

**Argumentation and Debate in the Foreign Language Classroom:  
Russian and American University Students Collaborating  
through New Technologies**

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**Introduction**

As pressure to articulate clear learning outcomes has increased in recent years, many foreign language departments across the United States have drawn on proficiency guidelines established by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) to define expectations of their curricula. Misguided perceptions in the past about the “hardness” of the discipline frequently stemmed from a combination of instructors relying on arbitrary measures rather than nationally recognized standards, and administrators failing to provide financial support needed to carry out proficiency testing.

The resulting predicament likewise can be attributed to a perception among students that foreign language study does not stand to benefit them career-wise subsequent to graduating. Indeed, U.S. universities such as Texas A&M increasingly are measuring the value of departments based on their marketability and on cash flow generated by faculty and respective departments. According to the Texas A&M model, three criteria factor into evaluating faculty performance: 1) salary; 2) dollars brought in through research; and 3) money generated through teaching (Riley, 2010). Although research and teaching can complement one another, quite frequently the two remain distant cousins, thus resulting in an either/or situation with faculty either consumed with research projects or entirely devoted to classroom teaching. Amid such circumstances, classroom instruction and curricula often suffer at the expense of large research grants, as evidenced by the ironic fact that students enrolled at the Texas A&M International University can complete a bachelor’s degree without registering for a single foreign language course. Such a model clearly fails to take into consideration

disadvantages that graduates will face when competing for international education opportunities, U.S. government work (the Foreign Service, the intelligence communities, the armed services, e.g., ROTC candidates must now have some foreign language coursework), etc.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, concern has arisen over whether the U.S. education system has succumbed to profit margin demands at the expense of education itself.

Similarly, from the ashes of the Soviet Union arose an educational system in Russia largely built on free-market economic principles rather than reliance on government funding exclusively. Unlike the U.S., though, Russia has a long and valued tradition of foreign language study as manifested by a vast array of reputable departments of philology that graduate large numbers of students each year. In contrast to the Soviet era when the study of English typically involved extensive translation and formal analysis with little to no opportunity for real-world application, today's rapidly growing interest in English reflects largely pragmatic thinking, specifically: 1) Higher education worldwide has become increasingly accessible; 2) Students are required to pass international English exams when applying to universities abroad; 3) Globalization has contributed to a surge in multinational businesses, thus making English a passport to gaining employment and earning a competitive salary; and 4) As travel opportunities outside the former Soviet Union have swelled, so also has the incentive to learn English.

Schools and universities throughout Russia often place significant demands on their students in English language programs. Many urban schools (middle through high school) use textbooks printed by international publishing houses that target Novice-high to Intermediate-high levels of proficiency.<sup>2</sup> So-called traditional "English schools" go even further than most urban schools by pushing their students to achieve Advanced level proficiency.

Recognizing that students of foreign languages in the U.S. and Russia stood to profit from a bilateral collaboration, instructors from universities in both countries designed a course based on previously

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence with William P. Rivers (American Council of Teachers of Russian board member) in regards to the announced closing of the Russian, Italian, and French language programs at SUNY Albany, 17 October 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Such ratings reflect norms outlined in the Common European Framework.

published research addressing Advanced-level foreign language gain through the forum of debate. Pre- and post-Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) and Written Proficiency Test (WPT) ratings from Brown (2009A) suggested that implementing innovative curricular methods in the university foreign language classroom contributed to significant gain. Lev Vygotsky's idea of the "zone of proximal development" served as useful framework for explaining a high percentage of gain at the Advanced-high/Superior threshold in oral proficiency while native speaker written corrective recasts followed by revision and resubmission of written assignments offered a useful paradigm for facilitating threshold gain across a range of proficiency levels for all participants involved. Subsequent research (Brown, Bown, and Eggett, 2009B) examining written proficiency suggested that an emphasis on argumentation and debate and content-based instruction proved statistically significant. In addition, participants in the treatment group benefitted considerably from the inclusion of native speaker consultations. Additional findings from Brown, Solovieva, and Eggett (2011) involving quantitative and qualitative analyses of ACTFL pre- and post-Written Proficiency Test (WPT) compositions underscored the value to both the writer and the instructor of applying both types of measures when analyzing second language writing compositions. To be sure, the "gainers" identified in the aforementioned research turned out to be very different gainers than originally thought, when viewed solely from the perspective of complexity measure usage on the pre- and post-WPT. The findings further underscored a problem that extends beyond the question of an instrument's reliability and/or the pedagogical soundness of an outcomes-based approach to teaching; namely, cultural conditioning that shapes human perceptions and judgments at the deepest psychic levels. The present research builds on past findings by expanding the overall research design; in particular, it introduces: 1) parallel pre- and post-ACTFL oral and written proficiency testing of both Russian and U.S. students in English and Russian respectively; 2) weekly debates between Russian and U.S. students via video-conference technology; 3) post-debate asynchronous blog discussions in Russian or English depending on the assigned language of debate for a given week; and 4) open enrollment versus selection of participants based on ACTFL oral and written proficiency ratings. As such, the present research has as its primary objective to 1) test whether gains from past iterations of the aforementioned debate course can be replicated and made scalable; and

2) enhance an existing curriculum through the inclusion of new technologies in and out of the foreign language classroom.

