

REVIEW OF *MEZHDU NAMI*

<p>Mezhdu Nami</p> <p>Lynne deBenedette, William J. Comer, Alla Smyslova, & Jonathan Perkins</p> <p>2016</p> <p>ISBNs: 9781611950168 US \$12.50 9781611950175 US \$15.00 9781611950182 US \$12.50 9781611950199 US \$15.00</p> <p>268 pp.</p> <p>Jayhawk Ink</p> <p>Lawrence, KS</p>	
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INTRODUCTION

Mezhdu Nami ([Между Нами](#)), the first fully-online introductory Russian textbook, was released publicly in the summer of 2015 and is rapidly gaining popularity. According to the textbook website, it has been adopted by sixteen universities and one middle school in the United States and Canada. It is perhaps unsurprising, given that this textbook is innovative in at least three ways.

First, while most of the elementary Russian textbooks currently on the market adhere to the principles of communicative language teaching, *Mezhdu Nami* is the only one claiming to incorporate the ideas of task-based language teaching as well. A second important characteristic of *Mezhdu Nami* is that its methodological approach is theoretically grounded in the input processing theory (VanPatten, 1993, 1996, 2000). This theory views the processing of the input (target language) by L2 learners as a crucial step of language learning and allows for the mapping of linguistic form (morphology and syntax) onto meaning. Third, as the textbook is released under a Creative Commons license, it is free to use. The accompanying workbooks (*Classroom Activities* and *Homework Assignments*) are also available for free download from the website, and users may order printed and bound copies for approximately \$15.00 USD.

WEBSITE LAYOUT AND STORYLINE

The website's Cyrillic interface may be intimidating to a true beginner at first, as it contains very little English, apart from an introduction section with traditional Russian imagery (see [Figure 1](#)). However, once a student learns the alphabet and basic vocabulary, it becomes easy to navigate. Even if one does not understand the meaning of the words behind the lessons and the content of the top bar, it is fairly easy to deduce the meaning behind the numbers. Each unit is marked with the word *Урок* (*Lesson*) and a sequential number; the sub-sections of each lesson's drop-down menu are also numbered in sequence. The reference and supplementary section—located directly below the bar with the lesson contents and containing links to the dictionary, multimedia, grammar tables and index—is also labeled in Russian, but English translations of each section's titles are available if one hovers the mouse pointer over the Russian labels. Further assisting the user in overcoming the deluge of Russian is the “Getting Started” section at the bottom of the main website. It is written in English and links to an overview page, which contains a

description of the textbook's storyline and characters. Instructions on how to use the website (which contains a brief video tutorial) and a section with the workbooks are also located in the same section. It is worth noting that, although the video tutorial is eminently useful, navigating to it is a multi-step process, which may require initial intervention and guidance on the part of the instructor. First, from the main website, users must scroll to the bottom left and click "Read more" under "Getting Started". The link will take them to the Overview page, the left frame of which contains a link called "Using the Website". Clicking that link brings up the video instruction.

The course content is organized around a story about four American students (three undergraduate and one graduate student) on their year-long study abroad program in Russia. The list of main characters also includes their Russian friends, teachers, and host families. Importantly, both the American and Russian characters are of different ethnic backgrounds which enriches the cultural component of the textbook and may add to the characters' appeal for diverse language learners.

The characters mainly live or stay in four Russian cities (St. Petersburg, Yaroslavl', Kazan', and Irkutsk). This approach switches the focus of attention from the capital city of Moscow that is typical for many Russian textbooks (e.g., *Голоса, Live from Moscow*) and allows instructors to naturally weave in some valuable information about the diversity of Russian geography, climate, and even everyday life in different parts of the country. This is of particular importance, because generally culture does not seem to be a key component of the textbook—there is no specific part of the website devoted to it, nor is culture a structural part of the units. However, certain tidbits of cultural information may be found within different units. For example, in Unit 3.4, under "A Little Bit About Language," there is a note entitled *What You May See At A University*:

University buildings in Russia may contain one or more departments. Campus buildings may not have any large plot of land containing dorms and academic buildings in an enclosed space—unlike a US [campus]. Dorms and university buildings may be located at some distance from one another. Departments often have their own library, which will usually not have open stacks.

