

'MICROLEARNING' AS A METHOD OF TEACHING RUSSIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT THE BEGINNERS' LEVEL



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Abstract: *The method of 'Microlearning' has had a tremendous impact on the process of acquiring knowledge in recent times. As the name suggests, microlearning is foremost a method of providing information in small blocks. It is about understanding and mastering skills in small portions.*

The development of smartphones and their widespread use, especially among the youth, has propelled the concept of 'e-learning' forward. It has brought net connectivity to the learners and has provided the framework for the development of the method of microlearning.

In the current context, when teachers are coming to terms with the 'new normal', teaching foreign languages, specifically Russian to beginners, at the level A1, is quite challenging. This paper discusses how microlearning provides a solution to continue the teaching-learning process, not just in the present, but also, the future.

Keywords: *Microlearning, Russian as a Foreign Language, Levels 0 - A1 - A2*

The method of 'Microlearning' has had a tremendous impact on the process of acquiring knowledge in recent times. As the name indicates, microlearning is foremost a method of providing information in small blocks. It is about understanding and mastering skills in small portions.

The question arises whether microlearning can provide a solution, as a method complementary to the conventional methods of teaching a foreign language, to continue the teaching-learning process, not just in the present, but also, the future. Teaching at present is being carried out in the online mode. Consequently, conventional methods of classroom teaching are not suitable in this context.

This paper is based on experiential primary research and secondary research of available literature on the topic.

The usage of the term 'Microlearning' became widespread in the 1990's, as it became known as a method of taking classes online. The internet reimagined the context in which the teaching-learning process took place. Students did not have to be present at a specific location as was required in the traditional mode. Lessons could be streamed online, to learners in other cities within the country and also worldwide. The term 'e-learning' came into being.

Alexander Sangra writes, that "E-learning could also be considered a natural evolution of distance learning, which has always taken advantage of the latest tools to emerge in the context of technologies for structuring education. In fact, some authors consider e-learning to be a new generation of distance education, even as they point to significant differences between the two and highlight a key starting point: "E-learning does not represent more of the same (...) [It is] about doing things differently" (Garrison & Anderson, 2003, p. 7)".¹

Researchers base their understanding of e-learning on various approaches, emphasising the technological aspect ("E-learning is to take a course online using a modem, wireless, or cable connection to access academic course material from a computer, phone, or handheld device" (Governors State University, 2008); or the fact of the delivery ("E-learning is the delivery of education (all activities relevant to instructing, teaching, and learning) through various electronic media" (Koohang & Harman, 2005)).²

Definitions of this mode of learning can be communication oriented ("... uses computerised communication systems as an environment for communication, the exchange of information and interaction between students and instructors." (Bermejo, 2005); or focus on the educational paradigm ("E-learning is the use of new multimedia technologies and the Internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services, as well as remote exchange and collaboration" (Alonso et al., 2005)).³

The development of smartphones and their widespread use, especially among the youth, has propelled the concept of 'e-learning' forward. It has brought net connectivity to the learners and has provided the framework for the development of the method of microlearning.

In the current context, when teachers are coming to terms with the 'new normal', teaching foreign languages, specifically Russian to beginners, at the level A1, is quite challenging. The use of new tools and platforms had to be understood, and one that would be suitable, chosen. New methods had to be adopted to continue facilitating the flow of information to the students in a meaningful manner. Microlearning provides a solution to continue the teaching-learning process, not just in the present, but also the future.

1 Sangra A. et al. Building an Inclusive Definition of E-learning: An approach to the conceptual framework//The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning. Vol 13. No.2. April 2012. pg. 146. URL. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ983277.pdf> as on 7.8.20

2 Ibid pg. 148

3 Ibid pg. 149

As its name suggests, microlearning is foremost a method of providing information in small blocks. There is no fixed time duration of a block– it can generally be from five to fifteen minutes long. This method focuses on understanding a topic in small portions. Secondly, as this method is based on the use of smartphones, the teacher uploads the block, and the students can access it at a time convenient to them. Thus, learning can take place anywhere and at any time suitable to the student.

As Peter A. Bruck et al opine, “The basic notion of micro-learning is that people can learn better and more effectively when the content is broken down into digestible parts and learning thus takes the form of small steps (Simon, 1974). This is based on human cognition theory which places the limits of processing information in short-term memory (Cowan, 2001). This temporal dimension, learning in small steps better fits into the human processor model of receiving information or knowledge in small homogeneous chunks (Simon, 1974) and fits well in the small screen size of mobile devices (Robes, 2009; Hartson&Hiks, 1989)”⁴

Blocks are devoted to a specific topic. Each block is structured around two activities: The first, provides an explanation of a single concept, the second assesses the comprehension of the concept.

An attempt was made by me to follow this method while teaching the students of Russian as a foreign language of the second semester. I was still becoming familiar with the various online platforms, and decided to begin with recording explanations of a few topics that needed revision, and sending to the group as a voice message on WhatsApp. The length of the explanation of each topic was around ten minutes. The explanations were received positively by the students, and it was then decided to cover new topics also in a similar manner.

