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## Oral translation as a way of fostering accuracy. Evidence from teaching Russian

Устный перевод как способ развития грамматической точности.  
Доказательства из обучения русскому языку

**Abstract.** This paper presents the results from two different experiments carried out independently with two different groups of students using the same materials and the same methodology, with the aim to check whether oral translation, if applied as a main teaching technique, can foster the development of the accuracy component of language proficiency. The experiments were carried out at the International Centre for Plurilingualism at the University of Udine with two experimental groups over a period of three years. Apart from providing a positive answer to the research question, the results show that the whole training can be carried out as part of the in-class activities and is independent of factors of personal character like the amount of time a student dedicates to the L2 learning at home, his or her willingness to put him/herself to work and even, to a large extent, independent of the student's mother tongue or previous contacts with the foreign language. Since the main goal is the rapid memorization of the lexical and grammar material inside a context, the present technique suggests itself as a promising teaching tool in any lexically specialized field of L2 study.

**Keywords:** oral translation, memorization, fluency, accuracy, complexity

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### 1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present a teaching technique which aims at the rapid development of linguistic skills related to the use of grammar and lexis. Though the current methodology proposal has much broader aims striving towards the development of language competence regarding all its components, this work will only focus on the use of grammar and lexis in production and comprehension activities.

The methodology proposed here is based on oral translation as a main teaching technique. The rapid development of language skills is favoured by the activities

related to oral production and memorization, and relies on the almost full conversion of the texts used as teaching materials into internalized knowledge of the L2.

The paper presents the results from two experiments carried out at the International Center for Plurilingualism at the University of Udine involving the teaching of Russian as a foreign language to first year university students. The study reports positive results suggesting that the oral-translation-based teaching could be an efficient and time-saving way of developing language skills.

## 2. Theoretical premises

In the mid-nineties of the previous century Skehan's model (1996, 1998) defined language proficiency as three-dimensional, identifying its three components as fluency, accuracy and complexity (henceforth CAF).

Fluency is defined as the ability to produce rapid and uninterrupted speech in the target language, similarly to a native speaker (cf. Lennon; Towell et al.; Kormoz, Dénes). Accuracy, on the other hand, is the ability to produce error-free structures (Hammerly, Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki, Kim). The third component – complexity – remains until today the most difficult one to identify and measure. Probably its most popular definition is the one proposed by Rod Ellis, according to which complexity refers to the “extent to which the language produced in performing a task is elaborate and varied” (Ellis 340).

The development of the present methodology in its complete form was directly inspired by a well-known fact, namely that fluency is very difficult to obtain in an L2 classroom and often remains an unachieved goal (cf. Gatbonton, Segalowitz; Rossiter et al.). As Rossiter et al. put it “although many communicative language teaching (henceforth CLT) classrooms promote general fluency, they do not provide the repetition necessary to achieve automatic fluency” (Rossiter et al. 585).

On the other hand, if classroom activities, are mainly centred around the development of communicative competences, this may lead to the underdevelopment of the knowledge of the formal features of a language. Indeed, CLT has been criticized also for underestimating the role of grammar (see, for example, Ridge and Swan among others).

This paper will focus on the question whether we could successfully develop language competences related to the use of grammar and lexis in particular by applying oral translation as a main teaching technique. In other words, we are going to focus on one of the components of language proficiency, i.e. accuracy.

During the last decades of the twentieth century, grammar teaching and activities related to production are gradually returning to the focus of interest, af-

ter having been discarded by some scholars in the post-war period. In addition, with the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methodologies, the process of learning and the role of the learner themselves gained more importance. The development in the field led to a significant improvement of the syllabus design and of the exercise types and variety (as even critiques to the CLT recognize cf. Swan). Still, the quality of the results arrived at through the Audiolingual method, adopted during the Second World War period, and their rapid achievement outstand those of CLT classrooms.

The strength of the Audiolingual method is invariably to be sought in the overlearning. During the post-war development in the field of L2 teaching, the overlearning practices fell into oblivion, since they were considered stressful and boring. However, while the field was trying to free itself from wrong practice, it actually went to the other extreme, negating the benefit even of some useful activities.

What the present work suggests is that the effects of overlearning can be achieved not necessarily by learning lessons by heart. Learning by heart is quite time and effort consuming. The oral translation method offers another way of obtaining the same results by learning only the lexical and grammatical properties of a given text without having to memorize the sequence of events presented in it.