### **Content-Based Methodology**

A considerable body of literature addressing content-based instruction informs this research. Stryker and Leaver (1997) persuasively argue that performance in a foreign language can and should reflect an integrated continuum of form and content rather than a mutually exclusive relationship between the two; the latter approach describing what Resnick (1987) calls “symbol-detached-from-referent thinking.” Long (2007) concurs that a “focus on forms” approach sets out to accomplish the impossible – that of facilitating L2 uptake by means of imposing a prescribed syllabus that does not account for individual differences. Furthermore, he argues that such an approach is “psycholinguistically untenable.” Conversely, content-based methods<sup>3</sup> imbue language with authenticity, such that subject matter in the L2 is taught *with* and *through* a foreign language, thus enabling language to become a vehicle for communicating ideas for meaningful purposes rather than functioning solely as an object of study (Coyle et al., 2010; van Lier, 2005; Long, 2007; Stryker & Leaver, 1997; MLA Ad Hoc Committee, 2007; Shaw, 1997; Hedegaard, 2005). Accordingly, otherwise fragmented elements of learning become fused into one meaningful whole, thus facilitating a process of “convergence” (Coyle et al., 2010). Such an approach affords language learners a message or voice, an audience, a position or identity, and a purpose or motivation to communicate (van Lier, 2005).

Yet Dietrich (2005) rightly observes that authentic materials in and of themselves do not constitute a content-based course; rather, any content-based course needs a clearly-defined theme that lends direction and meaning to related topics. Jourdenais and Shaw (2005) point out that when used appropriately, authentic materials contribute to increased learner motivation largely owing to the relevance of the content in attaining one’s professional goals and aspirations. Increased learner motivation stemming from relevant content coupled with an emphasis

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<sup>3</sup> The term “content-based methods” represents a generic reference to a number of closely-related educational practices bearing different names, e.g., Content-Based Instruction (CBI), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), English as an Additional Language (EAL), and so forth.

on scaffolded activities within learners' zone of proximal development (ZPD) afford a symbiotic learning environment in which students become co-constructors of meaning and teachers become *assisted users* that guide students' learning by providing scaffolding when needed and then dismantling it so as to effect handover/takeover (van Lier, 2004). But perhaps the most valuable outcome of content-based and corresponding task-based, and project-based approaches has to do less with *what* students learn and more with empowering students by teaching them *how* to learn, so that they exit a foreign language class as autonomous, lifelong learners (Stryker & Leaver, 1997; van Lier, 2004; Wang, J., 2005). Indeed, when pursued in this manner, learning itself becomes a transformative experience from within (Engeström, 2005).

### **Computer Assisted Language Learning**

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) refers to "learning language in any context with, through, and around computer technologies" (Egbert, 2005). Students and educators often report differing opinions of CALL. On the one hand, scholars including L. Wang (2005) point out that students have favorable perceptions of CALL and emphasize the inclusion of technologies as powerful tools for facilitating interactive and authentic learning environments. Evans (2009) claims that digital platforms usually are viewed by learners as attractive and favorable for both communication and learning since they "facilitate the various dimensions of integration" that support language acquisition. On the other hand, Allan (2009) observes that "many educators feel overloaded with technology" due to the sheer volume of applications, e.g., Office Applications, Grade Book, Data Storage and Management, Virtual Learning Environments, Assistive Applications, Internet Resources, Audio-Visual Equipment, Electronic Whiteboards, Mobile Devices, and Virtual Personal Networks.

In an effort to reconcile differing perceptions of the value of technology in the language learning classroom, Blake (2008) suggests that "there isn't one technology best suited for language study, but rather there is an array of technological tools that can be harnessed, efficiently or otherwise, to the ends of learning a second language or studying the acquisition process," including Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) tools, which represent an essential form of CALL.

Salaberry (2000) points out that "increased access to interaction and the emergence of a new communication medium" define the

pedagogical design of CMC. Researchers emphasize that CMC creates a unique environment that fosters collaborative learning (Abrams, 2003), increases the quality of the problem-solving process (Jonassen and Kwon, 2001), and increases learner confidence by providing a safe environment in which they can practice and evaluate themselves (Satar and Ozdener, 2008).

Both synchronous (video-conferencing, real-time written chats, and the like) and asynchronous (emails, discussion boards, etc.) CMC tools encourage an essential process in foreign language learning, i.e., negotiation of meaning. As Smith (2005) argues, “teachers should focus on the nuances of negotiated interaction as well as more subtle indications of acquisition rather than learner uptake per se.” Accordingly, negotiation, and even renegotiation of meaning (Tolmie and Boyle, 2000) define the primary function of CMC in the broader context of foreign language learning.

Without supplanting the primary role of agents in the learning process, namely students and teachers, synchronous and asynchronous language learning tools aim not only to co-construct meaning among learners, but also to enhance intercultural competence (Chapelle, 2003). Indeed, Kern (2006) argues that long-distance collaborations involving two or more classrooms in different countries have “the potential to enhance learners’ communication skills and to enrich their knowledge of another culture, as well as to provide a context for viewing one’s own culture from another group’s perspective.” Talalakina (2010) likewise addresses the process of improving cross-cultural understanding through asynchronous international discussion forums that aim to reinforce students’ analytical skills by providing research incentives, fostering self-reflection, projecting values from one culture to another, and establishing points of intersection between the respective cultures.

### **Debate in the Foreign Language Classroom**

This research approaches the task of improving logic and reasoning *in* and *through* a foreign language as a method of facilitating language uptake at the Advanced level. Collaborative learning in the form of oral debates mirrors what Swain (1993) refers to as the “output hypothesis,” in that students “push their linguistic competence to its limit as they attempt to express their ideas” and negotiate meaning. Such a functional approach to foreign language study, as Fessenden et al. (1973) point out, “makes words the servants of ideas; it enlarges immeasurably our ability

to create, to invent, to relate, and to utilize our cumulative fund of experiences in making intelligent decisions and mapping intelligent courses of action." Research conducted by Massie (2005) and Connor (1987) identifies the task of argumentation and debate as a valuable strategy for improving both L2 oral and written proficiency, particularly at the Advanced level.

