

Spiralling in Teaching Russian as a Foreign Language

*"Knowing how something is put together
is worth a thousand facts about it."
(Jerome Bruner)*

Abstract

This paper will discuss an approach to foreign language teaching based on Spiral Curriculum principles and developed into a new methodology of teaching Russian to English speakers, successfully piloted in my recent pedagogical experiment focusing on pronunciation, and extended to grammar in my current research. The key features of the approach are illustrated by examples from Russian grammar and pronunciation, suitable for non-Slavicists.

Key words: language pedagogy, teaching methods, linear approach, spiralling methodology, complete beginners, Russian language, pronunciation, the teaching of grammar, case inflection, Russian verb conjugation, Russian stress

Принципы спиралевидной учебной программы в обучении русскому как иностранному

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Аннотация

В данной статье представлен подход к обучению иностранным языкам, основанный на принципах спиралевидной учебной программы, которые легли в основу новой методики обучения англоговорящих студентов русскому языку. Методика была успешно протестирована в рамках продолжительного педагогического эксперимента по обучению произношению и впоследствии доработана применительно к обучению грамматике. Основные принципы подхода иллюстрируются примерами.

Ключевые слова: обучение иностранным языкам, методики обучения, линейный подход, спиралевидная учебная программа, начальный уровень, русский как иностранный (РКИ), произношение, обучение грамматике, падежные флексии, спряжение глагола, ударение

Spiral Curriculum - background

Spiral Curriculum (SC) is a particular way of introducing learning material; it was put forward by the American psychologist and educationalist Jerome Bruner (3), who laid the foundations of cognitive learning theory, and whose work inspired numerous applications in various subjects, as well as educational reforms in different countries. Unlike teaching in a traditional “linear” way (7), when each new point is studied as a whole and learners are expected to retain abundant details for future use, spiralling involves introducing key concepts in a simplified form first, and then revisiting them, adding more details each time, to consolidate previous input (see 10 for a summary). Thus, on each return to the topic, learners’ knowledge and skills rise to a higher level (hence, the spiral analogy).

The idea of applying SC principles to teaching languages is not new and, since first introduced by Howatt (7) and Corder (5) in the 1970-s, it has been explored in various directions, and different aspects of Bruner’s multifaceted theory have been investigated, with experiments within English Language Teaching as a main strand (for example, 4, 12, 9, 13). As far as my investigations could stretch, I could not identify any attempts to apply Bruner’s ideas to the teaching of inflection or the teaching of Russian.

Simplifying abstract concepts

If we are to follow SC principles, the amount of language theory, traditionally presented to language learners at one time, for example, within one lesson, is to be divided into smaller “portions” which would be introduced in a few steps, with each of these steps representing a “coil” (or a “turn”) of the Learning Spiral. Thus, instead of memorizing the entire, say, conjugations system of a Russian verb in the present tense (6 endings) and then spending weeks practicing the full paradigm and months trying to “internalize” the theory (8), in our example, to use multiple verb endings in speech; learners would deal with one ending at a time, effectively, efficiently and comfortably processing it in their speaking practice, getting ready for the next one.

However, spiralling does not just reduce the amount of information presented to learners at a given time – it is essential how the information is structured and how its parts are interconnected, as the main purpose of learning, according to Bruner, is to help learners build a required system: in the case of language learning, an interlanguage that is close to native language. Thus, each new portion of information is introduced not in isolation but as part of the whole, and is linked to what has been previously learnt, reemphasising the core concept.

It might seem that presenting abstract notions about a system structure at initial stages of language learning contradicts the suggestion of simplifying ideas. For Bruner though, this makes perfect sense: “*We begin with the hypothesis that any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form [...] at any stage of development.*” (3, p. 33). This can be easily illustrated by our conjugation example.

