Some notes on teaching myself Russian

BOB BLAISDELL

A teacher of EFL takes up RFL, and all on his own

1 June 2005

There's the illusion that, by repeating words, I'm learning the language. There's the illusion – translating word by word from *Anna Karenina* – that I am *reading* it. Yet something does happen. The dead spots I accept: I can't pronounce *this*; I can't learn *that*. But the joy of figuring things out: Ah-hah, *that*'s the past tense! – of finding a root in a word – of reading a word I had only ever heard before! – of my goal, visiting Yasnaya Polyana, Tolstoy's estate, before I'm fifty. When I said to myself the word 'pilgrimage', I got teary-eyed, then mocked myself. But that *is* my goal. If I could go now, I would. But, before then, I'd like to know more, to have some illusion of competence.

2 June

I have trouble with the *e* in Russian, the one that has dots over it. It's usually pronounced *yo*. Then there's a common word for 'all', *bce*. It looks like that. It's pronounced something like 'vuhso'. It's the common but misleading characters that throw me. Such simple things shouldn't throw me, but such things have thrown me my whole life, ever since grammar school and learning script, some letters being very hard to decipher or to get myself used to – capital *G* was one.

The illusion that I could really memorize all 2,500 words and phrases from these four CDs disappeared today as I went through almost two of them. I imagined myself in my English classroom, throwing one of these phrases to one of my Russian students, and I realized that even if I were able to spout out one at an appropriate time, the student would *answer*! It's the difference between hitting a baseball off a tee and hitting one thrown by a live pitcher. Still, I learned and saw some words, and I read aloud and tried to get set in my head about half the root-words from Townsend's *Russian Word Formation*. It's great, just as my friend Ross said, but this is going to take years – just to be embarrassingly bad.

3 June

What do I find most difficult? I suppose what most English-speaking people find difficult: the clusters of consonants – the odd pairings or triplings of letters. In one of the books I've used, the author helpfully insists that the Russian alphabet does *not* represent the pronunciation. You have to learn the pronunciation in addition to seeing the word. Then there are those ridiculous one-letter consonant words – which in English cannot be words, but the *c* represents something like 'suh', and the *b* represents something like 'vuh'.

So, the Russians didn't know that rule, the one that says a consonant needs a vowel to

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help make the sound. They just left off some vowels as if it was lunchtime and they were going to get back to finishing things later – but when they came back to the shop the person who ordered the words had come and taken them away, incomplete. 'Oh, well!' they shrugged.

6 June

Reading Townsend's *Russian Word Formation* and the list at the back is good. I feel as if I'm getting educated. But it's easier repeating the words on the CDs. It's like snow on a hot surface – it all melts away. I don't know enough to build up anything. So it doesn't congeal. It all melts away and the water is an illusion of learning. But the snow is the learning. The melt is all gone. I also let myself go to almost anything I want. Today I kept wanting to read *Anna Karenina*. I didn't do much Russian yesterday, maybe twenty-five minutes in the car and some in the bathroom. I read aloud to myself the first paragraph of the chapter where Anna kills herself. As I remember it, it's all or mostly in her consciousness, convincing itself. She thinks she sees everything clearly, with the clarity of people who are seeing the worst.

9 June

I'm still reading the chapter about Anna killing herself. It takes me five minutes or more to read a paragraph aloud. It'd be excruciating if anyone who knew Russian was listening. I can see and understand a few words and phrases. I'm glad I can sound it out – though the pronunciations cannot be right, for the most part. I mess up the pronunciations of words and phrases that I know and have heard – so how could I guess the ones I don't recognize at all?

I'm starting on a three-thousand-mile walk, and it's the first step. I appreciate my first step. I look down and think, I've covered some ground! I can see to a horizon, but that horizon is about ten miles ahead. I can scarcely imagine the three-thousand miles beyond that – the mountains, the canyons, the wild natives, the lack of familiar food.

