

Teaching and learning Russian using *WhatsApp* Messenger in the Croatian-speaking language environment

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Abstract

This article offers practical solutions (application of modern communication technologies) for teaching Russian to Croatian students in the absence of a language environment. Recommended methods of teaching presented in this article are primarily the result of the author's pedagogical experience, as a Russian language teacher in her private language school *Azbuka* (Zagreb, Croatia) and experience acquired as an external lecturer of Russian language at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (University of Zagreb, Croatia) within the courses *Russian Language practice* (first year) and *Russian language morphology* (first and second year) of the Russian language and literature study programme during the academic year 2020/2021.

Keywords

Russian, Croatian, blended learning, hybrid environment, *WhatsApp*.

1. Introduction

The present day is marked by rapid technological progress and digital media consumption, which have led to the emergence of powerful new, impactful and widely used communication [16].

Modern trends are reflected in all aspects of our lives, including the formal and informal education system. Keeping up with contemporary trends requires the inevitable introduction of information technologies and their innovative products into the education process.

The methodological basis for studying this topic are the theory and concept of famous Russian scientists (A. A. Akishina [1, 2], O. E. Kagan [2], E. G. Azimov [5, 6, 7, 8], A. N. Bogomolov [10, 11], E. S. Polat [32], I. A. Orehova [29], A. N. Shukin [8, 35, 36], N. D. Gal'skova [19], N. I. Gez [19, 20], E. I. Passov [31], O. I. Rudenko-Morgun [33], L. A. Dunaeva [16, 17], M. A. Bovtenko [12, 13, 14, 15]) and the author's teaching experience.

The aim of this paper is to explain the possibility of reconciling traditional teaching methods with the application of modern communication tools – in this case, the use of *WhatsApp* Messenger in teaching the Russian language (from Breakthrough (A1) to Vantage (B2) level) at a foreign language school. It discusses the advantages and disadvantages of using this communication tool, with practical examples from a study by the author, who is a native speaker of both Russian and Croatian, as a direct observer of activities and feedback received from students. The purpose of this article is to give an example of how traditional learning methods can be combined with modern methods (blended learning) and confirm how using *WhatsApp* Messenger in teaching Russian to Croatian-speaking students can be a motivating and stimulating [9] factor for lifelong learning.

2. Use of *WhatsApp* Messenger in teaching

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It is well known that learning a foreign language is a challenge for anyone. Although Russian and Croatian share a common Slavic origin, this on the one hand is a factor that facilitates learning, while on the other, the numerous grammatical, lexical and syntactic similarities often lead to confusion and errors. Today, language instruction in foreign language schools in Croatia is most often based on combining traditional teaching methods and applying modern technologies, aimed at making the learning process more dynamic and interesting, and increasing student motivation [3].

The students enrolled in the private language school *Azbuka* were mainly university students and highly educated employed individuals in the age range of 20–50 years. Their goals of learning Russian ranged from the use of language in business to learning a language as a hobby, love of Russian literature and similar. Specifically, on the one hand, learning Russian was conditioned by the need of entrepreneurs, tourism professionals, travel guides to communicate with their Russian partners and clients, while on the other, the decision to learn this Slavic language was motivated by a desire to communicate with native speakers, to travel, and reading literary works in the original.

As a teacher of Russian and Italian, and relying on the author's pedagogical experience with textbook-based learning with the addition of written homework, it seemed expedient to fit the use of *WhatsApp* mobile application into the teaching process. The idea was born when one of the students suggested that a group of learners and the teacher should connect in a group with the aim of easier communication and for the exchange of technical information. His proposal was accepted with great enthusiasm.

Nearly every day, various kind of content (current events in Russia; cultural peculiarities such as customs, traditions, holidays; news from the world of science and technology; lifestyle, material suited to the students' special interests) was published to the group by the author, aimed at arousing interest in learning Russian and the study of Russian culture, and to serve as a subject of discussion among language learners. The ultimate goal of this activity was to inspire students to interact and talk with one another.

2.1 E-communication features

It is important to emphasise that the principal rule of communication was initially set by the teacher: all questions related to teaching, homework, etc. should be written exclusively in Russian. Needless to say, in the beginning, not all students followed the agreed rule, which the teacher made known by using emojis and GIFs that expressed doubts and obstacles in communication. It is important to emphasise that after a short adjustment period, the rules were accepted by students. Students began to react to messages sent to them by the lecturer, they began to ask questions related to specific interesting facts they read. They were encouraged to conduct an internet search to explore a current topic covered in the text and audio messages on *WhatsApp*. The chat was to serve as a space where they could comment on the professor's messages, exchange opinions, and share information [4].

