

Advantages of keeping a diary in teaching Russian language

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Suggested Citation:

Karakale, F. (2016). Advantages of keeping a diary in teaching Russian language. *Global Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*. 6(1), 55-62.

Received November 15, 2016; revised January 15, 2016; accepted February 2, 2016.

Selection and peer review under responsibility of Assist. Prof. Dr. Ali Rahimi, Bangkok University, Thailand.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to reveal the benefits of getting students from the end of level A1 or from the beginning of level A2 according to European Common Framework of Reference, to keep a diary in teaching Russian as a foreign language. We will try to explain the studied topic with concrete examples from our professional experiences at Ankara University TOMER. We will stand on contribution of keeping a diary especially in learning “perfective and imperfective cases of verbs” and “motion verbs” as the most difficult issues in Russian language, giving examples from the diaries of students. This study also aims to prove that, getting students to keep a diary lets them express their thoughts in writing freely.

Keywords : Foreign language teaching, Russian language, TOMER, Get students to keep a diary.

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1. Introduction

In the teaching of Russian language, which requires a patient learning period especially in the sense of its difficulty in grammatical rules, it is essential to create a positive interaction between the learner and the target language so as to keep the eagerness to learn alive and to provide a more permanent learning. In the Russian language, there are six noun cases (padej), the affixes of the nouns and adjectives in these cases are different from each other in singular and plural conjugations. In this respect, learning the noun cases in the Russian language requires a long period. However, due to the fact that they have no similar equivalent in Turkish, the subject that takes the most time to learn and use correctly in the Russian language is the 'perfective – imperfective cases in verbs' and motion verbs with and without prefixes.

Independently of their teacher, students should be able to express their own thoughts and feelings easily in the language they learn (Richards & Rodgers, 1999). A more effective method is necessary both to keep the learners' attention on the lesson permanent and to enable them to use the grammar rules they learned during the lesson. It is necessary to go beyond the artificial texts and exercises in the course book and let the students, who have attained a certain level of vocabulary and grammar rules, express their thoughts freely and continuously. Speaking from our professional experience at Ankara University TOMER, we will point up the importance of having the students keep a diary, which is a significant method in Russian language learning that enables students to find opportunities to express their thoughts.

2. Method

The most efficient method to teach imperfective – perfective cases and motion verbs with and without prefixes, which are much more difficult to learn, and to reinforce the noun cases in Russian language faster and more permanently is to have students keep diaries. Having the students keep a diary, who have learned the mentioned grammar structures and attained a certain level in sense of vocabulary, is the best method to let the learners go beyond the course book and express what they know freely.

It is of importance to decide on which level to start keeping a diary. The Russian language courses at Ankara University TOMER consists of 12 courses in total, which are 6 elementary (A1), 3 intermediate (A2), and 3 upper intermediate (B1) levels. Course attendees who have completed the Russian courses, which are organized according to European Language Portfolio, and received a diploma achieve the B1 level. In Russian language courses, primary subjects such as the noun cases affixes, 'perfective and imperfective in verbs' and motion verbs with and without prefixes are taught in Elementary courses (A1 level). Due to the fact that in Russian language, the noun cases get different affixes both in dedensions and in adjective cases, these subjects are taught gradually all through A1 level at TOMER. However, the 'perfective – imperfective in verbs' and motion verbs with prefixes, which are more difficult to learn, are taught by the end of A1 level. Therefore, we consider that it is better to begin having students keep a diary by the end of A1 level or beginning from A2 level.

For the research that is subject to this essay, a class which had attained a 5th level in Elementary courses (A1 level) were encouraged to keep a diary until they finished B1 level. It was asked from these students to write down how they spent two or three days of the week. These diaries that they kept were read in the class in the first lesson of a predetermined day of the week. Restricting the diaries to two or three days of the week enabled all the students to read their diaries in one lesson. By making them read their diaries in class, it was aimed to help them improve their reading skills, as well as their writing skills. On the other hand, it was seen that having the students read their diaries in class was interesting not only for the other students but also for the instructor.

While the diaries are being read, instead of correcting every mistake of the students, the misusages that we aim to overcome should be pointed out at the beginning. Moreover, the diaries are not evaluated through grading. Thus, it is aimed to keep the students continue writing a diary without discouraging them.

