*My Russian Journey*: Rethinking Teaching Russian to Beginners

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**Abstract**

We present *My Russian Journey* (MRJ; *Min russiske reise* in Norwegian), a new digital beginners’ course of Russian as a foreign language designed for Norwegian students and available on the open MOOC platform Open EdX. This resource introduces researched-based methods into the classroom and adjusts teaching practices to modern realia in a rapidly changing world. Instructors with access to the course code can fine-tune MRJ at any time in accordance with geopolitical and cultural developments. Through an overview of MRJ, we approach several essential issues in teaching elementary Russian. We analyze how a digital educational resource can be integrated into the classroom and whether digital platforms can completely replace paper textbooks. The experience from the pilot semester with MRJ suggests that both media are needed. MRJ also contributes to the discussion of student-centered learning through active student involvement in the design of the resource. Students have provided valuable feedback on the structure and content of the grammar instructions. The explanatory sections are interlaced with interactive exercises and accompanied by instructional videos describing grammatical patterns that students can watch before and after class. Furthermore, we approach language teaching at the beginner level as a cultural medium. MRJ’s texts are supplied with rich information on the cultural, national, religious, and geographic diversity of Russia and place special emphasis on long-established amicable relations between Russia and Norway. We offer an overview of MRJ against other comparable elementary courses and share student feedback on the resource.

**1. Introduction**

We discuss current challenges for teaching Russian in connection with a new resource entitled *My Russian Journey* (MRJ; *Min russiske reise]* in Norwegian). MRJ is a beginners’ course of Russian as a foreign language (CEFR level A1), available on the open MOOC platform Open EdX: <https://mooc.uit.no/courses/course-v1:UiT+C001+2020/about>.[[1]](#footnote-1) The goal of this resource is to change teaching practices in the classroom and to bring them closer to modern realia in a rapidly changing world.

Contemporary teachers and learners face new challenges such as increasing population mobility, which requires use of flexible teaching formats, and demands for adaptive teaching. MRJ meets the current needs in language teaching in several important ways. The whole resource is digital. Whereas some digital platforms focus on a subset of language learning, such as grammar and vocabulary, or spoken Russian and listening comprehension tasks[[2]](#footnote-2), MRJ comprises all aspects of learning Russian as a foreign language: texts (stories and dialogs), obligatory vocabulary, grammar instructions and videos, practical exercises on grammar and vocabulary, various sections for review, a pronunciation module, and a media module. The content of MRJ is openly available and free, contributing to open science.

In addition to digital access, adaptive learning and student-centered teaching are of primary importance in the modern classroom. Diversity and inclusivity are key aspects of contemporary society, with major focus on the relevance of individual differences. As recent studies show, individualized focus can be realized in the classroom through a learner autonomy perspective where curricula can be adjusted to the needs of individual students (Leaver and Campbell 2020, Spasova and Welsh 2020). Adaptive learning aims at transforming the learner from a passive receptor of information to a collaborator in the educational process. Adaptive learning can take advantage of various tools such as computer algorithms and artificial intelligence to deliver customized resources and learning activities that address the unique needs of each learner (Wambsganss et al. 2020, Kaplan 2021).

MRJ adopts the principles of adaptive learning in two ways: by introducing a research-based approach to teaching vocabulary through the most frequent lemmas and inflectional forms and by reconceptualizing grammar instruction through active student involvement in the design of the resource. The vocabulary in MRJ builds upon the Strategic Mastery of Russian Tool (“SMARTool”, freely accessible at <https://smartool.github.io/smartool-rus-eng>, Janda 2019), which contains a basic vocabulary of nouns, verbs, and adjectives across the A1 through B2 CEFR levels. The SMARTool displays the three most frequent forms of each word, with a corpus-inspired example illustrating the typical grammatical constructions and collocations that motivate the use of each given form. The design of the tool has been developed with reference to the frequency distributions of Russian word forms and a machine-learning experiment described in Janda and Tyers (2018). The choice of grammatical constructions in MRJ is partly inspired by the Russian Constructicon (<https://constructicon.github.io/russian/>; see Janda et al. 2020, Endresen and Janda 2020), a full-scale inventory of idiomatic Russian constructions. Our team is currently working on developing synergies between MRJ and the Russian Constructicon.