11 June

Reading the last chapter of Part VII of *Anna Karenina* I cried twice. What can I really understand? I said to Suzanne my wife that it was like seeing a foreign movie, and I can hear the tone of voice and see the expressions, but I don't understand the words. Really, though, it's having read the novel so much, and Anna being such an important figure to me – when I wrote that I understood or knew her motivations for suicide better than I ever understood my own or anybody else's, I was right.

So she's at the station. I see the names – Peter, Mikhail, Vronsky – I see some words I know – *where, said, herself,* even *Where am I?* Reading aloud her words, her words to herself, I cry. I can get the tone. I can get a different feeling than from Tolstoy's prose. We have this feeling in opera when we know the story and the heroine is singing, and even if we don't know the Italian or the Russian or the German we know this, that she is feeling bad, and we cry.

So, even though it was so slow to read – I cannot move through these Russian words at any decent pace (just like some of my students through English) – I was so moved. I was proud when I could read the phrases well. I was frustrated by the multi-consonantal words. I was puzzled by words I had one or two clues about – a root or a prefix – and yet I was reading, again as I told Suzanne, the only sacred text in my life. I don't care that *Anna Karenina* is so far over my head. I don't care, because I cherish every word I understand. Every little clarity, a prize. Hearing the alliteration, the natural alliteration of Russian – maybe it's just the human, meaty texture of the prose – but I hear it, the *shsh szah szah*.

17 June

Again, I am jumping about, satisfied that I feel as if I'm learning, yet besides that I babble Russian-sounding words and phrases at night when I'm falling asleep and when I wake up and when I'm idle. I don't know what good it's been. The speed! I need the speed. I can't read Russian fast enough, easy enough. Okay. I'm going back to the last chapter of Part 7, Anna's suicide. I will read it from the book and look up the words as I go. I will NOT write the definitions above the words. I will have to read and reread and recheck the dictionary until I know what it says. That's how we did Greek with Professor Margon.

10 July

With the CDs, I occasionally memorize the words, and sometimes the word for the thing will pop into my head when I'm *not* listening to the CDs. Ross, just back from Russia, loaned

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me a couple of new CDs, the first of which is bad: *Jivoi Zvook* ('Lively Sound,' I think it means) from the Alexander Nevsky Festival in St. Petersburg, 2002–03. But, as he said, the Russian is clear and I might pick up things that way. It's poppish stuff, on acoustic guitar, derivative of Tom Waits and 'Angie' by the Rolling Stones, but I can hear recognizable words.

18 August

I have too much confidence for the paltry bit I know. I've also become an etymologist. What about *dealy* – 'thing'? 'Give me that dealy.' Did our *dealy* come from the Russian *dealy*? Did 'chopped liver' – as in, 'What am I, chopped liver?' – come from *Ya schasliva* ('I'm happy')?

1 September

There is so much to learn. But, anyway, everything is beginning to look normal – I now expect to understand something of what I read as I read it, no matter what it is.

4 October

I was reading an essay today about learning to read, by one of my Russian students, Sofiya, and I couldn't stop thinking about my own experience while she was writing about hers. I don't remember learning to read English. I had several older siblings and I assume they read to me until whatever age it was that I got impatient of asking them or they got tired of reading and told me to figure it out for myself.

In junior high and high school I took Spanish and became a competent speaker. In college I continued with Spanish and spent some time in Mexico, then took two years of French, which I was later able to read okay. In grad school I took Latin, but it never sank in, because I kept relying on my Spanish and French to get me through a year of quizzes and exams. I took four courses in Greek and survived by hard work. I knew I had no knack for languages, but I so wanted to know Sappho and Homer at first hand. All the while, though, I envied the students learning Russian. My closest sister studied it at Stanford and in the USSR, and my girlfriend took enough to puzzle through a little Chekhov.

Meanwhile, there I was, a child again, reading and re-reading *Anna Karenina* in various translations, worshipping Tolstoy yet not able to hear his voice. The translators – good and perhaps not so good – were my guides and I was grateful to them, but I was on the outside. Other people could learn to read Russian, but I couldn't! And I continued my worship of Russian even after I began teaching in New York City more than a dozen years ago, and one out of every ten of my students was a native Russian speaker.

