

# 9 The “Onstream” Project: Collaboration between Higher Education Teachers of Russian and Teachers of Russian in Mainstream and Supplementary Schools

Terry King<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This case study describes how the problem of the isolation of teachers of Russian in supplementary (Saturday) schools in London was addressed by organising collaboration between them and teachers in a mainstream secondary school and a university. The aim was for them to share resources and pedagogical approaches. The project began with a meeting for identification of common needs and goals. A space in a Virtual Learning Environment (*Moodle*) was set up and subsequent activity was via an on-line discussion forum for exchanging ideas and a resource bank for sharing materials. Early on, the supplementary teachers visited the mainstream school to observe lessons. The ensuing resource bank was substantial; four short films of lessons in each sector, twenty items of teaching materials, two PowerPoints by teachers for classroom use and seven by their students on study topics. In their first venture into on-line Open Educational Resources, the team found the development of a culture of sharing among teachers faces many obstacles: differences in the context of the production and use of the created materials and in styles of pedagogy, the problem of non-take-up of resources and the psycho-sociological factors inherent in sharing with strangers. Yet, on the positive side, everyone recognised the benefits of sharing.

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**Keywords:** collaboration, supplementary schools, cross-sector, Russian, OER.

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1. UCL, London, UK; [terry.king@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:terry.king@ucl.ac.uk)

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## 1. Context: London, the multilingual city

At least 300 languages are spoken in London's mainstream state schools. All of the world's major languages are represented. Over 40 languages are each spoken by more than 1,000 pupils<sup>1</sup>. Some of these, currently called "community" languages, are taught in mainstream schools but most are taught in supplementary schools, i.e. small schools with their own teachers running outside school hours, in the evenings, on Saturdays, or on Sundays. A directory of schools in London, compiled by the 'Our Languages' project lists 283 supplementary and 43 mainstream schools which teach a range of community languages from Albanian to Yoruba. Many of these supplementary schools are part of a larger organisation dedicated to preserving the culture associated with the language.

Previous work on the [ATLAS Olympics competition](#) based in University College London (UCL), for secondary and supplementary schools in London, showed that language teachers in both sectors often desired to know more about ways in which the target language was taught in the other sector.

## 2. Intended outcomes

In September 2010, the author and colleagues in UCL were successful in gaining funding from [Links into Languages](#), London, a government-financed initiative, to work with teachers of Russian in supplementary schools.

They had broadly three aims:

- to address the perceived isolation of teachers in different sectors and the desire of some supplementary school teachers to learn how to teach to the examinations set for mainstream learners;

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1. Research conducted by the Department of Quantitative Social Science at the Institute of Education, London, based on data obtained from the Annual School Census of 2008 <http://repec.ioe.ac.uk/REPEc/pdf/qsswp1012.pdf>

- to create Open Educational Resources (OERs) useful to all sectors and to discuss their use;
- to improve the quality of the learning experience for students in both sectors.

### **3. Nuts and bolts**

#### **3.1. Recruiting**

Focussing on Russian, the team recruited participants from three sectors:

- four supplementary schools for Russian in different areas of London (Bexley, Greenwich, Newham and Kingston);
- a mainstream London secondary school with a flourishing, highly successful, Russian Department of three teachers, with a year 10 class of twenty, a year 11 class of twenty studying for GCSE, a year 12 class of ten taking AS level and a year 13 class of eight taking A level<sup>1</sup>;
- higher education: two teachers of Russian from UCL and a second year undergraduate class of twelve were involved.

The outcome was to involve ten teachers working with eighty pupils in total, sharing materials and ideas.

#### **3.2. Setting up**

In September 2010, the team organised a workshop attended by seven teachers of Russian from the four supplementary schools, two teachers from the mainstream

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1. GCSE is the exam taken in the last year of compulsory education at age 16; AS level is an exam taken in a chosen subject at the age 17 and A level is a continuation of AS with an exam taken in the year prior to entry to university at age 18.

school and one from the Higher Education Institutions (HEI). Prior to the meeting, participants identified problems and successful methods. Suggestions were made for likely areas to focus on.

Some supplementary students with Russian as their home language had little skill in reading or writing and needed help on how to prepare for GCSE and AS/A level exams. Under the new specifications, students needed help with writing their Creative, Discursive and Research-Based Essays - a problem shared by mainstream pupils. After a discussion of common needs, sharing knowledge of resources and pedagogical approaches and identifying specific agreed goals, a project plan was agreed and drawn up.

