature. No exercises are given and no vocabulary is glossed. Students get a taste of their own ability to navigate larger texts without instructional support. In reading for pleasure, students can see the marked improvement in their Russian. **Reading for Pleasure** also provides one more cultural link to their families' heritage, which, like some other assignments in the textbook, provides a motivation to continue studying Russian.

Selection of the Material

The authors based their selection of materials on cultural significance. The vast majority of the texts are authentic. Only some passages in Part 1 of Chapters 2, 3 and 6 originated with the authors.

One of the goals of the textbook is to restore the students' links to Russian culture. For that reason, we started with the **Russian names** (Chapter 2), **childhood experiences** (Chapter 3) and then moved into areas farther removed from the students' immediate knowledge of Russian culture (**education** in Russia in Chapter 4; **relationships in the Russian society** in Chapter 5). The last three chapters provide students with the less everyday thematic vocabulary and discussion (**business and letter writing in Chapter 6**, a glimpse of the **Russian media** in Chapter 7, and **Russian history** in Chapter 8).

The textbook takes a culturally-based approach while providing students with solid knowledge of grammar, from noun declensions and verbal conjugations in the earlier chapters to the use of verbals in Chapter 8. Despite the wide scope, it has been our experience that heritage students are capable of absorbing this wealth of materials even when they start the course without literacy.

Pacing

At UCLA, *Russian for Russians* is used in classes meeting three hours a week for two quarters (20 weeks altogether). Homework requires 5–6 hours a week. Most of the book can be covered thoroughly but some materials may have to be left out or receive only partial coverage. In case of such tight scheduling, one may want to allocate more time at the end of the course since the last three chapters are more complex grammatically and also contain more difficult texts and assignments. At the George Washington University, the eight chapters are covered in 90 hours (three hours a week over a school year with 30 weeks).