Developing Russian aural self-study materials for advanced HE learners

Claire Wilkinson
University of Birmingham

INTRODUCTION: NEW MEDIA, NEW POSSIBILITIES

The potential of new media resources to assist in language learning has long been a topic of discussion amongst teachers of languages, including Russian (Robin 1987). More recently, the continued development of the internet has led to a vast increase in the availability of authentic audio and video materials in almost all languages. In conjunction with increasingly affordable hardware and software for producing audio and visual material in suitable formats, it is now possible to find everything from commercially produced TV programmes to individually produced vlogs, or video blogs, online.

As in many other countries, podcasts have become a particularly popular medium on the Russian-language internet, or *Runet*. While there is still some dispute about the precise scope of the word 'podcast', it can be used generically to describe 'a digital recording of a broadcast (whether solely audio or audio-visual), made available on the internet for downloading to a computer or a personal audio player' (OED). Podcasting in Russia has become prevalent to the extent that in October 2008 Dmitrii Medvedev launched an official presidential video blog (http://blog.kremlin.ru) with video addresses available to watch or download in Russian or with English subtitles. Major media outlets such as NTV and *Argumenty i fakty* offer news reports for download (www.ntv.ru/exp/ and http://gazeta.aif.ru/podcasts), while sites such as RuTube (www.rutube.ru), a Russian analogue to YouTube – which itself hosts a great deal of Russian-language content – claim to have in the region of 3,500 new clips uploaded daily. In addition, there are now a growing number of aggregator sites that act as repositories and directories for podcasts (see for example http://rpod.ru and http://podfm.ru/).

However, in practice, finding a way to harness the potential of this vast and ever-expanding resource for Russian language teaching is far from straightforward. Even before the task of how effectively to utilise authentic materials is addressed, time and technological constraints must be considered. Few language teachers can afford to spend hours trawling the internet to locate suitable clips and then create materials from scratch. Similarly, many people feel daunted by the idea of needing to download and edit sound and video files, fearing that it will be time-consuming and complicated. In addition, there are the problems of finding time to make use of the materials created within the restrictions of a formal programme of study as well as ensuring that the needs of students are met in terms of supporting their learning and that the tasks set are of an appropriate level. In short, while it is very easy to see the potential of podcasts, the practicalities of developing aural materials can seem somewhat off-putting.

In light of these issues, this article discusses a recent project undertaken by the author to develop materials for an aural translation course for final year undergraduate students of Russian (advanced L2 users). Following a brief discussion of relevant literature about teaching foreign language listening comprehension and its implications for materials development, I describe how materials for the course were developed and outline the rationale for the approach taken. Crucially, a standard framework of tasks was adopted, which not only guided students through the tasks while simultaneously developing their listening skills, but also helped ensure that the time required to create the materials was not excessive. I conclude by discussing the advantages and disadvantages of the approach used and suggest ways to develop and refine self-study aural materials to maximise their utility for both teachers and students of Russian with reference to an ongoing project to create listening materials for lower-intermediate level postgraduate students of Russian.

TEACHING LISTENING COMPREHENSION: A GENERAL FRAMEWORK

Many theoretical models of second language acquisition emphasise the role of listening comprehension. However, as Vandergrift observes, despite the importance of developing L2 listening competence, 'L2 learners are rarely taught to listen effectively' (Vandergrift 2007, 191). Listening comprehension, despite sometimes being viewed as a passive skill in contrast to the productive skills of speaking and writing, makes considerable demands upon the listener, who must synthesise phonological, lexical and grammatical data as well as contextual and paralinguistic

information (e.g. prior knowledge of the topic or situation or, in the case of video material, the speaker's gestures) (Cohelan Benson and Hjelt 1978). Developing effective aural materials, therefore, requires the creator to think about the strategies that students use to process and comprehend what they are hearing.