Another unusual aspect of MRJ as a resource n elementary resource is its strong emphasis on the cultural perspective. The resource focuses on the long-term close relations between Russia and Norway, introducing cultural diversity at the national, geographical, and historical levels. Characters in the story are connected to multiple nationalities such as Sami and Tatar. The texts present multicultural families and their traditions. The resource is not limited to descriptions of Moscow and Saint Petersburg and presents the whole country, guiding the user through larger and smaller Russian cities in northern, central and eastern Russia. Finally, the resource pays special attention to building competence in the history of Russia of the 19-20th centuries. This component is of particular importance in the current situation of political tensions. MRJ incorporates historical and cultural information in an engaging and entertaining way and is suitable for both university and high school audiences.

The resource was first tested in Fall 2021, which allows us to share preliminary fresh experiences and raise some questions for the future. In this article we address three major issues. First, we analyze how a digital educational resource can be integrated into language teaching and, more generally, whether it is possible to move away completely from paper textbooks (section 2). Another vital aspect in the design of MRJ has been student participation: is student-centered teaching feasible and how can students contribute to building teaching materials (section 3)? We also share our experience with introducing grammar videos as the key component in explicit grammar instruction. Finally, we present our arguments for the importance of language teaching as a cultural medium and show how detailed cultural information can be integrated into a teaching resource (section 4). Section 5 offers an overview of MRJ compared with other available resources and section 6 provides a summary of student feedback from the first semester of teaching with the resource. We conclude with a discussion on how to create an engaging learning environment (section 7).

**2. Integrating a digital educational resource into language teaching**

The growing demand for digitalization in language teaching was apparent even before the COVID-19 pandemic and has been closely connected with two issues. On the one hand, digitalization is relevant for the flipped classroom approach according to which traditional lecture content should be moved out of the classroom to leave more time for face-to-face active learning in the classroom (Spasova and Welsh 2020). On the other hand, increasing population mobility requires use of flexible teaching formats that enable students to use teaching materials anywhere anytime. Widespread Internet access through multiple devices provides ample opportunities for remote work and study. The demand for hybrid forms of teaching and distance learning has further accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kaplan 2021) and has a direct impact use of digitalization and flipped classroom techniques that are widely discussed in current scholarship on pedagogy.

As we will show, MRJ is compatible with both flipped classroom and blended or hybrid learning, which combines elements from flipped classroom and more traditional approaches to language teaching. The resource is equipped with relatively extensive explanations of grammatical patterns, supplemented by short instructional videos that facilitate independent learning of grammar outside the classroom (see section 3). At the same time, it offers a digital platform that presents texts, practical exercises on grammar and vocabulary, and review sections in an interactive mode, which raises the question of how these materials should be used in the classroom.

At present a few other projects also exploit digitalization in teaching elementary Russian: *Russian for beginners 1* (developed at Saint Petersburg State University), *Russian Stage One: Live from Moscow*, *Golosa* and *Mezhdu nami*. A more detailed review of MRJ compared to these teaching materials is offered in section 5. In this section, we discuss specific ways in which electronic materials can be integrated into teaching and address a more general question: can digital platforms completely replace paper textbooks?

***2.1. MOOC platform Open EdX***

MRJ is available on the Open EdX platform specially developed as a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) (Lebron and Shahriar 2015, Kim 2016). One of the major benefits of the platform is that it enables instructors with access to the course code to freely update any part of the resource as needed, following the progress of technological, geopolitical, and cultural development. In addition to the standard setup, one can also use HTML code to adjust the content. The platform can easily be used on various devices, including smartphones. These have been decisive factors for our team when choosing the platform.

Moreover, due to the simplicity of the design, EdX allows instructors to organize grammar and text modules in the resource as short meaningful chunks, or “building blocks”, which are organized into more general units. For instance, Lesson 1 includes two grammatical topics: “Grammatical gender: masculine, feminine and neuter” and “Personal pronouns: *он* ‘he’, *она* ‘she’ and *оно* ‘it’”. Both chunks are illustrated by corresponding exercises and are tested in a review quiz called “Are you ready to go further?” that concludes every lesson in the resource. More advanced lessons (15-35) review grammar topics further in additional translation exercises which precede the section “Are you ready to go further?”.

An extra bonus of the platform are the types of exercises available. In addition to the common multiple-choice options and text input, EdX facilitates advanced drag and drop exercises, which significantly enrich the interface. Such exercises can be used for both matching words and pictures or finding Russian cities on a map (see Figure 1), or simple grammar tasks like sorting nouns according to grammatical gender as illustrated in Figure 2.

