



Learning Russian through Poetry in the Russian as a Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract

The use of literature in foreign language teaching has been a subject of heated debate for a long time. The present paper aspires to argue that the use of literature, in particular poetry, can be used as stimulus to motivate students playing the role of the +1 in Krashen's "input hypothesis" (1982, 1985, 1991), provided that it is appropriately integrated in the teaching along the lines proposed by Savvidou (2004); furthermore, this "integrated approach" becomes an excellent tool in enabling the teacher to familiarize students with the cultural aspect of language learning (Shchukin, 2003; Brown, 1986; Fortunatova, 2004). To achieve its purposes the present paper presents a case study of using poetry in a Russian as a Foreign Language (RFL) class in Taiwan following the principles of the "integrated approach". The case study is located in context both through a review of the role of poetry reading in foreign language and through a review of Russian teaching in Taiwan (with special attention paid to the opportunities and limitations of holding this case study in National Taiwan University). Then the paper proceeds to present the methodology used in integrating the teaching of Pushkin's poem "To Chaadaev" and Lermontov's "The Sail" in this particular RFL class, and pays special attention to a problem students faced with enunciating properly the rhythm of the poems (a problem that was not predicted by Savvidou's "integrated approach"), as well as the steps taken to solve this problem. Finally, the paper presents the evaluation of the progress made by the students and concludes by emphasizing how the "integrated approach" can enhance both the students' creativity and their ability to engage into autonomous learning.

Keywords: Literature Teaching, Russian as a Foreign Language (RFL), Poetry Reading, Integrated Approach

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1. Role and function of poetry reading in foreign language classes

A wide spectrum of opinions is held by scholars and teachers regarding the inclusion of literature reading in language classes; nevertheless, both positive and negative opinions reflect their concerns on students' learning efficiency. Opponents suggest that literature hinders learning, and teachers who intend to familiarize learners with the target culture through classic literature end up finding that the students become overly dependent on word-for-word translations (Rosenkjar, 2007). Metaphors and ambiguities in literary texts are especially singled out for creating insurmountable difficulties for students at the basic level, with the result that they fail to develop their language skills and literary appreciation. Eventually, neither teachers nor students are satisfied with the class. Consequently, "there is often reluctance by teachers, course designers, and examiners to introduce unabridged and authentic texts" (Savvidou, 2004) to the foreign language syllabus.

In most cases, learners follow designed textbooks, usually non-literary, to acquire language knowledge and skills. However, upon achieving a certain level of language mastery, students are often reported to reach a dead end and feel bored with routine teaching methods "such as grammatical analysis, sentence structure analysis, story-telling, diary writing, translation, group activities, and role plays" (Ming-sheng Li, 1998, p. 6). At this point, literature reading could serve as a motivation to make further advances. According to Krashen's "input hypothesis" (1982, 1985, 1991), students should be provided with material "a bit beyond" their current level of competence. The language input is called $i+1$, where the i is the current level, and the language which learners are exposed to should be $i+1$. I propose that literature can stimulate students and be the $+1$ for them, provided the texts are suitably selected. Therefore, literature is certainly suitable for students if used in proper teaching approaches so that the "reluctance" suggested by Savvidou

might not necessarily occur.

There are two reasons for adopting this opinion. Firstly, as Savvidou (2004) shows, literature “can provide a powerful pedagogic tool” that helps in improving language skills. Equally, if not more importantly, “literature can also act as a powerful change agent” (Amer, 2003, p. 63) that assists students to enhance their cultural/intercultural awareness, and therefore enables them to acquire knowledge of the target culture, which, as many studies have pointed out (Maley, Daskalovska & Dimova, Bibby & McIlroy), is necessary for acquiring language competence.

Literature is also important in the Russian as a Foreign Language (RFL) classroom. Since the 1990s, the focus of theoretical and practical methodology has turned to “human language” (человек в языке), i.e., the attention of the class being slightly drawn to cultural linguistics (лингвокультурология). As Shchukin (2003) states, “strategies of RFL teaching should be based on culture, the study of which determines learners’ ability of cross-cultural communication and generates their social competence as the final result of language acquisition.” This agrees with Brown’s emphasis on the cultural aspect of language teaching. He argues that “second language learning is often second culture learning” (Brown, 1986, p. 33). Besides literal accuracy in communication, teachers need to help learners understand not only literal, but also implicit, culture-related meanings (Fortunatova, 2004). However, these “implicit meanings,” including the nuances, creativity, and versatility in the Russian language, always cause difficulties, or even insuperable obstacles for RFL learners. Most RFL teachers use literature as a powerful tool to help students both remove such obstacles and improve their language competence. A good example of this could be the short- and long-form adjectives in Russian. RFL teachers usually explain that the long-form adjectives are preferred in today’s conversational Russian, while the short-form ones are used in formal Russian. Then they typically quote Lev Tolstoi’s sentence “Real wisdom is concise” (Настоящая мудрость немногословна) as an impressive example of the short-form adjective used in written Russian. To put it simply, literature can be used in the RFL classroom as a model of style and reference to grammar.