The positive side of using a chat is certainly the opportunity to think about one's reply and having time to choose the right words, as this removes certain psychological barriers to communication. In this communication method, the teacher was given a new role, as a collaborator in the full sense of the word and as a moderator in distance learning.

After becoming more confident in communicating [2], in addition to the use of text messages in Russian and sharing various content (photos, videos, podcasts, audiobooks, memes, jokes etc.) linked to Russian culture, the teacher encouraged students to record short audio (spoken) or video messages following her example. The messages she recorded were mostly entertaining and had a laid-back character. In her videos, the lecturer spoke about how she spent her free time, and described her hobbies. Apparently, students saw a certain role model in their teacher, motivating them to start using audio and video messaging themselves.

The video topics were mostly related to the material they were currently studying according to the programme or to the learners' everyday routines (e.g., going shopping, at the post office, in the bus, at the faculty, at the library, in the hospital, at the pharmacy, in the bank, in the cinema or simply description of a current life moment or weather conditions). Learners were able to ask questions after watching the videos made by their colleagues. They commented on the content in the chat and retold them at the lecture. Thanks to a stimulating and pleasant working atmosphere created by the teacher,

this learning method was met with complete approval from students. It created trusting relationships and thus students became emotionally invested in learning. It was a true personalised, student-centred learning experience that created a hybrid environment and laid the foundations for blended learning [1].

2.2 Examples of exercises used within the WhatsApp application for educational purposes (Breakthrough (A1) – Vantage (B2) level)

The basic premise we were guided by when choosing exercises was in the peculiarities of the Cyrillic alphabet and pronunciation, and complexity of the Russian prepositional case system. One of the tasks was to remove psychological barriers [10] to entry into communication in the target language, and also to teach learners the etiquette of informal communication and to form sociocultural competences.

A frequent activity practiced within the homework was shooting a video on the proposed topic. For example, students were asked to put themselves in the role of a tour guide and show the sights of the city of Zagreb. Virtual excursions could be conducted either in online (live) and offline modes.

The chat was also used by a teacher to share authentic materials (inserts of fiction films, documentaries, shows, series, cartoons) followed by related tasks [11]. Based on the viewed content, students were asked to record a short audio or video file in which they presented a character from the film.

Students were also given an advertisement as the subject of the discussion. The questions asked were of the following type: *What could happen next? How would you behave in that situation?* Learners were assigned to record their own commercial. While doing so, the emphasis was placed on creativity and humour. This exercise spurred great interest among students.

Students were sometimes given group assignments that were especially challenging and fun. For example, they had to record a short audio or video interview in which one person played a journalist and the other a celebrity. In these exercises, both grammatical accuracy and originality of their work was evaluated.

As the use of *WhatsApp* to record audio and video files became common and students managed to overcome their initial embarrassment and discomfort, it became a practice to record occasional greetings for certain holidays (Christmas, New Year, Easter, Women's Day, birthdays). Students looked forward to this task and performed it with great pleasure. During carnival season, the most creative students presented the character they were disguised as with a suitable song or a joke.

Another exercise that students performed outside of regular classes and which encountered great interest was to follow live events (cultural lectures, concerts, theatre plays, etc.) through links sent by the teacher in a chat group. Later, learners had to comment on what they saw and were given certain exercises related to the material.

Occasionally, usually once a semester, they were offered a virtual museum tour of one of the most famous Russian museums (State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, using Google's Street View technology [8]; Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow [14], which offers 3D version of walks for mobile viewing with immersive virtual reality glasses and audio guides; State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg [6]). They were asked to select a specific piece of art, explain their choice, describe what it represents and express their opinion about the piece. This kind of exercise expands student horizons and raises the aesthetic taste of students.

Before the end of the summer semester, we found it best to organise the game *Guess a word*. One student gives a written indication of the concept they have thought of and the rest of the group must guess the word. The game can last long enough to keep students from getting bored and tedious and to have an educational character [13].

3. Advantages of using WhatsApp Messenger in language learning

In our opinion, *WhatsApp* helped to improve student articulation and phonetic skills overall. Listening to the record as many times as you need is an excellent way of perfecting the mentioned linguistic aspects.

Another great advantage of using this application is that it gives the teacher the opportunity to see student mistakes (feedback), which can then be analysed and systematised [15]. The teacher can choose to correct or comment on errors or suggest explanations and encourage learners to do the same.