Learning strategies used by L2 learners can be broadly divided into two groups: 'top-down' and 'bottom-up'. Top-down strategies draw on meta-cognitive processing, when students mobilise their prior knowledge and the context of the material to build a conceptual framework for comprehension. Bottom-up strategies, on the other hand, rely on the listener gradually constructing meaning by accretion, i.e. starting with individual phonemes and aggregating them up into words, then phrases, then sentences and so on up to the discourse level (Vandergrift 2007, 193). Significantly, it appears that good learners can be distinguished from poor learners on the basis of the strategies they employ. In the case of aural tasks, poor listeners are more likely to use bottom-up strategies such as listening for individual words rather than for phrases or sentences, and also to view comprehension as a word-by-word translation task (O'Malley, Chamot and Küpper 1989).

Regardless of the precise strategies employed, Rixon suggests that there are four basic steps involved in effective listening, which may occur non-sequentially or simultaneously: ascertaining the reason for listening (most often in order to pass a test or other form of assessment in a formal language learning setting); predicting what information is likely to be included in what is heard and the listener's familiarity with it; assessing the relevance of what is heard in relation to the reason for listening and hence deciding what information to select; checking understanding (Dunkel 1986, 100). These steps can be mapped to the three stages of 'listening strategy application' listed by Dunkel: '1) prelistening; 2) listening; and 3) postlistening' (ibid.). As Dunkel goes on to note, aural course materials should include all three stages and guide students in developing and applying learner strategies. The result is a general framework that can be used to structure listening comprehension tasks when creating aural materials. Specifically:

> 1) predicting or anticipating content of the foreign language message (during the prelistening exercise); monitoring for discrepancies in messages received (during the listening exercise); selecting relevant and ignoring non-relevant messages (during the listening exercise); 4) checking accuracy of comprehension (during the postlistening exercise) (ibid.).

This framework emphasises the centrality of effective – i.e. top-down and meta-cognitive – listening strategies to

comprehension. An additional advantage of this approach is that it facilitates the use of authentic materials regardless of the L2 ability of the students, since tasks and the amount of 'scaffolding' provided can be tailored to different levels with relative ease, as I discuss in more detail in the concluding section.

AURAL TRANSLATION: CREATING ADVANCED LEVEL MATERIALS

Being aware of the vastly increased availability of Russian language podcasts, I wished to make greater use of online audio-visual materials to expose students to authentic Russian and thus reduce the artificiality of classroom-based language learning and simultaneously improve their functional listening competency. Crucially, podcasts presented a practical solution to the problem of students becoming overly used to the speech of their teachers, which is frequently more easily comprehensible to students in terms of the clarity of enunciation and speed of delivery than the speech of people not involved in L2 teaching.

The course that was chosen for re-development was a final year undergraduate course called 4 Aural Translation (4AT), which formed part of a module entitled 4 Additional Russian. It had previously been delivered as a classroom-based course, with the course tutor reading out a text in Russian and the students being required to produce a written English version. These versions would then, in conjunction with transcripts, form the basis for discussion with a view to improving the translations. As such, the learning aims of the course go beyond listening comprehension and into the realms of developing the ability to produce faithful and natural translations from aural sources. In essence, these aims have not changed – a situation warranting discussion in its own right, given the overlap with issues of translation as a language learning method, but beyond the scope of this article. Rather, it was the delivery and format of the course that was altered.

Feedback from previous Russian language undergraduate final years had highlighted students' desire to have greater control and autonomy over their learning. In addition, many students indicated that an element of continuous assessment in the final year would be beneficial in view of the predominance of assessment by examination for language modules. These factors, combined with strong institutional support for extending the use of virtual learning environments (VLEs) for course delivery and the advanced level of the students both linguistically and as independent learners, meant that 4AT was an ideal pilot project.

The actual process of writing the course and materials was in many ways extremely straightforward. Key to the process was finding suitable – that is, user-friendly and affordable –

editing software. Editing sound and video files was limited to trimming the length of the recording or removing unwanted sections and splicing the remaining sections of the recording. Through careful selection of materials (arguably the most time consuming process, not least as the temptation is to always keep looking for a 'better' clip) it was possible to avoid more extensive editing, saving time, money and nerves. Working on a Macintosh, I settled on two basic and affordable stand-alone sound and video file editing programs: MP3 Trimmer to edit sound files,[1] and Video Editor for Mac to edit video clips.[2] Beyond this, the only software used was an internet browser and Microsoft Word, making both projects very technologically modest and manageable.