The first verb ending that learners are to acquire, for example, 1st pers. sing. present, needs to be put in the context of the Russian inflection system (or “system of endings” for learners), required in order to keep words connected within the flexible word order, where a verb has to be linked to a subject in a distinctive way, as the words do not have a fixed position in a sentence, as, for example, in English. This creates a basic concept of inflection that relates to the whole system and consequently, can then be transferred to noun cases, gender agreements and other parts of the inflection system. That is what sets Bruner’s ideas apart from the developmental psychology of Piaget (2), to a large extent underlying traditional educational curricula, reserving complex concepts for later stages of learning.

Revisiting – not revising

Another crucial difference between spiralling and linear teaching is the idea of *revisiting*, which is not at all the same as *revising*. It is true that in both cases, learners come back to what they have learnt, but unlike revising, which goes over the same material, revisiting builds on previous knowledge and expands it by adding more details. For example, when our 1st pers. sing. verb ending is revisited, 2nd pers. sing. verb ending might be taught during the next step, thus adding to the initial material; as opposed to introducing all six endings at the start of the topic and then revising all six at the end. Following this logic, I am suggesting that a learning spiral could be envisaged as an inverted conical helix (spiral) rather than a cylindrical coil, representing an expansion of knowledge and skills; rather dissimilar to linear learning when topics can be represented by the same size blocks stacked on top of each other, with amounts of information being similar at the start and at the end of a block.

Furthermore, revising is normally planned for the end of a topic, while revisiting is intermittent with other topics and activities. Some research in language acquisition, for example, suggests that the effectiveness of grammar instruction increases if combined with speaking practice (11, 8). Thus, our 1st pers. sing. verb ending can be practiced in various speaking activities, e.g., roleplays when learners adopt different identities and talk about what they do. Moreover, it could be followed by, for instance, a prepositional sing. noun ending, expressing the meaning of location, thus creating an ample base for beginners to talk about where they work, live or play. Once these forms are acquired, the 2nd pers. verb ending can be brought into play, thereby revisiting the conjugation topic, and allowing learners to practice asking and answering questions to develop their speaking skills. To take it further, it might be more effective for the language skills acquisition if 3rd pers. ending comes before that for 2nd pers., as in this scenario, turn-taking, predominant in the use of 2nd pers. forms, would not be involved till later when learners are more confident in handling verb inflection. This kind of structuring would allow language learners not to only learn *about* conjugation but exactly *how* to use it. The significance of this is wisely reflected in Bruner’s famous quote “Knowing how something is put together is worth a thousand facts about it.” (1, p. 183)

Teaching intervention

To investigate the effectiveness of the of the SC approach to teaching Russian as a foreign language, a piloting intervention, supported by the British Philological Society, has been conducted. The study focused on teaching pronunciation to English speakers and aimed to measure the differences in learners' performance resulting from different types of instruction. The research questions posited were whether the application of the SC principles to teaching Russian pronunciation to complete beginners would improve learners' performance with regards to 1) stress production, 2) vowel reduction and 3) palatalization in Russian words.

The idea of testing two groups who are taught using two different methodologies, that laid the foundations for the present study, was borrowed from Derwing and Rossiter's (6) pronunciation teaching experiment, though most of the other aspects of the experimental design of the intervention, for example, the type of instruction, target language, proficiency level of the participants, methods of testing and rating techniques, are rather different. Furthermore, following the recommendation by Thomson and Derwing (14) on increasing the validity of the results in pronunciation teaching research, the above idea was developed further and, as a result, three groups were recruited – one which was taught using traditional linear methodology, and two, employing spiralling, but taught under different conditions.

All participants were complete beginners: two groups from Year 1 Russian Studies department, at the start of their course, and one from other University departments, who had no previous knowledge of Russian. With pre-test not required at beginner level, a short preliminary questionnaire was administered in order to exclude bilinguals, heritage speakers and "false beginners"; that is, those who had advantage over other participants and thus, the potential to skew the results.