Pragmatics is also introduced through commentaries, such as the one in Unit 1.4 discussing the appropriateness of certain greetings in different situations and for different interlocutors.

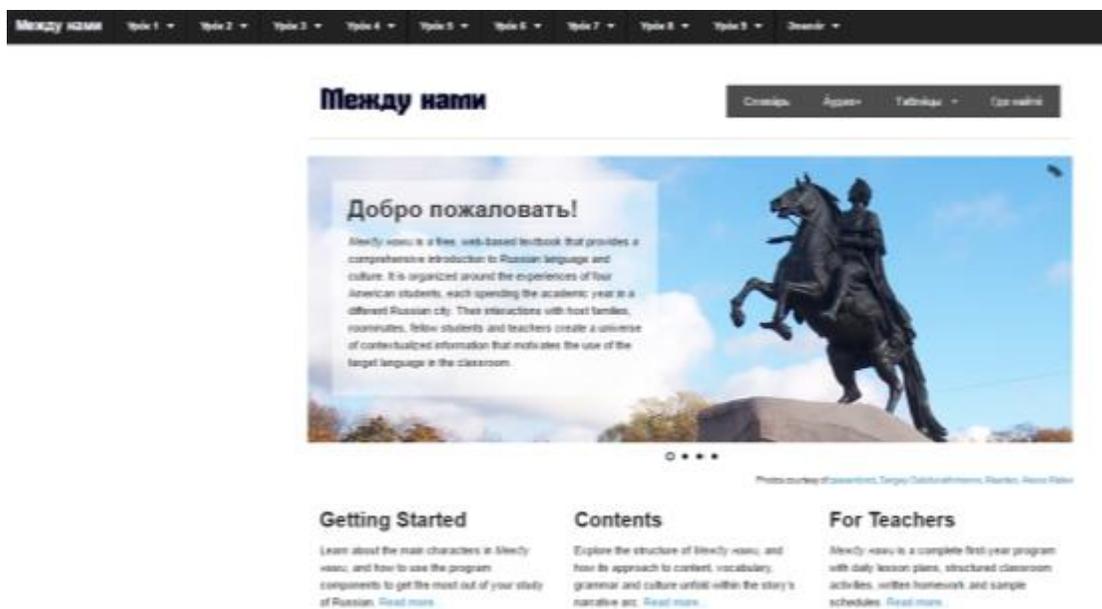


Figure 1. *Mezhdru Nami*: Home page view.

UNIT STRUCTURE AND CONTENT ORGANIZATION

The textbook covers a rich list of topics, including, but not limited to, family and academic life, getting around in a city, dining out, and shopping and social interactions. The content is organized into nine large units (or lessons), and an epilogue which does not introduce any new grammar or vocabulary material or exercises, but instead completes the four students' stories and recaps some of the major themes of the course. Each of the lessons is broken down into three parts, each one of which, in turn, contains from one to four episodes (see Figure 2). Importantly, there is a special section with learning goals at the beginning of each of the lessons. The goals are presented in a user-friendly format that resembles can-do statements, such as those offered for self-assessment within ACTFL and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. They all begin with a statement: “By the end of this unit you will be able to...” and contain various goals, such as “ask and tell about items that you and others do have/don't have” (Lesson 4) and “give a biographical sketch of yourself or another person” (Lesson 8). In addition to stating the goals, the section describes what linguistic features of the target language will be covered in order to help learners achieve those goals, such as “conjugating verbs in the present tense (1st and 2nd conjugation)” (Lesson 3) and “date-month expressions (какое число and какого числа)” (Lesson 6).

Figure 2. Unit content view.

