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## **Teaching Russian to Visually Impaired Students during COVID-19: Technological Tools, Teaching Strategies, and Digital Materials**

GIORGIA POMAROLLI

### **1. Introduction: the value of inclusion**

The possibility of succeeding in distance education has been discussed by a consistent number of authors in literature over the past two decades (among others, see Kanuka and Conrad 2003, Moore and Kearsley 2012, Vu, Fredrickson, and Moore 2017). The defining element of distance education is the lack of physical interaction between teachers and students. In itself, distance education offers a series of benefits, most prominent of which is the removal of barriers in accessing learning: “[d]istance education has the goal of providing access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied” (Apata 2014, 19). As Kelland (2005) outlines, distance education historically has become prevalent in developing countries and in rural areas of industrialized countries in order to offer training to disadvantaged groups of students excluded from conventional means of learning.

The power of distance education in removing access barriers in education has emerged with unprecedented strength following the outbreak of the COVID pandemic. The pandemic has contributed to raising a new awareness of the importance of ensuring that all students have access to instruction as well as their full inclusion within the teaching environment. Traditionally, the notion of ‘inclusion’ within the educational context has been, and still is, widely associated with the idea of vulnerable groups of learners, such as the socially disadvantaged or ethnically marginalized subjects, people that may be discriminated against based on their gender, and people with disabilities or with special educational needs (see, for example, Stubbs 2008; Boston-Kemple 2012; Suleymanov 2015). However, the massive transition to online instruction as a result of the COVID pandemic has demonstrated the extent to which the traditional notion of inclusion in education is limited.

The issue of inclusive education does not refer exclusively to particular groups of learners; instead it concerns all learners. We must assume that (1) potentially anyone can become a “vulnerable subject” and

thus experience exclusion, even if it is just on a limited basis – it may be as a result of a short- or long-term illness, a (temporary) inability to access educational spaces – as is the case for students residing abroad or working students, or a global pandemic crisis which prevents the free movement of people; (2) every learner is unique insofar as s/he has peculiar capabilities, cognitive characteristics, learning times and styles, memorization strategies, motivations, and psychological/emotional attitudes towards learning. Essentially, as Moriña (2017) puts it, “[i]nclusive education focuses on the need to provide a high-quality educational response for all students [...]. Within the inclusive philosophy, diversity is conceived in a broad sense comprising the different capabilities, gender differences and differences in social and cultural origin. These differences are seen as a benefit rather than as a problem” (3).

Abroader conception of ‘inclusion’ has recently made its way into the international debate with the UNESCO International Forum on Inclusion and Equity in Education, held in Cali, Colombia in September 2019. Under the motto “[e]very learner matters,” the Forum finally acknowledged the importance of “moving away from the vision that inclusion is restricted to disability” and at the same time, recognizing the “diversity of all persons” (UNESCO 2020, 4).

The experience of the COVID pandemic has encouraged us to explore and develop new models of distance education in a re-conceptualization of the notion of inclusion in education, which transcends the assumption that inclusive learning is about disadvantaged students. Inclusive education addresses all students and aims at promoting and supporting the full and equal participation of every single learner in the learning process.

This paper approaches the intersection between distance education and inclusive education from the perspective of language learning and teaching. Specifically, we present the experience gained in the design and delivery of an online course of Russian as a foreign language (FL) which was delivered to a group of Italian native learners, including some who are visually impaired (VI). The course was held in Autumn 2020 and, while originally planned as a conventional in-person class, due to the pandemic it underwent a radical reconsideration in terms of instruction mode, tools, strategies, and materials.

## **2. An overview of inclusive education policy at European and Italian levels**

Inclusive education started to appear on the international policy agenda in the 1990s and since then has been represented in many policy documents

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(UNESCO 1990, 1994, United Nations 2006, UNESCO 2020 – to mention only the most significant policies).

