Teaching English-Russian and Russian-English Translation through Email

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The demand for teaching foreign languages using computer-mediated communication (CMC) is increasing (Barker and Hall, 1993; Lambert, 1991). Most researchers agree that the computer-mediated mode of communication may be popular with students and effective in teaching (Beauvois and Eledge, 1995-96; Warschawer, 1995, 1996: Newburger, 1996). While CMC, ideally, does not eliminate the face-to-face interaction, it can be a very powerful tool to enhance the classroom. The ability of the computer to serve as a communications device is still insufficiently used by teachers, especially teachers of foreign languages.

Participants

This pilot study in teaching Russian-English and Russian-English translation and elements of Russian grammar included six former students of Russian and a Russian instructor at Central Texas College. The inspiration for this study came when students complained about losing proficiency in Russian after completion of the Russian course. It was decided to create an email scheme to keep in touch with students after their course and to allow them to maintain proficiency through exchanging assignments in Russian. The six learners take short (2-4 weeks) Russian refresher courses as a part of their foreign language proficiency maintenance. Their level is 2+/2+ which can be roughly compared to the proficiency of good 3rd year students at a university. One of the incentives was to be prepared for the annual language proficiency test given by the Department of the Army to military linguists.

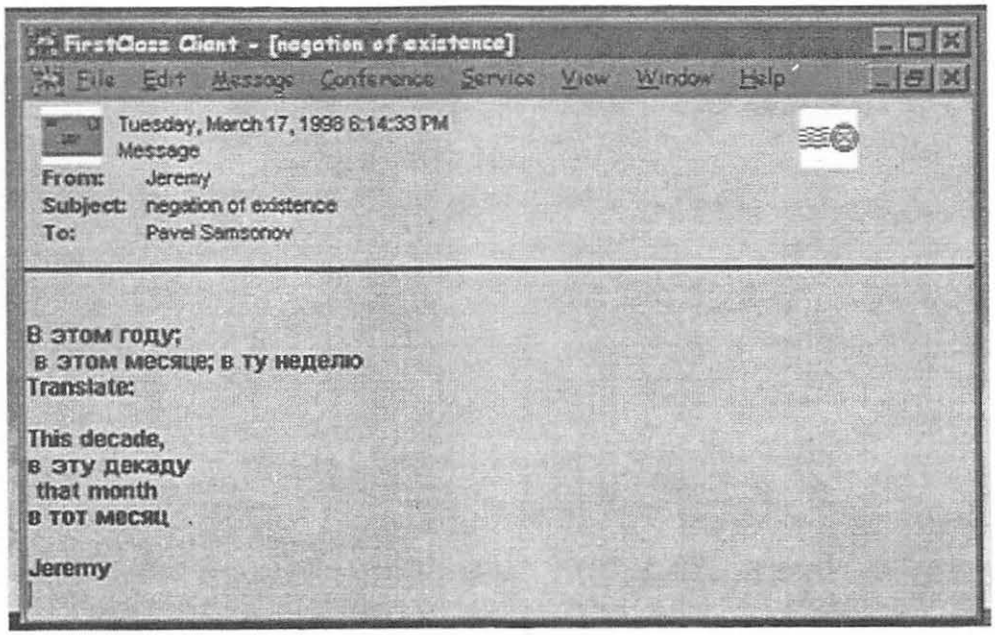
The study started in November 1996. It took no less than two months at the start to find a software solution to make email exchanges in Russian possible. The final set-up included 1251 Win Cyrillic fonts and the Eudora Light 3.0 email software package. Downloading the necessary fonts and marry-