3. Findings

3.1. Perfective – Imperfective case

‘Perfective – imperfective case in verbs’ is a subject that prolongs the learning process in Russian language. The reason behind is that there are a good number of rules on which of these verbs to use in simple and complex sentences. ‘Perfective – imperfective case in verbs’ states when the action happened and its result. For example, the verbs *писать – написать* (*pisat’ – napisat’*), both mean ‘write’. *Писать* is an imperfective case verb (*nesovershennyj vid*), while *написать* is a perfective case verb (*sovershennyj vid*). Though these verbs have the same meaning, their usages differ.

- *Что ты делал вчера? (Chto ty delal vchera?)* “What did you do yesterday?”

1. Я **писал** статью. (*Ja pisal stat’ju.*) “I wrote an article.”

2. Я **написал** интересную статью. (*Ja napisal interesnuju stat’ju.*) “I wrote an interesting article.”

As it’s seen in the example, in the first respond an imperfective case verb is used. It is understood from the sentence that I worked on writing an article. However, the adjective ‘interesting’ in the second respond shows that the article is finished. Therefore, there is a result. For this reason, the perfective case is used in the sentence. In Russian language perfective case verbs are used to show that the action is finished. In these type of sentences, an additional wording can be used, as it is seen in the above example.

Another example, of the verbs *сдавать - сдать экзамен* (*sdat’ – sdat’ ekzamen*) ‘take an exam’ again, first one is in imperfective, the latter is in perfective case.

- *Вчера он **сдавал** экзамен по русскому языку. (Vchera on sdaval ekzamen po russkomu jazyku.)* “He took the Russian exam yesterday”

- *Ну как, **сдал**? (Nu kak sdal?)* “Did he pass?”

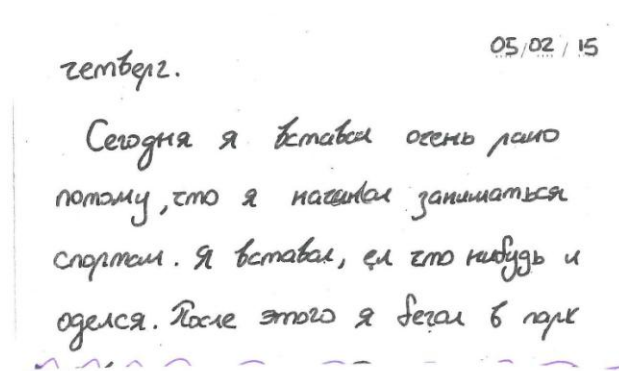
- *Конечно, **сдал**. (Konechno sdal.)* “Of course, he passed.” (Rozhkova, Rassudova, Shmidt, Buttke, & Buttke, 1979).

As it is seen, an imperfective case verb is used in the first sentence. It gives the meaning that yesterday he took the exam and left. In the question, on the other hand, perfective verb is used as the result is more important. In the respond, again, the perfective case is used because it expresses the result.

Imperfective verbs are used to express actions repeated in the past. However, while talking about a certain event, perfective verbs are used (Russkaja grammatika, 1980). Two verbs, *вставать – встать* (*vstavat’- vstat’*), mean ‘to get up’ in Russian language, the first one is in imperfective and the second is in perfective case.

*Мы **вставали** рано. (My vstali rano.)* In this example, since the verb ‘to get up’ is used in imperfective case, it can be translated as “We were getting up early.”, “We used to get up early.”, “We always got up early.” From the used verb, it can be understood that the action repeated in the past.

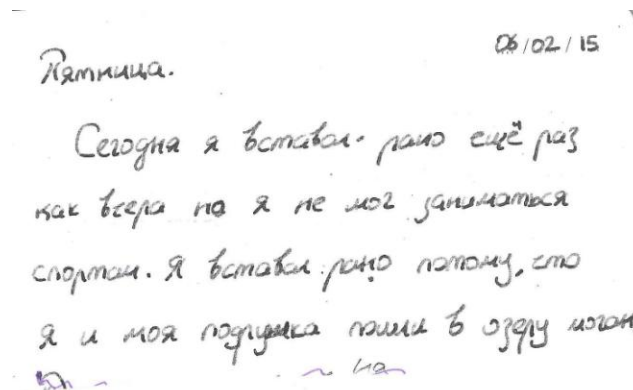
*Мы **сегодня встали** рано. (My segodnja vstali rano.)* “We got up early today.” Here, on the other hand, the perfective case of the verb ‘to get up’ is used. It mentions today, that is to say a certain event and a certain time.