Amongst some of the topics taught to the second semester, were ‘Use of modal words’, ‘Formation of the Future Tense using the Perfective Aspect of the Verb’, ‘Transformation of Direct Speech to Indirect Speech’. The last topic was divided into separate blocks, based on the type of sentences – statements or interrogative; and on the mood – conjunctive or imperative. At first, five sets of sentences were sent as a photograph, as examples. This was followed by a voice message, in which all the sentences were first read out, then the definition and explanation about the difference in the structure of the sentences as well as the punctuation marks was given.

For the second part of the block, i.e., the assessment, students were asked to complete one or two exercises from the textbook or workbook, photograph the written work and send as a WhatsApp message. Correction was done using photo editing apps and comments were sent in the next message. To improve their reading skills, the students were asked to read passages from the given texts and send a recording.

4 Peter A. Bruck, Luvai Motiwalla, Florian Foerster. Mobile Learning with Micro-content: A Framework and Evaluation pg. 530. Proceedings of the 25th Bled eConference eDependability: Reliable and Trustworthy eStructures, eProcesses, eOperations and eServices for the Future. [https://domino.fov.uni-mb.si/proceedings.nsf/Proceedings/C3FB705E43F2F302C1257A2A0032CC30/\\$File/P38_Bruck_35.pdf](https://domino.fov.uni-mb.si/proceedings.nsf/Proceedings/C3FB705E43F2F302C1257A2A0032CC30/$File/P38_Bruck_35.pdf) as on 10.8.20

At a later stage, when I became aware of Learning Management Systems or LMS, recorded audio explanations were uploaded on Google Classroom, and the students handed in their assignments on it too.

The method of 'Microlearning' includes the use of various mobile applications in the learning process. They can be applications about the news, weather, sports, maps of the city, applications about booking airline or train tickets etc. They can be used as an amazing source of material in the process of language learning.

I would like to focus on three applications that proved immensely helpful for the students in reinforcing the grammar concepts, especially in the current context.

One of the many effective applications for building vocabulary are the dictionaries. Students can download the applications in their smartphones for online as well as offline dictionaries, such as Lingvo live and AbbyyLingvo Dictionaries Offline. In addition to understanding the meaning of a word, beginners can also read the multiple meanings of that word, a concept they will use at later levels. They learn about the literal and figurative meanings, the synonyms and antonyms of that word. As these dictionaries also provide many examples, the students learn about the usage of a word in word combinations and sentences too.

Russian is a syntactical language, with the grammatical meanings expressed in the word forms. The applications Lingvo live and AbbyyLingvo Dictionaries Offline reinforce the grammar by providing the declension of nouns, pronouns, adjectives etc. in tabular form, in the singular as well as the plural forms, and the conjugation of verbs in the past, present and future tenses. They also show the participle forms of the verbs according to gender, number and case, as well as the verbal adverbs. The applications, thus can be used at the advanced levels too.

Most of the students who had rushed back home due to the lockdown, did not have dictionaries at hand. The applications familiarised the learners with the use of explanatory dictionaries of a foreign language. They also helped to create assignments where the learning is more student oriented. For example, a list of adjectives in the original form was given, and students asked to form word combinations with nouns of their own choice, in all the genders, as well as in the plural. This verified their grasp of the various hard and soft consonant adjective endings, and also the plural form ending of both the adjectives and the nouns.

Students were also given a short list of verbs, with the task of forming their own sentences. The sentences should be about their routine, and reflect their interests.

Apart from dictionaries, two other educational applications were actively used in the course of teaching students of the second semester - 'Talk2Russia' and 'Learn & Go'. They have been developed recently by the faculty members of Moscow State University, for students of Russian as a foreign language. They are for students of the levels 0 - A1 – A2, and have been recommended by the International Association of Teachers of Russian Language and Literature – MAPRYAL. The applications were used as additional learning tools, along with the prescribed textbook.

Talk2Russia has three sections - an Introductory Phonetical Course, Elementary and Basic Russian. In the context of my experience, the Introductory Phonetical Course has been used to reinforce the skill of speaking, beginning with the pronunciation of sounds, to understanding the rules of pronunciation that are specific to Russian. In addition to listening, while using the app, the students can also improve their ability to recognise and master the Cyrillic letters.

The Introductory Phonetical Course has ten units, each having a short explanation in English. To improve their skill of listening and speaking, students were asked to listen to the recording of individual vowels and consonants. They were asked to do the interactive exercises given in the application, differentiating various sounds, requiring them to tap on the letter they heard. A progress bar under each exercise marked the pace, and also indicated, by colour, whether the answer was correct or not. The exercises are at the end of each section and emphasise listening to, and comparing and repeating the sounds.

The learners can progress from one unit to the next, from listening to the sounds in isolation, to listening to a sound in a word, understanding the changes that occur in a sound in a context. In addition to audio files, the application includes video files, which highlight the corresponding letter which is being pronounced, or show objects denoted by a specific word. The learners can learn at their own pace, revising or moving ahead as they choose.