The standard structure of each episode is as follows (all labeled in Russian): The episode begins with the input part, *Текст* (*Text*); continues to a set of comprehension check activities, *Вы всё поняли?* (*Did you understand all of that?*); and then finishes with a section containing linguistic information and related exercises, *Немного о языке* (*A little bit about the language*). In the first unit, there is also a section devoted to the Cyrillic alphabet and Russian handwriting. It's worth noting that because the offline workbooks contain the bulk of the exercises, tasks, and other activities, there are not many in the online textbook itself.

The input is provided mostly in both textual and aural forms and is supplemented with situationally appropriate pictures of the main characters. The dialogues are scripted, but are clearly intended to mimic authentic real-life situations—one of their peculiarities that I particularly appreciated was the fact that the native speakers sound as they should, while the students have accents, which further contributes to the

authenticity. At times, however, the speech rates of both native and non-native speakers are unnaturally slow even for a beginner-level course. Additionally (and unfortunately), the website does not allow the user to hide the captions while playing the audio, which limits the instructor's opportunities to use listening-only activities. The only way to do so would be by forcing students to close their device and not share the instructor's screen. In rare cases, there are mismatches between the recorded text and the captions, which may lead to confusion.

The *Did you understand all of that?* parts vary substantially in the type of activities included, but there are often few comprehension check exercises per episode. The most frequently used types of comprehension activities are true/false questions, identifying speakers, matching words or phrases with pictures, multiple choice questions, and fill-in-the-gap exercises. These may be used by students independently (e.g., as part of homework in a flipped classroom), as the answers are often available by clicking on the answer link or hovering the mouse pointer over the answer choices (where such links are provided). There are also Quizlet interactive vocabulary learning activities in many episodes, in which learners may select different study modes: *match*, *learn*, *test*, *flashcards*, or *spell*. Depending on the vocabulary in question, learners may be asked to make words disappear, match them with pictures, or other sorts of activities. *Did you understand all of that?* may also contain cultural or pragmatic commentary for the learners.

Finally, each episode's *A little bit about the language* part contains brief information and a few exercises on Russian syntax, morphology, and pronunciation. In addition, there is often a box titled "Use good learning strategies!" which contains pertinent tips. For example, the authors suggest using association for learning irregular plural forms of certain nouns in Lesson 2 and good practice words for the pronunciation of certain consonant clusters in Lesson 6.

ADDITIONAL FEATURES

The additional features of the website are represented in the reference and supplementary section. The dictionary contains not only words and phrases, but also titles of important cultural texts and idioms (e.g., *Герой нашего времени* [*Hero of our time*], the title of a book by Mikhail Lermontov; *великий и могучий русский язык* [*the great and mighty Russian language*]). The sortable and searchable list contains the translation, as well as grammar information and a reference to the place in the textbook where the grammar forms can be seen in context. For certain words, hypernymic categories to which they belong (e.g., places, seasons, etc.) are included. The dictionary only contains words and phrases that appear in the textbook, however, so learners will not be able to use it to look up words they may find elsewhere.

The *Audio+* (multimedia) section consists of two parts. The first part consists of audio and various materials corresponding to the activities in the *Homework Assignments* offline workbook; however, certain tracks are missing from the audio part. I assume that these will be fixed over time, as the editors and authors are still updating the materials, which is evident from the workbooks, since each one has a date stamp with the last update. The other materials, although engaging and rich, are not yet equally distributed across all of the lessons, and some are missing altogether—of the total of thirteen, four refer to Lesson 7 while Lessons 4 and 9 are not represented at all.

Tables does a particularly admirable job of covering all six grammatical cases with detailed information about their functions (including multiple examples). There are also declension tables and, curiously, a whole separate section dedicated to the use of two directional/locational prepositions. However, no tables for verb conjugation or extra information about the verbal aspect can be found.