In reference to debate in one's L2, Kaplan (1987) observes that oral and written argumentation are similar in that they aim to produce conviction, but differ from one another in their extension, structures, lexicon, and interrelation of structures. Correct usage of grammar naturally plays an important role in any written composition, as does a command of a wide range of lexical items. Redding (1954, p. 205) asserts that "although it should be obvious that argumentative discourse requires extraordinary precision in vocabulary, many debaters have been known to toss about, with gleeful abandon, vague and ambiguous terms. The debater, like any public speaker, should command a precision of word choice that will reflect the most subtle shadings of meaning." Although framed in the context of L1 oral debate, Redding's comments apply equally to L2 writing. In short, breadth of vocabulary facilitates precision and expands one's capacity to provide uninterrupted, extended level discourse on a topic, rather than spotty, fragmented statements that lack transitions, cohesion, and continuity.

### **Course in Argumentation and Debate in the U.S. and Russia**

Given the perceived parallels between formal debate training and development of Advanced- and Superior-level language skills (supporting and defending opinions, precision of vocabulary, connected, cohesive, paragraph-level speech, intellectual prowess, and cultural sophistication), it was decided to offer a collaborative course in argumentation and debate at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah and National Research University Higher School of Economics in Moscow, Russia, and to assess its potential impact on students' language proficiency. The central goal of the course was to demonstrate how rhetorical methods used in a debate forum could be integrated effectively into the foreign language classroom. Accordingly, debate topics became the vehicle by which to improve students' oral and written proficiency in the target language.

### **Research Question**

- Can U.S. students of Russian and Russian students of English achieve measurable gain in oral and written proficiency over a period of an academic semester?

### **Research Design**

#### *Data Gathering Instruments*

Prior to the start of the winter 2011 semester, Russian and U.S. participants completed both the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview and Written Proficiency Test on their respective campuses. Both pre-OPI and WPT data provided benchmark ratings by which to gauge possible gain as measured by the post-OPI and WPT.

#### *Participant Demographic and University Foreign Language Curricula*

A total of 18 American and 12 Russian students participated in the course. On the U.S. side, all of the students learned the bulk of their Russian while living in a Russian-speaking country for 18 months to two years. Although these students had considerable contact with the target language while abroad, their exposure consisted primarily of speaking and listening. Upon returning to their home institution, each student matriculated directly into a two-semester, third-year advanced grammar course that reviewed formal elements of the language, including verbal conjugation, adjectival endings, and noun declension, and incorporated a modest writing component comprised largely of descriptive summaries of assigned short stories. Students enrolled in the debate course in question were in the process of completing part two of fourth-year advanced grammar that focused on inflectional and derivational morphology and historical phonology.

On the Russian side, all participants already had passed an obligatory English language entrance exam as part of the university admissions process and 72 hours of ESL-related courses during their first year of study. Concurrent with the debate course, participants were enrolled in Business English (English for Business Studies).

In terms of gender representation, the Russian side consisted of nine females and three males (75 percent and 25 percent respectively), whereas the U.S. side consisted of three females and fifteen males (17 percent and 83 percent respectively). The average age of US students was 24 (once again, indicative of the nature of the aforementioned institution

characterized by students who interrupt their education for an extended period of time to live abroad before resuming their studies), while the average age for Russian students was 18.

#### *Classroom Structure and Schedule*

U.S. and Russian students enrolled in a two-credit course at their respective universities. Whereas U.S. students met twice a week for 50 minutes, Russian students met once a week for 80 minutes. Since many students in both classes lacked prior experience in debate, a portion of in-class time was devoted to learning principles of argumentation and debate in the students' first language. The remainder of classroom time was devoted to reviewing grammar, building vocabulary, and debating assigned topics in the target language. To provide students with established criteria of what constitutes a speaker and writer at the Advanced and Superior levels, the researchers distributed copies of the ACTFL oral and written proficiency guidelines to each of the participants at the beginning of the semester.

The researchers agreed on eight debate topics and dates on which U.S. and Russian students would debate via synchronous video-conference technology.<sup>4</sup> The choice of language alternated from one week to the next, thus giving both sides a chance to use each language, i.e., Russian for four debates and English for four debates. Owing to the number of students in each group and a window of 50 minutes to carry out a video-conference debate, the researchers assigned six Russian and six U.S. students to each debate. Every speaker was allotted four minutes to present his/her position on a given topic, which when multiplied by 12 speakers totals 48 minutes. Over the course of the semester, U.S. students had a chance to participate in at least two video-conference debates, whereas Russian participants had a chance to participate in at least four (18 students versus 12 students respectively and eight video-conference debates).

Assigned topics and the order in which participants debated them are as follows: 1) Big vs. Small Government; 2) Individual Freedom vs. Public Control; 3) Two-Party vs. Multi-Party System; 4) Secularism vs. Theocracy; 5) Social Darwinism vs. Affirmative Action; 6) Flat vs.

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<sup>4</sup> The U.S. side used a Tandberg Edge 95 MXP video-conferencing system and the Russian side a Polycom HDX 8000 system.

Progressive Tax; 7) Gun Control vs. Gun Rights; and 8) Universal vs. Private Healthcare. The researchers further agreed that students would debate whichever side of an issue least characterized general views or traditions of their respective cultures. For example, in regards to Topic 1, Russian students argued in favor of small government, whereas U.S. students argued in favor of big government.

