

School Name University at Albany—State University of New York, Albany, NY
Course Name Elementary Russian
Course Format Face-to-face; flipped classroom

Key Results Students improved 17 percentage points from Readiness Check pre- to post-tests. A strong correlation was found between MyRussianLab homework scores and the average of six exam scores.

Submitted by

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Course materials

Golosa by Robin, Evans-Romaine, Shatalina; MyRussianLab

Setting

University at Albany is a major research institution serving 13,000 undergraduate and 4,300 graduate students.¹ Ninety-four percent of students attend full-time, and 48 percent of the student population is female. In 2013–14, 79 percent of full-time, first-time degree or certificate-seeking undergraduate students received financial aid.²

The University's Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures offers PhD, MA, and BA degrees in Spanish as well as minors in French, Hebrew, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. The University at Albany requires one semester of a language for most undergraduate programs. Elementary Russian is a 14-week, 3-credit course.

Challenges and Goals

Because the Russian language is so heavily inflected compared to English, it is often difficult for Anglophone beginners to learn, no matter how engaging the instructor and learning materials. In the first semester of Elementary Russian, students have to work hard to associate a new set of sounds with a new alphabet. I have found it necessary to have students engage in repetitive, mechanical practice ("pattern drill") to gain proficiency. Grading large flows of this type of homework, however, is extremely time-consuming for an instructor working without graduate student assistants. Utilizing computer-graded assignments in MyRussianLab is an elegant solution to this problem.

An additional challenge facing second-language instructors at the college level is that students in elementary language courses often do not understand many of the fundamentals of the grammar of *any* language. Therefore, in the fall of 2014, I started assigning Readiness Checks in MyRussianLab with the goal of helping students review and test their understanding of basic grammatical concepts.

Implementation

I post and regularly update the assignment schedule for the course in MyRussianLab. For each unit, I assign textbook readings, a rehearsal of conversations/dialogues and related oral drills, four or five instructor-graded activities, and 15–25 computer-graded Student Activity Manual and Extra Practice exercises in MyRussianLab, with at least one Oral Practice/voice recording activity. A Readiness Check pre-test is required to ensure that students are prepared to proceed with the chapter assignments. If needed, students may review English grammar tutorials to brush up on topics and then take a Readiness Check post-test to assess their comprehension. The Readiness Check process is required but is not counted as part of the student's grade.

I view homework as a low-stakes, formative assessment and give students unlimited attempts to practice. I tell students to read the feedback and follow additional help links as they work on MyRussianLab and then resubmit their answers. If an assignment is particularly deficient, I offer corrective feedback and often will alert students in the same feedback window to the fact that I have set their assignment to allow resubmission. The more motivated students take me up on this offer and resubmit improved assignments.

MyRussianLab is an effective tool for pursuing the flipped-classroom approach. In my elementary Russian course, I assign exercises in MyRussianLab (about 30–45 minutes of preparation time) to be completed *before* class. I want students to arrive

¹ http://www.albany.edu/about/about_fastfacts.php

² <http://www.forbes.com/colleges/suny-at-albany/>

“If needed, students may review English grammar tutorials to brush up on topics and then take a Readiness Check post-test to assess their comprehension.”

at class already having absorbed some of the unit information and ready to work—and even “play”—with the new material in class. It’s a challenge; I invariably end up reviewing and supplementing the explanatory material, but I believe class time is best spent this way.

In addition to computer-graded and instructor-graded homework, I create my own assignments in MyRussianLab. For each unit, I assign the review exercise that our textbook authors call “Preparing for Conversation,” in which students must accomplish prescribed communicative tasks, such as, “Explain to your waiter that you did not order a bottle of wine.” Students are expected to write a response in Russian. When students do this assignment, they know it is a hint of what is to come, in either written or oral form, on the unit exam.

I occasionally play back audio conversations from MyRussianLab in class, more often in the earlier units. We listen as a group and then address comprehension questions together. I also make use of the brilliant video exercises for preparation for the unit exams and the final exam.