Within the European Union (EU), the active commitment to inclusive education saw the foundation of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education in 1996. The Agency's aim is to provide member countries with guidance on how to implement inclusive education following the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRDP) and the EU policy initiatives. In 2009, the Council of European Union adopted the Education & Training 2020 Programme (ET2020) – a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training for the period up to 2020. Fundamentally, the framework addresses four strategic objectives: “(1) making lifelong learning and mobility a reality; (2) improving the quality and efficiency of education and training; (3) promoting equity, social cohesion, and active citizenship; (4) enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship at all levels of education and training” (ET2020 2009, C119/3). In order to monitor the progress made by every member state, the Council elaborated on a series of reference levels of the European average performance (European benchmarks), that every country is invited to consider. The ET2020 Framework is implemented by the establishment of Working Groups composed of experts nominated by member states and key stakeholders. Their role is to support policymaking at the EU and national levels, and offer a forum of the exchange of experiences and best practices on ways to accomplish the key educational challenges. In 2015, the EU Ministers of Education approved the Paris Declaration on Promoting Citizenship and the Common Values of Freedom, Tolerance, and Non-Discrimination through Education. In order to implement the commitment undertaken by member states of the Paris Declaration, the Council of the European Union issued a Recommendation on Promoting Common Values, Inclusive Education, and the European Dimension of Teaching in 2018. The Recommendation reaffirmed the importance of promoting inclusive education for all learners, “including those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, those from a migrant background, those with special needs and the most talented learners” (Council 2018, C195/4). We must not forget that, as Smyth et al. (2014) outline, within the EU context, each country is responsible for the design and delivery of educational provisions (e.g., integration of students with special educational needs in mainstream schools, personalized support for students with special educational needs in schools and universities), and it is apparent that the standards defined in the international initiatives have not been incorporated into the legal systems of many EU countries.

Turning our attention to the Italian context, the principal reference on matters relating to the rights of persons with disabilities is Law no. 104/1992 (“Framework Law for Assistance, Social Integration, and Rights of the Handicapped”), which was further integrated and amended by Law no. 17/1999. Articles 12–17 establish the right of disabled persons to be integrated in educational institutions, from kindergartens to universities, requiring that students with disabilities are to be guaranteed (1) specific technical and educational aids, (2) the support of specialized teachers (in schools) and specialized tutors (in universities) who assist the student during classes, studying, tests and exams, (3) the presence of Italian Sign Language interpreters within universities to help deaf students in their learning process, (4) the establishment of specific personalized tutoring services in universities, (5) individualized educational plans, and (6) personalized support, in terms of compensative technological tools to assist students in taking tests and exams. In addition, the amended Law no. 17/1999 stipulates that every university should designate a delegated teacher to coordinate, monitor, and support all initiatives relating to integration within the university. In 2001, the National University Conference of Delegates for Disability (CNUDD) was founded in Italy. The CNUDD meets regularly with the aim of exchanging information and good practices in the field of inclusive education, as well as promoting the sharing of common guidelines for activities and initiatives that could be undertaken by universities throughout Italy. Further provisions on inclusive education are contained in Law no. 4/2004 (“Provisions to Help Persons with Disabilities Access Technological Tools”). Law no. 18/2009 stipulates the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the establishment of the National Observatory on the Status of Persons with Disabilities. The Observatory is composed of representatives of central and local administrations, the National Institute of Social Security, the National Institute of Statistics, labor organizations, national association representing disabled persons, as well as experts in the field of disability. The Observatory’s main objectives are to implement the CRPD and the Italian national legislation, collecting data on the condition of persons with disabilities, and reporting on disability policies.

### **3. Foreign language education for visually impaired people**

#### *3.1. Who are visually impaired (VI) persons?*

‘Visual impairment’ is an umbrella term that includes low vision and blindness and generally refers to “any degree of impairment to a person’s

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ability to see that affects his or her daily life” (Sapp 2010, 880). In other words, low vision or partially sighted individuals have an impairment to their visual function that cannot be (fully) corrected with glasses or surgery. On the other hand, the term ‘blindness’ is commonly used to indicate the total absence of vision. However, it should be noted that the term “blindness” may also be used to refer to people who are able to perceive lights, colors, and shapes.

For our purposes in this educational context, we must bear in mind that, while blind students cannot use their vision at all, the partially sighted are able to use their residual vision in the learning process aided by special equipment. Furthermore, it is important to consider that vision loss emerges as disabling under diverse conditions and at various times. Coupland, Giles, and Benn (1986, 55) suggest differentiating between: (1) congenital blindness; (2) gradual loss of sight in the early or middle years due to an illness of hereditary conditions (e.g., diabetes); (3) instantaneous loss of sight caused by an unexpected event (e.g., an accident); (4) gradual loss of visual acuity due to degenerative diseases associated with aging. It goes without saying that the cause and the process of visual loss has a strong impact on the person’s attitude towards his/her impairments, self-perception, psychological condition, social behavior, preferences when choosing assistive devices, and level of proficiency in using compensative tools and technology. All these aspects must be taken into account when designing a course that involves VI students.