Following each debate, an asynchronous written blog discussion was carried out in the language of the oral debate. So as not to overwhelm students with writing assignments in the target language, participants were allowed to opt in or out of blog discussions throughout the semester. For participants on a given week and topic, such discussions provided an additional opportunity to debate issues under consideration, albeit in a more reflective manner owing to the methodical nature of written composition versus impromptu public speaking. As such, the blog discussions helped to clarify opinions of participants in both groups, contributed to understanding the perspective of the opposing side, and offered an opportunity to comment on language use.

### *Homework*

Assigned homework played a critical role in the course curriculum owing to very limited contact time with students per week (2 hours). The standard set of weekly assignments for which students were responsible consisted of the following:

*Writing Assignments.* U.S. students were assigned to write a two-page paper in Russian for each of the eight debate topics in which they were to articulate clearly and persuasively their assigned position. So as to emphasize the importance of a rough draft in the writing process, participants were informed that rough drafts would factor ten percent into their overall grade.

The same students met once a week for approximately 30 minutes with one of three possible native speaker teaching assistants, who guided students' learning by providing corrective recasts and directing them to areas in need of improvement while allowing them to self-correct. Such a process sought to create a scaffolded learning environment conducive to negotiating meaning and providing corrective feedback (Chaudron, 1988; Jourdenais & Shaw, 2005).

Students then revised and resubmitted their assignments taking into account feedback from the native speaker assistants, thus emphasizing a process, rather than product-oriented approach to each

writing assignment (Cohen, 1994; Shaw, 1997; Connor, 1987), or as Kaplan (1987) insightfully observes, “recognizing writing (composing) as a process in which a given text is not at all finished output, but merely a waystage.” Native speaker ratings reflected the final grade for both rough and final drafts. On the Russian side, each week students submitted a summary in English describing the proceedings of a recent video-conference debate. Rather than turning in a rough draft to an instructor or native speaker of English for initial assessment purposes, Russian participants peer-reviewed each other’s work—a method in keeping with the Russian tradition of teaching academic writing and enhancing proofreading skills in a foreign language. Using peer comments, students revised their summaries and submitted them to the instructor for a final assessment.

*Reading Assignments.* U.S. students received a reading assignment in Russian, while Russian students were assigned a reading in English relative to each debate topic. For example, if the topic for the upcoming week’s debate addressed the second amendment to the U.S. constitution, students would read a relevant article (3-4 typed pages) and then respond orally to comprehension questions during class. The purpose of such readings was two-fold: 1) to introduce students to topic-related lexical items that, in turn, could be applied when writing their individual position papers, and 2) to deepen their understanding of the relevant issues under consideration.

In addition to reading topic-specific literature in the target languages, both groups of students discussed assigned chapters from the second edition of Corbett and Eberly’s *The Elements of Reasoning* and passages from Graff and Birkenstein’s *They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing* so as to enlarge their understanding of debate and academic writing.

*Cohesive Devices.* At the beginning of the semester, U.S. and Russian participants received an inventory of cohesive devices consisting of transition words, connectors, coordinate, participial, and adverbial clauses.<sup>5</sup> On the U.S. side, participants received explicit in-class instruction regarding the usage of such cohesive devices and weekly quizzes to assess their recall of them. Memorization of the said devices

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<sup>5</sup> U.S. participants received a Russian/English inventory of cohesive devices, whereas Russian participants received an English/Russian inventory of the same cohesive devices.

represented an option for Russian participants who, in lieu of practicing their usage during class time, peer-reviewed each other's written work.

### **Findings**

As a prerequisite for completing the course, participants in both countries completed a pre- and post-OPI and WPT prior to the start of the semester and at the end. Figure 1 illustrates Russian participants' ratings on the English language OPI and Figure 2 their ratings on the English language WPT.

Figure 1: Comparison of English Language Pre- and Post-OPI Ratings<sup>6</sup>

<b>Ratings</b>	<b>Total Participants (Pre-OPI)</b>	<b>Total Participants (Post-OPI)</b>
Intermediate-high (IH)	0	1
Advanced-low (AL)	6	3
Advanced-mid (AM)	4	4
Advanced-high (AH)	1	3
Superior (S)	1	1

Figure 2: Comparison of English Language Pre- and Post-WPT Ratings

<b>Ratings</b>	<b>Total Participants (Pre-WPT)</b>	<b>Total Participants (Post-WPT)</b>
Intermediate-high (IH)	1	0
Advanced-low (AL)	4	0
Advanced-mid (AM)	6	6
Advanced-high (AH)	0	4
Superior (S)	1	2

Overall, the data in Figures 1 and 2 indicate upward movement, especially in regards to written proficiency, which saw a definitive departure from the Intermediate-high and Advanced-low levels and a solid entry into the Advanced-high level accompanied by an addition to the Superior level. Results of performing a post-hoc t-test of the mean gain for each group after adjusting for the pre-test score through an

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<sup>6</sup> IM=Intermediate-mid, IH=Intermediate-high, AL=Advanced-low, AM=Advanced-mid, AH=Advanced-high, and S=Superior.

ANCOVA (analysis of co-variance) reveal statistical significance in terms of gain for written proficiency at the .01 level and near statistical significance for oral proficiency at the .05 level, especially considering the small sample size (12 participants).<sup>7</sup> Results from the aforementioned analysis are provided in Table 1.