Unit exams are structured and active. I have adapted the downloadable sample exams created by the authors of the textbook. Each unit exam includes a listening portion as well as a speaking portion where I call students outside of the classroom for a three- to four-minute oral exchange.

Assessments

45 percent	Unit exams (5) and quizzes (6)
20 percent	MyRussianLab homework (80 percent computer-graded / 20 percent instructor-graded)
20 percent	Final exam
15 percent	Attendance and participation

Results and Data

Students are assigned the Readiness Checks in MyRussianLab to ensure a solid understanding of the basic grammatical concepts needed for the given unit before they embark on learning the grammar of a second language. A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare students’ Readiness Check pre-test to post-test scores in the fall 2014 section of Elementary Russian. There was a significant difference in the scores. On average, students increased their scores by 17 percentage points, from 73 percent on the pre-test ($M=73\%$, $SD=15\%$) to 90 percent on the post-test ($M=90\%$, $SD=13\%$), $t(49)=-8.54$, $p<.001$ (Figure 1).

Average MyRussianLab homework scores for successful (course letter grade of A, B, C, or Satisfactory) versus unsuccessful students (course letter grade of D, F, or Unsatisfactory) differed by 22 percentage points (Figure 2). It is clear that students who do

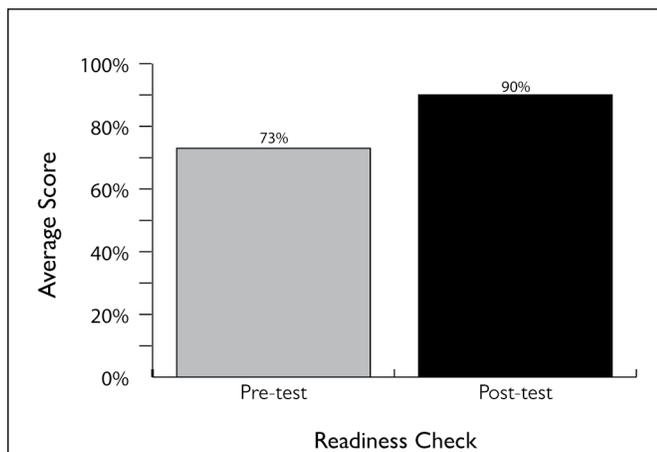


Figure 1. Readiness Check Average Scores, Fall 2014 ($n=50$) (Please note, scores were only included for students who took both the pre- and the post-test, not one or the other.)

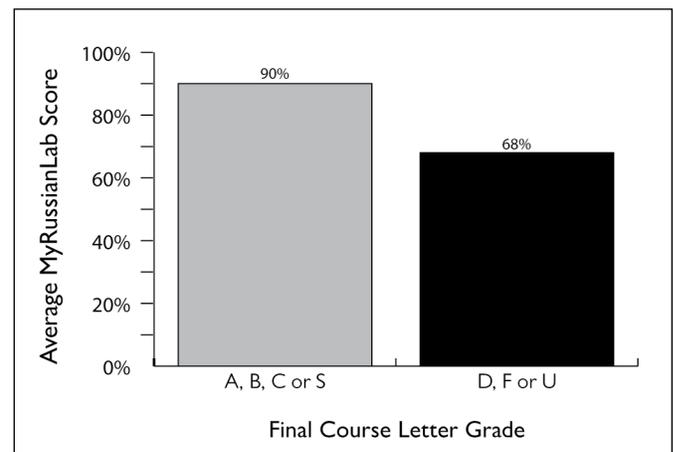


Figure 2. Average of 137 Homework Assignments in MyRussianLab Grouped by Final Letter Grade Achieved in the Course: A, B, C, or S ($n=11$); D, F, or U ($n=5$)

well on MyRussianLab homework perform better in the course overall. It should be noted that MyRussianLab homework scores made up 20 percent of the final course grade when calculated, influencing this relationship.