2. Role and function of poetry reading in foreign language classes

Among literary genres, poetry is most valued for its role and functions in language learning, and is often included in teaching materials. Thanks to its characteristics, such as wording, rhythm, repetition, intonation, and association, poetry appeals strongly to language learners. Indeed, poetry reading can be seen as singing, which greatly helps learners memorize vocabulary efficiently and in the long run improves their language competence. In addition to facilitating language learning, poetry has also been demonstrated to help learners develop a deeper understanding into the culture and society of the target language. A very good example is provided by *Learning English through Poems and Songs*, published by the Education Bureau in Hong Kong for senior high students in 2010. The third section, entitled “Reading and Writing Poetry,” contains varied poetic forms like acrostics, shape poems, limericks, narrative poems, and ballads. It not only familiarizes learners with the structure of English poetic texts but also encourages them to compose a poem themselves, thereby promoting their active engagement with the target culture. In short, poetry reading is widely accepted among language teachers who claim poetry can succeed in arousing learning interest.

RFL teachers have paid special attention to the function of poetry in language class because the memorable rhythm of Russian helps readers command its pronunciation rules. In recent years, poetry of the Silver Age (1890-1921),¹ a creative period of Russian poetry on a par with the Golden Age (1820-1835) more than half a century earlier, has been found to be efficient in boosting learners’ interest. These poems are frequently covered by language teachers, and they have been found highly suitable for advanced learners, arousing their interest. As Chelkalina (2010) points out with reference to a language class based on the reading of Silver Age poetry, analyzing and understanding the composition of

1 Divergent views are held by Russian scholars regarding the beginning and the end years of the silver age of Russian poetry. Some of them think it began in 1890; others suggest that it started in 1880. The more controversial opinion is about its end year. Some scholars think it ended in 1917, after the outbreak of the October Revolution in Russia; others think it was in 1921, after the death of A. Blok and N. Gumilyov’s execution. However, some scholars believe that it ended in 1930, after the suicide of V. Mayakovsky and the growing ideological control in the Soviet Union.

Silver Age lyric poems turn out to provide stimulating challenges to both teachers and learners. This is because most poets, not limited by established convention, deliberately make their works actionless and put more stress on image description. Occasionally, some well-known poets, such as Alexander Blok (1880-1921), Marina Tsvetaeva (1892-1941), and Velimir Khlebnikov (1885-1922), even make their poems nothing but a play of acoustic instrumentation, such as assonance and alliteration. Surprisingly, these traits draw the attention of language learners.

However, given the fact that poetry of the Golden Age is more familiar among the RFL circles in Taiwan (indeed, the work of poets such as Pushkin (1799-1837) and Lermontov (1814-1841) are considered indispensable in learning Russian), I decided to introduce these poems to Taiwanese students.² Poetry of this period is well-known for its richness of content and action. In addition, despite the fact that the poems were composed almost two centuries ago, their cultural and social background can be comprehended by learners without much confusion. Students are consequently expected to be able to identify themselves with the poetic heroes and make poetry part of their lives.

3. Russian as a foreign language in Taiwan

The history of teaching Russian as a foreign language in Taiwan has not always been smooth or uneventful. Historical and political factors combined in such a way as to play a role that was, paradoxically, both obstructive and constructive. In 1957, the first academic institute offering Russian teaching was set up in National Chengchi University's (NCCU) Department of Oriental Languages (Russian Division), followed by Chinese Culture University (PCCU) in 1963. They had been the only two institutes teaching the Russian language until another department was founded in Tamkang University in 1993.

For geographical, historical, political, and economic reasons, English

² The methodology and results of this approach will be discussed later.

