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(Not Yet) In Focus

The Neglected First Lessons in Slavic Language Teaching

An Editorial Reflection

This text examines the first encounter with a Slavic language in the classroom, a moment of renewed pedagogical and ethical relevance amid shifting sociopolitical contexts. The decline of Russian instruction following the war against Ukraine highlights the need to reconsider how this initial experience is structured and framed. The six contributions approach the “first lesson” from linguistic, cognitive, and practical perspectives, addressing phonetics, plurilingualism, and heritage-language learning. Yet the small number of submissions and predominance of traditional models reveal a gap between theory and innovation. Classroom insights from Hamburg illustrate how teachers increasingly prioritise social aims—community building, learner diversity, and reflection—over purely linguistic goals. Together, these studies emphasise the need to reconceptualise the first lesson as a space where language, identity, and pedagogy intersect in contemporary Slavic education.

Keywords: first lesson; Slavic languages; language pedagogy; multilingualism; heritage speakers

Текст посвящен первому знакомству со славянским языком в учебной аудитории — моменту, приобретающему особую педагогическую и этическую значимость в современных социополитических условиях. Сокращение преподавания русского языка после начала войны против Украины подчёркивает необходимость переосмыслить структуру и содержание этого начального опыта. Шесть представленных статей рассматривают «первый урок» с лингвистических, когнитивных и практических позиций, включая аспекты фонетики, полиязычия и обучения наследных говорящих. Небольшое количество откликов и преобладание традиционных подходов указывают на разрыв между теорией и инновацией. Примеры из гамбургских школ показывают, что преподаватели всё чаще ставят на первый план социальные задачи — формирование сообщества, учёт языкового многообразия и развитие рефлексии. Эти наблюдения подчёркивают необходимость осмыслить первый урок как пространство пересечения языка, идентичности и педагогики в современном славянском образовании.

Ключевые слова: первый урок; славянские языки; методика преподавания языка; многоязычие; наследные говорящие

When we first announced this issue, we anticipated a broad range of contributions on the topic of the *very first encounter* with a Slavic language in the classroom – a topic that carries particular relevance today. At a time when the teaching of Russian as a foreign language is visibly declining in schools and universities as a consequence of Russia’s war against Ukraine, the question of how this initial moment of learning unfolds, and how it positions a language culturally and ethically, deserves renewed pedagogical attention. Yet despite the topical urgency of this call,



only six contributions were accepted for publication. We would like to note that the reflections offered in this article represent the editors' own perspective and are not intended as a scholarly article in the strict academic sense.

This modest response may in part reflect the framing of our Call for Papers, which invited proposals on the structured and reflective design of introductory lessons, the presentation of basic linguistic elements, and the creation of an inclusive, non-intimidating classroom atmosphere. We encouraged authors to address the linguistic particularities of Slavic languages – from the Cyrillic script and complex grammatical systems to phonetic challenges – to situate their teaching in cultural contexts without relying on stereotypes, and to share practical lesson plans or examples of best practice. In addition, we sought reflections on multilingual learning environments, the role of heritage speakers, and the impact of curriculum (syllabus) design and language policy on the ways Slavic languages are introduced. This constellation of themes also resonates with an argument by one of the authors that contemporary language teaching must respond to changing learner needs and adopt genuinely modern, up-to-date methodological approaches.

Most of the contributions engage selectively with these aspects – often concentrating on phonetics, grammar, or classroom interaction – while digital and policy-oriented perspectives remained largely absent. *A Neurolinguistic Approach to the First Lesson in Teaching Russian as a Foreign Language* and *Phonetics, Cognates, and Culture: A Holistic Approach to the First Ukrainian Lesson* offer linguistically and cognitively grounded introductions. *Language Animation in the First Russian Lesson* proposes playful, activity-based strategies, whereas *Starting the Lesson with Multiple Languages* adopts a multilingual perspective that mobilises learners' prior linguistic knowledge. *I Don't Speak a Word of Slovenian – Or Do I?* stands out for its intercomprehensive use of authentic materials, such as newspaper articles, linking language discovery with autonomous learning strategies. Finally, *When the First Lesson Is Missing or Interrupted* addresses the specific challenges of heritage-language teaching, where the "first lesson" may not occur in a conventional form.

Across all contributions, a recurring theme is the necessity of introducing the Cyrillic script. Yet considerable uncertainty persists regarding when and how this should take place, and whether learners should begin with print letters only or with both print and cursive forms. Taken together, these articles offer valuable insights into contemporary classroom practice and pedagogical creativity. At the same time, they reveal a broader tendency within Slavic language education to rely on established models rather than to explore new methodological, theoretical, or digital frameworks. The small number of contributions, combined with this predominance of traditional approaches, suggests that the *starting point* of language instruction – while foundational – remains under-discussed and under-theorised, partly because research literature on the very first lesson in Slavic language teaching is still limited.

While our call and the accepted contributions can be situated within Klafki's *didactic triangle* – the interrelationship between *teacher*, *learner*, and *subject matter* – classroom realities often look rather different. This becomes clear in the reflections of two young Russian teachers from Hamburg, who described in short voice messages how they introduce the subject to their students, outlining their aims, methods, and possible adaptations.

Both teachers work at secondary schools with highly multilingual student populations, where Russian may be chosen as a foreign language in Years 6 or 7. Since the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine, the number of Russian-speaking pupils has increased markedly, meaning that almost every Russian class now includes a substantial proportion of heritage speakers.

The most striking feature of these teachers' accounts is their prioritisation of social and pedagogical over linguistic objectives. "My overarching goal was only secondarily linguistic," one teacher notes. Their primary concern was to foster a sense of community, create a positive classroom atmosphere, and help pupils from different classes get to know one another – echoing the sentiment that "you only ever get one chance to make a good first impression".

This interpersonal focus is closely tied to an awareness of learners' linguistic backgrounds. Both teachers stress the importance of identifying pupils' prior language knowledge from the outset, as many possess heritage-language skills. Mapping these resources during the initial lesson enables them to identify individual needs and adapt subsequent instruction.

They also assign a reflective writing task in which pupils note their expectations, goals, and concerns about learning Russian. These reflections are collected and returned at the end of the school year, giving students an opportunity to observe their progress and shifting attitudes. Organisational matters such as materials and assessment criteria are likewise clarified during this meeting.

What is particularly notable, however, is that the language itself – Russian as subject matter – plays a comparatively secondary role. The teachers' attention is directed instead toward their students, their diverse experiences, and the emerging teacher-learner relationship. Through the integration of personal linguistic backgrounds, real-life connections, and reflective opportunities, their lessons embody a strongly learner-centred orientation, and both teachers report that students left the first lesson motivated and engaged.

Although these classroom practices differ markedly from the more theory-driven approaches presented in this and other academic contributions, they highlight an essential point: subject pedagogy must attend not only to content and method, but also to learners themselves, to the evolving role of the teacher, and to the relational dimensions of teaching.

Looking ahead, a future Call for Papers on this topic should more explicitly connect the "first lesson" to the rapidly changing sociopolitical and educational landscape. This may include inviting contributions that engage with issues of language ethics and cultural positioning in times of conflict, explore digital and hybrid teaching formats, and examine the implications of increasing multilingualism and heritage-language diversity in classrooms. It would also be fruitful to encourage collaborative studies that combine empirical classroom research with methodological and theoretical reflections, thereby bridging the gap between pedagogical practice and academic discourse. In this way, the "first lesson" could become not only the beginning of language learning, but also a focal point for rethinking the role of Slavic languages in contemporary education.