### 3. Research aims

As mentioned above, the present study aims at elaborating a method of second language teaching whose goal is to rapidly develop better oral (but also written) L2 skills (as done by intensive methods). This goal is achieved by carrying out the memorization work in the classroom through oral translation activities, under the supervision of the teacher/professor.

As a matter of fact, homework assignment for the experimental group has been completely excluded *only* for the purposes of the present experiment. In order to show that the application of oral translation can lead to the successful development of language skills, without the influence of personal factors like the possibility and willingness of the student to dedicate time and efforts at home to the foreign language learning, the experiment was only based on in-class activities.

The more articulated idea on which the method is based can be formulated as follows: the main objective is to dedicate the classroom activities to the ultimate goal of the language training – the development of oral (but also written skills), i.e. to the memorization of the material by fixing the correct stress, intonation, pronunciation and speed under the supervision of the teacher, as well as to writing activities. To this end, the main part of the work was done on texts. The unknown

vocabulary and grammar were initially explained to the students in a relatively concise manner and most of the time was dedicated to the memorization of the text through oral translation from the mother tongue to the L2. This activity not only led to the memorization of the material but also developed in the students the valuable oral translation skills. It should be noted that the activity leading to memorization constitutes the first, and not the last step of the whole learning process.

Specific work on grammar was also done in class through oral translation activities, but during the second or the third lecture, when the learners were already able to perform an excellent oral translation of the text from the audio file (further-on I provide more detailed explanations of the exact procedure).

According to the present methodology, what should remain for homework (though homework was not included in the present experiment) are practically activities that lead *not* to the memorization (which was already done in class), but to the further consolidation of the students' knowledge and competences.

The current methodology, in its entirety, has much broader aims. The language skills developed through oral translation training, for example, are an excellent basis for the development of communicative competences and for further consolidation work, which can be carried out both with the help of electronic appliances and through conversational activities. The training realized autonomously, of course, through work on files, should not be seen as a complete substitute of genuine communicative activities.

In the following section, I present a layout of the research design.

## **4. Research design**

In this section I present the research questions, the participants, the materials, the training procedures and the final testing of the students participating in the experiment.

### **4.1. Research questions**

The present experiment is designed to provide an answer to the following question:

Can oral translation be used as a teaching technique to successfully develop language proficiency (in terms of its three most common components – fluency, accuracy and complexity)?

The experiment aims at comparing how the results obtained through oral translation training differ from those obtained on the basis of the traditional teaching given to university students. As mentioned earlier, in this paper we simply

focus on the development of the accuracy component of language proficiency, in particular the way its development is expressed in written exercise testing.

## 4.2. Participants

Two experiments have been carried out as part of a specialized experimental course of Russian<sup>1</sup> at the International Centre for Plurilingualism at the University of Udine over a period of three years.

By choosing the participants, the parameter of the initial level of students was kept constant by selecting only first-year students, aged nineteen to twenty-five.

### 4.2.1. Experiment 1

The participants in the experimental group were all first-year students who, apart from their regular classes in Russian, attended also a specialized course in Russian. Ten volunteers from the course were selected to participate in the experimental group. The selection was done on the basis of the following parameters.

Apart from the main goal, which was to compare the results of the experimental and the control groups, I wanted to explore also the effect of two other variables on the students' results. The first one regards the degree of their willingness to work at home, both defined by the students themselves and by their grades in the progress test done as part of their main course of Russian. The second variable regarded their mother tongue, i.e. the fact that two of the experimental group students were heritage speakers of Serbian. Since Serbian is a Slavic language, we could expect that the knowledge of it could facilitate the two students' learning of Russian.

In sum, the experimental group consisted of four students (Alessandra, Ilaria, Fiorella and Nicole) who defined themselves as not very willing to dedicate time to language learning at home and all of whom had obtained a negative grade (four out of ten) in the mid-term progress test of their main course of Russian. All four students were Italian native speakers. Another two participants (Daira and Dejana) were heritage speakers of Serbian, with both parents native speakers of Serbian. The students themselves were born in Italy and completed their school education in Italy. Another four students (Bianca, Edoardo, Gabriele and Federica) were native speakers of Italian with positive grades in the progress test, since they generally dedicated enough time to the study of Russian at home.

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<sup>1</sup> The course of Russian is an optional experimental credit-assigned course held at the International Centre for Plurilingualism at the University of Udine.