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and Japanese have been front and center in foreign language education in Taiwan, followed by European languages such as Spanish, German, and French, while the Russian language is of less importance due to generally unstable relations with the Soviet Union/Russia. By contrast, China, Japan, and Korea have been placing more emphasis on RFL not only because of geographical proximity but also because of their complicated historical, political, and economic ties. However, in comparison with other East Asian polities, such as Singapore and Hong Kong, Taiwan stands out in terms of RFL education in that it has been developing and growing for longer than half a century.

In 1949, the Nationalists retreated from mainland China to the island of Taiwan, and “Anti-Communism and Anti-Soviet Russia” became one of the basic national policies and propaganda drives of the Republic of China. The political slogan literally means opposition against Communist Russia and Communist-controlled China, and it introduced a faraway country, Russia, to the island. Since then, the Taiwanese have apparently become more knowledgeable about Russia, but this understanding has always been politically prejudiced against it. Until the 1970s Russia was considered an archenemy. In this historical context, most colleges in Taiwan were passive or uninterested in teaching Russian. However, NCCU and PCCU embraced the advice of Sun Tzu, the ancient Chinese strategist, to “know your enemy and know yourself,” and pioneered Russian teaching in Taiwan. Such teaching was obviously influenced by the political guidelines of its time. Some of the first teachers of the Russian language often injected their anti-Russian attitude into teaching materials, so it was common to see in textbooks many political terms such as *Советский союз* (the Soviet Union), *коммунизм* (communism), *враг* (enemy), *демократия* (democracy), *Три народных принципа* (*Three Principles of the People*), and *создавать Республику* (found the Republic). Yet, these biased textbooks were gradually discarded as Russian-Taiwanese relations improved.

The courses provided by the three above-mentioned Russian departments were mostly grammar translation-based, some of which were Basic Russian (I & II), Advanced Russian (I & II), Practical Russian, Russian

Conversation, Stylistics, and Literature. Regarding their credit hours, language teaching was emphasized far more than literature teaching; actually, it was not until the 1990s that Russian literature courses started becoming frequently available.

In the 1990s, literature reading gained more attention as the three departments started to enroll specialized instructors (both of Russian and Taiwanese nationalities). Most of the courses addressed the nineteenth-century classics, such as Pushkin's and Lermontov's poetry, while twentieth-century literature was secondary. As for narratives, what were often included in teaching materials were Pushkin's *The Belkin's Tales* and Chekhov's early short stories.

4. Russian as a second foreign language in NTU

There is no specialized Russian program in National Taiwan University (NTU). However, Russian-related courses have been provided at NTU for at least twenty years. These courses were designed to cultivate basic language ability and literary knowledge. They can be categorized by their methodological focus: (1) grammar-based: Russian I (basic), Russian II (intermediate), and Russian III (advanced); (2) conversation-based: Russian Conversation I and II; and (3) literature-based: Selected Readings of Russian Novels, and Selected Readings of Russian Poems. These courses focus on language itself, i.e., grammar, lexis, and syntax. Despite the restricted syllabus, Russian teachers try their utmost to help students acquire communicative competence and, most importantly, the ability to understand discourse in all socio-cultural contexts.

The current paper will try to provide some illustration of these efforts by referring to the course "Selected Readings of Russian Poems," while at the same time analyzing and suggesting the benefits of poetry reading in Russian teaching. Readers should be aware, however, that this poetry reading course is a new, experimental class which has only been offered during the last few years; as a consequence, it should not come as a surprise that this course can be improved in many aspects, some of

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which have already been selected for incorporation in future versions of the course.

The course “Selected Readings of Russian Poems” is designed to help intermediate and advanced students enhance their language competence through poetry. We adopted Savvidou’s (2004) integrated approach, in which she offers the following six stages as a model for teaching literature. Stage 1 (Preparation and Anticipation) tries to elicit learners’ real or literary experience of the main themes and context of text. In Stage 2 (Focusing), learners experience the text by listening or reading and focusing on specific content in the text. In Stage 3 (Preliminary Response), learners give their initial response to the text. In Stage 4 (Working at It – 1), the focus is on comprehending the first level of meaning through intensive reading. In Stage 5 (Working at It – 2), the focus is on analysis of the text at a deeper level, exploring how the message is conveyed through structure and special uses of language in the text. In Stage 6 (Interpretation and Personal Response), the focus is on increasing understanding, enhancing enjoyment of the text and enabling learners to come to their own personal interpretation of the text. As Khatib states, “each of these stages is conducive to the betterment of teaching literature” (2011, p. 205).

