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## Aspect Forms in Teaching Russian to American Students

The author teaches Russian at an American college. A research was done among second year students of a four year study of the Russian language. The purpose of this research was error analysis and development of the best method to present a verb aspect for American students.

The group of students who took part in the research was representing the Novice-mid level. In their first year of study, the students took Russian classes four times a week for 70 minutes per class period. In their second year of study, they took classes 70 minutes each three times a week. The group was composed of 21 people.

On the first day of classes based on the available material<sup>1</sup>, we explained that imperfective verbs are used to describe an action in progress without reference to completion or termination and perfective verbs are used to describe an action that have been or will be brought to completion or termination. We added that in most cases imperfective and perfective verbs fall into pairs in which the two verbs are identical (or very close) in meaning but different in aspect. One such pair is читать, прочитать.

1. Я прочитал роман.

I read the novel.

2. Я читал роман.

I was reading a novel.

The first sentence indicates that action was brought to completion, and the second sentence describes that action was in progress, but does not say it was brought to completion. Such distinction does not present a problem for natives but is undoubtedly a difficult problem for anglophones. We also added that perfective verbs have only two tenses, while imperfective verbs have three tenses. This is illustrated in the table below:





We introduced two verb pairs:

читать, прочитать

писать, написать

They belong to the most frequently used verbs in Russian language according to the dictionary<sup>2</sup>. We made sure that the students knew how to conjugate verbs and we gave examples (pattern sentences) both in Russian and English.

Verb pair читать, прочитать

1. Алёша читал весь день и прочитал весь этот длинный роман.  
Alyosha was reading all day long yesterday, and read that whole long novel.
2. Лена прочитала только половину этого романа.  
Lena has read only half of that novel.
3. Мы будем каждый день читать русскую газету, нам нужна практика.  
We shall read a Russian newspaper every day; we need practise.
4. Я завтра прочитаю эту статью.  
I shall read this article tomorrow.
5. Анна только что прочитала вашу интересную статью.  
Anna has just read your interesting article.

Verb pair писать, написать

1. Я писал четыре часа, и написал только это письмо.  
I have been writing for four hours, and I have written only this letter.
2. Вы знаете, что эта молодая писательница написала уже два романа?  
Do you know that this young writer has already written two novels?
3. Вы знаете, что Коля написал своей сестре? — Знаю. Он сам прочитал мне своё письмо.  
Do you know what Kolya wrote to his sister? — I know. He read me his letter himself.
4. Он вероятно будет писать книгу ещё год или два.  
He will probably be writing this book for another year or two.
5. Завтра я напишу моей матери.  
I shall write a letter to my mother tomorrow.

As a home assignment, we asked the students to choose the correct aspect in sentences, e. g.

Он говорит, что он (напишет, будет писать) нам каждый день.

Мы (читали, прочитали) весь роман.

Что ты делаешь? Я (читаю, прочитаю) газету.

We also asked the students to translate sentences, e. g.

I have read only half of his letter.

He has been writing a book for two years.

In the summer Anna was reading Dostoevsky.

Next time class met students had a test. 21 students participated in this test. The results of it were not satisfactory. In the first part of the test, students had to choose a correct aspect in Russian sentences. The second part was a translation from English to Russian.

Table below illustrates data collected:

Table I. Test #1.

Aspect	No. of verbs used in sentences	No. of Students	Wrong Answers	%
Exercise 1	168	21	39	23.2
Exercise 2	147	21	56	38.0

Indicator of Correctness: Exercise 1: 76.8%

Exercise 2: 62.0%

After interviewing the students we discovered that most of them do not know how many tenses are in English language and in general they are confused about the tense system in their native language. We decided the best solution would be to explain in a simple manner the tense system in contemporary English language. We explained that the tense of the verb indicates when the action of the verb takes place. We also explained that by placing the verb in a different tense and without any additional information such as: I am reading *now*, I read *yesterday*, I shall read *tomorrow*, one can indicate when the action of the verb takes place: now, before now, or after now. In English, by using auxiliary verbs such as *have*, *do*, *be* and participles we can create many tenses. The six principal tenses of English are underlined:

Present Simple                    I read  
 Present Progressive            I am reading  
Present Perfect                I have read  
 Present Perfect Progressive   I have been reading  
 Present Emphatic                I do read

Past Simple                        I read  
 Past Progressive                I was reading  
Past Perfect                        I had read  
 Past Perfect Progressive      I had been reading  
 Past Emphatic                    I did read

Future Simple                    I will read  
 Future Progressive            I will be reading  
Future Perfect                    I will have read  
 Future Perfect Progressive   I will have been reading

In Russian, verbs have only three tenses: past, present, and future. Each of these three tenses corresponds to one of several different tenses in English, depending upon context.

	Present Tense
I write I am writing I have written I have been writing I do write	Я пишу
	Past Tense
I wrote I have written I was writing I had been writing I used to write I would write I did write	Я писал/написал
	Future Tense
I will write I will be writing I will have written I will have been writing	Я буду писать/напишу

We explained that, with one exception, all the present tenses of English verbs may be translated into Russian by the present tense. The exception is the Present Perfect.

The Present Perfect tense translates into Russian with the present tense only if the context implies that the action is continuing at the present time.

I have already lived in Moscow for two years.

(time expression shows action continuing in the present)

Я живу в Москве уже два года.