Interestingly, the heterogeneity of the experimental group was not matched by the results. As we shall see later-on, the oral translation in-class training produced quite a homogenous picture of all participants' achievements in the final test, which was a very positive result.

For organizational reasons three different control groups were formed: one composed of five first year students, not participating in the specialized course of Russian, who did only the comprehension test activities; one which did the grammar test activities, also composed of students who did not attend the specialized course in Russian; and one composed of students who attended the specialized course in Russian but were not taught grammar (but only lexical knowledge) following the oral translation procedure. They achieved their lexical knowledge during the fall semester through the oral translation training.

#### 4.2.2. Experiment 2

The second experiment was carried out three years later. For the purposes of this experiment, two groups of students were formed – an experimental and a control group. The experimental group consisted of six students participating in the specialized course of Russian. The group was heterogeneous according to the following parameters: two of the students were false beginners, three of the students were absolute beginners and one was a heritage speaker of Slovenian.

The control group was formed of nine students who did not participate in the specialized course in Russian. The students were selected according to the same criteria. Three of them were false beginners, five were absolute beginners and one was a Heritage speaker of Slovenian.

### 4.3. Materials and time span of the work

#### 4.3.1. The experimental groups

The participants of the experimental groups of the first and the second experiments were provided with photocopied materials and audio-files elaborated for the purposes of the experiment. The seminars of Russian took place twice a week. The total number of class hours was twenty-five.

During the fall semester, the students received training which was not specifically related to the development of grammar competences. The third control group (taking part in the first experiment) followed the oral translation methodology only during this semester and not during the spring semester. In this period, grammar was taught more implicitly – providing only short explanations. The spring semester training was dedicated both to lexical and specific grammar training.

For the purposes of the experiment, the grammar training focused on the teaching of one grammar unit, i.e. the singular forms of the dative case. Since the present experiment checks not only the students' grammatical competences but their overall proficiency, this paper takes into consideration also the lexical knowledge obtained throughout the whole year.

During the first half of the period, i.e. the fall semester, the students were provided materials in the form of dialogues and other texts. The aim was to teach the following competences: presenting oneself and other people, and being able to ask and answer questions about one's occupation, one's family, one's free time and hobbies, and one's plans for the future.

During the second half of the training period, the students were provided with materials aiming at developing the ability to speak of one's past experiences and the ability to use the dative case. During this period, grammar was taught explicitly whereby a special training was provided, which was centred around the oral translation of texts and short repetitive drills exercising the use of the dative case. The structure of the drills was of a traditional type. The original element concerned not the structure of the drills but rather the way the drill work was performed by the students, namely translating orally the examples. In the rest of this subsection I present in more detail the materials that I used during the classes.

During the period of grammar training, the students were provided with a fifty-four word long text containing a number of substantives used in the dative case. Next they were presented with drills which aimed at helping the students learn the dative singular endings of nouns and adjectives, learn the various contexts in which the dative is used and the prepositions the dative is used with, as well as the dative pronouns.

Subsequently the students were provided with another sixty-nine-word long text and with yet another sixty-seven-word long text. These texts had the role of introducing some particular cases in which the dative is used, which might typically present difficulties to an Italian learner.

The work on the two texts was followed by another session of drill work.

In sum, during the second semester each student worked on texts with the overall length of 190 words and on additional grammatical drills.

#### 4.3.2. The control group of students attending the course of Russian

As mentioned above, only during the first experiment five of the students attending the course were given a traditional training on the same grammar materials described above in order to check how their results would differ from the ones of the control group students not attending the course, on the one hand, and from

the results of the students from the experimental group following the oral translation training, on the other.

The rest of the control groups were students who did not participate in the specialized course of Russian and obtained their training in Russian only during the regular first-year-course of Russian.

#### 4.4. Training of the participants

Since our aim was to check whether oral translation can develop the accuracy component of language proficiency, the teaching activities carried out during the experiment were reduced to using only this technique.

##### 4.4.1. Training of the experimental groups

Crucial for the application of the oral translation teaching technique was the use of personal smart phones (or computers) on which the students could download the audio files and listen to them while translating<sup>2</sup>.

The proceeding was the following. Each student was sent several audio files via email and was asked to download them on her own telephone (or computer) before coming to the class. Before the beginning of the activities, the students were asked to open the file containing the new text in Russian registered with near-native fluency, to listen to it at least three times and try to understand what it says. Each person assumed her own speed of work and did not need to wait for or catch up with the others. Who was ready was invited to restart the file and start repeating after the speaker, imitating the speaker's speed and pronunciation, possibly without pausing the recording. Again, everyone was invited to repeat this exercise as many times as they wanted.