The website also features a *For Teachers* section in which instructors can find a detailed outline of the program components, an overall list of expected student outcomes, and a clearly stated methodological and theoretical ground upon which the textbook is based. By contacting the authors, teachers may gain access to a shared folder with supplementary materials for the textbook (transcripts, flash cards, warm-up activities, PowerPoint presentations, etc.). In addition, I assume the authors will soon have a home for

these supplementary materials on the textbook website—having these readily available will be a bonus to teachers. Some of the materials are developed by the textbook authors, but other instructors using the textbook are invited to share their materials as well—and some of them do.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The structure of the episodes, as outlined above, clearly reflects the input processing approach that the authors claim to favor. In the *Methodological Approach* section, the authors state the following:

We prioritize having learners first show comprehension of the narrative and then map words and forms used in the story line to the meanings they convey; the learners' initial work with the input is structured and active, even if they are not creating new grammar forms in output-based practice immediately...[because] learners who do the input-based work first have had a chance to get familiar with the new vocabulary and map its forms to the correct meanings before they are asked to deploy these in their own speech.

To further persuade the Russian instructors using the textbook to follow the suggested order, the authors provide a link to their own published empirical study. The results show that processing instruction worked just as well or better than traditional instruction for the low-level learners of Russian learning directional and locational expressions (Comer & deBenedette, 2011).

The authors' claim that they utilized principles of task-based teaching when they designed this textbook may be an overstatement. Certainly elements of task-based language teaching are incorporated into the course, but there are many different ways to define a task and there are many theoretical underpinnings behind task-based language teaching design. Unfortunately, the authors do not define how they envisioned the tasks they were using when planning. However, in a previously published study, one of the authors of *Mezhdu Nami* (Comer, 2007) used Ellis' (2003) description of a task and suggested that a clear nonlinguistic outcome is a crucial feature. For example, a regular communicative activity may involve a role-play imitating the process of renting an apartment, but for a pedagogical task, the most important part would be *success* or *failure* to rent. Although a vast majority of the activities offered in the *Classroom Activities* workbook are intended to promote learner collaboration (group- or pair-work) and communication, many of them fail to lead the learners towards achieving any real-life outcome. For example, the final activity in the part of Lesson 2 devoted to family life presents a set of pictures showing the characters the learners are already familiar with and gives the following instructions: *Work with a partner to say as much as you can about each of the pictures below. Be prepared to share your answers with the class (Classroom Activities I, p. 69)*. As this is the final activity, it can be assumed that the learners would have enough linguistic skills to engage in an activity with a clearer outcome. For example, they could have been tasked with finding a person who could help them with something by searching through the available options and remembering their family members, some of whom could possess necessary medical or similar kind of knowledge. The learners would need guidance from their classroom teachers in using the linguistic forms and information from the textbook lessons in real-life, meaningful situations, either in the classroom with their teacher and peers or with others outside of class.

CONCLUSION

Despite minor technological problems (which are likely to be resolved by the authors as they continue to revise the textbook content) and the fact that the textbook is perhaps less task-based than it could be, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of an online textbook like *Mezhdu Nami* appearing as an open educational resource for Russian language education. *Mezhdu Nami* is innovative methodologically and theoretically, bringing the principles of processing instruction and some elements of task-based language teaching into the Russian classroom. In addition, its content is highly relevant, especially for

undergraduates who might consider going on a study abroad program in Russia. The characters are relatable, the story is engaging, and the design is user-friendly. Instructors benefit greatly from the shared folder with supplementary materials (answer keys, image collections, sample lesson plans, PowerPoint presentations), while learners do not need to worry about the cost of the textbook when making a decision to take a Russian class. I highly recommend that Russian language teachers not only adopt *Mezhdu Nami* for the language classroom, but also contribute by giving feedback to the authors as the authors continue to work on the textbook content. Most importantly, teachers should consider uploading any supplemental tasks that they design that correspond with the individual chapters or units. The textbook authors should be commended for creating a space where textbook users can upload supplemental files, and this feature of the textbook should be highlighted and amplified as an important toolbox associated with *Mezhdu Nami*.

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