Findings from the U.S. participants provide a near-mirror image of those supplied by their Russian counterparts, as shown below in Figures 3-4.

In terms of the OPI, the above findings suggest that U.S. students found that moving beyond the Advanced-mid level presented a formidable challenge, as evidenced by a full 13 out of 18 students (72 percent) pre- and post-testing at that level. Notwithstanding such a challenge, results from a post-hoc t-test indicate that U.S. students demonstrated significant oral proficiency gain at the .05 level, whereas modest WPT gains for the same group fall short of statistical significance, as illustrated below in Table 2.

Table 1: Post-hoc t-Test for English Language Pre- and Post-OPI and WPT Ratings

	Mean	SE	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
English Language Post-OPI – Pre- OPI (current ACTFL scale)	.32	.17	1.88	27	.068
English Language Post-WPT – Pre-WPT (current ACTFL scale)	1.27	.22	5.77	27	<.0001

Figure 3: Comparison of Russian Language Pre- and Post-OPI Ratings

<b>Ratings</b>	<b>Total Participants (Pre-OPI)</b>	<b>Total Participants (Post-OPI)</b>
Intermediate-high (IH)	2	0
Advanced-low (AL)	5	2
Advanced-mid (AM)	8	13
Advanced-high (AH)	2	3
Superior (S)	1	0

<sup>7</sup> All analyses were done using SAS 9.2 (SAS Institute, Inc.).

In an effort to compare the overall performance of both groups on the OPI and WPT, an analysis of covariance using the pre-OPI and WPT test scores as the covariate was performed, the results of which are presented below in Table 3.

Figure 4: Comparison of Russian Language Pre- and Post-WPT Ratings

Ratings	Total Participants (Pre-WPT)	Total Participants (Post-WPT)
Intermediate-mid (IM)	4	3
Intermediate-high (IH)	7	8
Advanced-low (AL)	4	3
Advanced-mid (AM)	3	4

Table 2:  
 Post-hoc t-Test for Russian Language Pre- and Post-OPI and WPT Ratings

	Mean	SE	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Russian Language Post-OPI – Pre- OPI (current ACTFL scale)	.34	.14	2.43	27	.019
Russian Language Post-WPT – Pre-WPT (current ACTFL scale)	-.069	.17	-.41	27	.70

Table 3:  
 Results of Analysis of Covariance Between Groups on OPI and WPT

	F	Num DF	Den DF	Sig. (2-tailed)
OPI (US and Russian participants)	.01	1	27	.91
WPT (US and Russian participants)	19.23	1	27	.0002

Data from Table 3 indicate that differences between U.S. and Russian participants achieved statistical significance in regards to written proficiency, but not oral proficiency.

Although valuable in their broad assessment of oral and written proficiency, the OPI and WPT inadequately assess gradual and often subtle language gain that transpires over a short period of time. Detection of nuanced degrees of change requires a separate instrument, such as that developed by Language Training International (LTI), the ACTFL training office. For an additional fee, ACTFL raters will complete a diagnostic grid designed to assess a test taker's ability to carry out functions one threshold higher than that person's assigned global rating, e.g., if an individual received an Advanced rating, regardless of sublevel, the diagnostic grid for that person would assess ability to carry out Superior level functions. Of particular relevance to the research at hand are the first three functions at the Superior level, namely: 1) Can state and support opinions on a variety of topics; 2) Can speculate and present hypotheses; and 3) Can participate in and develop a discussion on topics of personal and current interest in extended discourse. Corresponding data for students on both sides who rated at the Advanced level breaks down as follows: US Pre-OPI ( $n=15$ ), US Post-OPI ( $n=18$ ); Russia Pre-OPI ( $n=11$ ), Russia Post-OPI ( $n=10$ ). Figure 5 illustrates how U.S. participants performed on the first of the aforementioned functions and Figure 6 the same, but for Russian participants.

Data from Figures 5 and 6 suggest that participants from both groups benefitted directly from intensive study and application of rhetorical methods inherent to the forum of debate, i.e., presenting one's point of view clearly, presenting well organized supporting arguments, elaborating on arguments, and handling a topic at the issue level.

Similarly, Figure 7 illustrates how U.S. participants performed in relation to the second of the aforementioned functions, namely, the ability to speculate and present hypotheses, and Figure 8 the same in relation to Russian participants.

Features of the second function presented above in Figures 7 and 8 also dovetail with sophisticated rhetorical methods employed in debate as a way of supporting one's opinion and persuading others to agree. In this function, U.S. participants made greater strides than Russian participants, who improved consistently as well, albeit less noticeably overall.

A final function of especial relevance to this research concerns the third aforementioned function, specifically, matters of extended discourse, as illustrated in Figures 9 and 10.

Figure 5: U.S. Participants' Performance on Superior Level Function "Can State and Support Opinions on a Variety of Topics"