Seven or eight years ago I finally bothered to learn the alphabet, a messy variation of Greek, it seemed to me. Then, four or five years ago, I signed up to audit Russian at my wife's university across the street, but, after two meetings, the instructor insisted I drop the class when I told him that as soon as my own semester started in a few weeks I would be unable to come to class every day.

While editing a book of Tolstoy's articles on education (translated into English), and poring through various editions in Russian, I became desperate enough about my need to decipher captions and contents pages that I painstakingly – as if they were hieroglyphics – translated dozens of words and phrases. Soon after that, editing a collection of Tolstoy's children's stories in English, I began comparing the translations and again sought out the Russian editions for help in deciding between phrases.

But I felt like a professional musician who can't read music – I was piecing together the meanings from two or three sources. I finally begged librarians at the New York Public Library's Slavic Division for help, which they generously gave me, but I felt like a child! – 'This word – *kugli*? What is it?'

I still had myself convinced that I could not learn Russian in spite of the evidence my students provided me with every semester – that ten, or four, or even just two years ago, they knew no English, and now they were reading and writing in English – in college! So, on my sabbatical, while working on a memoir in English of my Russian mentor, I told myself to study Russian too. While there were courses available at the university nearby, they didn't fit into the schedule of my new domestic responsibilities, and I decided I would try learning on my own.

I knew right away it was *not* possible to learn Russian from books and recordings. It was as ridiculous as trying to learn how to play baseball by watching it on TV and memorizing statistics. But I enjoy watching ballgames and memorizing statististics, and that is what learning Russian became to me. It made me feel busy, and that it was no more of a waste of time

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than baseball. I was spending at least an hour or two a day on Russian. My friend loaned me his course books from when he studied it at a U.S. military institute, and I learned, for instance, 'There is a tank.' – 'Where? On the road?' – 'No. The tank is on the mountain.'

For the first time in my life I didn't care if anybody thought I was a kook. I now fondly remembered the various on-campus kooks I had snickered at over the years.

One day, after a few months of this studying, I went into the university library and Xeroxed off the two-page first chapter of *Anna Karenina* and the three-page suicide chapter that concludes Part 7. I spent about five hours over the next two days reading aloud and then translating Chapter 1, Part 1, word by word – well, I knew a few of the words. I hadn't studied tenses, though the CDs I had listened to had given some to memorize, but I figured them out.

Of all the scenes of all the books I have read, I *knew* the first chapter of *Anna Karenina* – in English. I knew it the way other people know Shakepeare soliloquies or Keats – except that I have no phrasal memory. When I proof-read galleys of my own work, for instance, I cannot detect editorial changes unless the ham-fisted, tone-deaf editor has used words I would not have used. So, although I have no verbal memory, I think I do have *emotional* memory – and so, as I translated 'What's to be done!' I was as delighted as if I had been able to shake Tolstoy's hand that had written that sentence. It was a revelation – the Russian says exactly what it says! I could hear it!

The critic Edmund Wilson, who taught himself several languages, pointed out that, when he was learning Russian and reading *War and Peace*, he could *hear* the characters. I knew what he meant! So I had the experience that my daughter had when she read her first words out in the world, and said: 'The sign by the bookstore says BOOKS.'

So, I'm back from my sabbatical and I have *seven* native Russian speakers in one of my remedial English classes, three of them named Irina, two of them former school teachers – and the lure of Russian is still there. Now my childish image is of a paleontologist who has discovered his favorite dinosaur. I simply need to remove its skeleton from the rocks in which it is preserved. I am armed not with the latest technology but with a toothbrush and a nail. I'll continue digging till I die.

12 October

I am so shy to speak Russian, and yet it comes to my lips sometimes in the classroom when my Irinas ask me questions.

'Question?' said Irina L—, yesterday in the computer lab.

'*Vapros*?' I said.

'*Da*!' she said.

She then turned to Irina S— and told her what I had said.

