

REVIEW OF RUSSIAN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTIONAL SITES ON THE WEB (BASED ON SHER'S RUSSIAN INDEX)

Sites reviewed	Russian language instructional sites on the Web (based on Sher's Russian index)
Platform	all
Minimum hardware requirements	IE 6.0, Safari, Mozilla Firefox 1.0 with Cyrillic encodings: Unicode, Windows Cyrillic (1251), KOI8r
Support offered	none
Target language	Russian
Target audience	Beginning, intermediate
Price	Free

Reviewed by [Richard Robin](#), George Washington University

You are your institution's Web guru on less commonly taught languages. The part-time teacher of Russian, relatively unschooled in second language acquisition (SLA), whose Web skills end at ordering a book from Amazon, asks you for recommendations on sites for students of the language. You can Google your way to a cumbersome list or check a comprehensive megalist of Russian sites, such as [Sher's Russian Index](#). But will you find anything worthwhile? The answer is a cautious and very limited yes, as this review shows. But first, let's establish some ground rules.

- 1) All the sites mentioned come from [Sher's Index](#), probably the most comprehensive of the Russian megasites. They are all free.
- 2) Sites tightly based on individual textbooks or school syllabi are not scrutinized. This frees the reviewer of a number of conflicts of interest. It also takes in all potential users, regardless of whether they are enrolled in intensive instruction or engaged in casual independent study.
- 3) Sites are examined in terms of methodological direction, learner strategies, interactivity and feedback, ease of use, and, where applicable, audibility. On all of the sites reviewed, successful feedback is programmed mostly through Javascripts. The more sophisticated [RusNet](#) site uses php. The most primitive type of feedback substitutes the right answer for a wrong one, or invites the user to try again. None of the sites add a significant second layer designed to trap nonsense responses, warn of repetitive errors, or provide information on what part of the answer might have been right. Such an additional layer requires a few additional lines of script for each validation.
- 4) This review excludes "raw" or "authentic" sites (i.e., those not specifically created for Russian language instruction). This leaves out the plethora of sites with multimedia content that constitute the most precious resources for learners approaching the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) Advanced threshold in the receptive skills, especially in listening comprehension. .
- 5) Finally, I have left out my own independent contributions through the [National Capital Language Resource Center \(NCLRC\)](#).

EARLY GRAMMAR-BASED SITES

With the rules set out, let's answer the question at the top of the screen: "What will a reliable connection bring you?" The quick answer is that learners will not master Russian from scratch or even make significant progress from looking at available computer screens. Why should this be, given the Web's enormous potential for the delivery of language materials? To begin with, few sites pass Ushi Felix's (2003) "best practice" test, namely, they are mostly not "the most appropriate tools to their best potential to achieve sound pedagogical processes and outcomes" (p. 8-9). This means that most sites set good goals, but exhibit wrong practices. Even fewer sites map instructional delivery practices to legitimate goals.

Still, learners will, even at the ACTFL Intermediate level, find occasional instructional materials of some value, especially in the receptive skills (after they make their way past the links leading through the great Cyberian graveyard dotted with the tombstones of projects from the halcyon days of the 1990s when technologists experimented with their brand new toys). The fact that things worked at all (you clicked on a link and saw something in Cyrillic!) produced such a sense of giddiness that methodological considerations received short shrift. However, the field owes a debt to some of the older pages of the earliest Russian language Web warriors (e.g., Mitrevski's *Russian Web Tutor*, and Beard's *Russian Online Interactive Reference Grammar*). Their simple Javascripts provided templates for others. In addition to writing on-line tutorials, they provided copious notes on the writing of Javascripts for Russian-language instruction, which laid the basis for more sophisticated pages that were developed later on.

However, as instructional materials, the early tutorial pages are limited to grammar-based expositions with minimal interactivity. In many cases, the grammar instruction is more linguistic description than pedagogy. In short, such sites feature end-of-the-millennium technology wedded to 1970s pedagogy. For example, Beard's coverage of verbs is based on a dumbed-down generative analysis, which has at long last fallen out of favor. [Sher](#), [Beard](#), and [Mitrevski](#) each take a stab at explaining Russian verbal aspect. All three try to present a linguistically accurate picture rather than rely on short-cut generalizations that produce the least number of errors on the part of learners.

Most symptomatic of the linguistic approach to Web-based language pedagogy comes in the tried-and-failed theoretical coverage of transitive verbs of motion. It assumes that mastery of the non-prefixed verbs of motion must precede coverage of the prefixed verbs. This leads to exercises with near-nonsense sentences such as "Молодой человек несёт девушку на пляж" (*The young man is carrying his girlfriend to the beach*), with the learner being asked whether this scene is repetitive or continual.

Watch the movie until you understand this **transitive** verb or motion, *нести- ||| (но)нёс-*, then try the exercise below.