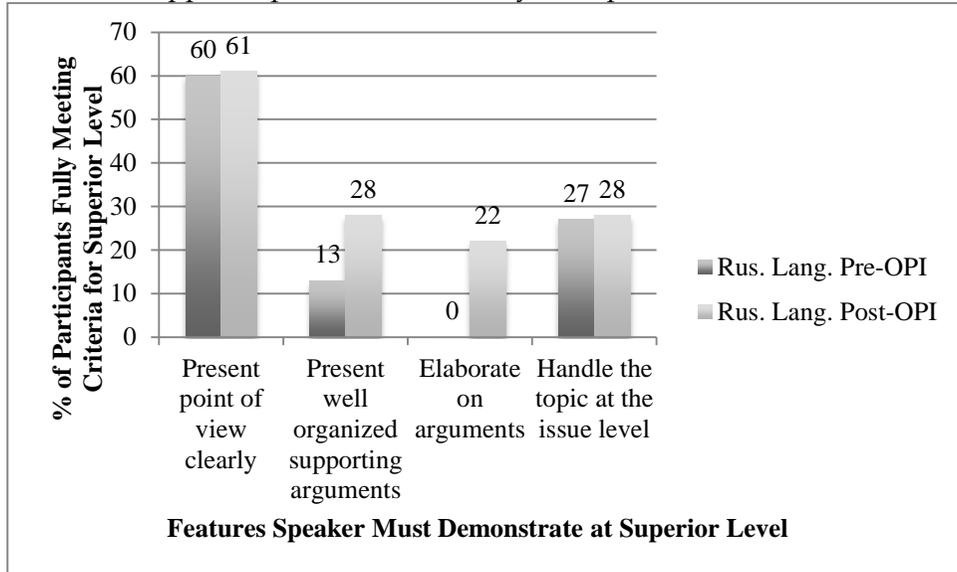


Figure 6: Russian Participants' Performance on Superior Level Function "Can State and Support Opinions on a Variety of Topics"

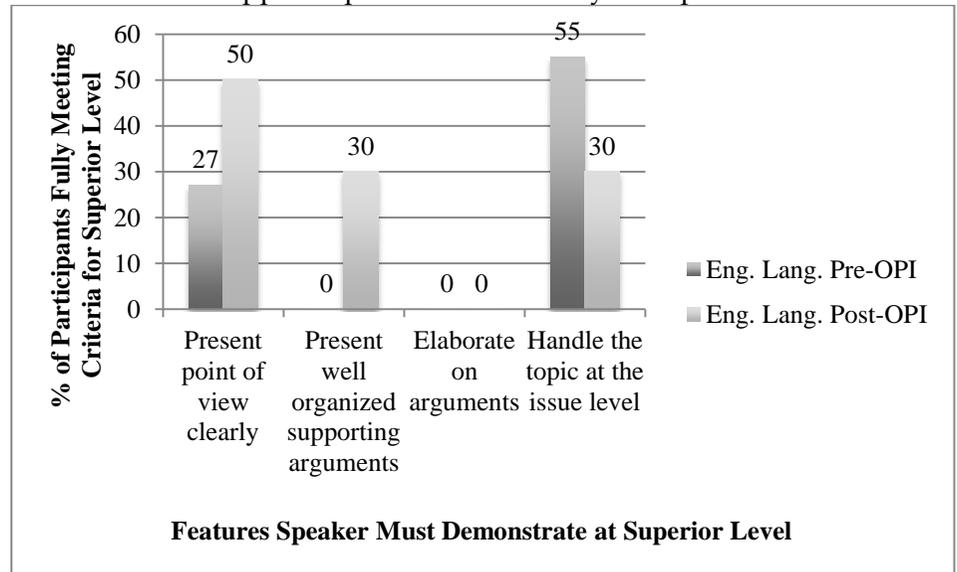


Figure 7: U.S. Participants' Performance on Superior Level Function "Can speculate and present hypotheses"

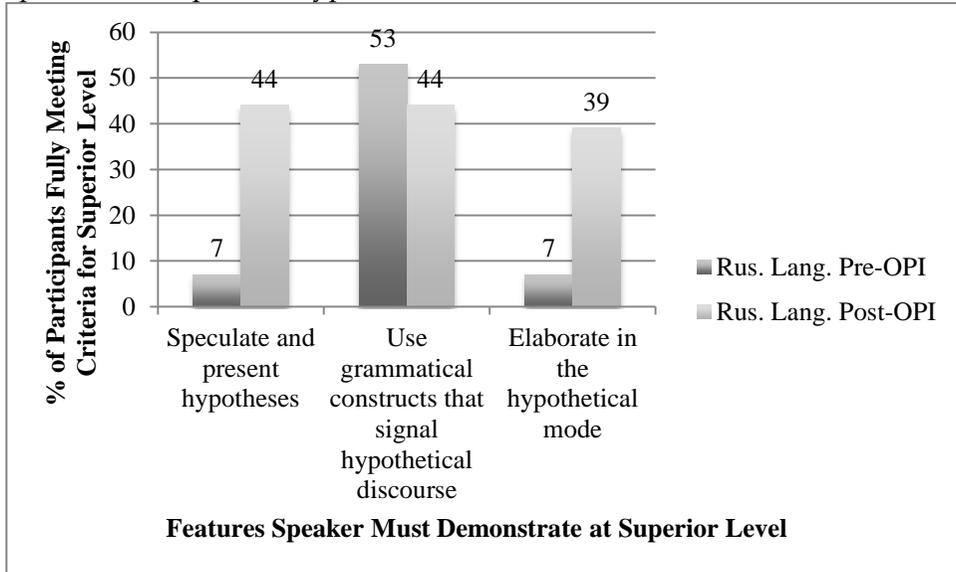


Figure 8: Russian participants' Performance on Superior Level Function "Can speculate and present hypotheses"