Graphical user interface, map

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Figure 1. Lesson 1, Task 1: Find the cities on the map.

Graphical user interface

Description automatically generated

Figure 2. Lesson 1, Exercise 3: What gender are the nouns? Sort the nouns into three groups by gender: *он* (male), *она́* (female) and *оно́* (neuter).

Student feedback on the structure of the resource is presented in section 6.

***2.2. Digital platform vs. paper textbook***

In its early stages, the MRJ project had the working title “Russian without book covers” (Norwegian: *Russisk uten permer*) to emphasize the importance of moving away from extensive use of paper textbooks. However, at the later stages of the project it became clear that some paper version of the texts and exercises is still needed in the classroom. A paper version of the exercises was crucial for two reasons: in order to facilitate handwriting practice and to foster physical contact among the class participants (both between the teacher and the students and within the groups of students during group work).

With regard to the question of how electronic teaching materials should be used in the classroom, there were three options available. The first option would be to use everything that the resource has to offer, i.e., videos, texts, and exercises, in the classroom. In the second option, the digital version of the texts and exercises could serve as an additional resource that the students work with at home. Finally, there could be a compromise between the two extremes, an alternative where some assignments are done digitally whereas others are completed in the written form in a compendium.

Our second concern was how electronic feedback is presented in the digital resource. The EdX platform is sensitive to uppercase and lowercase letters, punctuation marks, and extra spaces, presenting a challenge to include all the correct options in the feedback. Our experience with the resource shows that the digital format requires clear instructions in all exercises, i.e. more information is needed if the content is presented in an electronic format rather than in a paper textbook. Wherever possible, the resource should provide concrete samples and examples to avoid confusion on the part of the students.

At the end of Fall 2021 we collected feedback from students who completed the Russian elementary course at UiT using MRJ. The questionnaire contained questions about the benefits and challenges in connection with the resource. We also asked about student experience of both media (EdX and compendium) with vocabulary, texts, grammar, and exercises and when they prefer to use the compendium versus EdX. As demonstrated by their responses (see Appendix 1), many students used both resources, and many found a way to supplement each resource with the other. Despite this, a systematic compendium is still in demand and used to a greater extent than EdX.

The pilot semester with MRJ had several important outcomes: it revealed that electronic resources must have clearer instructions than regular textbooks and that there is still a need for a paper compendium in the classroom. Physical language teaching requires some “physical” materials to practice handwriting and to promote good interaction among class participants.

**3. Grammar: student co-authorship and instructional videos**

In order to acquire basic skills in Russian (speaking, writing, reading, comprehension), an L2 learner must master a number of morphological and syntactic patterns. How should these patterns be presented in a digital learning resource? Should one go for a purely communicative approach or resort to more traditional teaching methods? In MRJ, we explore a middle ground. In order to make space for communicative learning activities in the classroom, it is necessary to include explicit grammar instruction in the digital resource. If learners can acquire basic linguistic patterns outside the classroom, it is possible to free up valuable classroom time for communicative learning activities. In addition to this flipped classroom-inspired idea (Abeysekera & Dawson 2015), an important theoretical premise for MRJ is constructivism, the idea that each learner constructs his/her own knowledge networks in the process of acquiring a language (Biggs 1999, Biggs & Tang 2011).

Inspired by the concepts of flipped classrooms and constructivism, we devised a relatively traditional format, whereby each lesson addresses a number of morphological or syntactic patterns, which are explained in some detail. In order to support communicative skills, the grammar sections typically start with a statement of the type “when you go to Russia, you need to talk about X” or “when talking to a Russian, you need to be able to say X”, rather than assertions like “the genitive is a widely used case in Russian”. Furthermore, the explanations are contrastive in the sense that corresponding patterns in languages such as Norwegian and English, which the students already know, are taken as the starting point. This enables the students to proceed from the known towards the unknown when constructing their knowledge network. For instance, when presenting the three grammatical genders of Russian, it helps to point out that Norwegian has the same three genders. Then, we can go on and explain the differences, showing that in some respects the Russian gender system is simpler than the corresponding Norwegian system.