To display the correct communication patterns, the teacher can use screenshots of specific parts of the student's polylogue. Mobile learning is also an effective tool for the repetition of material learned in the classroom.

We can conclude that the popularity of mobile learning is increasing significantly [12]. The opportunities it provides in learning and improving a foreign language are very diverse. Involving various mobile applications like *WhatsApp* in the learning process helps to improve student writing and speech skills, and to increase their motivation [5] to learn foreign languages.

4. Note on the use of *WhatsApp* Messenger in an academic environment

We would like to comment on the use of the *WhatsApp* Messenger as a mean of a communication at a higher education institution. Namely, in the academic year 2020/2021, the author taught Russian as an external associate at the Department of East Slavic Languages and Literature, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Zagreb (Croatia). During two semesters she held classes in the courses *Language practice* (1st year) and *Russian language morphology* (1st and 2nd year) in the Russian Language and Literature study programme.

Since this period was marked by a pandemic, a change in teaching conditions was inevitable. The deterioration of the epidemiological situation at the end of 2000 required that teaching should be switched to online form, which covered virtually the entire academic year.

Changing the way of teaching was stressful for both teachers and students and required a period of adjustment. Since classes began to take place through communication platforms such as *Zoom*, *Skype* and similar, *WhatsApp* Messenger was used only as a facilitator in solving urgent technical issues related to teaching, in organising the teaching process and homework, and for ambiguities related to the material. All students were connected in a group on this application and were able to communicate with the teacher at any time. All questions and answers were public to all group members, and the nature of the questions mainly concerned the whole group.

Through *WhatsApp*, students were also able to view midterm exams they wrote online.

We can conclude that *WhatsApp* Messenger significantly facilitated communication [7] for students and teachers and was a reliable mean of exchanging necessary information during the pandemic.

5. Conclusion

It is important to point out that author's teaching practice was primarily strongly supported by theoretical and methodological guidelines of eminent Russian scientists and specialist teachers of Russian as a foreign language stated in the introduction of this article. This was an indispensable aspect in the application of *WhatsApp* Messenger in modern teaching.

We consider that *WhatsApp* Messenger can play a positive role as an educational setting to facilitate foreign learning. As shown by our pedagogical experience, it balances the needs of every learner. It is an excellent didactic tool in the work of any teacher and helps to accomplish their unique professional educational objectives. We should highlight that this didactic technique is quite labour-intensive for the teacher and requires careful exercise preparation. The new role of the lecturer is to be an equal partner in communication, as this supports students and monitors messaging.

We are aware that in the future, language learners will primarily use the written language, i.e., they will use it in written electronic communication instead of handwriting, due to the growing computerisation and the emergence of communication applications (messengers) such as *WhatsApp*, *Viber* and the like.

As our experience has shown, *WhatsApp* contributes to the automation of graphic skills, enriches learners' vocabulary and helps learners to learn from their colleagues' mistakes, while also developing their social skills (improves collaboration, interaction and communication). Students quickly lose the fear of making mistakes. This platform helps learners to develop critical thinking abilities, idea-sharing and problem-solving skills. Students' emotional involvement plays a crucial role in learner-centred and

community-centred learning environments, which in turn contributes to the effectiveness of the teaching process.

Since fluent expression in a foreign language requires communication with native speakers, which is known from the didactics of teaching foreign languages, in the absence of a language environment it is necessary to invest much more effort and many more hours of work to practicing and improving communication. The goal of improving communication has been achieved through the use of the *WhatsApp* application. A huge advantage of mobile learning is the simultaneous availability of information, regardless of student location.

It is also necessary to emphasise the significant shortcomings of the use of messengers in teaching. The perception of the provided information may have certain limitations due to the small size of smartphone screens and the lack of data storage space of some smartphones and tablets. Internet speed also plays a crucial role. Working with large multimedia files requires a stable working 3G / 4G network or high-speed Wi-Fi. Other disadvantages might be Internet connection problems, software compatibility, and system crashes.

The usage of this digital application cannot replace classroom communication with the teacher, though it can be successfully combined with classical teaching materials. *WhatsApp* should be used rationally and skilfully. Since it allows a student to engage anytime and anywhere, it develops skills and abilities for lifelong education.

It is worth noting that in the academic environment, *WhatsApp* has served as an excellent tool for communication and information exchange. Certainly, *WhatsApp* can be considered a very effective tool that facilitates learning a foreign language in the absence of a language environment.

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