

# Language immersion in the self-study mode e-course

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**Abstract.** This paper assesses the efficiency of the ‘Language Immersion e-Course’ developed at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) Language Centre. The new self-study revision e-course, promoting students’ proficiency in spoken and aural Russian through autonomous learning, is based on the Michel Thomas method, and is focused primarily on lexical work, which students commonly consider to be one of the biggest challenges in language studies. The course, targeted at the intermediate (A2/B1) level of proficiency in Russian (with a specific focus on language for Social Sciences) was incorporated into students’ guided revision programme. The package is downloadable as a mobile application offering more flexibility for the users. This paper focuses on the pedagogical evaluation of the project (through students’ feedback and their exam performance), and analyses the learning implications of such e-courses as a valuable alternative and added value to classroom teaching. Given that lexical command plays a fundamental role both in fluent language production (speaking and writing) and efficient comprehension (listening and reading), the paper asserts the benefits of such e-courses for blended learning programmes, as well as for improving overall efficiency of students’ second language acquisition.

**Keywords:** mobile application, Michel Thomas method, lexical work, autonomous learning.

## 1. Introduction

A new self-study revision e-course was designed to develop students’ proficiency in spoken and aural Russian and to enhance their skills as autonomous language learners. The Russian Language Course discussed here is offered to LSE undergraduates within their Degree programme. The project was based on the Michel Thomas communicative method (see below) and draws on several related areas of language, pedagogical research and practice. Firstly, it was designed to increase the number

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of language immersion hours, especially during the Easter break in the lead-up to students' examinations. The absence of language practice during the four-week break may impair students' fluency and language command acquired over term time; this is largely the case for beginners/low intermediate level students, whose proficiency in Russian has not yet been consolidated by years of continuous tuition and practice.

Secondly, the project addresses difficulties associated with aural and lexical work in language learning. These areas of language acquisition are traditionally perceived by students as the most problematic (Rivers, 1992), and require significantly more practice to reach the same level of mastery as other modules. The issue becomes of particular pedagogical relevance in light of the fact that listening comprehension plays a major role (40-50%) in the overall process of language communication (Gilman & Moody, 1984).

Finally, the course reflects specialised Social Sciences focus of the LSE Language programme. The intention was to provide students with tailor-made language materials within a socio-political context (the relevant spectrum of topics is rare among commercial on-line materials), and to enhance their experience in language learning through a resource adaptable to the variety of learning abilities and individual needs.

## 2. Method

The project is grounded in the Michel Thomas method, aimed at developing cognitive fluency through oral and aural practice by way of contextual reiteration of vocabulary and linguistic structures (Solity, 2008; Woodsmall & Woodsmall, 2008). The latter is combined with the 'inductive' mode of critical apprehension (grammatical concepts are derived from a series of examples rather than from traditionally 'pre-packed' explanations). The strength of the method lies in progressive accumulation of ready-to-use lexemes, allowing learners to retain vocabulary, while gaining a deeper understanding of how the language actually works. Every new lexical set is introduced topically within an exchange context. This, together with the interactive aspect (there is constant pressure to recall and reconstruct from the previously acquired lexical bank), provides an effective mode of multidimensional learning from internalising intonation and pronunciation to embedding contextual memory prompts.

The unique feature of the course is its subject-specific content, purposely designed for the LSE Language for Social Sciences programme. The development of this

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course ties in well with the general framework of applied research carried out by the Russian Section, which is focused on cognitive fluency study (Bershadsky, 2012; Sobolev & Nesterova, 2013).

The course was targeted at the intermediate (A2/B1) level of proficiency in Russian, and was incorporated into students' guided revision programme outside term-time classroom teaching (a group of 12 students used the resources for a continuous period of four weeks). The course was available as a mobile application (iPhone/iPad/android devices), so that students could have some extra flexibility for the hours spent on their daily language routine (a full written transcript of the recording was accessible on-line).