The pedagogic principle underpinning the project was that linguistic competence is developed when students are engaged through creative activity and have a sense of authentic communication, i.e. involving real situations and audiences. So it was agreed that the project would run in tandem with the CrossRoads2 project which provides undergraduates as e-mentors for school students in a password-protected, teacher-monitored environment (King, 2010). The virtual learning environment (VLE) used was *Moodle*. Each undergraduate student was paired with two students.

## **4. In practice**

### **4.1. Using the VLE**

The same *Moodle* site employed for the student e-mentoring was used for the *OnStream* project. The teachers were to use the Discussion Forum facility to communicate with each other and to contribute to a resource bank.

A large number of files from the mainstream school on the teaching content for A level and GCSE classes was uploaded, along with lesson plans and advice on conducting orals. Further items were uploaded by the supplementary school teachers.

## **4.2. Classroom observation**

It became clear from the teachers' Discussion Forum that OERs needed to be seen in the context of their use. So the supplementary school teachers were invited to observe three lessons (with years 10, 11 and 12) at the mainstream school.

The event was most successful as feedback showed. One supplementary school teacher said:

It was a great experience to see Russian language to be taught a different way other than done in our supplementary school.

A discussion in the Forum on the different circumstances in supplementary schools followed. As a result more teaching materials were put up on the project website by all three sectors as well as material pointing out the differences between mainstream and supplementary teaching and requests for information. Another supplementary school teacher wrote:

It will be interesting to know how do you give grammar [sic] topics and how do you choose an order of grammar [sic] introduction or criteria of importance. What children have to cover (from grammar [sic] point of view) at the end of year 10, for example.

At a meeting after the lesson the future direction of the project was planned. At the suggestion of the supplementary school teachers we expanded the scope of the project to include teaching methods as well as sharing materials. It was agreed to make a film of classes in all three sectors as a record of some of the differences.

## **4.3. Filming classes**

Accordingly in late December 2011 a film was made of a year 12 grammar lesson at the mainstream school and a link to it was put up on the project web site. In January, a film of a first year undergraduate lesson at university, also

on grammar, was made. In March the third film was made in a supplementary school, on the topic of reading and literature. The three films clearly highlighted the contextual differences between the three sectors. The obvious ones are:

- a) University class: small, motivated. Teaching in English.
- b) State school: classes large and mixed in ability and motivation but of the same age. Teaching in English. Well resourced.
- c) Saturday school: classes small and mixed in age, ability and motivation. Teaching in Russian.

#### **4.4. A competition for students**

To involve the students creatively a competition was organised for all participating students to create materials, with vouchers for prizes. There were three sections – one for each of the levels –, GCSE, A and undergraduate. The students were asked to create a PowerPoint or word document on a topic suitable for the level at which they were studying and relevant to topics on the syllabus. These were:

- for GCSE: Russian customs and/or traditions, Russian celebration days;
- for AS/A level: Popular culture. e.g. An aspect of Youth culture, Popular Music, Leisure, Sport or Tourism;
- for undergraduates at university: an aspect of Russian “high culture” (e.g. a writer, composer, artist or an area, e.g. opera, ballet) or a topic from Russian history or current affairs.

#### **4.5. Student involvement in creating materials**

The competition produced some excellent entries on topics ranging from the poet Anna Akhmatova and International Women’s Day. Below is a slide from a PowerPoint on Russian popular music, written by an AS level student.

Figure 1. A page from a school student's PowerPoint on popular Russian music



A **selection of the materials** created in the project can be seen on the Links into Languages website.

## 5. Conclusion

The aims were achieved, commensurately with the time and resources available.

In terms of the learners, reading the exchanges of the pairs of students in the discussion forum and judging by the enthusiasm of those who entered the competition, it is clear that some students were helped with their motivation. There were only a few cases of targeted support helping performance. Improvements in performance take a much longer time to evaluate.

As for the teachers, all those participating had access to the created resources and most expressed, at some time, their satisfaction with them. They all had exposure to a wider range of activities and practices. It would take more time to evaluate whether they were able to develop pedagogical skills as a result.

At the initial meeting, the supplementary school teachers were pleased to be included in the project, valuing the opportunity to collaborate with mainstream teachers. In the subsequent lesson observation, their immediate response was of great interest in the methods and resources of the mainstream teachers. One would hope that it contributed to a sense of belonging to a community of diverse practice.