Word in the Movie	Type of Action
Explain the use of each of the verbs in the subtitles of the movie. Choose the aspect of the motion which is repeated (Iterative), which is continuing (Progressive), or whose completion is implied.	
1. Молодой человек несёт девушку на пляж. <i>The young man is carrying his girl to the beach.</i>	<input type="radio"/> Repeated <input type="radio"/> Continuing <input type="radio"/> Completed
2. Другой человек никогда не носит свою жену. <i>The other man never carried his wife.</i>	<input type="radio"/> Repeated <input type="radio"/> Continuing <input type="radio"/> Completed
3. Он уже понёс её на пляж. <i>He already carried her to the beach.</i>	<input type="radio"/> Repeated <input type="radio"/> Continuing <input type="radio"/> Completed

The [Cornell Russian page](#) is another "tombstone" site featuring broken links, non-functioning Cold Fusion scripts, [Lora's dialogs](#), nonsensical and poorly recorded snatches of Russian, and theoretically bound explications of the grammar, unsuitable for beginning learners.

A great many other sites are non-interactive descriptions of the language (e.g., [Pacheco's Grammar review](#), a PowerPoint demo; an audio-supported [Friends and Partners alphabet site](#), limited to the names of the letters, to name a few).

Of some interest is [Zumbach's puzzle site](#), which offers a series of gif images of Russian crossword puzzles and other word games meant for beginners. A Google search turns up scores of authentic crossword puzzles for the advanced learner.

Looking beyond the Cyberian graveyard, we find three sites that are active, fully interactive, and largely pedagogically correct.

RUSSIAN LANGUAGE MENTOR

Bogdan Sagatov's [Russian Language Mentor](#) is, in the author's words, "a different kind of website ... a self-paced Language Maintenance and Development Curriculum intended for intermediate to advanced Russian *linguists*" [reviewer's emphasis -- this usually is the U.S. government's word for foreign language learners and/or users]. The site's strength is its proficiency-based exercises based on authentic written texts and audio scripts. The audio recordings, all taken from late 1990s SCOLA materials, while not crystal clear, are acoustically accurate for over-the-air reception with cheap analog receivers. The exercises are modest: They consist of a vocabulary preview plus scanning-type comprehension questions.

The setup for reading is similar. Users look through the vocabulary, read the passage, and then answer comprehension questions. A more logical progression would be to place the questions up front and explain what to look/listen for. The material could also use some notes to the learner on other receptive skills strategies, such as prediction and contextualization. That said, the materials presented, especially in audio, are selected carefully, and dedicated users can legitimately hope that diligent practice (a point emphasized on the site) will lead them from ACTFL Intermediate to Advanced.

The site features a concise grammar review plus exercises. The exercise feedback loop rejects attempts to get at the answer without trying ("Write something") but does not distinguish between nonsense answers and real attempts.

A separate page gives users a grammar mailbag that covers some of the more esoteric topics of Russian, such as the use of quotation marks. Some of the coverage (e.g., verb aspect) is too much invested in linguistic precision, but the lively prose, a relief from the overly cautious scholarly style on most other sites, goes a long way in mitigating too much reliance on theory.

The site also includes some static print-out games and puzzles, and the *Boris and Gleb Tea Room*, containing fun tidbits, and a section, in lively English, on cultural literacy.

RUSSNET

[American Councils' RussNet](#) provides a wealth of interactive material for Novice, Intermediate, and Advanced levels, grouped in three categories: (1) a Cultural Map of Russia; (2) Modules for the High School to College Articulation Project; and (3) Business Russian. Registration (anonymously) is required so that users can keep track of their scores over a number of sessions.

The Cultural Map of Russia provides texts, minimal vocabulary support, and modest post-text exercises. A separate page provides video clips, mostly from Soviet-era shorts. They make nice postcards, but the accompanying soundtrack is unscaffolded and often cut off in mid-sentence.

The Business site has a more complete set of exercises on all three levels, in multiple choice, direct text entry, matching, and ordering formats, and with a greater variety of feedback, including persistence of

partially correct errors up until the first mistake. So an incorrect answer **мама** for correct **маму** appears as "wrong" but persists as **мам_**.

The Intermediate portion of the site contains six listening texts, all accompanied by cloze dictation. Unfortunately, there is only one voice, and some of the recordings suffer from clipping and popping p's.

Business Russian Home Listening Help Упражнение 8
 Module 1 Intermediate «Презентация фирмы» 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 Reading «Порядок слов»

задание

*In the first three questions, each sentence below answers a specific question. In the last three, each question has a specific answer. Choose the question or answer which would answer the given statement or question. **Keep in mind that word order is significant here!** In Russian, new information tends to come last.. Click **Add Score** if you want to record your scores. If not, click **Next** to simply go on to the next exercises.*

1. Корпорация «Ай-Би-Эм» была создана в 1914 году.