After this second exercise, the students were presented with the written text and were asked to do the third exercise which consisted of the following steps: Everyone was invited to listen once again to each sentence, while reading also the written version of the text. After this the students were provided with short and rapid explanations regarding the unknown words, phrases and grammatical units. Then, helping themselves both with the oral and the written versions they were asked to open the file containing the same text in Italian (their mother tongue) and to learn to translate the first sentence orally into Russian (listening to the Italian version), obtaining a sort of simultaneous (or initially consecutive) translation.

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<sup>2</sup> As mentioned earlier, this experiment is a part of a larger study which develops a methodology of L2 teaching to a large extent relying on computer-based activities. The aim is to allow each student to do oral work throughout the academic hour, without being forced to wait while another course-mate is speaking.

The aim was to obtain a fluent translation of the sentence without pausing the file and without reading the text in Russian. When a student was ready with the first sentence, that student was invited to repeat the same procedure with the second sentence and put together the two sentences until a fluent translation of both was obtained. The same procedure was repeated with the whole text until the students were able to perform a fluent oral translation of the text without pausing the file and without helping themselves with the written version in Russian.

The time duration needed for each of the texts the students were presented with was about thirty or forty minutes. As soon as a student learned to translate the text, that student was invited to perform the oral translation in front of the teacher (the author).

The above described procedure was applied both to the texts and to the grammar drills. The only difference was that the drills were more repetitive and centred around one grammatical unit. Each of the two sessions of drill work lasted for about three academic hours.

#### 4.4.2. Training of the control group formed of students participating in the specialized course of Russian (as part of the first experiment only)

This control group was taught by making use of the same materials but without using the oral translation for the grammar activities. The hours with the control group were more teacher-centred classes if compared to those with the experimental group. The texts were initially read by the teacher. Afterwards the learners were encouraged to read them themselves and the unknown words and grammatical units were explained. The students took notes of all explanations.

Next, the students were led into oral practice by encouraging them to explain what the texts were about thus reproducing parts of them, and by pair work oral practice. Grammar was taught by doing grammar drills asking the students to take turns. The control group students were assigned homework consisting of lexical and grammar exercises.

### 4.5. Testing of the participants

Since the purpose of this study is to establish whether oral translation training can help to foster the accuracy component of language proficiency, we must have a look at how this component was measured.

#### 4.5.1. Testing accuracy

The accuracy competence of the students of all groups was tested by making use of a test consisting of five exercises. The level of comprehension was tested

both with one oral and one written comprehension exercise. In the written test the students were asked to comprehend and complete a complex text with lexical items suggested to them in a column running alongside the text. The oral task, on the other hand consisted in listening to a text and answering nine multiple-choice questions.

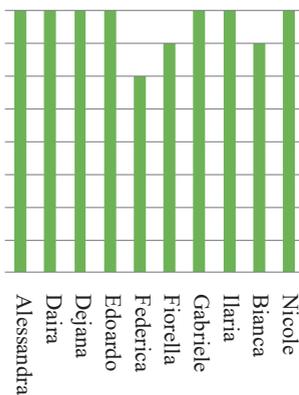
The grammatical competences were checked by making use of three exercises. The first one (a cloze test) was the easiest. The students were presented with a text in which twenty items were removed and for each of these three possibilities were offered. The student had to indicate the correct item. Most of the items were related to the use of the dative case, but not all of them (otherwise the exercise would test only the form and not the use of the dative). The second exercise was quite similar but the possible answers were presented one after another with a slash and not in a column. It was slightly more difficult than the first exercise, since it tested not only grammar (mainly the dative case) but also some lexical knowledge. The third exercise was the most difficult one. It consisted in twelve sentences containing errors which the students had to identify (and, if they wanted, to correct).

## 5. Results

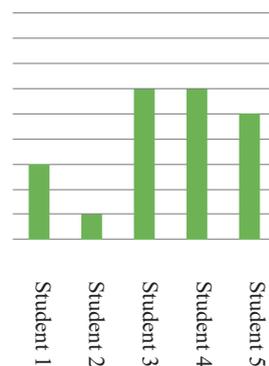
### 5.1. Experiment 1

#### 5.1.1. Listening comprehension

The results from the listening comprehension test carried out in the first experiment are illustrated in Figure 1 and Figure 2.