Later, in the other remedial class, Margarita said, as she sometimes does when I hand back papers, 'Spicy-ba'. And I said, 'PaJHALusta.' I realize that if it were Spanish I would not hold it of any account at all: *Gracias. – De nada*. But it was significant to me. I was trying. I said something later to Irina L., something in relation to her paper – and she smiled, nodding.

26 October

I talked to my friend Sandy on the phone today for half an hour. Much of the talk was about the difficulties of learning Russian. I finished the *Living Language* book, and I should continue to listen to the CDs, but, because they're entirely in Russian, I get discouraged. I shouldn't. During lunch at Kingsborough, I eat, and while I do I cruise the internet for Russian learning sites.

I listen and scarcely recognize any words. I listen and read, and I realize that my reading aloud is at about a quarter speed, *similar to my slowest, worst-reading English remedial students*. The accomplishment for them and me is simply reading syllables out loud – never mind the pronunciation, the flow, the sense. We are playing a musical instrument and sounds are coming out. *That*'s the accomplishment. That the sounds come out so slowly and are sometimes the wrong sounds makes it difficult, I imagine, for anyone to recognise the tune. It's a crippled version.

I told Irina S, *ZheLAyu udACHi*, as she was leaving my class to give a talk on Pushkin in her Speech class. I had encouraged her to read the Pushkin poem in Russian to the class before she read the poem in English and discussed it. She said she didn't know if she could, if her teacher would let her, and I told her he would and that the students would want it. I asked her the following week if she had read it in Russian. She said no.

I listen to the CDs as I walk from the train to Kingsborough. I am more and more oblivious

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of being overheard and taken for a nut. I don't care, and I don't think anyone really notices.

1 November

The type in my Russian edition of *Anna Karenina* is not big enough for me to read in bed with the bad light, not to mention that to read it I have to mutter it, and while Suzanne says it doesn't bother her, I'm sure it's not easy for her to have to listen. I am reluctant, however, to take my Russian edition on the train for fear that someone will start talking to me in Russian about it, and I will be utterly incapacitated.

If I could *really* read it (not instead as part of an ambitious experiment of not knowing the language but reading the book anyway), I would read it on the train. Instead, on the train I listen to CDs from the teach-yourself Russian books. I can mutter to myself and not feel very self-conscious, unless there are Russians near me. Then I say the word inside, but it's a lot better to say it out loud. Phrases that blew past me last week I can now mangle – but it shows me I have gained some grip of it.

Yesterday morning, as I arrived at school I ran into Irina Y—. I told her what I was doing, that I was listening to Russian, and she was pleased. I said, 'It's so hard.' She offered to speak it 'any time' with me, and I said, 'I can't say anything.' I was so embarrassed I probably blushed. I would love to speak it with her, but I think I need an unattractive older woman to teach me.

Last week she told me, 'Your accent, it's good!' She had heard me say at most three or four phrases over three or four weeks. One day in class I told them I had tried to read *Anna Karenina* – and how joyful I felt recognizing words. And how frustrated I was, reading the first chapter, when I got to *pommit*, because I didn't remember it. I said, 'I forgot "remember". And then the next time I came to it, I did remember it, and I was ridiculously proud of myself.

The only thing in Russian I managed to say to Irina yesterday was *kanECHna* ('of course') when she said something about, well, one needs to practise and then it gets easier. Later, after class, I tried to tell her and Irina L., 'Until Thursday.' They corrected me and I tried to repeat it. I think I said, *Ta ChetVERK*. I think they said *Pa ChetVERku*. I botched whatever it is, though I tried twice. I noticed that I tried to catch what they said as a written word in my head. When I hear Russian now I try to convert it into spelling. I don't think it's in either Cyrillic or Roman alphabet – maybe Roman. Anyway, I try to 'see' it as I attempt my speaking it.