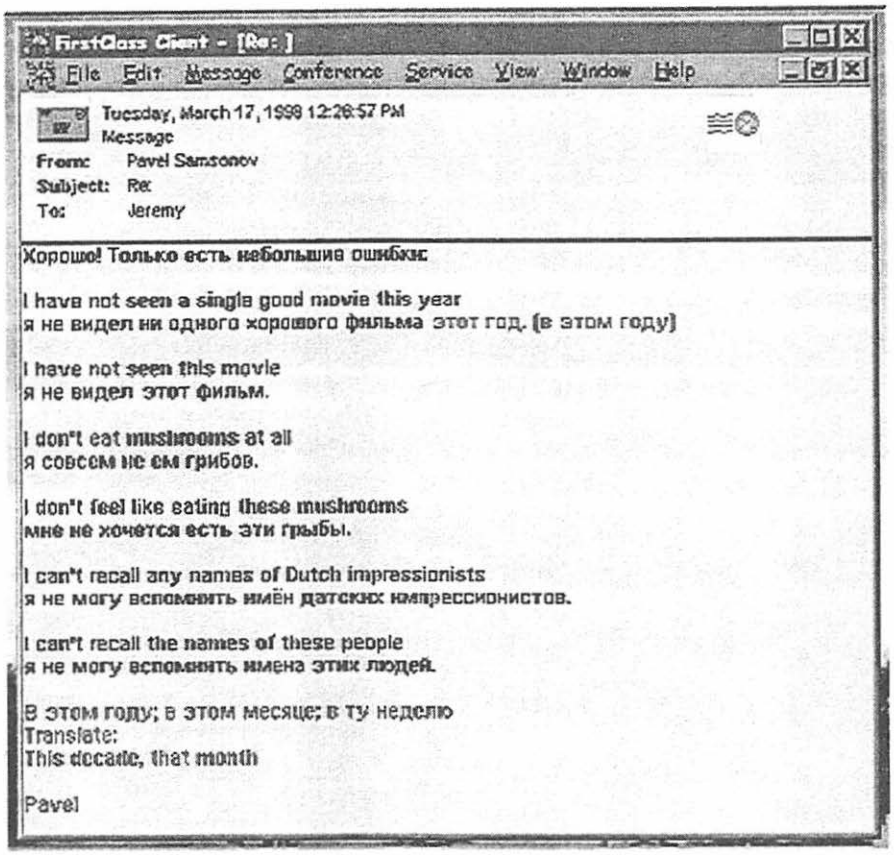
ing them to the software was not an easy task for some participants. In some cases students lost interest in the experiment after unsuccessful attempts to install the software. From the original nine students who indicated their interest in the email exchange, two have never been able to set their computer up for the communication in Russian and one withdrew after two months. His complaint was a lack of time.

Exchange of email in Russian and English began in late January 1997, after six students had managed to install the chosen software package. The first messages included: small assignments in Russian ("translate form Russian into English") and some grammar drills (identical for all the participants). As students' individual needs were identified, the experimenter provided more individualized assignments. These included: translation, error-correction exercises and work with expressions.

Sample Exchanges

A pattern eventually emerged from these early exchanges: the teacher's assignments were emailed to students; completed assignments were emailed back to the teacher; the teacher's comments, corrections and suggestions were inserted into the text of the completed assignments, followed by final student work in the form of the corrected errors and completed exercises. In some cases, though, this give-and-take required additional comments from the teacher. Some screen prints included below show a typical exchange.





Advantages of the CMC Environment

1. Communications by email in text-based Russian becomes easy, prompt and dynamic.

2. The instructor is able to make corrections, suggestions and comments right in the text of student assignments, which greatly facilitates mastery of the material..

3. The instructor can devise new assignments by pasting texts from the Internet or other sources.

4. Student and teacher messages and other information are easily archived.

5. Students can reach their teacher from literally any place in the world and get immediate feedback.

Disadvantages of the CMC Environment

1. Students experienced difficulty in downloading and installing software from different sources. Such problems kept willing students from participating in the study.

2. Sometimes it is hard to follow the thread of assignments for an individual student.

3. The students who participated in the experiment had already graduated from Russian study. Though all of them initially indicated their willingness to maintain their Russian

proficiency through participating in the email exchanges, some students were unable to take part as actively as it was expected, due to either lack of time or commitment to the idea, or both.

Results

The data collected with this group of learners does not provide any objective evidence that the CMC mode of teaching is effective in terms of improving foreign language proficiency. However, anecdotal data regarding student satisfaction was striking. In email interviews at the end of the term, students were asked about their satisfaction using computer-mediated communication as a mode of maintaining Russian translation proficiency.

All of the participants agreed that email communication in two languages was a very powerful and effective way of enhancing and maintaining foreign language skills. Most participants suggested that this mode of teaching be developed and applied to greater numbers of students. Indeed, the feedback from learners was very positive.

Conclusion

Electronic mail delivery of assignments proved effective in this short pilot study. Further and more detailed research is planned for the future. Email-based Russian-English translation practice certainly proved effective and popular with students, although there is clearly much more—both practically and theoretically— to be done to more fully understand CMC as a tool in the teaching of modern languages.◆

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