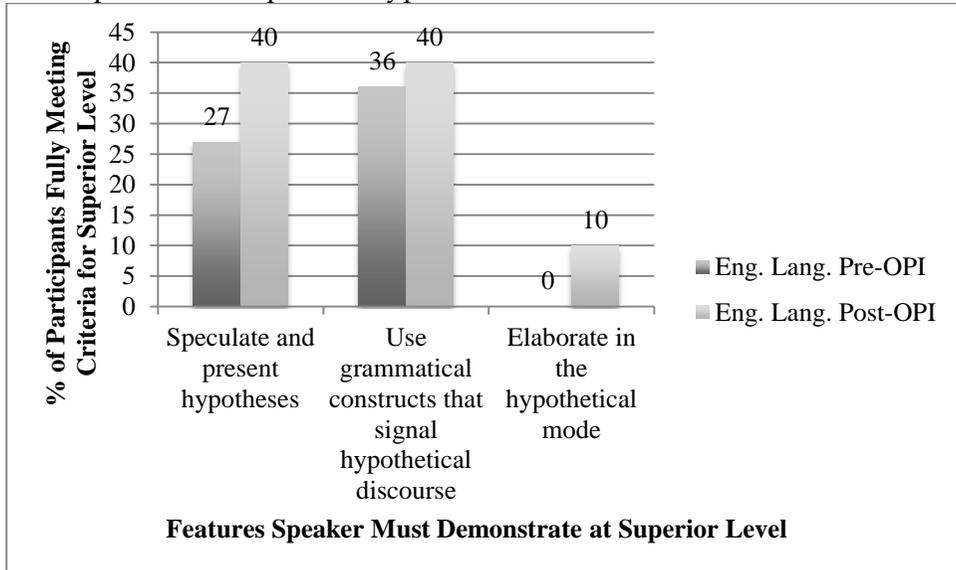
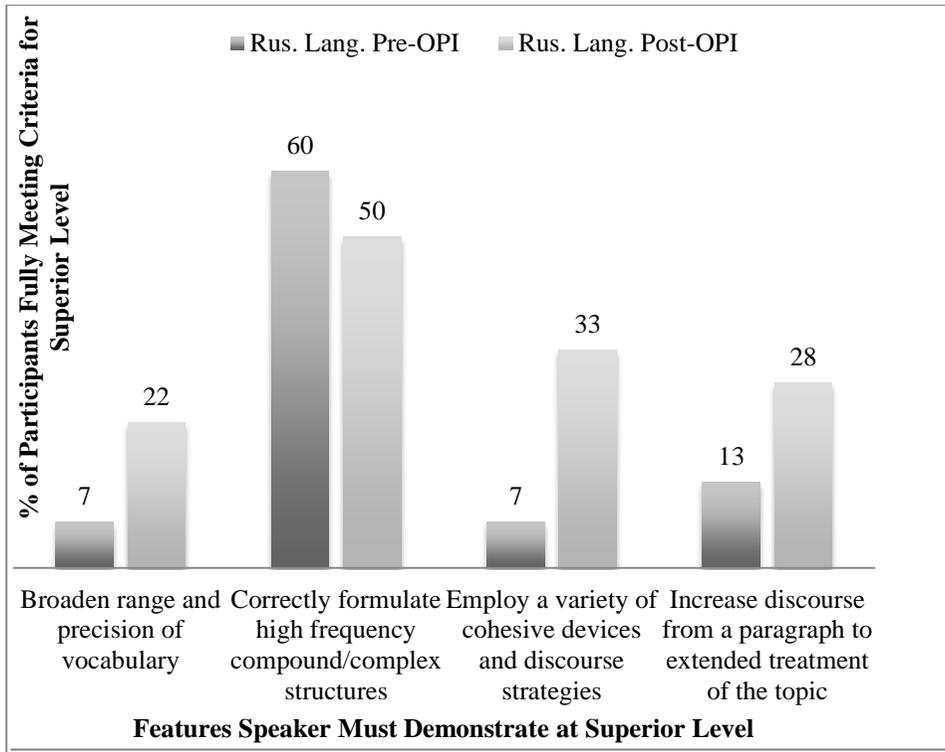


Figure 9: U.S. Participants' Performance on Superior Level Function "Can participate in and develop a discussion on topics of personal and current interest in extended discourse"