An illusion shared by most language instructors (including the authors of this article) is that we know what the students need. Although teaching experience is a valuable resource, the only people who know what students need are the students themselves. What do the learners know about language before they start learning Russian? What kinds of learning strategies are they likely to use? And what goals do they have? In order to create explanations of grammatical patterns that take these questions into account, two first-year students participated as co-authors of the grammar sections. The instructor drafted sections, which were subsequently discussed with the two students in weekly meetings. The grammar sections were then rewritten until they were found to match the prior knowledge, strategies and goals of the L2 learners.

In order to stimulate language learning outside the classroom, the grammar sections of MRJ include 35 instructional videos. While most textbooks involve videos in one way or other, instructional grammar videos seem less widely used. In MRJ, the videos typically start with a question (e.g., how to say X in Russian?), and then give a couple of examples. Based on the examples, the L2 learner is invited to come up with an explanation or rule, before in conclusion the instructor suggests a rule. While it is too early to draw firm conclusions about the value of instructional videos, student evaluations so far are positive (see section 6 and Appendix 1 for further details).

**4. Language teaching as a cultural medium**

In our dynamically developing world, a crucial element in foreign language learning is familiarity with the culture associated with the country of the target language. Learning a foreign language cannot be limited to mastering its vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation because students also need a general knowledge of the cultural context. Absence of such knowledge may lead not only to semantic, but also to intercultural misunderstanding.

Comprehensive knowledge of the culture and history of the country associated with the target language improves students’ general proficiency, leads to better understanding of the cultural context, and promotes a respectful attitude toward the culture. In addition, this type of knowledge helps students to use the target language more accurately and appropriately in real-life situations (Zajceva and Lomoxova 2016, Nemtchinova 2020).

Whereas the cultural component plays a major role at higher CEFR levels, one has to be selective in what students should know about Russia at the beginner level. In this resource we have aimed at emphasizing that language teaching is cultural communication and that all texts should convey cultural values. The resource has been enriched with layers of historical and geographical information.

## *4.1. Historical component: the plot as a dynamic journey*

The plot of MRJ presents a detective story about two siblings from Norway who travel to Russia to find their relatives and learn about their family history. Maria, who is 21 years old, and Peter, who is 15, have a Norwegian mother and a father from Russia who has Sami heritage. From the start the family is well familiar with Russian culture and the siblings have been exposed to the Russian language. One day Maria and Peter find a box with old family pictures in the attic of their family’s home in Tromsø. From their grandfather they learn more about the circumstances under which their great-great-grandfather immigrated to Norway in the early 1920s together with his wife and the youngest of his three sons. Their connection with the two older sons who stayed behind in Russia was lost. Maria and Peter decide to travel to Russia and, while visiting relatives from their father’s side, to find the descendants of the two older brothers and further information about them. The siblings succeed in finding their relatives, and they meet many people and see many different places along the way. The lessons unfold more or less like episodes in a TV series with a culmination in the end. Students who use the resource can look forward to an unexpected twist in the final lessons as Maria and Peter learn a surprising truth about their family roots. All the characters in the story have real-life prototypes and the historical credibility of the events mentioned in the text has been checked by consulting relevant literature and experts in Russian and Norwegian history.

What makes MRJ truly special is that the resource pays special attention to building competence in the culture and history of Russia, implemented in a variety of ways. The story of the siblings’ family reproduces in miniature Russian history in the 19-20th centuries. As the story develops, through this family we learn about important historical events in Russia and the Soviet Union: the Pomor trade, the October revolution of 1917, the emigration of the 1920s, Stalinist repressions, WWII and the siege of Leningrad, as well as post-war and modern life in Russia. The idea of a journey through time and historical events as well as through human destinies is further supported by abundant illustrations: color pictures of the present and black and white family photos of the past (see Figure 4).

A picture containing text

Description automatically generatedA group of people posing for the camera

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

Figure 4. Illustrations in MRJ. Maria and Peter on a train on their way from Murmansk to Arkhangelsk (lesson 19). An old family photo: great-great-grandfather Alexander, his wife Uliana and youngest son Petr in Arkhangelsk by the Holy Trinity Cathedral, destroyed in 1929.

Moreover, MRJ places strong emphasis on the cultural and historical connections between Russia and Norway. As already mentioned, the family of the main characters has both Russian and Norwegian heritage, which is not uncommon for Northern Norway. They speak two languages and engage in both Norwegian and Russian cultures. The grandfather comes from the family of a ship owner from Arkhangelsk who escaped to Norway after the Russian revolution of 1917. The plot is based on real historical events and the stories of real families. This way MRJ replaces the “outsider” perspective which is more common in elementary textbooks with the idea of understanding a neighbor with a common past.