3 November

This morning, having finished all my marking last night, I listened on the train to the CD of *Living Russian* and read along with it. Some of the phrases that I knew how to say I finally saw what they meant. Some of the phrases that I knew what they meant I realized I had no clue before how to pronounce them. The male speakers on those CDs have a guttural blasé voice, even if, in one instance, the guy has accompanied his woman friend into a department store, and he looks around in amazement at the store's size. He says, wearily, life having lost its savour thirty years ago, *Kakoi balshoi magazhin* ('What a big store') and *Kak zdees interiYESnah* ('How interesting it is here.') And yet he sounds as if he would rather be dead. It's ridiculous, utterly ridiculous – but that's exactly how half of my male Russian students sound.

Boris, who's in one of my remedial classes this semester, shows with his body language and gruff flat low voice that he would rather be anywhere than in the classroom. He takes one or two cigarette breaks per class. When we write, he writes faster than anybody else and better than most. 'If we finish, we can go?'

'No!'

'Oh.'

'We've still got an hour left.'

'Yeah, well …'

I like the Russian guys, but they refuse to put any enthusiasm in their voices. Is it a pose? How is it trained or cultivated?

The women Russians have much more pleasant voices. They are polite, officious. Irina S— greeted me this morning with *Kak delah*? And I answered, thinking a moment, even though I knew immediately what she had said ('How are you doing?'), *HarashOH*. She nodded, and I wanted to say more, but all I could get out was *Spicy-bah*. I wanted to say, 'And you?' I wanted to say, 'I'm in a low mood, but at least my Russian is getting better.' But I couldn't say that in Russian: I don't know how. She asked me later, regarding her English, 'How do I improve my pronunciation?'

She explained that I often ask her to repeat herself, but I told her that I thought it was because she spoke so quietly, as if into a funnel

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(pursing my lips), and that whereas Ling Tong (from China, but no wallflower, she) booms out her questions, and while the guys' voices carry in the classroom, the quiet voices don't. I told her it wasn't the pronunciation, but that one trouble for Russian speakers was that they clip the vowels down – all the vowels except for the vowel in the stressed syllable.

I asked the other Irinas if that didn't seem true. I think they had no idea what I was talking about. I think they were getting nervous about Irina Y— being too friendly to me. I told Irina Y— that when she said 'speaking' it sounded like 'spicking,' where the vowel needed to be broader, longer. She asked how she could practice, and I said that when I took French the best advice I got was to overdo an imitation of someone – for instance Inspector Clouseau (she didn't know who that was). I told her that there was an English comedian who played him, and that when I imitated him, I came closer to the French pronunciation than when I cautiously and precisely tried to speak French. So I said she should watch people's mouths – imitate her native English-speaking friends. Irina S— said, 'I have no friends who speak English good.'

'Sure you do. Or I'll introduce you to some.'

The older Irinas teased Irina Y—. She should watch her boyfriend's mouth, and I said, 'Yeah, watch him.'

She shook her head. 'I watch people's eyes. I'm not used to it, to watching mouths.'

Sometimes when I'm reading Russian it seems the speed is what makes me conscious of the difficulty more than my lack of vocabulary and grammar. But it does get faster.

9 November

I overloaded one day on listening to a Living Language CD. Or I was too tired to listen. I listened on the train, looking at the text, on the way to school. Then, after school, walking to the train, even though I usually know some of what they're saying, I wasn't paying attention and it was all going past me. I was just tired, I guess. I've switched now back to the vocabulary CDs. I like the feedback – phrase for phrase. *Kakoye schaznaye pagoda cevodnya:* 'What terrible weather we're having!'

1 December

I keep talking in my classes about trying to learn Russian, so it must be an obsession. I started copying out the alphabet in Cyrillic, as well as a few words – using the chart from that Penguin edition I bought in 1992. I was inspired to do that again not from wanting to share handwriting practice-time with my daughter Odette (she does hers too quickly for my painstaking method), but because Irina Y— told me that my writing of *pisMO* was not Russian but a mixture of Russian and English – or maybe, she said (wincing) *Ukrainian*.