According to the data collected by the Vision Loss Expert Group (VLEG), it is estimated that in 2015, 36 million people worldwide were blind, 216.6 million had moderate to severe visual impairment, and 188.5 million had mild visual impairment (see Bourne et al. 2017). With regards to Italy, the VLEG, together with the Global Burden Disease, report that in 2020 there was a total of 6.2 million people with vision loss, of which 510 thousand people were blind (the data are released by the International Agency for Prevention of Blindness; see IAPB 2021).

### *3.2. Current literature and research on teaching foreign language to VI learners*

Since the late 1980s, there has been an extensive discussion of inclusive educational practice with reference to VI children and youth (e.g., Chapman 1986; Webster and Roe 1998; Bishop 2004; Salisbury 2008). At the same time, together with digitalization, which has impacted the educational system in the last few years, there has been an increasing number of research studies discussing the potentials of assistive technology (Alves et al. 2009; Mulloy et al. 2014; Kamaghe, Luhanga, and Michael Kisangiri. 2020) and e-learning

tools (Bocconi et al. 2007; Leporini and Buzzi 2007; Calvo, Iglesias, and Moreno 2011; Kharade and Peese 2012; Periša, Peraković, and Remenar 2012) with specific reference to VI individuals.

As far as foreign language education is concerned, there exists a relatively consistent body of literature devoted to VI learners (see Aslantaş 2017 for a general overview of the most relevant studies). Most of the publications report on the practice of teaching English as a foreign language within mainstream school environments in different countries, such as Spain (Araluce 2002), Turkey (Başaran 2012), Estonia (Lõvi 2013), and Greece (Efstathiou and Polichronopoulou 2015). However, there are limited research studies that pertain to language instruction for VI university students or, more generally, adult learners.

In 2010, the “Pedagogy and Language Learning for Blind and Partially Sighted Adults in Europe” project consortium published the edited volume, *Good Practice for Improving Language Learning for Visually Impaired Adults*. The book provides some general insights about the needs of blind and partially sighted adults when learning a foreign language, although it lacks a discussion of methods and specific educational strategies. Practical suggestions for accommodating VI students within the university setting are given by Hamilton (2008), who refers to her experience of teaching German as a foreign language to English-speaking college students in the U.S. Hamilton offers useful instructions, as well as sample activities to support teachers “making the classroom not only accessible to students who are blind but also as inclusive as possible” (24). A study by Kocyigit and Artar (2015) presents the results of in-depth interviews conducted with VI students and teachers of English as a foreign language who reflect on their learning/teaching experience in prep schools of two foundation universities in Izmir, Turkey. The data obtained from the interviews reveal that, although the learning/teaching process was considered a success by all respondents, there were two main criticisms: on the one hand, students claimed that they were not totally autonomous in participating in the learning process, but it should be noted that they had benefited from the extra support given by their families in the form of taking them to and from school, as well as helping them with their homework; on the other hand, teachers highlighted their own lack of formal education, experience and adequate methodology for teaching learners with special needs in general and VI students in particular (a fact that is echoed by many; see, for example, Başaran 2012; Efstathiou and Polichronopoulou 2015). Malinowská and Ludíková (2010) discuss the advantages of using

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Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in a course of English FL – A2 level specially designed for a group of four adults (older than 25) with visual impairment. The course was organized by a specialized center for VI persons in the Czech Republic. As shown by the authors, the use of digital material for in-class activities and homework, as well as of emails for communication, facilitated the students' access to the learning process. The study by Sokolova and Balakova (2019) is, to our knowledge, the only one which reports the practice of teaching Russian to VI students within an institution of higher education. The research was conducted over six semesters in a class with one visually impaired student – Balakova herself – at Masaryk University (Brno, Czech Republic). Sokolova and Balakova provide practical suggestions, focusing on class activities which involve working with texts and the blackboard.