This integrated approach is in general based on Carter and Long’s (1991, p. 2) three models of literature teaching: the culture model,³ the language model,⁴ and the personal growth model,⁵ with the last model being the basis of Savvidou’s integrated approach. In this approach the focus emphasizes the interaction of the learners with the text and their personal interpretation of it. Additionally, when implementing it in our classroom special attention was paid to the listening/reading and creativity mentioned in the approach, as it was considered to be

3 The culture model requires learners to explore and interpret the social, political, literary, and historical context of a specific text. However, such a text is often considered a cultural artifact, which makes the model largely rejected by EFL teachers (Savvidou, 2004, p. 3).

4 The language model is the most common approach to literature in the EFL classroom, but the disadvantage is that literature in this model is used only as a focus for grammatical and structural analysis (Savvidou, 2004, p. 3).

5 The personal growth model attempts to bridge the culture model and the language model. The function of this model emphasizes the interaction of the learners with the text. By using this model the text is seen as a stimulus for personal growth activities (Savvidou, 2004, p. 3).

essential for the development of our learners' oral abilities.

5. Russian poetry reading in the RFL classroom: methodology and evaluation

Poetry reciting, a common activity in language lessons, is very useful for improving Russian learners' pronunciation and intonation. If the teacher can include such an activity in his/her teaching design, the class will certainly be more meaningful. "Through reading repeated lines in poems aloud, students can appreciate poetic rhythm, understand the characteristics of poetry, and eventually construct knowledge of the discipline" (Cheung, Wing-Tak, 2008, p. 16).

5.1 Teaching Pushkin's Poem "To Chaadaev" Using the Integrated Model

Classic poems were chosen as course materials, especially poems of Alexander Pushkin⁶ and Mikhail Lermontov.⁷ To abide with Krashen's *i+1* principle, the selected poems were purposefully chosen to be a bit challenging for intermediate and advanced learners.

Four of Pushkin's representative poems were included in the course: "To Chaadaev" (К Чаадаеву), "If Life Deceives You" (Если жизнь тебя обманет), "The Prophet" (Пророк), and "A Monument I've Raised Not Built with Hands" (Я памятник себе воздвиг нерукотворный). These four poems represent different periods of Pushkin's literary career, from the romantic to realistic periods.

Class procedures will be exemplified with reference to Pushkin's "To

6 Aleksander Pushkin (1799-1837), the Russian Romantic poet, novelist, and dramatist, has often been considered the founder of modern Russian literature. His works include the narrative poem *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* (1822), the novel in verse *Eugene Onegin* (1833), the tragedy *Boris Godunov* (1825), and the novel *The Captain's Daughter* (1836). His personal life was made difficult by his conflicts with the authorities who disapproved of his liberal views. He was killed in a duel.

7 Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841), the Russian Romantic poet, novelist, and dramatist, has been considered the most important Russian poet after Alexander Pushkin's death in 1837. His works include the narrative poem *Demon* (1829—1839), the play *Masquerade* (1835), and the novel *A Hero of Our Time* (1840), which founded the tradition of the Russian psychological novel. The poet was killed in a duel.

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Chaadaev.”⁸ The original and English versions of the poem are presented below for reference.

Пушкин А: К Чаадаеву

Любви, надежды, тихой славы
Недолго нежил нас обман
Исчезли юные забавы,
Как сон, как утренний туман;
Но в нас горит еще желанье,
Под гнетом власти роковой
Нетерпеливою душой
Отчизны внемлем призыванье.
Мы ждем с томленьем упованья
Минуты вольности святой,
Как ждет любовник молодой
Минуты верного свиданья.
Пока свободою горим,
Пока сердца для чести живы,
Мой друг, отчизне посвятим
Души прекрасные порывы!
Товарищ, верь: взойдет она,
Звезда пленительного счастья,
Россия вспрянет ото сна,
И на обломках самовластья
Напишут наши имена!

A. Pushkin: To Chaadaev

Of love, of hope, of quiet glory
Not long I nursed the self-deceit,
Vanished are adolescent dallies
Like a dream, like the morning mist;
But still desire burns within us;
Beneath the press of fateful power
With impatient soul
We hark the native country's summons.
We bide with yearning expectation
The moment of sacred liberty,
As the young lover bides
The moment of the promised meeting
The while with liberty we burn,
The while our hearts are quick for honour,
My friend, to our land we dedicate
The soul's exquisite raptures!
Comrade, believe: it will arise,
The star of captivating bliss,
Russia will rouse herself from sleep,
And on the ruins of despotism
Our names will be inscribed!