The Russian Studies groups, taught using linear approach, had *all* aspects of a particular pronunciation phenomenon (for example, of vowel reduction) presented at the start and then emphasized throughout the following activities, as it was encountered in different contexts (e.g., realised in different sounds or different word positions). The two SC groups differed in the amount and frequency of Russian practice - Russian Studies participants had 5 hours of Russian a week within their course (the total of 50 hours by the time of testing) *in addition* to the experimental instruction, as opposed to volunteers from other University departments with *no* practice outside the experiment. Both SC groups were taught using the same materials. At the very beginning, they were introduced to the basic concepts of the Russian phonological system; for example, the limited number of vowel sounds in Russian and single word stress, resulting in the severity of vowel reduction. In accordance with SC features, each pronunciation aspect was explained for only *one* sound at a time and normally practiced within similar contexts to start with (e.g., stressed for vowels, non-palatalized for consonants), with the complexity and the

amount of details increasing each time. Speaking activities were carried out in between pronunciation exercises and reading.

All three groups were taught for 8 weeks, with weekly sessions of one-hour duration, focusing on the same pronunciation skills, with all of the activities targeting oral production. The materials used for the instruction in SC groups were also formally evaluated.

At the end of the instruction period, all three groups were given the same pronunciation test, designed to elicit the pronunciation skills through reading, as it was not considered feasible to acquire a valid speech sample from the learners at the beginner level. The Russian Studies groups were also tested for skills retention. All of the tests were recorded individually, on digital media, then transcribed and marked by the researcher and two second raters, who were native Russian speakers recruited from the same University, in order to increase the reliability of marking. Participants' performance with regard to each of the tested skills was marked separately, then analysed and compared with the help of SPSS software.

The statistical results showed that the two SC groups, produced higher scores than the linear group; with SC group recruited from various departments, who had only 8 sessions of learning Russian, outscoring both Russian Studies groups. The difference was significant with regard to stress and vowel reduction, demonstrating that spiralling is extremely effective in teaching these skills. SC participants also retained the acquired skills significantly better than the linear group. As for palatalization, though the SC groups produced more correct instances of appropriate palatalization, the difference was not significant. This could possibly be explained by the faults in structuring the material, when all consonants were allocated equal time, and in the course of instruction, some consonants proved more challenging for participants than others. To improve the effectiveness of teaching palatalization in the future, the amounts of practice need to be adjusted for each consonant according to the level of difficulty.

The overall results of this pilot study are extremely positive, suggesting that the spiralling can effectively facilitate the acquisition of learners' language skills with regard to Russian pronunciation.

Conclusion

Having discussed the general principles of SC and the way they could be applied to teaching Russian as a foreign language, this paper presented the results of the teaching intervention study that demonstrated the effectiveness of SC application to teaching pronunciation to complete beginners. It is, therefore, possible to speculate that spiralling has the potential to be successfully applied to the teaching of other subskills, for example, grammar.

As it can be clearly seen from the discussion at the beginning of this paper, rich morphology of Russian presents a perfect opportunity for structuring learning material in such a way that complex grammar concept of inflection can be simplified, while numerous affixes could be introduced and practiced in speaking activities one at a time, with the purpose of helping learners understand how the Russian inflectional system works, as well as improving their ability to use multiple endings in their speech. Spiralling grammar would ensure that the learning material is organised in a cognitively friendly way, rather than by linguistics principle of grammar topics.

My current project, which has secured the UK Research Councils funding through the White Rose College of Arts and Humanities (UK) and is under way, will investigate the application of SC to the teaching of Russian case endings, focusing on the acquisition of grammatical features within learners' speech. If successful, the project will pave the way to making teaching Russian to English speakers much more effective. With the ab initio student market being the largest, and with beginners perhaps most receptive to innovations because students have not had chance to develop bad learning habits, this research can impact on the training of thousands of students worldwide. Moreover, this methodology is seminal to research into the teaching of other morphologically rich grammars.

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