In order to introduce an element of continuous assessment to undergraduate final year Russian languages and give students greater control over their learning, it was decided to trial 4AT as a VLE-based self-study course with four unseen aural translation exams held at regular intervals over the duration of the course for assessment purposes. This arrangement meant that students' progress could be monitored regularly and timely feedback provided, while still offering students the freedom to study when and how they wished. The marks of the best three translations were to be averaged to give the final grade for the course. This apparently lessened the pressure felt by students; despite the fact that in effect they were now faced by four one-hour exams rather than one, they know that one 'off day' will not necessarily have a significant impact on their final grade. Moreover, four exams spread over the year was felt to provide students with the motivation to do the tasks set for self-study in the intervening weeks, and this did indeed prove to be the case.

The course runs over both teaching terms (22 weeks in total), with one class hour per week plus an expected one to two hours of homework. Before beginning to search for suitable recordings, the course structure and topics were mapped out to give a general course plan. Rather than simply require the students to complete a translation each week and then self-mark it using the feedback materials provided, I decided to spend two weeks working with them on each recording. In the first week, students would complete a listening comprehension with questions in English based on the first half of the recording and then complete a short cloze exercise in Russian. In the second week, students would begin with a short cloze exercise in English and then translate the remainder of the recording. The aim was to help students develop effective listening skills by giving them tasks requiring them to utilise different strategies to build up their comprehension of the material to which they were listening before they attempted the translation task.

Table 1: Course structure and topics for 4 Aural Translation

Week	Topic	Tasks
1	Job interviews part 1	Listening comprehension
2	Job interviews part 2	Translation
3	Careers part 1	Listening comprehension
4	Careers part 2	Translation
5	Assessment 1: Choosing a profession	Timed extempore
6	Script return and feedback tutorial	
7	Countries and tourism part 1	Listening comprehension
8	Countries and tourism part 2	Translation
9	Countries and national traditions part 1	Listening comprehension
10	Countries and national traditional part 2	Translation
11	Assessment 2: about a country/aspect of culture	Timed extempore
12	Script return and feedback tutorial	
13	Personal finance part 1	Listening comprehension
14	Personal finance part 2	Translation
15	Mortgages in Russia part 1	Listening comprehension
16	Mortgages in Russia part 2	Translation
17	Assessment 3: Learning about money	Timed extempore
18	Script return and feedback tutorial	
19	TV (behind the scenes) part 1	Listening comprehension
20	TV (behind the scenes) part 2	Translation
21	Country description part 1	Listening comprehension
22	Country description part 2	Translation
23	Assessment 4: Interpersonal skills	Timed extempore
24	Script return and feedback tutorial	

Once the structure of the course and exercises was decided, it was a question of finding suitable audio recordings. In contrast to many listening tasks, in which listeners are actively encouraged to make use of prior knowledge and paralinguistic clues, for a translation course it was important to maintain a standard format for the recordings so that students' analytical linguistic proficiency, rather than solely their functional proficiency, remained the focal point of the course. Although there were some initial concerns about whether it would be possible to find a series of 'audio articles' suitable for aural translation, the website shkolazhizni.ru provided a wealth of material in the form of written articles that had been recorded to turn them into podcasts. These podcasts had the additional advantage of coming with a full transcript, and being available for non-commercial educational use.[3]

It was then a straightforward and surprisingly quick task to select a total of 12 podcasts. These were organised thematically, so that students would work on two recordings for four weeks and then complete an assessed extempore translation on a related topic. The exception to this was the final unseen of the course, which was on a more general topic to give students the opportunity to fully to demonstrate their translation capabilities rather than recall of specific vocabulary. The podcasts were trimmed to ensure that the tasks were manageable in the time available; generally the files were reduced to between two and two and a half minutes long (to complete in one hour), or between 220 and 270 words. The overall course structure and topics are shown in Table 1, above (weeks 23 and 24 are in the exam period).