***4.2. Geographical component: Russian travel guide***

Since this is a story about a journey through Russia, students learn a lot about the geography and history of specifically Russian places, while also getting acquainted with the cultural and national diversity of the country (e.g., they visit a Sami settlement and a Tatar village). The resource presents Russia as a multicultural country with many different nationalities.

Starting with lesson 14, each lesson contains a “text 3”, which provides additional information about the places that the protagonists visit. First, students get information about some cities in Norway (Tromsø, Bergen, Oslo, Kirkenes), but when the siblings cross the border and start their journey, the resource provides information about various places in Russia. This information may include some of the following components:

* Interesting facts about these cities (e.g., Arkhangelsk, Murmansk, Yekaterinburg, Irkutsk, Vladivostok);
* Information about the various nationalities that live in these places, their culture and holidays (e.g., the Saami in Lovozero and the Saami Games, the Mishari Tatars in the Medyana village and their national holiday Sabantuy);
* Interesting tourist routes (Museum *Malye Karely*, Old Moscow, Trans-Siberian Railway, Lake Baikal, the Far East, the Golden Ring of Russia, the Petersburg of Fyodor Dostoevsky);
* Russian scientific and cultural institutions (Moscow State University, Akademgorodok in Novosibirsk, the State Hermitage Museum).

Thus, the goal of MRJ in terms of its cultural perspective is twofold. On the one hand, we aim to present the cultural, national, religious, and geographic diversity of Russia. On the other hand, we make Russia more comprehensible and familiar to a Norwegian audience by drawing historical parallels between the two countries and emphasizing positive neighborly relations in the common history of Russia and Norway over the centuries. The type of cultural information that is integrated into the resource departs from the students’ interests and needs, securing a stronger motivation in the teaching process and a better understanding of our “neighbor”.

Because MRJ is an electronic resource, it can be continuously updated to keep pace with technological and geopolitical developments. Unlike a static textbook, MRJ can grow and adapt as the world changes, replacing references to realia as they become obsolete (such as fax machines and CD-ROMs that have been replaced by email and cloud storage) and adding topics relevant to current events.

**5. MRR vs. other interactive elementary textbooks**

For the previous few decades, language instructors have been developing and implementing interactive components in the Russian teaching materials. Up till now, several strategies aimed at increasing the involvement of students in the educational process have been implemented in various Russian language courses. In this section we briefly review four widely used resources for teaching Russian at the beginner level, namely *Russian Stage One: Live from Moscow*, *Golosa, Mezhdu nami* and *Russian for beginners A1*, comparing them to MRJ where relevant. All of the comparable resources use English as a metalanguage. The structure of the resources is summarized in Table 1.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | *MRJ* | *Mezhdu nami* | *Russian for beginners A1* | *Golosa* | *Russian Stage One: Live from Moscow* |
| Textbook | + | + | – | + | + |
| Workbook | + | + | – | + | + |
| Entertaining  Video | – | – | – | + | + |
| Grammar video | + | – | + | – | – |
| Audio with exercises | + | + | + | + | + |
| Review | + | – | – | + | ? |
| Teacher’s book | – | upon request | – | upon request | + |
| Supplementary materials | + | upon request | + | + | + |
| Number of units | 35 | 10 | 16 | 21 | 14 |

Table 1. Components of five Russian courses for beginners.

Apart from MRJ, *Russian for beginners A1* is the only other course available as a MOOC, however instead of EdX it uses the platform Coursera. *Russian for beginners A1* is a self-study course by design but it can also be used for instructed teaching. However, the structure of the course (partially imposed by Coursera) might be problematic for both students and instructors. Grammar videos form the core of the course, followed by uploaded pdf-files with a few texts and the keys to the exercises. Every unit (or “week”) is followed by a multiple-choice test.

*Russian Stage One: Live from Moscow* is built around two one-hour long staged films divided into smaller fragments. The length of the fragments varies between seven and ten minutes. Each fragment corresponds to one unit. The film features an American photographer who came to Russia to capture the essence of Russian everyday life and culture. The rest of the course is a well-accepted combination of a textbook and a workbook, alongside a teacher’s book and other supplementary materials.