Scores for MyRussianLab homework averaged 83 percent overall. Low-stakes MyRussianLab homework assignments are intended to help students succeed on summative assessments; we found a strong correlation between MyRussianLab homework and the average of six exam scores, $r = .69$, $p < .01$ (Figure 3). The data suggest students who complete and score higher on MyRussianLab homework perform better on their course exams.

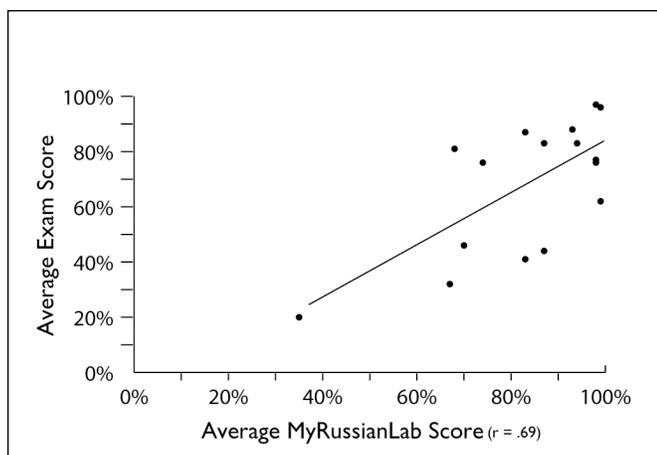


Figure 3. Correlation Between MyRussianLab Homework Average and Average Exam Score, Fall 2014 ($N = 16$)

The Student Experience

I find the following features within MyRussianLab to be immensely beneficial to students:

1. Students can adjust the delivery speed of the audio recording on certain assignments which helps with listening comprehension.
2. The interface of the electronic textbook conveniently allows students to read the new, Cyrillic alphabet while listening to the native pronunciation of the printed Russian material in tandem.

3. Speaking assignments allow students to record themselves and easily receive audio feedback from the instructor. In the past, students did not have such a convenient option to create and transmit audio files online.

When new textbook prices give many students “sticker shock,” I recommend that they purchase a secondhand copy of the print textbook and then buy their access code to MyRussianLab separately for a reasonable price online. Students appreciate having affordable options.

Instructor Benefits

MyRussianLab saves me time in three key ways:

1. There is plenty of very fine multimedia explanatory and demonstrative material available and assignable in MyRussianLab, so there is no need for me to create new video recordings of linguistic explanations or communicative enactments for students to view at home.
2. Assigning computer-graded activities in MyRussianLab frees me to devote my time to reviewing and grading assignments that machines cannot: handwriting acquisition in the alphabet unit, increasingly free-form writing assignments, and recorded speaking practice.
3. I expect students to complete homework on schedule and to read any individual feedback that I provide. MyRussianLab allows me to monitor students' compliance with this requirement. When I notice that individual students are ignoring my feedback, I let them know that they are on my “No Comment List,” which means that I will grade their assignments but create no more individual feedback for them until their backlog of feedback is read and marked as such.

Conclusion

Language courses at our school are neither immersive nor intensive, so naturally, I seek pedagogical “efficiencies” wherever possible. Despite a few technological hiccups along the way, MyRussianLab has brought considerable gains in efficiency to my efforts. It helps my students learn a difficult language by providing numerous and varied opportunities for learning. I will continue to assign the Readiness Checks in MyRussianLab and will strive to make Russian an engaging experience for my students.

M = mean, SD = standard deviation, N = total number of learners

This user-report case study documents implementation practices and evaluates possible relationships between program implementation and student performance. These findings are not meant to imply causality or generalizability beyond this specific instance. Rather, findings from this study demonstrate associations potentially useful for further theory testing in future experimental studies. For this case study, a mixed-methods design was applied, and the data collected included qualitative data from interviews, quantitative program usage analytics, and student performance data. An open-ended interview protocol was used to guide data collection.