Что было создано в 1914 году?

Когда была создана корпорация «Ай-Би-Эм»?

2. Компания «Каргилл» создана в 1986 году.

Что было создано в 1986 году?

Когда создана компания «Каргилл»?

3. В 1988 году была создана фирма «Легис».

Что было создано в 1988 году?

Prev Add Score Next

C Move your pointer over any underlined word.

The greatest riches on the site are in the high school to college section, meant to serve as part of American Council's Advanced Placement packet. Here learners will find a wide range of modules covering history and literature. Each topic is based on both reading texts and video clips, mostly at the ACTFL Advanced level. Both scripts and texts are well scaffolded with massive amounts of pre- and posttext activities. This is the one site of those reviewed where receptive skills strategies are built into the surrounding materials. The care with which this material has been assembled and deployed suggests massive amounts of grant dollars well spent.

"After the revolution: politics" Russnet
 Russnet Home | My Russnet | Display Scores | Contact Us | Help

Образование СССР > 1: Pre-reading

INSTRUCTIONS:

Based on your understanding of the title «Образование СССР», guess what the following text will be about by choosing the best answer from the following options.

The text is likely to deal with the

- formation of the USSR.
- formation of the national communist party.
- new educational policies in the Soviet Union.
- educational system in the Soviet Union.

RussNet has a few glitches, mostly in the way of occasional dead links, including one to the site map. However, the main lacking of the site is cosmetic. Users must download and use ER-Universal, one of the ugliest Cyrillic fonts available. The non-standard encoding loosely follows Russian-English transliteration and was obviously an attempt to get around Mac-related problems with Cyrillic, especially in earlier OSs. But any computer bought within the last 3 years should easily handle any of the existent encodings, thus ending the need for in-house fonts. In addition, students who have mastered the native Russian keyboard will be frustrated at having to remember differences in keyboard layout. This might seem like a small inconvenience, but in fact, for the Business part of the site, it represents a hole in the pedagogical framework. Anyone with pretensions of operating in the business world in Russia must learn the native Russian keyboard. *RussNet* business site should at the very least not hamper attempts at mastering it.

RUSSIAN LANGUAGE LEARNING ON THE WEB

[Russian Language Learning on the Web](#) is a joint project of Sussex University and the University of London School of Economics. This unique site presents texts and audio on Russian classical authors, such as Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy, and Blok. The literary texts are scaffolded with comprehension questions. Grammar exercises are provided for issues that come up in the texts themselves. Quite a bit of material addresses the prevalent system of participles and verbal adverbs. The site authors add critical commentary in English as background. Smaller texts are accompanied by fairly good audio (http-based Real media).

HOME
AUTHORS
PUSHKIN
HISTORY
CRITICISM
TEXT
TRANSLATION
EXERCISES
GRAMMAR
AUDIO
VIDEO

МЕТЕЛЬ

Кони мчатся по буграм
 Топчут снег глубокий...
 Вот, в сторонке Божий храм
 Виден одинокий.

.....

Вдруг метелица кругом,
 Снег валит клоками;
 Чёрный вран, свистя крылом,
 Вьётся над санями;
 Вещий стон гласит печаль!
 Кони торопливы
 Чутко смотрят в тёмну даль,
 Воздымая гривы...

В. А. Жуковский

В конце 1811 года, в эпоху нам достапамятную, жил в своем поместье **Ненарадове** добрый **Гаврила** Гаврилович Р**. Он **славился** во всем округе гостеприимством и радушием, соседы

Click a highlighted word above to see information about it in this window. Drag this bar ^ to change the window size.

Ненарадове
 Ненарадово - название деревни. Pushkin's pun on не нарадоваться 'not to be able to stop being joyful', 'to be uncontrollably joyful'.

An unusual feature of the site is the supplementary video clips. There are two clips for each author: Level 1 (Intermediate) and Level 2 (Advanced). The clips feature young people talking about the works treated on the site in interview format. The camera work is somewhat shaky, but the speech is clear and natural and the compression rate low enough to provide a rather sharp, if demanding picture (320x240 at 15 fps and, as per my calculation, about 840 kbps). Unfortunately, the video, by far the most dynamic feature of the site, lacks the required scaffolding.

In short, users in the Intermediate range are likely to find some useful materials in the receptive skills. Advanced readers and listeners should know enough about language learning to go directly into the raw Russian Internet (Runet). And the great killer site has yet to be assembled.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Robin is Associate Professor, Russian Program Director, and Language Technology Specialist at the George Washington University. He holds a University of Michigan Ph.D. in Slavic linguistics. His textbook projects include *Golosa*, a leading introductory program, and he coordinates many Russian-language Web projects. He serves as senior researcher at the National Capital Language Resource Center.

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REFERENCES

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