*Golosa* is also a course that consists of a textbook, a workbook, audio and authentic video materials. The authors of *Golosa* were pioneers in introducing an interactive online component; all the exercises in the workbook were earlier available at RussianLabPearson. Both *Golosa* and *Russian Stage One: Live from Moscow* are designed for one academic year; the rest of the courses are meant for one semester.

*Mezhdu nami* (2015[[3]](#footnote-3): <https://mezhdunami.org>) is a free web-based textbook. This textbook contains texts (mostly dialogs), obligatory vocabulary, grammar instructions and interactive exercises, and is well supplied with audio files.

MRJ includes all basic components, except for a teacher’s book and entertaining supplementary videos. A special bonus of the resource are instructional grammatical videos and an elaborate system of review. It is interesting to compare MRJ to the course *Russian for beginners A1*, which also includes instructional grammar videos. The videos in both resources are typically short (2-4 minutes), topical (i.e., address one topic such as the three grammatical genders), and consist of slides with voice-over. In the resource from Petersburg, the instructor’s face is not visible at all, while in MRJ the instructor presents himself as “The Grammar Uncle” and shows his face at the beginning of each video. This format establishes a more personal relation between the instructor and the L2 learner and enables the instructor to convey his enthusiasm about the Russian language.

Most elementary training packages discussed here consistently introduce immediate review (a “test yourself” section after every unit). However, for most efficient reviewing, the information has to undergo several rehearsal loops, which include rehearsal and retrieval. This suggests incorporating review at different levels. The review system in MRJ is comprised of three levels: immediate review, short-term review (an extra review unit after every third unit), and long-term review (three entire lessons spaced apart in the resource). Short-term reviews are designed to activate and systematize the topics learned during approximately one week of study. Long-term reviews allow students to evaluate their progress and shore up weak spots. Finding the best strategy for tailoring review units is not a trivial question: a review section should neither be too small nor too big. Furthermore, review sections should mix exercises targeting vocabulary and grammar. Review sections in MRJ offer decision-making and open-ended exercises ranging from multiple-choice and filling in the blanks, to sentence formation, sentence transformation, and essays.

Another characteristic of the resource is that it is primarily aimed at a Norwegian audience and thus sets a major focus on the cultural relations between Russia and Norway. MRJ broadens the geographical scope, traditional for the beginner level. Through this innovation we were able to present the cultural and national diversity in Russia (see section 4).

**6. Feedback from students**

At the end of Fall 2021 we asked students at UiT and Kongsbakken High School in Tromsø some questions about their experience with MRJ. The resource received a lot of positive feedback from both university and high school students. The students unanimously agreed that it is a great resource to use in teaching that they would recommend to others who want to study Russian. It is notable, however, that the high school students reacted more favorably to the use of this resource for self-study.

Both groups concurred that the MRJ resource is well structured, user friendly, accessible, detailed, rich in content, and provides the opportunity to work independently in an interesting, creative, and modern way. The students also enjoyed having a story that was not only interesting, but also taught and promoted a greater understanding of the Russian language. Additionally, students from both groups appreciated the availability and accessibility of the resource, allowing them to work with it anywhere and at any time. Furthermore, feedback concerning “The Grammar Uncle” (grammar videos) was very enthusiastic, indicating that they were a great success.

Students’ criticism of MRJ mostly concerns technical issues related to the EdX platform, for example, EdX’s oversensitivity to uppercase and lowercase letters and spacing. Potential answer alternatives are marked as incorrect if they do not exactly match the keys in EdX. This is a problem area that would be rather difficult to resolve. Simultaneously, some of the critical feedback is easily improved upon, for instance:

* altering some descriptions of assignments and exercises,
* adjusting the learning pace and quantity of teaching material for each hour,
* adding explanations to the answer key follow up, and
* adding tips and feedback for the students to know what they should focus on improving.

Students from both groups had very similar responses. The teacher who worked with both groups observed that the high school students used EdX more, and cared less about writing by hand than the university students did, although this topic was not specifically targeted in the questionnaire.

**7. Conclusions**

In this article we have discussed a new digital resource, *My Russian Journey* (MRJ), that aims to address major challenges confronting contemporary teachers and learners. The resource contributes to digitalization of Russian language learning by building a resource for CEFR level A1 and making it available on the open MOOC platform Open EdX. Due to the simplicity of the design, EdX allows instructors to build grammar and text modules in the resource as short meaningful chunks, which are organized into more general blocks. With access to the сourse code, any part of the resource can be freely updated to reflect technological, geopolitical and cultural changes in the society. The MRJ resource contains a wide range of various modules, with instructions and feedback, which make the interface suitable for hybrid teaching. This multifaceted design gives students a rich learning environment that they can take with them on their smartphones, tablets, and computers.