**Figure 1.** Exercise 1. Experimental group  
Listen to the text and answer the questions



**Figure 2.** Exercise 1. Control group  
Listen to the text and answer the questions

### 5.1.2. Reading comprehension, vocabulary, and three grammar tests

Figure 3 illustrates the results of the experimental group students from the vocabulary test as well as from the three grammar tests.

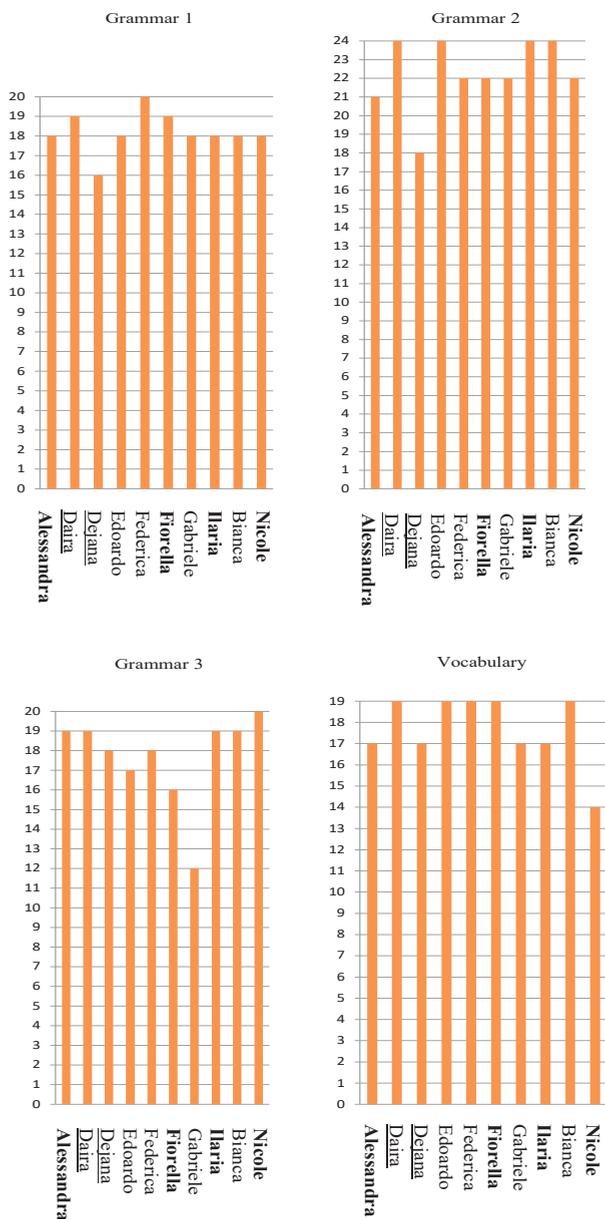


Figure 3. Experimental group results

In Figure 4 you can see the results from the same exercises of the learners from the control group formed from students not participating in the specialized course in Russian.

