

From the Middle Ages to Today: a brief manual-style excursus on teaching Russian to foreigners

ISSN 2657-9774; <https://doi.org/10.36534/erlj.2025.01.17>

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Introduction

The teaching of Russian as a foreign language has a long, complex, and surprisingly lively history, stretching from the 12th century to the present day. It is not just about learning a language, but about understanding how culture, history, and political choices have shaped the way Russian has been taught to non-native speakers. Each historical period brought new needs, tools, and theoretical reflections that left their mark on manuals, teaching methods, and language pedagogy.

A fundamental contribution to understanding this evolution was made in 2005 by a research group from the Pushkin State Russian Language Institute (*Institut russkogo jazyka imeni A.S. Puškina*), led by Professor A.N. Shchukin. The team published a manual that presents a detailed excursus of the stages and developments of teaching techniques, providing a comprehensive overview of how linguistic and pedagogical knowledge has transformed over time.

According to the researchers' work, the history of Russian language teaching can be divided into three main phases: the pre-Soviet period (12th century to the 1917 Revolution), the Soviet period (from the establishment of the USSR to its collapse), and the post-Soviet period, which continues to the present day. Each phase is characterized by milestones that influenced both theory and practice. This periodization considers political and socioeconomic changes that affected education, as well as advances in disciplines such as pedagogy, psychology, linguistics, sociology, and computer science, all of which played a significant role in shaping teaching methods.

Early Russian language manuals in Europe: curiosity and innovation

The first manuals for foreigners appeared in Europe between the 17th and 18th centuries, at a time when Russian began to attract interest outside its borders. One pioneer was the German Heinrich Wilhelm Ludolf, author of *Russkaja Grammatika*. Ludolf adopted an innovative approach: he did not limit himself to listing grammar rules but also included phrases and dialogues in the spoken language (*razgovornye frazy*), translated into German and Latin, so that students could practice in realistic contexts.

Moreover, the manual included geographical and cultural information: short descriptions of villages, natural landscapes, and the many ethnic groups living in Russia. These elements, seemingly secondary, actually had a pedagogical function: they allowed students to place the language in a real context and perceive it as living, rather than as a mere set of rules. Despite some grammatical errors, Ludolf's work represents a milestone in the methodology of teaching Russian to foreigners.

The 19th century: from grammar-translation to the natural method

Throughout the 19th century and into the early 20th century, Russian language teaching was dominated by the grammar-translation approach. In this method, study revolved around grammar: students learned rules and structures, and then applied them in exercises translating from Russian to their native language and vice versa. This approach produced satisfactory results in reading and understanding texts but was less effective in oral expression.

From the mid-19th century, the need to make language learning more lively and to promote spoken competence became evident. This led to the creation of the *natural method*, based on principles similar

to those used in teaching children: listen, repeat, understand, and memorize. The method employed thematic phrasebooks and lexical explanations, allowing students to internalize the language through concrete situations.

At the same time, intensive methods such as the direct method, the intuitive-imitative method, and the Berlitz method were developed. The latter achieved great success in Europe and even reached Moscow, where a school was opened on the Kuznetsky Bridge. Here, grammar took a secondary role, while dialogue became the focal point of lessons. By the end of the 19th century, two methodological approaches coexisted: traditional grammar and translation on one hand, and direct, communication-centered learning on the other. These developments laid the foundations for 20th-century methods.

Russian teaching in the soviet period: pragmatism and theoretical development

After the 1917 Revolution, in the 1920s, communist universities (*Komvusy*) welcomed foreign students from across the USSR. Teaching had practical and political aims: quickly providing students with complete communicative skills, with particular attention to oral production, while also allowing specialization in literature. Texts used were often of a political or social nature, reflecting the objectives of the new regime.

From the mid-1930s, the students' native language was reintroduced through translation exercises. Teachers faced significant challenges due to inexperience and a lack of teaching tools, making it clear that a solid theoretical foundation was necessary.

In the 1940s, the ideas of L.V. Shcherba helped define language teaching as an autonomous discipline. Learning a foreign language had practical objectives: students had to be able to communicate at a threshold level with native speakers. During this period, the contrastive-conscious approach (*soznatel'no-sopostavitel'nyj podchod*) emerged, which compared the system of the foreign language with that of the students' native language to facilitate understanding and learning. Grammar, vocabulary, and syntax were studied alongside exercises and texts to develop communicative competence.

In the 1950s, this theoretical approach was applied in new manuals designed for different nationalities, taking into account linguistic particularities. In 1951, the Moscow State University established a department of Russian for foreigners, offering Russian courses and preparatory courses for university entrance exams.

In the 1960s, a communicative approach was developed: grammar was taught in functional modules designed to enhance communicative competence. Psychologists and linguists such as S.L. Rubinstein, A.A. Leontiev, and I.A. Zimnyaya laid the foundations of the communicative-active approach, focused on students' individual characteristics. Lessons included contextualized exercises, real-life dialogue situations, and collaborative work.

During this period, Beliaev's practical-conscious method (1965) became widespread, combining conscious grammar knowledge with oral practice. In the 1970s, the method was refined in its pragmatic-communicative aspects, resulting in innovative manuals such as *Russkij jazyk dlja vseh*, *Start*, and *Temp*. However, the emphasis on spoken language at the expense of written language and the reduced use of translation did not always yield optimal results.

Also in the 1970s, the Pushkin Institute provided a major theoretical contribution with two key publications: *Metodika* (1975) by Leontiev and Koroleva and *Metodicheskoe rukovodstvo dlja prepodavatelej russkogo jazyka* (1976) by Kostomarov and Mitrofanova.

The post-soviet period: innovation and technology

With the collapse of the USSR, social and technological changes profoundly influenced Russian language teaching. Intensive methods were developed, new-generation manuals were created, and multimedia tools were introduced, expanding learning possibilities. In 1990, the publishing house *Zlatoust* was founded in Saint Petersburg, dedicated to producing manuals and scientific publications on teaching

Russian as a foreign language. These developments made teaching more accessible, interactive, and closely aligned with students' contemporary needs.

Conclusion

The history of teaching Russian to foreigners is a rich and dynamic journey, marked by continuous interplay between theory and practice, innovation and tradition. From the first manuals of the 17th century to today's texts and multimedia tools, each period contributed new instruments, methods, and approaches. Today, Russian language teaching integrates diverse strategies, emphasizing oral communication, cultural understanding, and the use of technology. The manualistic excursus thus remains a vital tool for understanding how Russian language pedagogy has grown, evolved, and continues to adapt to the needs of learners.