When the action of a Present Perfect verb does not continue in the present, it is translated by the past tense. In the sentence below the action of the verb indicates a past action that is no longer in force.

I have lived in Moscow.

Я жила в Москве.

We pointed on some rules which students should take for the consideration when choosing aspect of a Russian verb:

1. In Russian, there is only one verb form to indicate the present tense; it can only be formed from imperfective aspect verbs.

2. All the progressive tenses emphasize action in progress and are always translated with the imperfective aspect.

a. When I entered, he was reading.

Когда я вошла, он читал.

b. Alyosha was reading all day yesterday.

Алёша читал вчера весь день.

c. They will be reading all day.

Они весь день будут читать.

3. Imperfective verbs are used in clauses which contain adverbs and adverbial phrases like the following:

часто	often	иногда	sometimes
редко	rarely	никогда	never
обычно	usually	долго	for a long time
весь день	all day	каждый день	every day
всю ночь	all night	каждую ночь	every week
всё утро	all morning	каждое утро etc.	every morning
постоянно	constantly	некоторое время	for a while
всегда	always		

4. Imperfective is used when past tense with “used to” is employed in English.

1. Every morning I *used to read* at seven o'clock.

Каждое утро в семь часов я *читал*.

2. Volodya *used to read* often, but now he seldom reads.

Володя часто *читал*, теперь он читает редко.

5. Using a perfective aspect verb we can form the past tense and the future tense. We use perfective aspect when we want to emphasize:

a. concrete, result oriented action

b. actions which emphasize the goal of completion within a defined time period

c. the completion of an entire action

d. a result oriented action with a stated time of completion

Expressions or other key words help to show which aspect to use.

a. They wrote *all* the letters.

(“all” emphasizes a concrete, result oriented action)

Они написали *все* письма.

b. I wrote the book *in (within) three years*.

(the entire action was completed within a defined time period)

Я написал эту книгу *за три года*.

c. I *just* wrote the letter.

(adverb emphasizes the completion of an entire action)

Я *только что* написала письмо.

d. They will read this book *by supper*.

(*by supper* indicates a result oriented action with a stated time of completion)

Они прочитают эту книгу *к ужину*.

6. Perfective is used when verbs are accompanied by adverbs or adverbial phrases that emphasize the suddenness or unexpectedness, or the fulfillment of the action:

вдруг	suddenly	наконец	finally
сразу	all at once	как только	as soon as
неожиданно	unexpectedly	в конце концов	in the end
тотчас же	immediately	только что	just (a short time ago)
сейчас же	immediately		

1. Victor spent all evening working on the problem and *finally* solved it.

Виктор решал задачу весь вечер и *наконец* решил её.

2. Andrey has *just* finished writing his report.

Андрей *только что* кончил писать свой доклад.

These explanations, according to the students, were very helpful.

Consequently, we tested students again. This time the results were much better.

This table indicates so:

Table II. Test #2

Aspect	No. of verbs used in sentences	No. of Students	Wrong Answers	%
Exercise 1	105	21	8	7.7
Exercise 2	105	21	13	13.7

Indicator of Correctness: Exercise 1: 92.3%

Exercise 2: 86.3%

A comparison of the results of the first and second test allows us to establish the indicator of improvement. They were as follows:

Table III.

	Exercise I	Exercise II
Test #1	76.8%	62.0%
Test #2	92.3%	86.3%

Indicator of Improvement

15.5%

24.3%

As a next step, another test was conducted with verbs отвечать/ответить, спрашивать/спросить. The results are as follows:

Table IV. Test #3

	Number of uses	Number of students	Incorrent solutions	%
Exercise I	210	21	15	7.1
Exercise II	160	21	12	5.7

Indicator of Correctness: Exercise I 92.9%  
 Exercise II 94.3%

Indicator of Improvement in comparison with the Test #2

Exercise I 0.7%

Exercise II 8.0%

More tests involving other verb pairs showed indicator of correctness ranging from 90.5% to 94.5%

In our opinion, the comparative approach of teaching Russian verb forms for English speaking students is necessary, because this is the only way to convey to them the differences in verb systems between the two languages. Such approach also provides the students with the necessary knowledge allowing them to choose proper Russian equivalents of the English tenses.

We are convinced that the acquisition of any foreign language depends on the knowledge of the native language<sup>3</sup>.

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> G. Stilman, *Introductory Russian Grammar*, John Wiley and Sons, New York 1972, p. 210.

<sup>2</sup> Л. Н. Засорина, *Частотный словарь русского языка*, „Русский язык”, Москва 1977.

<sup>3</sup> W. Marton, *Dydaktyka języka obcego w szkole średniej. Podejście kognitywne*, PWN, Warszawa 1976, p. 25–101; S. P. Kaczmarek, *Wstęp do bilingwalnego ujęcia nauki języka obcego*, WSiP, Warszawa 1988, p. 9–32.

## Видовые формы при обучении русскому языку американских студентов

В статье идет речь о попытке обучить студентов 2-го курса американского колледжа правильному употреблению форм совершенного и несовершенного вида русских глаголов на базе осознанного усвоения необходимой элементарной лингвистической информации. Автор статьи приводит результаты тестов, доказывающие эффективность данного способа обучения видовым формам, употребление которых составляет существенную трудность для американских учащихся.