For each topic, it was then necessary to compile all the materials required for students to not only complete the tasks, but also then self-assess their progress. To this end, the following materials were created:

1. audio files in mp3 format, parts 1 and 2;
2. an instruction and task sheet;
3. transcripts of the recording, split into parts 1 and 2;
4. a fair translation of the recording, split into parts 1 and 2;
5. a grammatical and stylistic commentary, split into parts 1 and 2.

Most of these materials could be created very rapidly. Editing was minimal and required only to reduce the length of the podcasts. The instruction and task sheet followed a standard template, meaning that it was merely a matter of updating the listening comprehension questions and copying and pasting the final few sentences of the transcript of the part one audio file to create the cloze exercise. Creating fair translations was inevitably a more time-consuming process, albeit one accelerated by having a transcript. The aim was not to produce a perfect translation, but rather one that was of an average standard from the point of view of the assessment criteria, thus providing students with a benchmark against which to assess their work. This translation was then supplemented with a stylistic and grammatical commentary with discussion of particular points and further references (see Table 2).

The fair translations and commentaries are crucial for the post-listening phase, since they not only give students the information to check their answers to the tasks set, but also provide feedback on potential ways to improve their translations and understanding of the texts. That said, there is also a need for face-to-face contact, particularly for weaker students who may rely more heavily on learning strategies such as discussing problems with their peers. To this end I chose to hold in-person script return and feedback sessions in the weeks following the assessed extempore translations. Student feedback at the end of the course indicated that, while stronger students did not see this element as vital, feeling that they could use the materials provided to improve their performance, weaker students wanted more face-to-face contact and support for their learning.

FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF AURAL MATERIALS

As previously noted, the 4AT course was an ideal pilot project on how to develop aural materials, not least as the scope of the course was extremely specific and it was possible to assume that the majority of students had developed learning and listening strategies during their previous three years of study, including at least one semester in Russia. Positive feedback from the majority of the students was of course very welcome, but the comments made by weaker students suggest that there is still more that can be done to promote effective listening and learning strategies.

One possible innovation would be the incorporation of the Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ) (Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal and Tafaghodtari 2006). The questionnaire can used by L2 listeners to self-report their approach to listening comprehension. In principle the exercise should raise learners' awareness of the strategies they currently employ and offer a basis for discussion of how to develop effective metacognitive strategies to cope with the demands of listening.

Following on from 4AT, a second project to develop listening comprehension materials has been commissioned by CEELBAS, a national research council-funded collaboration designed to develop language-based research capacity about Russia and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.[4] In keeping with the CEELBAS

Table 2: Example of stylistic and grammatical commentary for 4AT

Что такое <u>хаггис</u> и где его можно поймать?	What is a Haggis and where can they be caught?

1. хаггис – yes, haggis. One of those words, like хакер, that has survived the great h-g change that Russian so often likes to inflict on words. You may also have guessed from this title that this is going to be one of those weird translations with some less mainstream vocabulary and something resembling humour. A text similar to this would not be set as an assessed piece of work, but it's sometimes good to have something a bit different and challenging.

Однажды я собралась в Шотландию, в Эдинбург. Накануне поездки мой муж с очень серьезным видом <u>предупредил меня, чтобы</u> я, ни под каким предлогом, не брала в руки и не кормила хаггисов, потому что с виду они добрые и ласковые, а на самом деле очень свирепые и злые маленькие существа, так и <u>норовят</u> откусить тебе палец.	One day I was getting ready to go to Scotland, to Edinburgh. On the eve of my trip, with a very serious expression [on his face], my husband warned me under no circumstances to pick up or feed Haggi, because although they look cute and gentle, in actual fact they are very ferocious and fierce little creatures that will try and bite off your finger.

2. предупредил меня, чтобы + past tense of verb – classic subjunctive construction. The subjunctive is used for requesting/telling/warning/etc. someone to do/not to do something. For example, "I want you to steal a penguin" would be "я хочу, чтобы ты украл пингвина". There is always a comma before чтобы. See Wade 335-336.
3. норовят – норовить (impf.) to try hard to do something. Colloquial.