(Translated by Walter Arndt)

At the beginning of the class, the instructor asked the students about their understanding of the poem. They answered that the first two lines of the poem, though only eight words long, made them think for a long time. Although the learners knew that the four words of the first line are in the genitive case “любви, надежды, тихой славы” (of love, of hope, of quiet glory), it took them a long time to realize that these words should be linked with the last word of the second line, “self-deceit”: “self-deceit of love, of hope, of quiet glory.” This shows that the construction of

⁸ This poem was written in 1818, when Pushkin was nineteen years old. The poem is addressed to Peter Chaadaev (1794-1856), Russian philosopher and friend of Pushkin. This poem reveals the spirit of resistance, which made the tsarist regime fearful of him.

poetry is very different from that of prose. Concerning learners' real or literary experience in the first stage of Savvidou's model, learners know that Pushkin's "To Chaadaev" is an epistle, a literary device that is common in both Western and Chinese cultures. Taiwanese learners, unsurprisingly, associate the poem easily with some classic Chinese poems belonging to the same genre, such as Li Po's (李白) "To a Friend" (贈友人), Du Fu's (杜甫) "To Li Po" (贈李白), and Wang Wei's (王維) "Wei City Song" (渭城曲). Therefore, learners expected that the poem "To Chaadaev" is about friendship, love, and school memories, but the main theme and content of the poem are actually about revolt against the tsarist regime, which exceeded their expectations.

In the next stage (Focusing), Russian theater actor Oleg Dal's recitation of the poems was played in class, and the students listened very intently. "That's the right way to recite Russian poems!" one of the students commented after listening. While it has been recognized that reading aloud is a useful way to memorize vocabulary, listening to poetry read aloud also helps students recite words, especially when the poem is performed by a well-trained actor/actress, his/her voice, tempo, and even pauses make every single word of the poem extraordinarily moving.

After the first listening, the students listened to the poem recitation again. This time, they paid attention to the tone and word stress. As mentioned in the previous section, the word stress is usually a tough problem for Russian learners because it is usually unfixed in Russian. Stress change is found in Russian nouns, adjectives, and verbs, and any wrong stress might change the meaning and cause miscommunication or even misunderstanding. That is why Russian learners and native speakers often cannot understand each other.

Concerning the Preliminary Response (Stage 3), student Wu thought it was weird that the sentimental feeling of ephemeral youth was connected with the theme of opposing the tsarist regime; another student, Weng, said that this kind of connection was not weird, but just the same as Lin Juemin's epistle "Farewell Letter to My Wife,"⁹ which is full of

⁹ Lin Juemin (1887-1911) was an early Qing dynasty revolutionary, who died in the Guangzhou Uprising in 1911, at the age of 24. The epistle "Farewell Letter to My Wife" was written three days before he joined, and was arrested in, the Guangzhou Uprising. In the letter he expressed his personal feelings

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sentimental power. In short, the theme and content of the poem “To Chaadaev” are more complex, which is not so often seen in classical Chinese poetry.

The next step is Intensive Reading (Stage 4). Some key words and techniques were pointed out for students for further analysis. The instructor guided students to find out the contrasting vocabulary of the poem, such as *любовь* (love) compared with *обман* (deceit), which Pushkin used to make the conflict in meaning. Students could then quickly point out by themselves the comparison between *юные забавы* (adolescent dallies) and *утренний туман* (morning mist), which refers to ephemeral youth. The most abstract contrast in the poem is the comparison between *отчизна* (motherland) and *самовластье* (despotism), the former referring to “Mother Russia,” that is the object to which the poet and his compatriots wanted to dedicate their loyalty, and the latter referring to the tsarist regime, the object they were trying to overthrow.

The poetry of Pushkin is well known for its “clarity and simplicity” but still has no lack of difficult vocabulary and comparison, both full of cultural meaning. Through this stage of Intensive Reading, RFL students can accurately grasp the first level of significance of the text, then go further to the next step.

In Stage 5 we continued intensive reading, but our focus was on the analysis of the structure and special uses of language in the text. In Pushkin’s “To Chaadaev” the first part describes the cruel reality and the gloominess of a young man, while in the second part the narrator is passionate and sincere in calling for friendship. The last part then ends with zealous and optimistic expectations, which is immensely encouraging for readers. What is most noteworthy in “To Chaadaev” is its shift from personal concerns to civil responsibilities, making the poetic work more memorable and profound in meaning. This unique analogy is shown in the eleventh and twelfth lines, in which Pushkin

towards his wife and country in a romantic tone. Now the letter “Farewell Letter to My Wife” has become the most famous love letter in the modern Chinese-speaking world.

