The use of digital media in the Russian language classroom: an empirical study conducted in Austria, South Tyrol, and Germany

Sonja Bacher[1]

Abstract. This work-in-progress study focuses on the implementation of digital media into the Russian language classroom at secondary schools in the German-speaking countries of Austria, Germany, and the trilingual region South Tyrol. The data were collected in a mixed-methods procedure: quantitative data from online-questionnaires and qualitative data from face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with teachers and learners of Russian. The data from the online-surveys were analysed with descriptive statistics and that of the interviews with qualitative content analysis. The results from the online-surveys illustrate the kinds of digital devices that are employed, the frequency of their use, and the purposes digital media are intended to fulfil in the Russian language classroom. Another finding concerns the teachers' digital literacy, suggesting that only half of the Russian teachers can create online language learning tasks. The paper closes with implications for pre- and in-service teacher education and future research.

Keywords: digital media, Russian language classroom, digital literacy, teacher training.

1.   Introduction

Although new communication technologies are omnipresent in everyday life, and school syllabi together with educational standards require foreign language teachers to integrate digital media into their teaching (BMB, 2018; KMK, 2012), such technologies and media have not yet been consistently employed in the

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1. Innsbruck University, Innsbruck, Austria; sonja.bacher@uibk.ac.at

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foreign language classroom (Biebighäuser, Zibelius, & Schmidt, 2012; Bos et al., 2016; Feierabend, Plankenhorn, & Rathgeb, 2017). In this respect, Roche (2008) stresses the fact that the question is not *whether or not* digital media should be used but rather *how* they should be implemented to provide added-value to the language learning process.

The current study aims at investigating the types of digital media, their frequency of application, and the specific purposes they are used for in the Russian language classroom. Furthermore, this study examines whether and in how far Russian teachers are satisfied with the teacher education they received in the field of digital media, as well as the digital literacy of teachers and adolescent learners of Russian. The fact that there are little empirical data available in this area concerning Russian taught at schools outside of Russia by non-L1 and L1 Russian teachers highlights the importance of this baseline study. The findings have implications for pre- as well as in-service teacher training and for further research.

2.   Methods

The data were collected by triangulating quantitative and qualitative research methods (*between-method*) (Caspari, Klippel, Legutke, & Schramm, 2016). The concurrent mixed-methods design is meant to enhance the reliability and validity of the data (Kelle, 2014; Maxwell, 2004). In order to research the current implementation of digital media into the Russian language classroom, online-questionnaires containing multiple choice, Likert, and rating scale questions were employed. To gain more insights, semi-structured interviews with secondary school teachers and adolescent learners of Russian were conducted. The online-survey data were analysed with descriptive statistics (Raab-Steiner & Benesch, 2012) and the interview transcripts with qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2015).

2.1.   Online-questionnaires

The online-surveys were accessible for several months, during which time 158 teachers and 411 learners of Russian participated; of those, 65.2% of the teachers and 76.4% of the pupils finished the questionnaire. Reasons may lie with the length of the online-questionnaires or Internet connection problems (cf. Gräf, 2010). The teacher-questionnaire included 31 and the learner-questionnaire 19 questions. Only fully completed questionnaires were analysed. As regards the country of residence, 55 teachers came from Austria, 41 from Germany, and six from South Tyrol, while 142 pupils came from Austria, 119 from South Tyrol, and 47 from Germany. The

comparably low number of participants from Germany was caused by the lengthy process of obtaining permission from the authorities to conduct a study with pupils. In total, seven participants did not indicate their country of residence.

2.2. Semi-structured interviews

The interviews complement the data from the online-questionnaires. Within four months, seven teacher and five learner interviews were held. Teachers and pupils were asked to relate their personal viewpoints and experiences concerning the use of digital media in class. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed with qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2015).

3. Discussion of results

In the online-surveys, teachers and pupils were asked to indicate the frequency of use of certain digital devices in Russian classes. Figure 1 shows the teacher responses, Figure 2 the pupil responses. More than half of the teachers and pupils stated that there are no interactive whiteboards at their schools. Even if whiteboards are available, they appear to be infrequently used. Interview data suggest that this is due to a lack of training of how to employ interactive whiteboards. The computer and smartphone can be said to play some role in the Russian language classroom with 20.39% of the teachers but only 3.82% of the pupils indicating that they always use computers in class. This discrepancy might be explained by the fact that teachers use computers for presentation or organisational purposes (see Figure 3). In the interviews, teachers commonly stated that there is only one computer in each classroom. Better technical equipment and targeted training would most probably facilitate the implementation of digital media.