Given the research studies here mentioned, we can outline the following recommendations for language teaching to VI learners in conventional in-person classes. First of all, the instructor should be aware of what visual impairment is, in order to understand the varying needs of his/her students (e.g., while blind students are prevented from using any printed material, partially sighted may work with it, as long as it is provided in a large format). Secondly, the instructor should consider organizing an individual meeting with the VI student(s) prior to the course, giving them a tour of the classroom, discussing the seating and the kind of light exposure they need in order to create an accessible setting. Thirdly, the instructor is required to develop specific teaching strategies, using alternative modes and favoring the use of audio or audio-visual methods. When writing on the blackboard, it is important to use a large and neat handwriting, frequently repeat what is being written, and spell out new lexical or syntactical items. Lately, the instructor should use multisensory teaching materials, combining multimedia, digital materials, and tactile materials. In particular, the use and handling of real objects (so-called 'realia') is recommended to help students learn vocabulary or concepts.

From the literature review, it can be established that there is limited reported experience in the literature with regards to the teaching of foreign languages to VI students in tertiary education. Furthermore, it is important to note that all the existing research studies relate to conventional in-person classes. For this reason, our online Russian language course may be considered to be breaking new ground in the field of inclusive FL distance education.



#### **4. The online course of Russian language for beginners**

##### *4.1. General plan of the course*

The course was organized as part of the project “Towards accessible and inclusive teaching practices in Russian FL. An experimental study,” which was launched in 2019 by the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature of the University of Verona (Italy). The project involves a group of researchers and professors of Russian language, Russian literature, and linguistics,<sup>1</sup> and aims to design models for accessible and inclusive FL courses, with a particular focus on VI students as the target group, and the introductory level of Russian as the target subject. The project is in partnership with the Italian Union of the Blind and Partially Sighted.

The course took place in October and November 2020 and lasted for six weeks. It was delivered remotely in blended mode and consisted of 36 hours in total, divided as follows: 15 hours of synchronous learning (two lessons per week, one hour and 15 minutes each); three hours of asynchronous learning (30 minutes per week), which consisted of short videos recorded by the instructor that students had to watch outside of lesson time; and 18 hours of digital work (three hours per week) that incorporated homework that each participant was required to do individually. The final goal of the course was to develop students’ Russian language skills to a beginner level (comparable to A1 level of CEFR) and to improve their knowledge of Russian culture. The course instructor was the author of the present article.

##### *4.2. Participants*

The target group included 20 participants, of which nine were sighted and 11 were visually impaired. Among the VI population, there were six blind and five partially sighted students. The age of the participants ranged from 21 to 65. Out of the 20 learners, 18 were L1 Italian, and two were bilingual Italian-Arabic. In addition, eight of the participants were majoring in FL, while the remaining 12 participants declared to know – with different levels of proficiency – at least one foreign modern language (English, Spanish, German, or French), which they had acquired either at school or in university or extra-university courses. No participant was familiar with any Slavic language.

An individual online meeting with each participant was organized prior to the course, with the dual purpose of (1) getting acquainted with the

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<sup>1</sup> Together with the author, the project team includes Manuel Boschiero, Daniele Artoni, Luisa Ruvoletto, Jacopo Saturno, and Rimma Urkhanova.

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participant and to take note of their linguistic background, their motivation for participating in the course, the availability of technological devices and the possibility of having a stable internet connection, and (2) testing to ensure their total lack of knowledge in Russian language. VI participants were asked additional questions in order to collect information about the various tools and equipment that they use to read. It emerged that among the blind, only one did not know (Italian) Braille, and two of them regularly used the Braille bar on their keyboard to read the computer display. All of them used a screen reader program installed on their computer and on their mobile phone. As for the partially sighted population, only two knew Braille. For paper texts, four used magnifying glasses, while for digital texts, three used a screen reader – although not regularly – or an electronic magnifier. All of them enabled a zoom magnifier on their computers and turned on color inversion – which applies to everything on the device – that allows black text on a white screen to become white text on a black screen. Such mode of visualization reduces eye strain.

#### *4.3. Technological tools*

The course was delivered remotely through a blended learning approach that combined synchronous lessons similar to a traditional classroom approach with online learning. As pointed out by Choy and Quek (2016), one of the main advantages of blended learning is that “students have more control over their learning through asynchronous online learning, and at the same time, the face-to-face instruction enables them to maintain quality faculty-student interaction in the classroom” (106). The three technological platforms used were Zoom, Panopto, and Moodle, all of which are regularly employed for (remote) course delivery within the University of Verona.