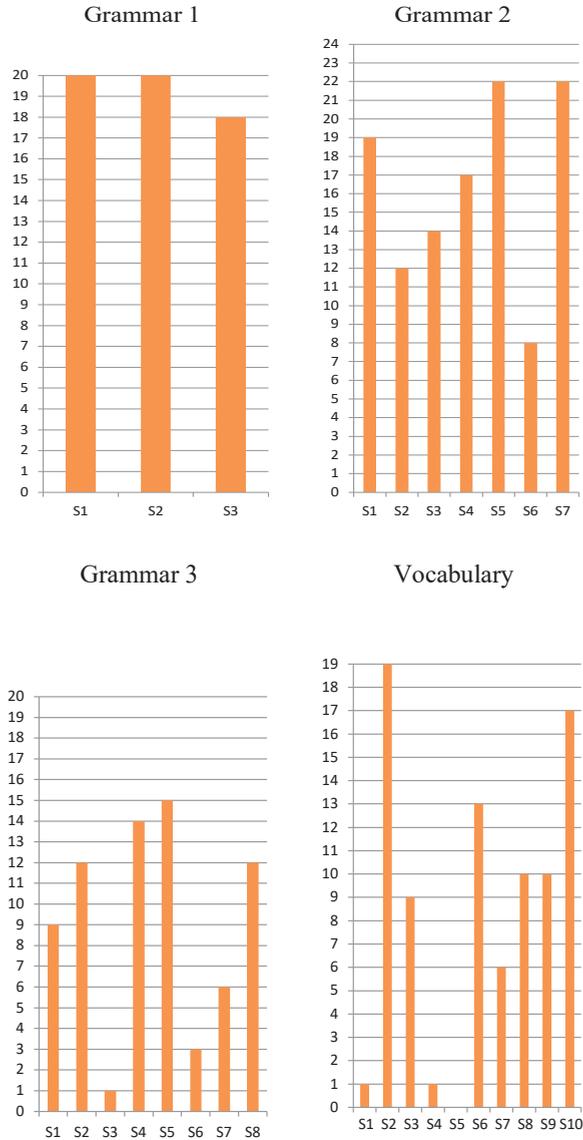


Figure 4. Control group 1 results

Figure 5 illustrates the outcome from the same exercise of the control group students who participated in the specialized course of Russian.

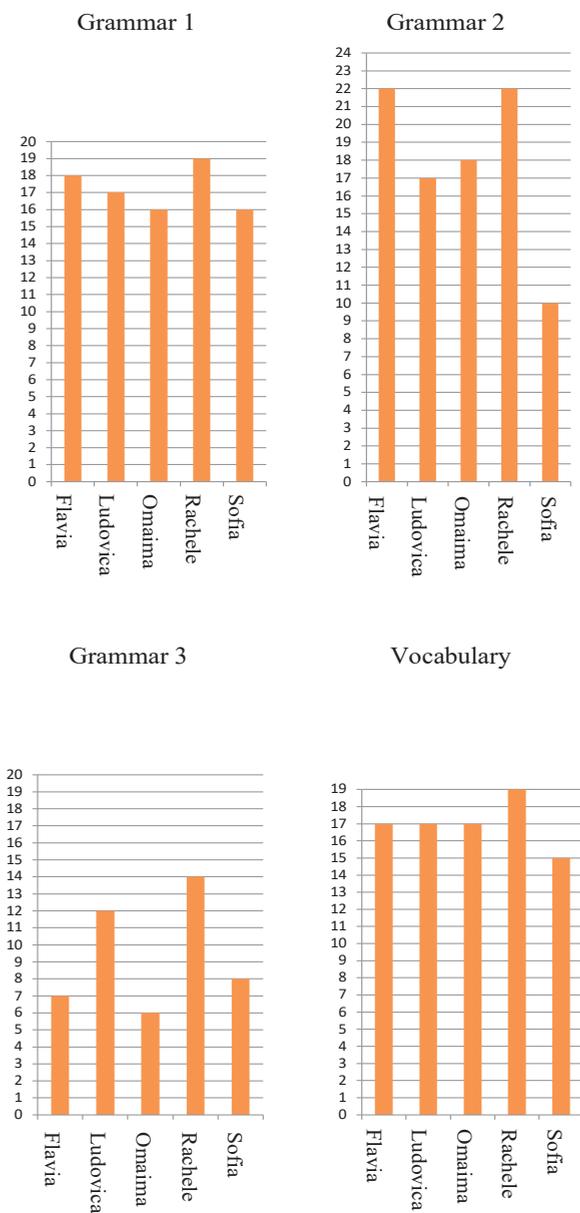
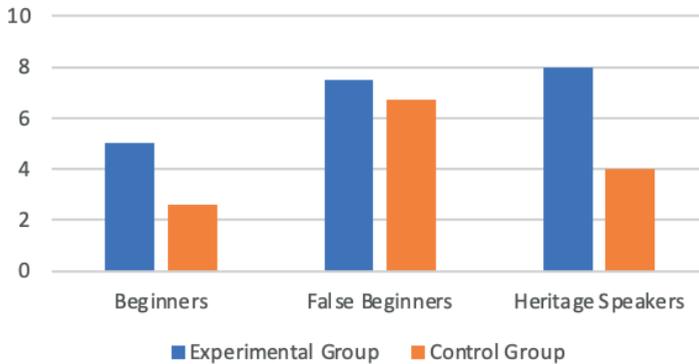