As regards further supplementary and mainstream collaboration, this is an important aspect worth pursuing. Many UK schools, especially in London, possess a greatly under-used resource – the wide range of linguistic abilities of some school students. More should be done to bring those outside the mainstream into it. In this respect the *Onstream* project was, as far as the author knows, a first attempt to encourage collaboration between the mainstream and supplementary sectors. As a pilot it encountered successes and difficulties which future developers might like to consider.

### **5.1. Successes**

The project succeeded where it was able to:

- use students from all three sectors in mutually helpful activities in creating materials for each other;
- use demonstration lessons where possible so that the resources could be seen in context;
- use the specialist knowledge and expertise of the teachers whose first language is Russian;

- use the mainstream teachers' knowledge of and experience in teaching to UK exam syllabuses.

## 5.2. Some difficulties

In our first venture into OER, it was found that the development of a culture of sharing among teachers faces many obstacles. One such obstacle was the differing context of the production and use of the created materials. At the initial meeting, it was felt that the participants had much in common and mutual help was possible. However, in the discussion forum, the supplementary teachers established that they worked in a very different context to the others. They were part-timers, teaching in the target language to small classes, mixed in age and with varying knowledge of that language.

Another obstacle was the different pedagogical styles of the teachers involved. The videos and observed lessons showed a variety of approaches, teacher-centred and pupil-centred. The resources ranged from the open-ended (e.g. web links with suggestions on their use or original writing for re-use) to the closed (e.g. worksheets for completion by the students). Worksheets and information sheets predominated, possibly because they are easier to share. There is a danger with OER that the easiest format for sharing might become the dominant mode for unimaginative teaching. For one teacher, grammar teaching is a matter of informing students of the rules and exceptions, exemplified in our resource bank by the sheets of grammatical tables. His students are passive receptors of information. Other teachers would want their students to be actively involved. One video shows a class being given some examples from which to deduce for themselves the patterns of grammar. Each approach produces different resources and methodology. One would hope that uploading resources for either would lead to a discussion about the effectiveness of each. Supplementary teachers are keen, sometimes untrained, volunteers, first language speakers giving up time at week-ends to teach the target language. Not all of them had the skill in English or the time to contribute to discussions on pedagogy.

The non-take-up of resources was a further obstacle. The short time-scale of the *Onstream* project did not allow a thorough investigation of the subsequent use of the uploaded resources. Creating a resource reflects the creator's own take on teaching. Ownership remains critical when the materials are offered to others. Resources alone are not enough; their quality and the way they are used matters.

Additionally, the psycho-sociological factors should also be taken into consideration. There are particularly sensitive areas when sharing with strangers. This would be true in a cohesive group but it is even more challenging for practitioners from a different range of circumstances. Some of the contributors to the forum were defensive and hesitant, others over-assertive. It takes time for a positive group dynamic to evolve.

A final obstacle was the limited use of the Teachers' Discussion Forum. In retrospect it would have been better to apply a lesson learned from the student mentoring – i.e. an open Discussion Forum is not the best way to develop involvement. Such a Forum tends to be dominated by one or two people with little participation by the others. With the students the best organisation was to use very small groups or even pairs. Maybe the same applies to teachers too.

### **5.3. Future developments**

On the positive side, everyone recognised the benefits of sharing. The work is on-going. A [public web site](#) has been set up to make the resources available to anyone. It is hoped that the idea might be taken up by teachers of other major languages taught in London schools and at London universities, such as Arabic, Bengali, Hindi, Polish, Portuguese, Punjabi, Turkish and Urdu. Certainly, London, as a major competitor in trading in the global economy, needs to recognise and capitalise on the rich linguistic diversity of all of its schools. OERs created, shared and discussed with reference to their context, in both mainstream and supplementary schools, would surely help to achieve this aim.

## References

King, J. T. (2010). The CrossCall Project. In S. Guth & F. Helm (Eds), *Telecollaboration 2.0* (pp. 437-450). Bern: Peter Lang.

## Useful links

ATLAS Olympics competition: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/atlas>

'Our Languages' project: <http://www.ourlanguages.org.uk/>

Resources from the *Onstream Project*: <http://www.linksintolanguages.ac.uk/resources/2589>

The public site describing the e-mentoring work is <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/crosscall>



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