Live classes were conducted on the web conferencing app Zoom, which can be downloaded as a desktop or a mobile app on any type of device. Zoom has an intuitive and user-friendly interface, in addition to being highly accessible to the visually impaired, since it fully interacts with any screen reader and supports (customizable) keyboard shortcuts to manage main workflows. As a learning environment, Zoom has proven to be extremely effective in terms of both teaching and learning processes. Basically, Zoom was able to replicate the traditional classroom environment, allowing teacher-student and student-student interaction. In addition, it enabled the instructor to share materials (visual, audio, and audiovisual) and to organize collaborative (pair or group) activities by means of Breakout Rooms. Throughout the course, Zoom was also used to arrange individual meetings with the teacher for office hours.

The asynchronous learning part of the course was delivered using Panopto, a platform that allows for the recording, editing, and sharing of videos. Every week, the teacher recorded videos, up to 15 minutes each, which the participants were required to watch individually. Each video incorporated a narrated presentation whose didactic objectives might vary: (1) schematically recapitulating contents already addressed in the classroom, (2) deepening some aspects pertaining to phonetics, grammar, lexicon, the alphabet, etc., or (3) introducing new topics (following the educational model of the flipped classroom; see 4.4). Panopto turned out to be a valuable tool for inclusive education: it allows students to have a more personalized training experience – videos can be paused, rewound, and reviewed on demand – and fully interacts with any screen reader.

Moodle served as the learning management system (LMS) of the course: a specific page of content – under the name “Russian course for beginners” – was created on which all course materials were posted. In particular, the Moodle page contained the Zoom link for the class meetings, all the content that was presented in the classroom, the videos for asynchronous learning, as well as a wide range of activities students were tasked to do individually. In order to facilitate the navigation, the course format was set so that one section per page was shown. Each section corresponded to a lesson. Every lesson had a fixed structure that was composed of four subsections: the first subsection (“What did we do?”) contained the materials addressed in the classroom, the second subsection (“Let’s sum up!”) displayed the URL to Panopto videos, the third subsection (“Homework”) contained activities for individual work – usually in the form of Moodle quizzes and assignments, and the fourth subsection (“Russian culture in a nutshell”) presented heterogeneous materials which focused on particular aspects of Russian culture (short videos, songs, etc.). The language used on the Moodle page was exclusively Italian to ensure that a screen reader could fully interact with it without any interference resulting from a multilingual situation. Overall, Moodle has proven to be an effective – albeit imperfect – technological tool in terms of accessibility. As reported by the students who used the screen reader, the main problems that they encountered were restricted to the procedure for submitting a Moodle assignment and the navigation of the page using a device other than a computer.

#### 4.4. *Teaching strategies*

The presence of VI students in the classroom encouraged us to implement a range of pedagogical techniques that combined communication-oriented models with more traditional approaches. An immutable characteristic of the course was the use of alternative sensory modes to design activities which involved simultaneously different senses (sight and hearing).

The main teaching method adopted throughout the course was a communicative approach that involved a high degree of interaction. Basically, during classes, the students were required to carry out activities or solve tasks that consisted in understanding and producing Russian language, as well as focusing on conveying the meaning rather than on forms. Activities and tasks were matched to the students' authentic needs, such as debating on what they like or dislike (*Я люблю/не люблю..., потому что...*), interacting with locals in order to understand where to find something that they needed (*Где можно...?*), collecting information at the hotel reception (*В номере есть wi-fi? Когда завтрак? Где ресторан?*), etc. During the interaction, the students received corrective feedback – either explicit or implicit – from the teacher with the purpose of improving their accuracy and further developing the discussion. PowerPoint presentations were used to orient the activities and display linguistic elements that students were asked to apply. Language input was offered in the form of individual sentences, short texts, or dialogues. Structuring the lesson on communicative activities enabled collaborative work from the students and, ultimately, had a significant impact on their communication skills, engagement with the lesson, and self-confidence.