Through an overview of MRJ, we have discussed several essential issues in teaching elementary Russian. First, we have analyzed how a digital educational resource can be integrated into language teaching and whether digital platforms can completely replace paper textbooks. The experience from the first semester of teaching with MRJ and the feedback from the students suggest that both media are needed. A paper version of the texts and exercises is still in demand for practicing handwriting and securing good interaction among the class participants. One can argue that physical teaching always requires some physical teaching materials.

MRJ reconceptualizes grammar instruction through active student participation in the design of the resource. Students have contributed to the grammar sections by providing feedback on their structure and content. The explanatory sections are interlaced with interactive exercises and accompanied by instructional videos available to students before and after class. Student participation has turned out to be of great importance to the resource and grammar instructions are adjusted to the learning strategies and goals of the students. At the same time, student involvement is rather demanding and requires thorough planning and supervision. It is important to find well-defined and suitable tasks for student assistants.

Finally, we have argued that language teaching even at the beginner level should convey cultural content. MRJ’s texts are united by a dynamic plot and supplied with rich cultural information, presenting historical, national, and geographical diversity of Russia. The resource is primarily aimed at a Norwegian audience and introduces important historical and cultural parallels between Norway and Russia. In the current geopolitical situation, the cultural component of language teaching is of particular importance. Avoidance of an “outsider” perspective can facilitate student motivation and understanding of our “neighbor”.

What other challenges lie ahead and how can we create a truly engaging learning environment? As follows from the student feedback, when using a digital resource, it is important to adjust the quantity of teaching material for each class. With many various exercises available, it is crucial to specify what is mandatory “homework” for each class. Within the pilot semester, it has become evident that both a digital platform and a paper version of the materials are needed, however, the question of how the two should be combined leaves room for discussion. It is important to gather more data and student feedback.

**8. Lessons learned**

What inspired you to take up the project in the first place?

* MRJ is primarily aimed at a Norwegian audience and sets a major focus on the cultural relations between Russia and Norway
* availability: demand for a digital resource with a compendium as opposed to a regular textbook
* At the beginner level we need a book with Norwegian (Scandinavian) focus. All relevant books with Norwegian (Scandinavian) as the language of instruction are either outdated (MiP 1999, Sosedi 2000) or grammar-centered (Azbuka 2017). MRJ answers the demand for newer and easier available materials. MiP contained a lot of relevant cultural information for the 1990s, however over time many phenomena became outdated (e.g. CD player, novye russkie 'new Russians, a social class of businessmen that appeared after Perestrojka', fax machines, etc.).
* Moreover, the available books emphasized some established stereotypes about the Russian society: the Russian girl is a model, her boyfriend is a businessman who owns a Mercedes, and he expects that his girlfriend will stop working after they get married.

What pedagogical, technical, personal issues did the author(s) encounter or have to solve during the process?

* **Digital format.** One of the major challenges is choosing an appropriate platform. Making your own website has its benefits, but it presents challenges in terms of updates and requires more human resources (including extra technical support and design developers). Thus, the choice of the EdX platform seemed most reasonable, however, it entailed a number of technical issues, for example, EdX’s oversensitivity to uppercase and lowercase letters and spacing. Potential answer alternatives are marked as incorrect if they do not exactly match the keys in EdX.
* **Instructional videos.** Inspired by the concepts of flipped classrooms and constructivism, we introduce morphological and syntactic patterns in instructional videos (in addition to more traditional instructional sections). We start with function and meaning and proceed with forms or grammatical topics. The grammar sections typically start with a statement of the type “when you go to Russia, you need to talk about X” or “when talking to a Russian, you need to be able to say X”, rather than assertions like “the genitive is a widely used case in Russian”. Furthermore, the explanations are contrastive in the sense that corresponding patterns in languages such as Norwegian and English, which the students already know, are taken as the starting point.
* **Cultural component.** The major challenge presented by the cultural component of the resource was how to express complicated ideas in very simple forms and expressions.
* **Integration of research into teaching**. Challenges with integrating research-based resources like SMARTool and The Russian Constructicon into MRJ. On what grounds do we choose vocabulary and constructions for our teaching materials?

What would you like to share with other teachers of Russian as a Foreign Language?