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compared the mood of a lover who is waiting for “a promised meeting” with the devotion of a young man to his motherland. Student Kao considered, “a promised meeting” purified revolutionary action, which is a typical approach of a romantic poet.

The instructor here could point out that the characteristics of Russian romanticism are full of the spirit and passion of revolution and revolt. Romantic poets of that era often regarded the autocratic Tsarist regime as the source of their discontent. Just as in “To Chaadaev,” the most striking characteristics are its civil concerns rather than personal sorrow over his ephemeral youth. Although it was composed 170 years ago in tsarist Russia, the civil concerns described in the poem still resonate in the twentieth-first century, and that is why it is very well-received by most RFL learners.

As for Stage 6, we will discuss it later in the last section “Creativity and Inspiration”.

5.2 Teaching Lermontov’s “The Sail” Using the Integrated Model

Besides “To Chaadaev,” this course used the integrated model in teaching another poem by M. Lermontov (1814-1841), “The Sail” (Парус). Lermontov’s poems present a difference from Pushkin’s poetic “clarity, simplicity, succinctness,” as they tend to be ambiguous and symbolic, displaying his conflicted and uncompromising character. Despite these differences, their poems basically reflect the same cultural consciousness and social issues which form the nucleus of contemporary Russian values. Therefore, by appreciating their poems, students can understand important aspects of the social and spiritual aspects of Russian speech. The original and English translation of the poem “The Sail” are presented below.¹⁰

¹⁰ This poem was written in 1832, when Lermontov was eighteen years old. The poem reflects a depressed mood of the Russian aristocracy-intellectuals after the failed uprising of Decembrists and the oppressive rule of Tsar Nicholas I.

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Лермонтов М: Парус

M. Lermontov: The Sail

Белéет пáрус одинокóй В тумá/не мó/ря го/лубóm. — Что í/щет он/ в странé/ далéкой? Чтó кí/нул он/ в краю/ роднóm?	A sail is gliding in the torrent, Enveloped in a bluish haze. What does it seek ‘mid breakers foreign? What did it leave in native bays?
Игрáют вóлны, вéтер свíщет, И мáчта гнéтся и скрипít; УвЫ! — он счáстия не íщет И не от счастья бежít! —	The tempest roars, the sea is riven, The mast gives in: it bends and creaks No, not by joy this sail is driven, And ‘tis not joy it vainly seeks!
Под ним струя светлей лазури, Над ним луч солнца золотой: — А он, мятежный, просит бури, Как будто в бурях есть покой!	Beneath, the stream is deep and quiet; Above, the clouds are soft as fleece... Alas! It longs for storms and riot, As if a storm could bring it peace.

(Translated by Anatoly Liberman)

Lermontov’s “The Sail” is widely admired because of its representation of the unique solitude and rebellion of puberty. For Taiwanese learners who live on an island, the imagery of sea, sailing, and waves never presents difficulties but is easy to understand: a white sail in the sea alludes to youth loneliness and rebellion; the waves imply tough reality. These implicit meanings are not difficult to understand, especially when listening to professional reciting: the rhythm, imagery, and word choice are smoothly integrated with the meaning. It shows that the success of Stages 4 and 5 depended greatly upon the learning efficiency of Stages 2 and 3.

The last two sentences of the poem are most obscure: “*Alas! It longs for storms and riot, As if a storm could bring it peace.*” The emotions in these two sentences are full of contradictions and complexity, but they are not just talking about one’s own destiny. The word “storm” here is a metaphor, not only referring to challenges and difficulties in one’s fate but also alluding to the rebellion against the authoritarian

tsarist regime. However, our poem's hero says that he will not escape but bravely confront the challenges and difficulties.

The two poems, "The Sail" and "To Chaadaev," were written in 19th-century tsarist Russia, but their humanist themes still succeed in connecting students with their personal experience in the RFL classroom.

