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Class and level: RUSS 110 First-semester Russian

Professor: (lecturer in Department of Slavic Studies, Yale University)

Number of students: 8 (1 female, 7 males)

Last week, I observed a first-semester Russian class taught by an instructor who is a native speaker. The topic of the class, which lasted 50 minutes, was to review grammar for an upcoming exam that included verbs to describe motion and transportation, and conditional sentence clauses. Overall the class was teacher-oriented, students talking mostly to the professor, who corrected their language and wrote extensively on the chalkboard.

(0-5 min). The professor began class by asking students about the elections from the night before (which I understood from the names "Obama" and "Romney"). Two students shared their experiences voting, and when they had difficulties expressing themselves, the instructor tried to finish the sentences for them. She also drew a picture to illustrate (what I think was) the verb for waiting in line. She used the students' input to clarify the uses of perfective verbs, speaking almost entirely in Russian with a few words here and there were in English (which allowed me to infer what she was teaching). She gave various versions of the same sentence, using different verb tenses, and explained the differences in meaning.

(5-30 min.) The instructor passed out worksheets with many small pictures illustrating scenes in which people are travelling, moving, carrying objects, carrying other people, and using various means of transportation. The students were to describe the actions they saw described in the pictures. At first, the students were reticent; this might have been because the handout displayed 25 small pictures, without any numbering or sequence, so they might not have known where to begin. The instructor (still speaking Russian) asked them to brainstorm various words that they would need to describe the pictures, using fluid hand gestures to indicate that students should offer ideas without waiting to be called. She wrote students responses on the board. She then drew their attention to one of the pictures, and asked for a sentence that described what was happening in the picture. Students participated on a voluntary basis, mostly practicing oral production, except for a few students that were writing down notes. One student wrote notes on a computer, which is uncommon in language classrooms, and he definitely participated less than other classmates, focusing mostly on the screen in front of him. For each picture, the professor wrote the student's response on the board, and either affirmed it as correct or repeated it with an inquisitive voice to signal that it was incorrect. The student then tried to correct him/herself. From time to time the instructor drew pictures or dramatized the hilarious meaning of an incorrect answer (for example, drawing a picture of a man riding a dog, when the student was meant to say the man was walking the dog). Moments like this kept the students engaged throughout this rather lengthy activity, which took nearly 25 minutes to complete.

(30-40 min). Next, the professor asked students what they felt they needed to work on most before their upcoming exam. This was a good moment for the pupils to assess their own learning. They wanted to review the use of the infinitive in an imperative context, and proceeded to complete a form-focused activity from their textbook in which each student had to translate a sentence from English into Russian. They did not read aloud the English sentence, just the Russian

translation, and the professor continued to write the answers on the chalkboard. She paused from time to time to explain the differences in politeness associated with each form, and used facial expressions to emphasize these differences.

(40-50 min) In the last 10 minutes of class, the professor began to work on conditional sentences. Here she connected the sentences with the students' personal lives, asking them questions based on their life at Yale, where they eat, what they might do on the weekend, and contrasted these sentences with "dreamer" sentences about the future or highly improbable circumstances. Here she used a few more phrases in English to explain the difference, ("You really might go" vs. "This is for dreamers"). She asked students to respond to each other's plans using the phrase "If I were you" (in Russian). Again, most of the production was oral, except where students took it upon themselves to write notes. The professor, however, was writing a lot on the board.

With 3 minutes left, the professor asked the students to begin working through a dialogue activity from the book. While they spoke, she circulated and corrected and/or encouraged what they were saying. This was the only time that she was not standing in front of the class, and thus the only time that students were talking to each other instead of to the instructor. As class ended, she assigned them homework, which was appropriately to finish the follow-up activity to the dialogue in the textbook, as well as to read a short story by Chekhov and write questions based on the story involving motion and transportation, thus connecting the homework with the first full activity of the class.

Overall I was impressed with the students' comprehension level in the class: the professor spoke quite naturally, using exaggerated teacher-talk only in a few moments in the class. She wrote much more on the board than I ever do, or have ever seen an instructor write, but I think it helped the students, since the alphabet is still quite new to them. I was impressed that in a first-semester class, with barely ten weeks of instruction, the students were already learning how to narrate stories and use conditional sentences. The instructor explained to me that these things are relatively easy in Russian, whereas things like verbs of motion are much more complicated. Thus, it was appropriate that she spent much time going over the verbs of motion in the first activity, and worked lightly with conditionals. The teacher stressed accuracy throughout the class, and corrected students both explicitly and implicitly, asking them to correct themselves, though she did not build much context around the activities in class. I thought this would have been easy to do with the pictures used during the verbs of motion/transportation activity, but I understand that she was trying to cover a lot of diverse grammatical topics to review for an exam.