«А где они обитают?» – спросила я. «Они живут на склонах в Шотландии!» «А как они выглядят?» – заинтриговалась я. «<u>Мордой они похожи</u> на ежиков, <u>покрыты</u> густой шерстью вперемешку с птичьими перьями, имеют недоразвитые крылья, как у страусов, и бегают на <u>трех</u> лапах, которые все разной длины для удобства перемещения по <u>крутым</u> шотландским склонам». «Да, да, да, рассказывай сказки!» – усмехнулась я, поняв, что попалась на уловку.	"Where do they live?" I asked. "They live on mountainsides in Scotland!" "But what do they look like?" I asked, intrigued. "Their face resembles a hedgehog's, they're covered in thick fur mixed with feathers, they have underdeveloped wings like an ostrich, and they run on three legs, all of which are different lengths to make moving around steep Scottish mountainsides easy." "Sure, sure, keep telling me tales!" I laughed, having understood that I'd been fooled.

4. Мордой они похожи – морда (nom. sing.) means "muzzle" as in the face of an animal. It is also used colloquially to refer to a person's face (vulgar), similar to the English "mug". Note that морда is in the instrumental case to give the delimited meaning "in [terms of] their face" – this has been rephrased in the English variant. See Wade 190-192.
5. покрыты – the short form adjective is used predicatively, i.e. to say something is a particular way. See Wade 168 for introductory comments about the use of long and short adjectives, Wade 182-187 for the formation of short adjectives and Wade 187-188 for use of the short form.
6. трех – a convenient reminder about numbers in the oblique cases. See Wade 208-211 for a refresher.
7. крутым – крутой. In relation to slopes, this versatile adjective can be translated as "steep", "sharp", "precipitous", "sheer". In other contexts it is also used colloquially to describe someone who thinks that they're a big shot, and appears in the phrase "a hard-boiled egg" (literally, not metaphorically) – "яйцо вкрутую".
8. Punctuation of direct speech in English and Russian – Please, please remember that Russian and English punctuate direct speech in different ways. A basic guide to Russian punctuation is provided in Wade 20-29, while a basic guide to punctuating direct speech in English can be found at http://www.ryerson.ca/writingcentre/students/handouts/handouts/conversa.pdf (amongst other places).

focus on language-based research, the course in this case is orientated towards the development of functional listening competencies, i.e. facilitating postgraduate researchers in possession of lower-intermediate Russian language skills not only to understand the literal meaning of utterances, but also their socio-cultural context. It was therefore decided that this second course would be based almost entirely on video clips rather than audio materials, in order to encourage listeners to make full use of visual cues and information.

From a pedagogic perspective, these requirements have necessitated far greater use of scaffolding (e.g. vocabulary lists, more general questions, glossing and more extensive use of cloze type exercises, as well as more extensive feedback), and emphasis on prelistening tasks to develop listening strategies. Most importantly, developing this second course has once again starkly highlighted the necessity not just of teaching our students to listen and understand Russian, but also showing them *how* to use listening effectively as part of their language learning; equipping students with these skills is vital if they are to become effective and independent learners.

The increased availability of podcasts and other online media presents us with an almost infinite source of material for L2 listening. However, it is only when they can be quickly and easily tailored to the needs of specific courses and listeners that their potential for contributing to L2 learning can begin to be properly realised. This article has demonstrated one way in which podcasts can be utilised to enhance learners' experiences of developing listening comprehension skills. Furthermore, by judicious editing of material and increased emphasis on prelistening tasks, it is possible to accommodate almost all levels of L2 learner.

Address for correspondence:
c.wilkinson@bham.ac.uk

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NOTES

1   http://deepniner.net/mp3trimmer/. It is a Mac only program and is shareware for which a licence costs $10.95. An equivalent free program for Windows users is mpTrim: http://www.mptrim.com/.
2   http://www.videoeditorformac.com/. I chose the program for the user-friendly interface. A single-user personal licence costs approximately £23.00. For Windows users (XP with SP2 or Vista), programs such as Video Spin (http://videospin.com/uk/) offer similar functionality at no or low cost, depending on the desired format for video files.
3   http://shkolazhizni.ru/rules/. In the event, I contacted the editor by email and received permission to use the podcasts.
4   http://www.ceelbas.ac.uk/.