* In order to successfully implement the flipped classroom technique it is vital to change students approach to individual work with the resource before class and to perceive it as a positive challenge.
* Grammar and text modules in the resource are organized as short meaningful chunks with a clear and convenient structure, which is suitable for both class activities and individual work at home. However, the number of topics covered during each class should be adjusted depending on the number of teaching hours per semester (preferably one should have four hours per lesson).
* paper vs. digital platform. There is still a need for a paper compendium in the classroom. Physical language teaching requires some “physical” materials to practice handwriting and to promote good interaction among class participants.
* The project has been evaluated at multiple levels: through student evaluation forms, questionnaires, interviews, and student participation. Student active involvement in the creation of the grammar sections has adjusted grammar instruction in MRJ. We move away from a purely top-down approach in language teaching and implement grammar instruction written in collaboration.

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**Appendix 1. End-of-semester feedback responses[[4]](#footnote-4)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Questions:** | **UiT students’ opinion** | **Kongsbakken HS students’ opinion** |
| What was positive about the resource? | • A new and creative way to learn languages  • Availability – you can work with the resource anywhere and anytime  • Structured, easy to find information, easy to work with, and comprehensible  • Nice to be able to go back to review demanding topics  • Good, clear explanations, and the ability to complete grammar problems on your own.  • Detailed and rich grammar section  • The ability to do exercises several times in EdX to practice  • Having an interesting story that develops and learn Russian at the same time  • Good examples and helpful phrases used in everyday Russian | I think the resource is structured in a good way.  • It is very easy to understand what you are learning. I am very happy!  • Varied tasks, nice illustrations  • You can work anywhere and anytime with the resource  • The grammar uncle's videos have been very helpful and I think the videos have the perfect amount of good explanations and information. |
| What could be improved? | • Sometimes there are no answer options in exercises  • There is no explanation in the answer key as to what the mistake is and where it was made, like it is in a platform like Duolingo  • Lack of follow-up / tips on what a student can work on improving  • EdX is more sensitive to punctuation, capital letters and spaces than it should be  • Some typos are present  • The words in each lesson have not been compiled into an accessible dictionary  • There could be more tasks and exercises | • There should be examples of how the assignments should be completed  • EdX is very sensitive to commas, spaces, etc.  • Sometimes the tasks are formulated in a way that is difficult to understand  • It would be great to have all the grammar we need gathered in one place |
| The “Grammar Uncle” (grammar videos) | • It was very nice!  • Love the grammar uncle!  • It was very well, clearly, and carefully explained  • Very useful!  • The videos have been very helpful, and they have saved the lecturers many emails or minutes during the class with questions  • Very nice to be able to go back to listening, the only thing I miss is to easily find the videos, instead of having to click through the whole lesson | •It helps a lot to have videos with Grammar uncle!  •Very useful!  •I can always repeat grammar with the grammar uncle at home, it helps! |
| How do you experience having two resources (EdX and compendium) to work with vocabulary, texts, grammar, and exercises?  When do you prefer to use the compendium and when do you use EdX? | • I use EdX very much, it is very practical to be able to work with the subject on my cell phone, but sometimes it is easier to do assignments in the book  • I use EdX to read texts and to check the assignments that I did in the book first, since it is faster  • I use the compendium to do assignments, to write as much as possible by hand. I use EdX at the same time to understand how the assignments can be completed.  I use the compendium every time I do Russian. I do not use EdX much, as there have been some technological issues  • It is difficult to use EdX in class, and the compendium is more manageable  • I have not used EdX much, I mostly used the books and presentations  • I preferred to use the compendium because this gave me the opportunity to practice writing by hand and it was just easier to find the necessary information  • I did not use EdX because it is so sensitive to typos as opposed to the compendium | • Uses EdX only (2 students)  • Uses both sources (4 students)  • Prefers and uses books over EdX (1 student) |

1. To access the resource, click the "Enroll" button and choose login with Feide or by filling out a registration form (name, date of birth and email). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, for instance, *Visualizing Russian* (Clancy 2014-2021: <http://visualizingrussian.fas.harvard.edu/>) and *If You Say So* (*Kak skažeš* 2021 (CEFR level B1+): <https://vsrussian.com/courses/5c0d40d765a47aa367cbfb4c>). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Mezhdu nami* is constantly updated by the authors. The latest available version is of 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Similar responses have been condensed into one. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)