Figure 5. Control group 2 results

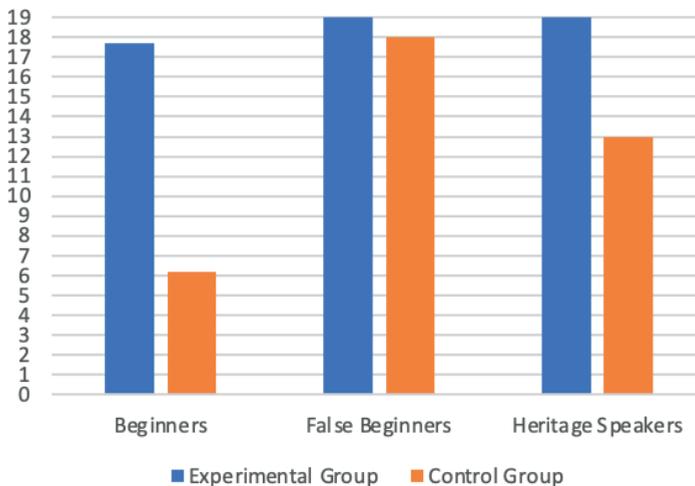
## 5.2. Experiment 2

Figure 6 illustrates the comparison of the listening comprehension results of both the experimental and the control group students. As mentioned above, during the second experiment the students were divided into three groups: beginners, false beginners and heritage speakers.



**Figure 6.** Listening comprehension results

In Figure 7 one can see the results from the vocabulary exercise.



**Figure 7.** Vocabulary exercise results

Figures 8, 9 and 10 illustrate the results from the grammar tests, and Figure 11 – the average of correct answers of both groups in percentage terms.

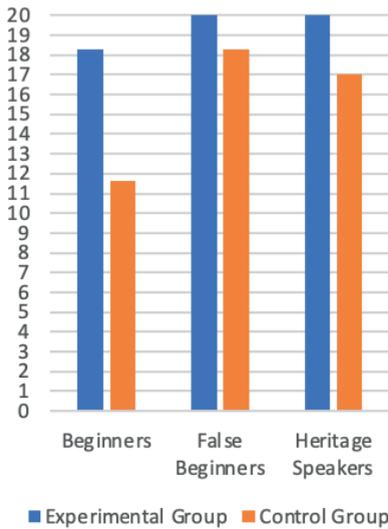


Figure 8. Grammar 1 test results

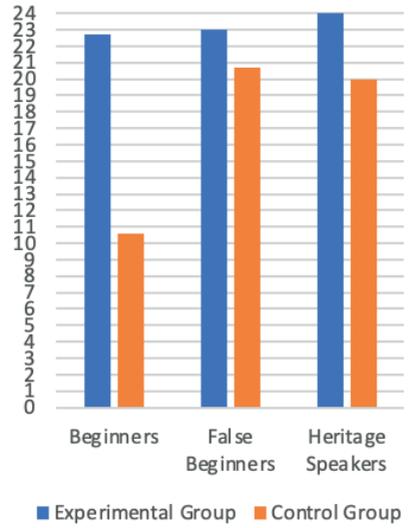


Figure 9. Grammar 2 test results

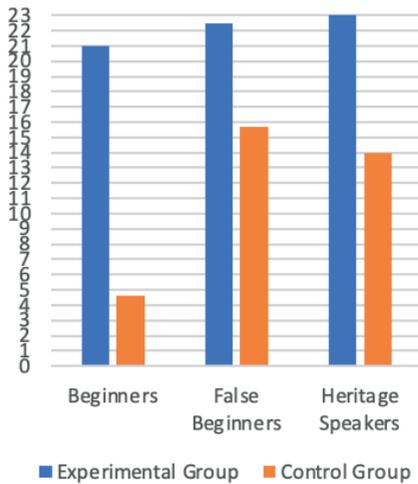


Figure 10. Grammar 3 test results

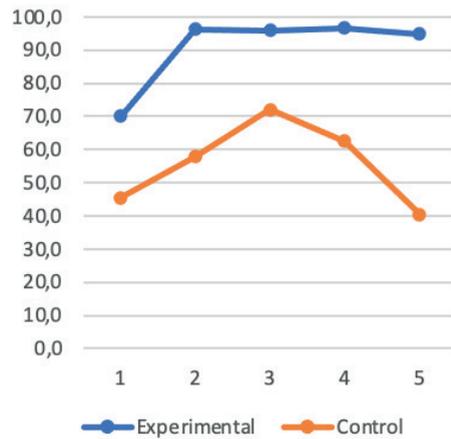


Figure 11. Average of correct answers

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1. Experiment 1

One thing worthy to note is that the experimental group’s results are not only higher than those of the control group but are also more homogenous. As

we can see in the graphs, there are no significant differences from one student to another and there are no significant low peaks. This suggests that oral translation training guarantees considerable uniformity and in this sense the students' competence is not strongly dependent on factors of a personal nature. Let us have a closer look at the different subgroups of students who participated in the experimental group.

