



Constructing Intercultural Dialogues **Case Study #8**

A Flying Miracle

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Context

This case study describes a specific example of a full-time study program, “Russian Language for Foreigners,” which included three students from Norway who came to Daugavpils University in Latvia, and enrolled in the course through the Russian Language Center for Foreigners. The program is designed for intensive language training, including lessons in grammar, vocabulary, and reading. Regular outside activities are also held, such as movie nights. The lessons often use description and explanation of contextual meanings, in addition to translation.

Participants

These Norwegian students are 27-30 years old and knew each other prior to taking the course. They belong to a Christian church, and are joyful, open, and curious. They learn with pleasure, seem highly motivated, and show a desire to understand linguistic details, not just memorize grammar rules. They arrived with Russian language skills at the A2 level (second beginning level) and enrolled in a course at the B1-B2 level (which will move them to the intermediate level). I have been teaching this group since the first day of their training, a total of 6 academic hours per week. We meet for lessons on vocabulary, reading, and practical colloquial speech.

Description

One of our reading sessions was dedicated to Russian fairy tales. This was the first time we read any fairy tales, so we began by talking about the design principles of fairy tales and the fact that this genre displays universal features (that is, tales collected from many cultures around the world, often have surprisingly similar plots, as Propp, 1968, clearly demonstrates).



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Dialogic features

We began reading a Russian fairy tale, one which starts with a typical introduction describing time and place. Time in fairy tales is typically undeterminably ancient. For example, Russian tales often use the phrase *давным-давно* – a long time ago. These tales also are located in an uncertain and distant place - *в некотором государстве* – in a faraway kingdom. This introduction did not provoke questions from the students, because universal fairy tale indicators were playing their expected role. In fact, the students replied: *yes, like typical fairy tales, we also have similar fairy tale introductions*. But the next part of the tale text began to specify the specific scene and circumstances in which the main activity takes place and the main character appears. The text used a phrase that described the location more specifically: *По небу летели куропатки* – *Partridges flew in the sky*.

The phrase was clear to the students in terms of both structure and grammatical construction, but one word turned out to be unrecognizable - *куропатки* - *partridges*. So I needed to provide an explanation. I remembered that one of Norwegian students was a passionate hunter, who had often shared stories about hunting and games with the group, as well as having mentioned the fact that one of his favorite gamebirds was the partridge. Given this context, I decided to use this prior discussion in my explanation, which sounded something like this: *That is the one that Geir likes to hunt the most*. And one of the students reacted instantly: *Is it the omelet?* After a long laugh, we were able to go on. The student who asked the question explained her suggestion as follows: since we were reading a fairy tale, it was necessary to accept unrealistic fairy tale conditions and so any object could appear in the story having any form or function. Since, for Russians, major emphasis is devoted to food, why couldn't omelets fly the sky in Russian fairy tales? In this case, there was a play on words because the first part of *куропатки* is a sound that the student associated with more familiar word – *кура/курица* – chicken.

Lessons learned

This short dialogue ended with my presentation of the exact meaning of the word, and I have to say that these students went on to memorize the new word thoroughly, thanks to the “omelet version.” The main lesson of this dialogue for me was that the universal characteristics of fairy tales, especially the universal plot design and common narrative elements, served to assist students in learning a Russian national genre of narrative, the fairy tale. Knowledge of culture, as well as stereotypes and expectations about the culture of a language being studied, sometimes intertwine in a bizarre way. A very interesting question concerns how cognitive mechanisms function both during and



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outside of training, what filters exist in these mechanisms, which filters affect these mechanisms, etc.

Reference

Propp, V. (1968). *The morphology of the folktale* (2nd ed.). Austin: University of Texas Press.