Another teaching strategy applied was that of the flipped classroom. This instructional model requires the students to complete pre-class preparatory work – e.g., reading the textbook or watching a video – in order to get acquainted with theoretical contents. In doing so, class time can be used for practical activities in which students can demonstrate comprehension of the content previously studied. During the course, participants were at times required to watch pre-recorded videos at home which presented new grammar or lexical structures (such as personal pronouns, professions, past tense of verbs, *идти/ходить*, etc.) so that the class became the place to discuss and review concepts, organize dynamic and participatory activities, and work on completing activities. Flipping the classroom enabled participants to actively contribute to the construction of knowledge, as well as to optimize their exposure to Russian language. However, this approach requires students to be very concentrated while watching a video that presents linguistic structures

they have never encountered before, and the pre-class preparation of new contents demands a significant commitment outside of lesson time. Taking that into consideration, we carefully rationed the use of this learning/teaching strategy.

More traditional activities were organized throughout the course by means of PowerPoint presentations shared on the screen in which the instructor presented various topics (e.g., the alphabet, plural of nouns, expressions to talk about the weather, prepositional case). When introducing new lexical structures, the instructor spelled out the single letters so that VI students could familiarize themselves with the new word(s) and possibly take note of them. The explanation was usually followed by exercises – gap-fill, substitution, matching, reformulation, correcting errors – that students were required to solve, either collectively or divided into groups.

#### *4.5. Digital materials*

It is well established that multisensory activities have a positive impact on the process of language learning. Based on the assumption that “as a primary channel for acquiring information, the sense of touch is often highly developed in blind students and underdeveloped in sighted students,” Hamilton (2008) suggests to “look for opportunities to use tactile objects” in the lesson, “as all students will clearly benefit from ... doing so” (36–37). Originally, our course of Russian language was intended to be a traditional in-person class, where we planned to actively use tactile materials to make the classroom as inclusive as possible. The transition of the course to remote delivery prevented us from using tactile objects and forced us to switch to entirely digitally conceived materials. This had a direct consequence in particular on the techniques and materials we used to teach students the Russian alphabet.

The alphabet was introduced in the second lesson – when students already possessed a little vocabulary (e.g. Кто это? Это мама, Что это? Это касса, etc.) – by means of a PowerPoint presentation where letters were first presented in sequence and with reference to words containing them, and subsequently, they were grouped into categories as follows: (1) letters that are identical to Latin ones (А, Е/Ё, К, М, О, Т), (2) ‘deceitful’ letters, e.g., letters that look familiar but represent a different set of sounds in Russian (В, Н, Р, С, Х, У), (3) letters resembling something else (З, И, Й, П, Э, Я), (4) letters unique to Russian (Б, Г, Д, Ж, Л, Ф, Ц, Ч, Ш, Щ, Ъ, Ю),

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and (6) signs (Ъ, Ъ).<sup>2</sup> For each letter, the instructor provided a description of its graphic asset, stimulating sighted students to help. At the end of the lesson, the students were asked to write some words (e.g. ‘мама,’ ‘кот,’ ‘вино’) on the Zoom chat using the phonetic Russian keyboard on their computers.<sup>3</sup> A video summary – where letters were presented as grouped into vowels, consonants, the semivowel and signs – was later posted on Moodle, together with a series of exercises designed to improve the students’ skill in pronouncing syllables and words (through listening and repeating activities), as well as in writing with the keyboard. In particular, an audio file was created where the instructor dictated some simple sentences (e.g., ‘это музыка,’ ‘это хлеб и борщ,’ ‘это январь’) and assisted the students in the process of writing with the keyboard, specifically focusing on “special” letters – letters whose position does not correspond with the Latin keyboard or letters that require a combination of keystrokes to produce. The same file was created in two versions: one for the Windows PC mnemonic keyboard, and one for the Mac phonetic keyboard.

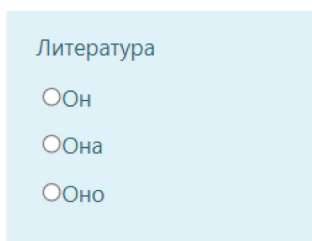
The whole set of digital materials was created *ex novo* by us and designed in the spirit of multimodality: textual contents were always accompanied by audio descriptions and/or saved in a screen reader-friendly mode in order to ensure that students could alternatively use the sight and hearing channels with equal ease. For example, each PowerPoint presentation that we posted on Moodle in the subsection “What did we do?” was followed by an audio file (saved in .m4a format) where the instructor narrated the presentation, providing the spelling of words when necessary.

All quizzes were presented as both a Moodle activity and a Word document, so as to ensure that students with visual impairment could choose the most convenient format, completing them in either place. Quizzes might include various question types, e.g., multiple choice (see Figures 1, 2, 3), short answer (see Figures 4, 5), etc., and might have different goals, such as or comprehension or fixing grammatical and lexical structures. The instructions were provided in Italian.