During the first experiment, there were four students who had obtained insufficient grades in the midterm progress test (as part of their regular course of Russian) and who had declared themselves not very diligent workers at home. You can find their names in bold under the corresponding graphs. It can be clearly seen, however, that their results are not particularly different from the ones of the rest of the experimental group. Notice even that most of the low peaks in the experimental group graphs do not correspond to the names of those participants.

As to the heritage speakers of Serbian, the results of one of them are among the best results in the whole group, while the scores of the other are somewhat lower. If we assume, as we do, that these heritage learners are facilitated in their acquisition of Russian, the results suggest that the non-Slavic learners have managed not only to reach but also to surpass the level of one of the heritage speakers of Serbian. Notice also that in each chart, there is at least one of the students of those who had failed in the progress test who matches the better result of the two heritage speakers. This outcome suggests that the oral translation training offers equal opportunities for every learner. Moreover, since the memorization work is done in class, in a controlled situation, this methodology offers also equal possibilities for everyone to reach a higher level.

Another thing to notice is that the raising of the difficulty starting from the first grammar exercise to the third one can hardly be noticed with the results of the experimental group. It is clearly seen, on the other hand, with those of the control group.

Remember that with the first experiment there were two control groups, the second being formed by students participating in the specialized course of Russian but not being taught grammar (only lexis) through the oral translation procedure. Looking at their results one can clearly notice that while their grammar graphs look more like those of the other control group's graphs, their comprehension graph differs significantly from the other control group's graph and looks much more like the experimental group's graph, being more homogenous and representing high scores. This is direct evidence, since it comes from the same group of people, suggesting that where the oral translation training has been applied, the results are high, and where it was not the results are lower.

## 6.2. Experiment 2

During the second experiment, a different subdivision was made among the students. In both the experimental and the control group there was a subgroup of absolute beginners, a subgroup of false beginners and one heritage speaker student of Slovenian in each group.

Looking at the charts, what one notices first is the homogeneity of the experimental group's results. This second experiment actually confirms what the first one suggested, namely that oral translation offers an equal possibility for all students to develop linguistic skills. This is a result of the memorization being done in a rapid and teacher-guided manner already in aula.

With the control group, on the other hand, the development of linguistic skills largely depends on factors of a personal character like the time one dedicates to the foreign language study at home and the personal willingness to dedicate efforts to the study.

Moreover, one clearly sees in the graphs that the difference in the results of the control group and the experimental group in the separate exercises is greater at the beginner level. This is of course natural and expected, since the false beginners are students who have studied the Russian language for five years at their high school. Still the experimental false beginners show consistently higher results than those of the control group.

A very positive outcome is that the results of the experimental absolute beginners are comparable and sometimes higher than those of the control false beginners.

The three grammar exercises were ordered according to their rising difficulty from the first to the third one. Notice that the rising of the difficulty of the grammar exercises yields a major difference between the results of the experimental and the control group.

Figure 11 presents the average correct answers of the two groups in percentage terms. Under number 1 is reported the percentage regarding the listening comprehension. Number 2 presents the results from the reading comprehension and the last three positions illustrate the results from the grammatical exercises. It can be observed that the listening comprehension proved to be difficult for both groups. Nevertheless, the experimental group's results are considerably higher than those of the control group students. What is interesting to note, however, is the particular behaviour of the control group's curve with the most difficult grammar exercise. It sharply goes down, and at position 5 goes even lower with respect to the listening comprehension position, while the one of the experimental group remains stable. This result again suggests that oral translation methodology offers an efficacious way of teaching grammar.

## 7. Conclusions

This paper presents the results from an experimental teaching of Russian at the University of Udine implementing a methodology based on oral translation. Two separate experiments have been carried out with beginner level students. The aim was to check whether the above mentioned methodology can foster the development of language skills related to the accuracy component of language proficiency.

Apart from suggesting a positive answer to this question, the study shows that the whole training can be realized in class and is thus independent of factors of a personal character like the amount of time students dedicate to the L2 at home, their willingness to dedicate themselves to work and even, to a large extent, independent of the student's mother tongue.

The training is dependent on the use of a simple technical device, a smart phone or a computer, and can be successfully applied to beginners.

The adopted teaching technique leads towards a rapid memorization of the material, offering immediate possibilities for a consolidation of the acquired knowledge.

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