Сегодня я вставал очень рано
потому, что я начал заниматься
спортом. Я вставал, ел это кефир и
оделся. После этого я лег в постель.

Figure 1. Thursday, 05.02.15
I got up very early today because I started doing sports. I got up, ...

This example is taken from an Elementary level 5 Russian language student's diary. Here *вставать* (*vstavat'*) is used, which is the imperfective case of the verb *вставать – встать* (*vstavat' - vstat'*) 'to get up'. This is a wrong usage because the student is talking about today. Since a certain time period is mentioned, the verb's perfective case *встать* (*vstat'*) should be used. This student who attends the class which was subjected to diary writing exercise shortly after teaching 'perfective –imperfective cases in verbs' surely has other mistakes. However, our primary aim is to fix the mistakes in the perfective- imperfective cases of the verbs that are most commonly used in the student's diaries.



Сегодня я встал рано еще раз
как всегда но я не мог заниматься
спортом. Я встал рано потому, что
я и моя подружка пошли в парк.

Figure 2. Friday, 06.02.15
I got up early today as usual, but I didn't do sports. I got up early because [...]

It can be seen that the same student corrected his mistake in the entry he wrote approximately a week later. Here, he used *встать* (*vstat'*) which is the perfective case of the verb 'to get up'. After this, the student's other mistakes were pointed out. Because correcting all the mistakes at once might lower the student's self confidence and discourage him from the language he learns.

3.2. Motion Verbs with and without Prefixes

Another one of the primary aims of having the students keep a diary is to ensure the correct usage of motion verbs with and without prefixes. One of the subjects that also require a long period to learn in Russian language is the motion verbs. A student who completes the Elementary courses at TOMER will have seen the motion verbs with and without prefixes subject. The student will learn the prefixed forms of the verbs that he previously learned with no prefixes at the end of the Elementary courses, just like the 'perfective – imperfective cases'. The exercises from the course book can be effective to some respect. Moreover, it accelerates the learning process of these verbs for the student to use these motion verbs as he gives slices of his own life.

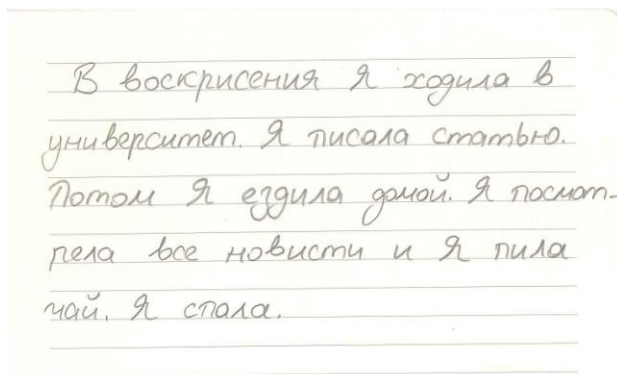


Figure. 4. On Sunday.

I went to the university. I wrote an article. Then, I went home. I watched all news and drank tea. I slept. This example is taken from another student's diary. The student used the motion verbs wrongly in this diary as he wrote it when he just began to learn the motion verbs with prefixes. The verb that the student used 'ходила' (Khodila) is a verb without prefixes and it means 'to go and come back', 'to be somewhere' in its infinitive form 'ходить' (Khodit') (Murav'eva, 2003). The form without the prefix is imperfect case and shows two directions as in to go – to come. But here, the student meant to say that he went to the university and wrote an article there. Going to the university should be in perfective case because it is both one direction and also he talks about a certain event. For this reason, he should have used 'пойти' (pojti) and written the past form of the verb 'пошла' (poshla). Likewise, when saying 'I came home' 'ездила' (jezdila), the verb is in its infinitive form 'ездить' (jezdit') without prefix and in imperfective case. Similar to the verb 'ходить' (Khodit'), it shows two directions in the meaning to go – to come. The only difference is that it means to go with a transport. To say 'I went home' the student should have used the verb 'пойти' (pojti) which shows one direction and in perfective case and written it in past form 'пошла' (poshla) or should have used the verb 'поехать' (pojehat') which means to go by transport. The student could also say 'I came home' instead of 'I went home'. For this, he should use the same verbs with 'при-' (pri) prefix.