The project's learning outcome and pedagogical impact were evaluated in two ways: informally, through students' feedback obtained through a short questionnaire; and formally, through students' performance in the end of year examinations. The questionnaire was paper-based, and circulated to students taking the course before examination results were published, and thus functions as an arguably more accurate gauge of the e-course as preparation for the examination.

### 3. Results and discussion

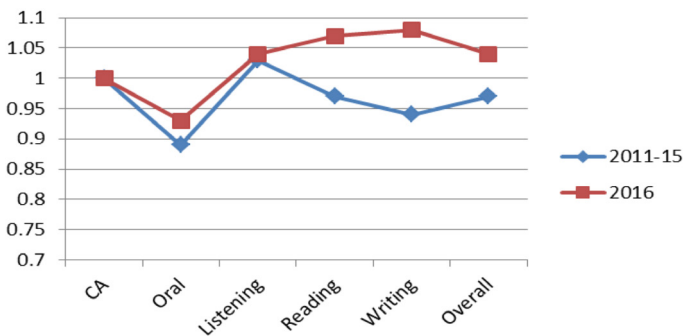
The survey contained questions related to the academic values of the project: its pedagogical worth (i.e. increasing students' confidence as language users) and presentation. Students rated each aspect on a scale of one to five (with five being the highest rating). The overall feedback was highly rewarding: all aspects of the project were rated over 80% positive by 92% of students. No negative aspects were specified. In their written comments, students specifically mentioned that the course was extremely helpful for the exams and increased their confidence as language users. The latter was particularly noticeable in oral examinations: according to the external examiner's comments, students' ability to take initiative in conversation was outstanding for an *ab-initio* level group.

Students' performance in exams was compared to their average Continuous Assessment (CA) grade throughout the year; this grade is based on weekly assignments in all four language skills: oral, listening, reading and writing. The cohort was a mixed ability group of students, who had started learning Russian *ab initio* at the beginning of the year (with A2/B1 exit level). The average CA grade for the group (74.2%) corresponds to the average CA grade recorded for the last five years, showing that this was not an exceptionally able group of Russian learners.

The standard of students' performance in the exam was noticeably high: the average final grade was 2% higher than the CA grade obtained throughout the year. This was a positive improvement on the predicted result, reversing the trend for the last five years: the CA grade used to be 2% higher than the exam grade.

The breakdown of exam results in four language skills is presented in [Figure 1](#), showing manifest improvement in all modules as compared to previous years. Given that these results cannot be attributed to the exceptional linguistic ability of the learners, this allows us to link the higher level of students' proficiency in Russian to the benefits of the revision e-course. Although it would perhaps be over-hasty to draw firm conclusions in this area on the strength of a single pilot exercise, the results indicate the key role of vocabulary work in advancing students' proficiency in the second language. The better outcome in reading and writing as compared to listening can be attributed to the generally acknowledged fact that improving aural skills is one of the most difficult tasks for language learners and teachers alike ([Rivers, 1992](#)).

Figure 1. The breakdown of students' exam results in four language skills



#### 4. Conclusions

A new self-study downloadable revision e-course had a proven positive impact on students' language learning experience and performance. Apart from a noticeable improvement in their competence in Russian, the course enhanced students' transferable skills as autonomous learners and, through its routine mode of active exchange, increased their self-esteem as confident language users. As regards teaching practice, the use of mobile applications can provide a valuable model for the development of language packages in blended learning – a balanced mix of

traditional and digital technologies, which enhances the productiveness of language acquisition. The course can be easily expanded to supplement routine classroom teaching. Topically based modules can be created to enhance and develop students' language skills throughout the year, increasing the number of contact hours of language immersion, ensuring the continuity of the learning cycle, and giving scope for certain activities to be 'flipped'. The preparation of this particular e-course was definitely facilitated by access to the skills available from a Russian language team built up over many years, and with a proven track record shared by all its members. The members of staff involved were, overall, highly encouraged by the outcome of the exercise, and, more generally, LSE are already looking to replicate e-courses along these lines with other languages taught as part of undergraduate degrees.

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