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<sup>2</sup> The course did not include Russian Braille, because its main purpose was to design a course that ultimately was inclusive for all students. Teaching the blind students Russian Braille potentially could have excluded the sighted students from the learning process.

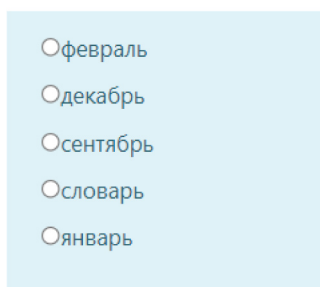
<sup>3</sup> Prior to classes, participants received instructions on how to install the phonetic/mnemonic Russian keyboard on their computers.



Литература

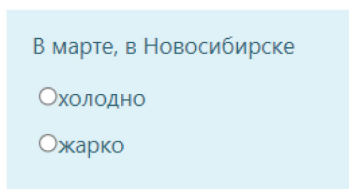
- Он
- Она
- Оно

Figure 1. Example of a multiple-choice quiz in Moodle where students were required to indicate the gender for some nouns by selecting the correct pronoun



- февраль
- декабрь
- сентябрь
- словарь
- январь

Figure 2. Example of a multiple-choice quiz in Moodle where students were required to indicate the “intruder”



В марте, в Новосибирске

- холодно
- жарко

Figure 3. Example of a multiple choice quiz in Moodle where students were required to select the correct answer.



Где можно купить антибиотик?

Risposta:

Figure 4. Example of a short answer quiz.

ЧИТАТЬ  
Алла и Инна \* детективы.

Risposta:

Figure 5. Example of a short answer quiz.

Moodle assignment activity modules were used to test participants in both oral and written production; once the assignment was completed, students were asked to submit it on the dedicated section or send it by email to the instructor, who reviewed it. Concerning the development of oral skills, students were required to submit oral monologues (e.g. “Record your answers to the following questions: Ты знаешь английский язык? Ты работаешь? Ты завтракаешь утром? Ты слушаешь джаз?”; “Record yourself describing what you did yesterday”) or dialogues (“With a partner, record yourself asking questions about three things s/he owns). In order to improve writing skills, students were at times asked to submit short texts (e.g. “Complete the following sentences: По профессии я..., Моя страна – ..., Мой город – ..., Мой язык – ...”; “Answer the following questions: Что ты делаешь утром? Что ты делаешь днём? Что ты делаешь вечером?”). Instructions were provided in Italian in the form of an oral or written text.

All text materials were designed in accordance with the guidelines for accessibility. For example, PowerPoint presentations, either those displayed in the classroom and then posted on Moodle, or those shown in the videos devoted to asynchronous learning had high contrast with a simple, non-graphic, black background and white letters. The font used was Verdana – which offers optimal readability – in a font size no less than 38. We avoided the use of italics, which is harder to process, and when there was a need to emphasize any element, we used boldface type. The text was displayed in paragraphs aligned left with 1.5 line spacing. Any picture was accompanied by an alternative text which enabled blind students to enjoy its content via screen reader or marked as “decorative” if not important for the understanding of contents. In Word documents posted on Moodle for individual work (quizzes or assignments) the information was organized by headings so that a screen reader could easily read the document. The font used was Verdana in size 18; colors and italics were avoided; the text was aligned left with 1.5 line spacing. As a general rule, PDF documents



were avoided since they may pose readability problems with the screen reader. To reduce the risk of a misreading of words by the screen reader in the event of a multilingual situation, Word documents were compiled entirely in Russian.

## 5. Concluding remarks

In this paper we provided a critical survey of the tools, strategies and materials used in a remotely delivered course of Russian language for beginners. Our participants consisted of a group of Italian native speakers, some of whom were visually impaired. On the basis of this experience, we came up with a set of recommendations which address any instructor who is committed to teaching Russian FL (A1) in an online course, designed for a group that includes VI students:

