

Rasskaz-Sensatsiia: v pomoshch' izuchaiushchim russkii iazyk (ne tol'ko dlia gvadeluptsev). By IGNATY DYAKOV. Pp. 164. London: Russia-Local. 2013. £12.31. Paperback. ISBN: 9781481216210.

Rasskaz-Sensatsiia is a new book for Russian language learners developed by linguist and entrepreneur Ignaty Dyakov. A graduate of the University of Saint Petersburg and the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London, Dyakov founded Russia Local Ltd., a London-based consultancy that offers language and related services to businesses seeking to work with Russia. The idea for *Rasskaz-Sensatsiia* was inspired by his experience of teaching Russian to business clients.

In his preface, the author advises that the book should 'by no means [...] be seen as a substitute for the classical language textbook', but hopes it will be 'a useful and enjoyable supplement to the course materials for elementary and pre-intermediate levels' (p. 7). This reviewer's own Russian learning began with the quintessential 'classical language textbook' – the 1985 edition of *Textbook: Russian* and its companion volume *Exercises: Russian*, published by *Russkiy Yazyk*. Bound in grey vinyl hardcover, it was the kind of durable, generic Soviet product from the 1980s that looked old-fashioned even at the time of its publication. The cartoon heroes were Maksim and Nina, married physicists who lived in a Moscow of modest apartments, orderly traffic, and steady academic progression. It was predictable, self-contained, and lengthy. The context was bounded by *Domknigi*, *Melodiia*, and the October Cinema on Prospekt Kalinina, along with summers in a Crimean sanatorium and winters skiing in the Caucasus. It provided a thorough grounding in Russian grammar, although it felt cut off from real language.

Fast-forwarding a generation, the slim paperback *Rasskaz-sensatsiia* transports us to the twenty-first century realities of globalization and the information age. The 'sensational story' of the title unfolds in a fanciful Guadeloupe. The unlikely hero – a banker named George – navigates an unpredictable, borderless world in which an elite of MBA graduates reads *The Times*, watches French films, and shuttles between summers in Ibiza and winters in Courchevel. It is a witty and engaging parody – part detective story, part office romance – set against a backdrop of offshore banking, shadowy international organizations, electoral politics, and financial crises.

The story is divided into thirty-three episodes. Each chapter contains an 800-word text, a keyword list, comprehension questions, and a cloze exercise. An audio version of the story – read by the author – is also available. All this material is in Russian with no translation for use by teachers and students of any native language. A Russian-English glossary of the keywords is provided at the back of the book. The texts are suitable for intermediate rather than elementary learners, since a basic vocabulary and familiarity with noun and adjective cases, as well as verb aspect and tenses are assumed. The language is relevant to everyday business communications. The Russian is appealing and contemporary, with idiomatic sentence structure, colloquial sayings, and interjections. Discourse varieties include dialogue and emails, and lexical areas cover the Internet, banking, business meetings, politics, the gym, geography, food, and clothes.

The keyword lists put special emphasis on words with the same stem, such as *ulybaetsa>ulybka*; *soviet>sovietskii*; and *pevets>pet'>poiut>pesnia*, familiarizing students

with lexical and derivational morphemes, key to expanding their passive and active knowledge of Russian. The cloze exercises focus on inflected noun and verb endings, which are problematic for English-speaking learners. The audio version, on the other hand, can turn the texts into an aural comprehension exercise, and can help students practise pronunciation and intonation.

Not intended as a stand-alone textbook, *Rasskaz-sensatsiia* needs the kind of foundation Maksim and Nina provided in their day. It could either be used as a reader to supplement other course materials, or alternatively as a base for lesson planning. The short, simple format belies a wealth of content for teachers to develop and extend. As well as flagging numerous language points – e.g. *svoi/ego*, *mnogo/mnogie*, verbs of motion, reflexive verbs, and past participles – the story drops plenty of cultural clues for further investigation in class. These include references to popular Russian songs and films (from wartime classics to Alla Pugacheva and Nikita Mikhalkov), literature (Chernyshevskiy), historical events (Napoleon, the Russian Revolution), contemporary household names like Kaspersky anti-virus protection and fashion label Valentin Iudashkin, and practices such as folk superstitions and business meetings in the bathhouse. *Rasskaz-sensatsiia* teaches that successful business relationships are as much about cultural codes as they are about language.

This is an original and effective Russian language book, which could only be improved in small ways. Chiefly, it would be helpful if the glossary contained all the words in the texts, not just the keywords. It would be particularly useful to have perfective and imperfective infinitive forms. The audio recording – well paced and enhanced by sound effects – would be even better if the different parts were read by different speakers. Finally, the risk of such an up-to-the-minute storyline – set in late 2012, with references to the financial crisis, Twitter, and the recently redesigned Russian military uniforms – is that it will rapidly seem dated, unless *Rasskaz-sensatsiia* evolves into a series that continues to move with the times. This reviewer for one looks forward to George's further adventures.

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