Воскресного апреля / среда 08/04/2015
Сегодня я встал рано, завтракал
и принимал душ, потом я вошёл
домой. после этого я встретился с
своими ^{хорошими} друзьями. мы решили встретиться

Figure 5. 8 April / Wednesday, 08.04.2015
I got up early today, had breakfast and had a shower. Then I entered home. [...]

In Russian language, each prefix that an motion verb takes has a different meaning and different noun case affixes can be used depending on these prefixes. In this example, the student wanted to say 'I left home', but because of the verb he used he said 'I entered home' instead. *In Russian language, the prefix 'в (во)' means 'to enter somewhere'. 'войти' (vojti) means 'to enter somewhere on foot'. 'Vinitel'nyj padezh' (the accusative case) is used after the verbs with these prefixes (Vinogradov, Istrina, & Barchudarov, 1960).*

Я однажды вошёл в дом, думал — сейчас компьютер включу, а электричества не было. (Ja odnazhdy voshjol v dom, dumal — sejchas komp'juter vkljuchu, a elektrichestva ne bylo.) "One day I entered the house and I thought now I'll turn on the computer, but there was no electricity." 'Вы' prefix gives the meaning 'to leave'. The verb 'выйти', similarly, means 'to walk out of a place'. After the verbs with this prefix, 'roditel'nyj padezh' (genitive case) is used. Here, the student should have said 'Я вышел из дома' (Ja vyshel iz doma.) "I left home."

В 6 часов
я поехал в магазин на велосипеде,
купил овощи. Я вернулся домой пешком
потому, что мой велосипед сломался.
В 11 часов я лег спать.

Figure 6. At 6 o'clock.
I went to the market by bike, I bought vegetables. I walked back home because my bike was broken. I went to bed at 11 o'clock.

Later on, it was seen that this student corrected his mistakes that were pointed out. Here, it can be seen that the student used the motion verb, the noun case affixes and also the perfective – imperfective cases correctly. In the above given examples, the students generally used the noun case affixes correctly. Because the students pay the most attention to use the noun case affixes correctly, which they learn for 6 levels. Having them keep diaries help them strenghtens the use of these affixes. Therefore, they begin to speak the language they learn more fluently.

4. Conclusion

The only difference between the diaries we have the students keep and the diaries people keep is that the former is being read in the class. Bearing in mind the level of the class and the number of students, the students are asked to write about two or three days of their week in their diaries. These diaries are read in class on a predetermined day each week. Asking the students to read their diaries in class is not only enjoyable but also educating to the other students in class. Total time spent on reading and aimed corrections usually take no more than a course hour.

“By the help of the diaries, the students learn how to use the leanguage they are learning in real situations by practice” (Ay, 2006). Thus, it gives a sense of mastering the language gradually. Keeping a diary triggers the eagerness to learn and stimulates the cofidence of the students who have been learning Russian language and have patiently completed the learning process to learn the necessary grammar structures to make correct sentences.

Through the diaries, the students can reinforce the usage of case suffixes which they learned in A1 level. Our primary objective to have the students keep diaries is to enable the students use the perfective – imperfective cases and motion verbs with and without prefixes correctly and quicker. It is more fruitful to have the students start keeping a diary at the 5th level of Elementary courses which constitutes the A1 level at Ankara University TOMER, as perfective – imperfective cases and motion verbs with and without prefixes are taught beginning from this level.

“One of the key aspects to keep in mind when having the students keep diaries is not to correct all their mistakes at once and directly” (Ay, 2006). First of all, the mistakes in the aimed structures’ should be corrected gradually. Apart from these, it can be asked from the students to mark the structures and words in their writing that they are not sure of. The correct forms of these mistakes should be written on board by the instructor. Thus, new structures which are not in the course book can be learned and also the continuity of the learning process is maintained through drilling.

One other benefit of having the student keep diaries is that it increases the student’s dictionary usage. This way, their vocabulary skills also increase. Since the student writes his own experiences, it gets easier for him to memorize these new words. To sum up the benefits of having the student diarize, it can be conduced that it is a student centered method that reinforces the teaching activity.

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