5.3 A parallel issue: poetry reciting in language teaching

Stress and rhyme help create a rhythm during recitation, but in actual practice learners consistently have trouble from the very first line. This is an unexpected task which is not mentioned in Savvidou's approach, and extra practice was necessary to get this crucial part right. The mistakes observed when the students of the course recited poetry (caused by the declension and stress change of Russian nouns) will be illustrated by reference to the poem "To Chaadaev". "To Chaadaev" is in iambic tetrameter of two-syllable feet with the stress on the second syllable: ∪ — | ∪ — | ∪ — | ∪ — ∪.¹¹ For example, the first line "Любви,| надеж|ды, ти|хой славы" (*Of love, of hope, of quiet glory*)¹² is fully communicated in iambic tetrameter. However, it is found that most of the students read with incorrect stress: "Любови,| надежды,| тихой сла|вы," making it sound like an amphibrach: ∪ — ∪ | ∪ — ∪ | — ∪ — | ∪. The word **любóвь** (love) in its genitive case (of love) should drop the vowel -o-, and the stress will move to the final syllable: **любóвь** → **любв́и**. In fact, the word after the declension remains in two syllables as it is in the nominative case, but most of the students incorrectly read **любови** without dropping the vowel -o-. The reason lies in the declension-driven stress change in the word **любóвь**, which is fairly common in Russian nouns. In fact, the flexibility and beauty of the rhythm and rhymes in Russian poetry are to a great degree affected by declension and stress change. As a result, a correct recitation of the poem suggests a desirable command of the declension and stress change

¹¹ ∪ = unstressed syllable; — = stressed syllable.

¹² Stressed syllables are in bold.

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of Russian nouns.¹³ Table 1 summarizes the errors made by the students when they first read out the word “любови” in the first line of the poem.

Declension Stress	Nominative	Genitive	Error
	ЛЮБÓВЬ	ЛЮБВÍ	
Fang	✓	✗	ЛЮБÓВИ
Kao	✓	✗	ЛЮБÓВИ
Chang 1	✓	✗	ЛЮБÓВИ
Yang	✓	✓	
Wu	✓	✗	ЛЮБОВÍ
Chang 2	✓	✗	ЛЮБÓВИ
Wang	✓	✓	
Weng	✓	✗	ЛЮБÓВИ

Table 1

Only two out of the eight students correctly pronounced the genitive case of the word. In fact, the word *любóвь* was not alien to students who knew its declension very well. However, they tended to retain and stress the vowel -o- when reading its genitive case, resulting in a redundant syllable in the first line. To address this issue, the instructor explained the meter, rhythm, and foot of Russian poetry so that students were aware of the fact that only *любвÍ* is allowed in this iambic line. It was observed, after the explanation, that most of the students corrected their pronunciation, but it was formally evaluated again on the midterm examination.

Another common error occurs in the word *сéрдце* (heart) in line fourteen “*Пока́/ сердца́/ для че́сти жи́вы*” (*The while our hearts are quick for honour*). The ending vowel changes into a stressed -a (*сéрдце* → *сердца́*) to indicate the plural form of the word, which Pushkin uses to preserve the iambic rhythm for the poem: ∪ — | ∪ — | ∪ — | ∪ — ∪. Thanks to the reading of the first thirteen lines, students were more familiar with the iambic form and fewer made mistakes this time

¹³ In Russian, both declension (relevant for nouns, adjectives, and pronouns) and conjugation (relevant for verbs) usually cause stress change.

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(see Table 2).

Declension Stress	Nominative Singular	Nominative Plural	Error
	сёрдце	сердца́	
Fang	✓	✓	
Kao	✓	✗	сёрдца
Chang 1	✓	✗	сёрдца
Yang	✓	✓	
Wu	✓	✓	
Chang 2	✓	✗	сёрдца
Wang	✓	✓	
Weng	✓	✗	сёрдца

Table 2

Most students do not feel confident with the stress change when forming the plural form of neutral nouns. As can be seen in Table 2, students tended to leave the stress in its original syllables when pronouncing the word *сёрдцá*. On the other hand, the instructor observed that some of the students, though unsure of the pronunciation of the plural form, made a good guess based on the iambic rhythm of the poem. This observation suggests that poetry reading might have a positive effect on Russian lexical and phonetic learning.

5.4 Evaluation

For the students' midterm evaluation, the instructor required them to recite the poems on stage. Over half of them thought it was very challenging but felt excited about this evaluation. The results of the midterm evaluation are presented in Table 3. The evaluation was based on four primary criteria: stress, pronunciation, fluency, and emotion. Stress and pronunciation should not entail more than three errors. As for fluency, the whole poem for recitation should not last more than three minutes. Emotion, which is more difficult to assess, was mainly based

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on volume and emotional expression. When students met the above criteria, they reached the expected level (✓); on the contrary, those who failed to reach the expected level got the mark (–).