- (1) Acquire knowledge about visual impairment, so as to gain awareness about your students' needs.
- (2) Prior to the course, organize an online individual meeting with the VI students, in order to collect information about tools and equipment they use to read and, more in general, to work with digital materials. Avoid private questions (e.g., How did you go blind?), and ask only questions that pertain to the learning process (e.g., How did you learn to read?). Bear in mind that the more specific your questions, the more informative the answers will be. So, do not be afraid of asking questions that may help you in improving the effectiveness of your teaching.
- (3) Prior to classes, provide VI students with technical instructions about the tools that will be employed during the course (what platforms will be used, how they work, how to install the phonetic/mnemonic Russian keyboard, etc.).
- (4) When planning in-class activities, make sure they involve alternative sensory modes that entail simultaneously different senses (sight and hearing).
- (5) Do not avoid visual resources just because of the presence of VI students in your class. If they are considered useful for your learning purposes, continue to incorporate photographs, paintings, and pictures of any kind, making sure – if necessary – to provide an oral description of visual materials for VI students.
- (6) When providing explanations or conducting activities, frequently repeat the grammar or lexical structures you are considering: this will help VI students (especially those who

are blind) become familiar with them; at the same time, such practice will be beneficial for sighted students as well, ultimately improving their pronunciation;

- (7) When introducing new lexical items, spell them out loud, so VI students can memorize and eventually take note of the new words.
- (8) Bear in mind that, since the course is delivered remotely, you can count only on digital materials (no tactile materials can be used). In designing your digital materials, follow the guidelines for accessibility (high contrast, large font, at least 1.5 line spacing, etc.). Be sure that all the materials can fully interact with screen readers (try to avoid multilingual situations, use headings for Word files, provide alternative texts for pictures, etc.);
- (9) Construct a set of homework that privileges listening and speaking activities. Ask your students to record themselves when completing a speaking assignment, as so you will be able to give them feedback about their oral skills. At the same time, do not exclude writing and reading activities. When asking students to complete a writing assignment (e.g., a quiz), make sure it can be carried out with a screen reader. If you are asking students to complete a reading activity, you can attach an audio file where you read the text; in this way you will avoid any problem of mispronunciation caused by a misreading by the screen reader.
- (10) In general, throughout the course, ask your VI student(s) if they are encountering any technical problems (e.g., in reference to the platforms used, the materials, the homework, the Cyrillic keyboard) in order to monitor the accessibility of the tools, resources, and materials you are providing. If they report any difficulty, you must find a solution (bearing in mind that there is always 'another way!'). Do not be afraid to ask students to help you with suggestions: most of the time, they have a better knowledge of what assistive technology allows them to do, how it works, and what accessibility truly means.

Our experience confirms the assertion that “the shift towards adaptation of the curricular materials and the teaching methods for VI learners ... appeal[s] to sighted people as well because of the variation of the methods and the instructional materials” (Coşkun 2013, 289–90). In fact, the presence of VI students encouraged us to implement multisensory activities (all written input was also given as audio input as well) and

double-channel materials (visual and auditory) that proved to have beneficial effects for sighted students as well in terms of oral production (pronunciation, intonation, fluency), motivation, and general engagement. It is important to note that the inclusive spirit that guided the instructor in designing and conducting activities ultimately affected the general atmosphere of the classroom, fostering the development of a collaborative environment, where sighted students always displayed a positive attitude towards implicitly helping VI students (e.g., by spontaneously offering to be the team leader in group activities that required a reading moment to accomplish a task).

Converting the class into an online course turned out to have positive effects on the learning process as a whole. In particular, holding the course remotely ensured the regular participation of all students in the classes, since they did not have to travel in order to attend face-to-face lessons. This in itself demonstrates how distance education is truly able to overcome physical borders – whether created by a global pandemic or an individual disability. In addition, the transition to distance delivery mode enabled us to explore alternative pedagogical practices that ultimately opened new horizons in teaching Russian as a FL. Among the most interesting and significant results of our course, there is, for example, the fact that at the end most students were able to write almost without errors using the Russian keyboard (a skill that is usually neglected in traditional A1 in-person courses).

Given the experience here reported, it would appear that the COVID-19 pandemic has inadvertently contributed to the way in which innovative contexts and tools can be explored and developed. While access to education for people with disabilities is enshrined in legislation at the international and national levels, the actual implementation of inclusive practices in university teaching programs is still an emergent and ongoing process. The technical solutions, together with the creativity and a renewed attitude towards the issues of inclusion and access(ibility) that we have experienced during this emergency will definitely have a significant impact on inclusive education and will continue to be influential long after the pandemic.

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