Figure 3 shows for what purposes Russian teachers use digital media in class. Teachers could give multiple answers. More than 80% of them integrate digital media to foster audiovisual reception or for motivational purposes. In the online-survey, two thirds of the pupils indicated that the implementation of digital media motivates them to some extent. Interview data suggest that this is partly due to the authentic language use and cultural information conveyed through digital media. More than 50% of the teachers employ digital media to facilitate intercultural learning. When it comes to developing pupils' writing skills or critical media literacy, digital media seem to play a minor role. Further research could establish the reasons why this is the case. School syllabi refer to the development of critical media literacy as one of the major learning objectives of the 21st century (BMB, 2018; KMK, 2012).
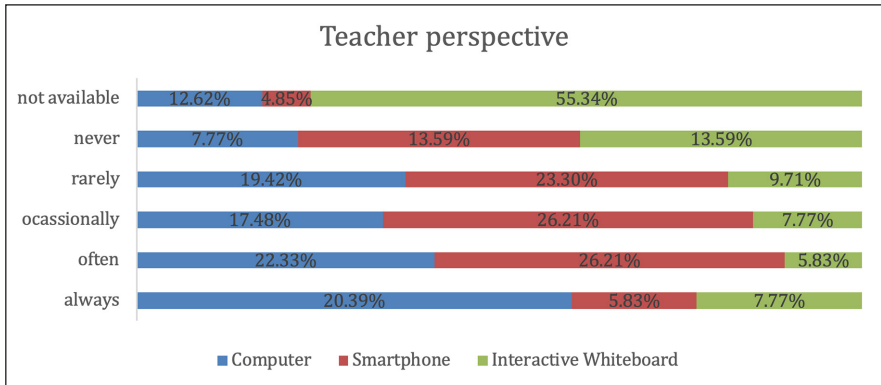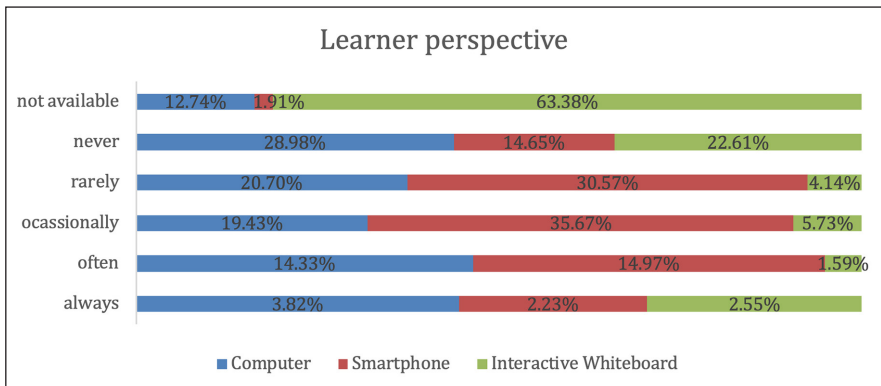
Figure 1. Frequency of use of digital devices

Figure 2. Frequency of use of digital devices

Finally, teachers and pupils were asked to assess their digital literacy on the basis of can-do-statements that had been grouped into three major categories, namely *technical and user skills*, *critical understanding*, and *participation and production* (Celot, 2015; Vuorikari, Punie, Carretero, & Van den Brande, 2016). One such statement in the teacher-questionnaire refers to the teachers' ability of designing online-tasks. Only half of the teachers feel that they are somewhat able to do so (see Figure 4). An interconnection between the teachers' age, whose mean was 41.7 years, and university curricula then in force can be assumed. In the online-survey, 69% of the teachers indicated that courses focusing on the integration of digital media into the language classroom were not part of their

pre-service teacher education. Interview and online-survey data also suggest a lack of professional development courses in this field.