To Chaadaev	Stress	Pronunciation	Fluency	Emotion
Fang	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kao	✓	✓	–	✓
Chang 1	✓	–	–	✓
Yang	✓	✓	✓	–
Wu	✓	–	–	–
Chang 2	✓	✓	✓	✓
Wang	✓	✓	✓	–
Weng	✓	✓	–	–

Table 3

The first criterion is closely associated with the training we had in class, and most of the students achieved the expected level. Two students couldn't get the "✓" in the second criterion "pronunciation." This is because they could not clearly and correctly articulate certain words, such as *нетерпеливой* (with impatience), *призыванье* (summons), *томленьем* (with yearning), *пленительного* (captivating) and *воспрянет* (rouse). All these words are multisyllabic; they need further practice. Half of the students couldn't reach the expected level in the third criterion "fluency." Some of them made too long a pause when reciting the poem and repeated words two or three times, which affected their fluency.

The last criterion "emotion" is the most critical, and at the same time the most difficult for students, especially as it depends on the fulfillment of the first three criteria. Half of the students achieved the expected level because of expressing emotion through their voice. On the contrary, students who didn't reach the expected level appeared too rigid and cautious in their voice.

5.5 Creativity and Inspiration

One of the most amazing aspects of the mid-term evaluation was the students' creativity. For example, student Fang played *Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 16* by the Norwegian composer and pianist Grieg as background music when she was reciting the poem "To Chaadaev." She explained that the concerto just flashed into her mind when she practiced reciting the poem. This musical piece is low and soft at the beginning, perfectly matching the first part of the poem, while it becomes louder and has a faster beat in the second part matching the increased emotional intensity of the second half of the poem. The music then ends with the student's perfect interpretation of the lines "*Russia will rouse herself from sleep, / And on the ruins of despotism / Our names will be inscribed!*" Fang's performance was immediately greeted with deafening applause. When it comes to how background music and poem recitation work together, most students commented that the music contributed to and even enriched the reciter's emotional expression. In fact, additional practice is required in order to make background music work with poem recitation, and Fang's performance and other students' comments again prove that fluency and emotion of poem recitation are generally based on learners' practice.

Another student Chang 1 chose to recite "The Sail." As she started to recite the poem, she played a short video clip where she was practicing volleyball alone on campus. The student read "*A sail is gliding in the torrent, / Enveloped in a bluish haze. / What does it seek 'mid breakers foreign? / What did it leave in native bays?*" At this time, the background sound turned monotonous with the volleyball hitting the wall and the ground. Then the student continued, "*The tempest roars, the sea is riven, / The mast gives in: it bends and creaks. / No, not by joy this sail is driven, / And 'tis not joy it vainly seeks!*" While the student read these lines, the girl in the clip was sweating heavily and out of breath. "*Beneath, the stream is deep and quiet; / Above, the clouds are soft as fleece... / Alas! It longs for storms and riot, / As if a storm could bring it peace.*" At the end of the recitation, the girl in the video was worn out and lying on the ground, with the volleyball rolling and finally coming to

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a stop. The lonely sail contrasted with the girl playing volleyball alone. The reciting student conveyed the subtle feelings in Lermontov's poem by associating her personal experience with the sail fighting with the waves. The rebellion and pursuits of puberty were best interpreted with the volleyball in the video clip. All the students were greatly touched by her poetic interpretation of the visual image. Chang's creativity and emotion showed her deep understanding of the mental aspect of Russian poetry.

The case of the second student indicates that autonomous learning can be boosted by means of the proper teaching approach and materials. Further, their strong willingness to learn and courage to speak are essential for mastering various Russian discourses, especially socio-cultural ones. In short, pursuit of creativity in poem recitation not only encourages the learner but also inspires the audience to have a more active attitude in language learning.

6. Conclusion

Poem listening and reciting are two sides of the same coin. The musical feature of Russian poems is highlighted by the human voice. Once students can appreciate the emotion in poems, they can easily overcome their timidity and enjoy Russian poetry.

Poetry learning is effective in helping students master various Russian discourses, especially socio-cultural aspects. "Poetry reading helps foreign language learners identify with the foreign countries. With multimedia materials, students could quickly and effectively adopt the material and apply what they have learned in creative ways" (Tsai, Ling-Wan, 2011, p. 61).

In general, poetry teaching has a positive effect on students' language competence. With a well-selected teaching approach and literary texts, students can quickly and efficiently understand deeper meanings of every language discourse. For intermediate and advanced learners, literary texts can indeed further raise their autonomous learning.

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