9 December

It becomes obvious is that learning pronunciation is *physical*, that by repetition it becomes possible to say *tzvizDA*. I have been working for a week on nouns, in the vocabulary CD. Now I know three-quarters of them, and don't feel impatient with the repetition as I have with the other CDs. So, finally, *tzvizDA* is 'star', or 'the star', as the CD insists – though adding the *the* to every noun is unnecessary, or odd, as in 'the stay', *STAVniya*. (Now I don't know for sure. It slips my mind. I question my impulse. *Is* that the word for 'stay'?)

Yesterday, in the local New York Public Library, while Max looked for a book I looked up 'Russian Sound Tolstoy'. *Sound* is the the distinguishing feature of audio recordings at the NYPL. There were five hits – three of them Prokofiev opera or ballet versions of Tolstoy – one of Tolstoy in English, and one of *eight* Russian tapes of Tolstoy's stories. I think they're his pre-1860 novellas. I didn't know the distinguishing words. I looked up 'Russian Sound' for Keywords and there were hundreds, but one was of Pushkin's stories on CD, and I ordered that as well. I felt like a fisherman reeling in two wonders. What did I imagine would happen for me with these recordings?

At home I would listen to the tapes. I would open the book of Tolstoy stories I had found in Butler Library. I would turn to the appropriate page, and I would hear the reader (male) and I would follow along. The story would race along. And what are the characters saying?

'Yes, but how?'

'Nikolai Ivanovich, I beg of you!'

'I understand.'

I recognize such phrases – but the sounds, the *speed*. What is it like for my students, when I, reading aloud a story that they have in front of them, notice the clock and that we're running out of time, so I speed up? I *do* know, because in my ESL-dominated remedial class, Gejza called out, 'Hey, professor! Can you go more slower?' So I went more slower, and I

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understood that it is not impressive to them or useful that I fly on over the words like a man crossing a river by leaps and bounds from boulder to boulder. My followers have fallen into the river. Or they have stopped, knowing they can't keep up.

Soon, when the New York Public Library notifies me that the materials I've ordered have come in, I will be at the mercy of the Russian actor hired to record these stories, just as they are at my mercy. He will read at an actor's pace. He will emphasize words in the dialogue. He will elide the words the way New York City tabloids elide New Yorkisms like *Fuhgittabowdit*! But I'll listen.

26 December

I learn a lot by writing – a lot through engraving the words in my head. I was foolish not to have done it before. And I enjoy copying out the words from *Anna Karenina*. The other day, I found a book at the used bookstore, *A Karenina Companion* by C. J. C. Turner. It is for the person who wants to know everything about the book, at least as much as the professor knows and finds of interest in the Russian commentaries and editions. I have only read the first few chapters, but it is very good – factual information, about Tolstoy's reading during that period and what he says about it in his letters and journals, with a few details of the changes he made from draft to draft.

I went to the donut shop to be on my own on the way back from taking the kids to the movies, and while I was finishing reading *Henry IV, Part 1*, I sat across from two men speaking Russian. When one of them noticed me trying to listen, he lowered his voice. I recognized words like *kagDA* and *kaNECHna*.

4 January 2006

Yesterday at my college – I had to turn in grades I had forgotten to turn in – I took Odette along with me and we ran into Irina L—. She said, 'Your …?'

I said, 'Yes, *maya dotch*.' And I told Odette, 'This is my favorite Irina, *maya luche Irina*.' Irina shook her head, correcting me, 'You mean *Lubiyevna*' (or something like that).

6 January

From *A Karenina Companion*: 'It was in December 1870 that Tolstoi conceived his enthusiasm for Greek. His own practice, which he imposed also on his children, was not to delay over formal instruction in grammar but to proceed swiftly to reading texts' (105). Elsewhere I've read that Tolstoy learned Dutch by reading the New Testament in Dutch. That is one reason I thought I could just plunge into *Anna Karenina*: the text I know best, to see what I can make of it in Russian.

14 January

I realize now that it's too much to say that I read *Anna Karenina* with the same comprehension as some of my students read English. I'm wrong about that. They're far better than I am. ■

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