The Elementary course has units relating to real-life situations, for example, 'At the Airport', 'Baggage Claim', 'Taxi Ride' etc. Each unit is subdivided into 'New Words', 'Expressions', 'Watch the Video' and 'Grammar'. New words are introduced along with a picture and an audio file; 'Expressions' include words as well as basic sentences relating to the topic of the unit, such as 'The passport is here', 'Where is the visa?', 'Are you a tourist' etc. Students can read and listen simultaneously to the expressions. In the 'Watch the video' subdivision, students can watch the video which includes the related words and expressions. They can read the corresponding text given alongside.

The 'Grammar' section is a commentary on all the topics covered in a specific unit. For example, for the first unit there are brief explanations on the gender and number of nouns, on pronouns. The explanations are accompanied by tables and interactive exercises. There is a progress bar with each exercise indicating the pace and correct or incorrect answer by colour. The students thus get feedback immediately.

Over the past few months, to reinforce their skills, students were given the assignment of revising the Introductory Phonetical Course in a guided, but independent manner. Material from the Elementary section of the application was assigned next. The students were given the home assignment of reading all the new words and expressions of the topic 'At the Restaurant'. The expressions have a few verbs and constructions that were new to the students, but the translation was given alongside. Students were also asked to read the grammatical explanation given at the end of the section. This section, for example, explained the use of the construction 'Мне нравится'. This construction is difficult to remember, as the verb agrees with the object, i.e., the noun in the nominative case, and not with the logical subject. The topic had been covered earlier using the prescribed textbook, but the application used it in a specific situation.

The application Learn & Go is about a complex, yet interesting topic in Russian – the verbs of motion. Verbs of motion are classified into two umbrella categories, one denoting the means of motion, i.e. on foot or by transport, the other denoting the direction of motion, i.e. single or multidirectional.

As teachers and students of Russian as a foreign language are well aware, the verbs are un-prefixed as well as prefixed, denoting a variety of meanings – the beginning of an action, arrival or departure, motion undertaken for a short period of time, motion randomly covering an area, or motion along a path. It could be a motion undertaken in addition to, on way to the main motion, motion towards an object or away from it etc. All this wonderful variety of meaning is expressed syntactically with the help of prefixes.

One must also take into account the aspect of the verb – imperfective or perfective. This grammatical category relates to the limit of an action, i.e. whether the verb indicates completion, result of an action or motion, or its progress.

The application Learn & Go follows the principle of ‘from simple to complex’. It covers 14 pairs of verbs of motion and 16 prefixes. It has more than twenty units and each fourth unit is a small quiz. There is an introductory unit with a comprehensive explanation of the basic un-prefixed verbs of motion, with their conjugation in the present and past tenses. Each unit starts with a brief explanation in English with illustrations and a variety of examples. Notes are given for additional information. The exercises at the end of each unit are interactive and have a progress bar. If a sentence proves to be difficult, the student can tap on the icon ‘Help’, which will take him/her back to the explanation section. If the task is completed correctly, the positive reinforcement is given in the form of remarks, such as ‘Well done!’ There are no negative remarks!

The students were given the assignment to first independently revise the prefixed verbs of motion that had been covered while classroom teaching was still on. Later they had to read the explanation of the new material given in English and do the assignment. We were able to cover two new prefixes in this manner.

The applications ‘Talk2Russia’ and ‘Learn & Go’ follow the communicative method of teaching and are wonderful tools that are being used in microlearning. They are oriented towards independent learning by the students and are structured in a manner that acquiring knowledge takes place in small steps.

To conclude, in the era of e-learning, ‘Microlearning’ has shown itself to be an irreplaceable method of imparting knowledge. The learners have immediate access to information that is provided in small blocks. Each block relates to a single topic. Students can study at their own pace and time, a provision that greatly reduces anxiety and helps in better comprehension. Each block has exercises for self-assessment and students receive the results immediately.

‘Microlearning’ as a method is an amalgamation of various forms of media – text, audio, video, and is interactive in nature. It is a complementary method that can support the conventional methods of teaching in the present as well as the future.

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‘Microlearning’ как метод обучения русскому языку как иностранному студентов на начальном этапе

Аннотация: В последнее время метод ‘Microlearning’ имеет огромное влияние на процесс приобретения знания. Как можно понять из самого названия, ‘Microlearning’ является прежде всего методом подачи информации в маленьких блоках. Он подразумевает понимание, а также освоение навыков маленькими порциями.

Разработка смартфонов и их широкое применение, особенно молодежью, дал большой толчок понятию ‘e-learning’. Смартфоны обеспечивали не только доступ к интернету, но и создали рамки для развития метода ‘Microlearning’.

В настоящее время, когда преподавателям приходится привыкаться к «новому нормальному», обучение иностранным языкам, а именно РКИ на начальном этапе, является весьма сложной задачей. В нашем докладе обсуждается вопрос о том, как метод ‘Microlearning’ может указать путь к продолжению учебного процесса, не только в настоящее время, но и в будущем.

Ключевые слова: ‘Microlearning’, русский как иностранный, уровни 0-A1-A2