Figure 3.   Purposes of digital media use
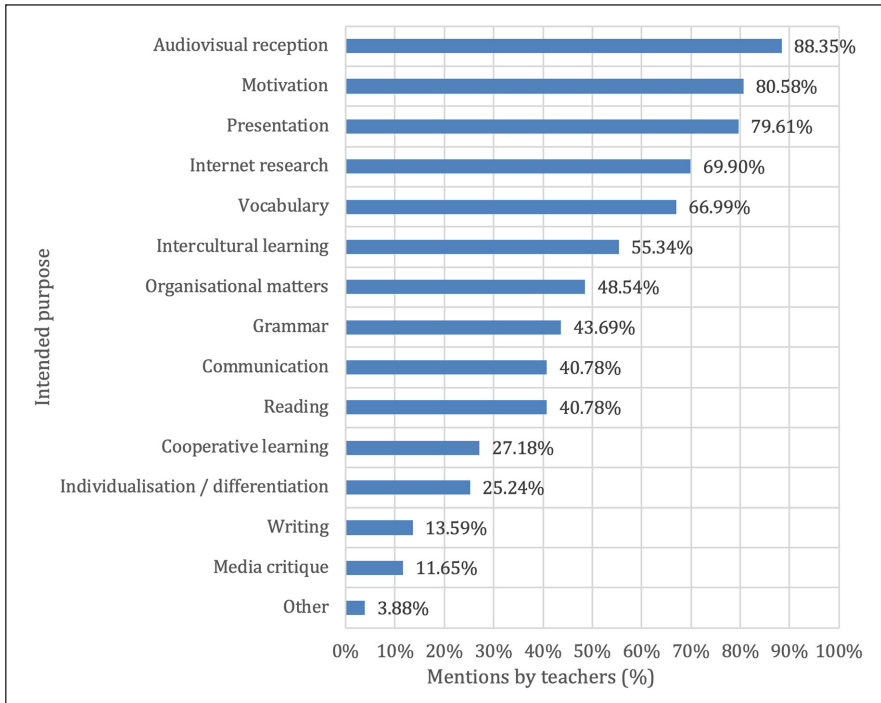
Figure 4.   Teachers' ability of designing online-tasks
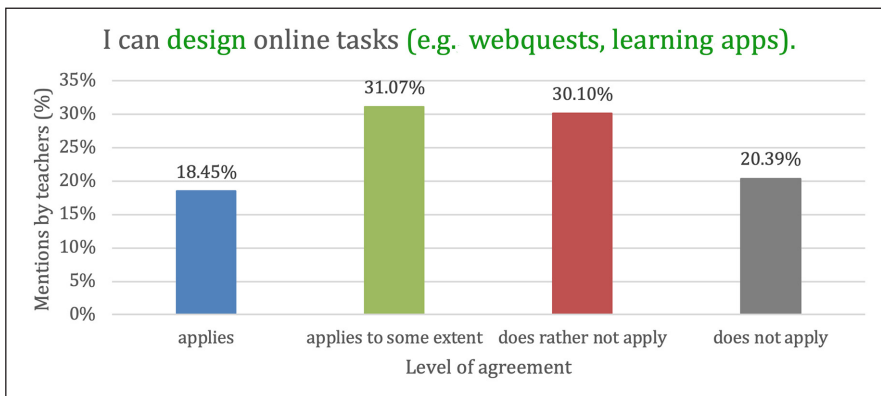
4.   Conclusion

The most frequently reported merits of using digital media in the Russian language classroom were the increase in learner motivation, authentic language use, a real-world focus, and intercultural learning opportunities. With regard to authenticity and intercultural learning, school syllabi stipulate the integration of digital media (BMB, 2018; KMK, 2012). In the online-surveys and interviews, teachers indicated a lack of specific digital devices or training of how to use these. The implementation of digital media could be facilitated by better digital learning equipment and constant technical support (cf. Bos et al., 2016). Courses focusing on using digital media in the foreign language classroom should form an integral part of pre- and in-service teacher training programmes. Especially in rural areas, a wider choice of professional development courses in this field is needed. Further research might clarify the reasons why specific learning objectives (e.g. media critique) appear to be neglected.

5.   Acknowledgements

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