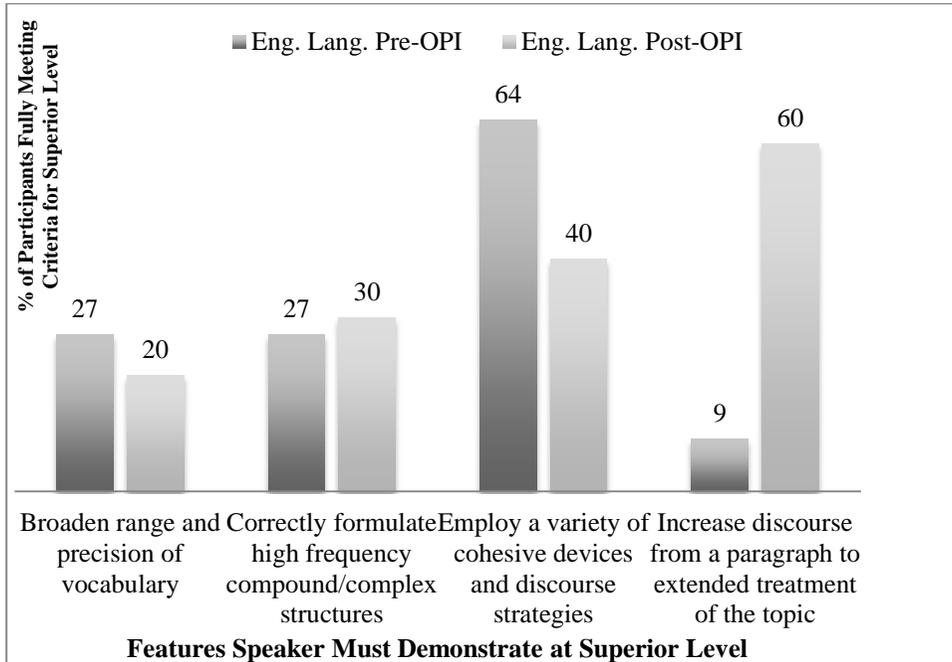


Of particular interest in regards to the above data in Figures 9 and 10 are findings relative to the last two features, namely one's ability to employ a variety of cohesive devices and discourse strategies and to increase discourse from a paragraph to extended treatment of the topic. The data suggest that U.S. participants improved by 25 percent in their usage of cohesive devices over the course of the semester. At that, the final percentage of U.S. participants fully demonstrating Superior-level mastery of this feature was lower than the initial percentage of Russian participants for the same feature (33 percent versus 64 percent respectively). Oddly, one sees a decrease rather than an increase for Russian participants in regards to this feature from the beginning to the end of the semester (64 percent versus 40 percent respectively).

Also noteworthy with regard to the above data are gains that participants, especially Russian, made in the way of advancing paragraph to extended level discourse on a given topic. While the

percentage of U.S. participants improved by 15 percent, Russian participants improved by a full 51 percent.

Figure 10: Russian Participants' Performance on Superior Level Function "Can participate in and develop a discussion on topics of personal and current interest in extended discourse"



### Discussion

The data from this research underscore a number of challenges associated with facilitating language gain at the Advanced level, in particular that of pushing beyond the Advanced-mid range. Indeed, eight of the nine U.S. students who began the course at the Advanced-mid level demonstrated null gain, while three out of four Russian students who began at the Advanced-mid level remained the same; the exception to this norm in both groups moved up to the Advanced-high level. Rather than suggesting that participants who did not manage to penetrate the Advanced-high level failed to make progress, this research illustrates: 1) the difficulty of carrying out Superior-level tasks as a prerequisite for demonstrating Advanced-high proficiency; and 2) the importance of analyzing individual diagnostic grids so as to detect otherwise unspoken for gains within sublevels.

Judging by U.S. participants' global ratings, one might attribute a seeming inability to cross the Advanced-mid level to an overabundance of concrete discourse at the expense of theoretical or abstract language. Ironically, the very rhetorical devices, i.e., emphasis on concrete examples that initially seemed to give U.S. students an advantage over their Russian counterparts during debates, ultimately may have hindered rather than facilitated gain in that they encouraged Advanced rather than Superior-level language functions. Nevertheless, diagnostic data from Figures 7 and 8 suggest that U.S. participants in fact made considerable improvement in the way of speculating and presenting hypotheses—a finding otherwise overshadowed by reliance solely on their global ratings.

One similarly could argue that participants on both sides demonstrated Advanced-high and Superior-level discourse during actual debates, having rehearsed in advance what they wanted to say, but when faced with unfamiliar prompts during the OPI found themselves at a loss to present well-organized arguments and/or retrieve complex structures and precise vocabulary indicative of the Superior level. Here again, diagnostic data, this time from Figures 5-6 and 9-10 suggest that both U.S. and Russian participants demonstrated some improvement in matters of stating and supporting opinion and developing extended level discourse. Furthermore, such data suggest that the forum of debate in the foreign language classroom potentially can expedite measurable gain and, thus, serve as a worthwhile course of instruction at one's home institution and a valuable springboard for anyone wishing to pursue an immersion experience either domestically or abroad.

Participants who rated between Intermediate-high and Advanced-mid on the OPI overwhelmingly demonstrated the most gain. Of the six U.S. participants within the aforementioned range, five moved up with one crossing the Advanced threshold and even progressing an additional sublevel. Russian participants in this regard also demonstrated gain, although fewer of them, as evidenced by two of the six participants within this range moving up with one of the two pushing from Advanced-low to Advanced-high. Such findings once again underscore the comparatively rapid gain that can occur at the Intermediate level and even the Advanced-low level and the correspondingly time-consuming and arduous task of clearing the Advanced-mid hurdle and sustaining Superior-level proficiency requisite

for achieving the Advanced-high level and beyond (cf. Brecht, Davidson, and Ginsberg, 1993; Freed, 1995; Higgs and Clifford, 1982; Rifkin, 2005).

In terms of written proficiency, U.S. students presumably stood a better chance than their Russian counterparts of demonstrating gain owing to comparatively lower pre-test scores going into the course. Furthermore, U.S. students carried out a more exhaustive approach to writing than Russian students that entailed a three-fold process: 1) submitting a rough draft of each position paper; 2) a 33-minute writing consultation with a native speaker; and 3) turning in a revised draft that accounted for native speaker feedback. Conversely, Russian students wrote summaries of each of the video-conference debates and peer-reviewed each other's work. Perhaps significant gains on the part of Russian students in this regard can be attributed to their carrying out level-appropriate writing exercises, e.g., summaries, compositions, descriptions, and narratives—all of which reflect writing needs at the Intermediate and Advanced levels. Such an approach falls in line with Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis, or  $i+1$ , which argues that learning occurs along a developmental continuum and, therefore, input should reflect the next stage in a learner's development (Krashen, 1988). If viewed from this perspective, writing assignments carried out by U.S. students failed to take into consideration students' developmental levels in that they called for writers to demonstrate Superior-level tasks, such as supporting opinion, treating topics both concretely and abstractly, and using sophisticated rhetorical devices. As such, unlike Russian students who managed to master level-appropriate tasks and push upwards incrementally, U.S. students floundered in a sea of abstractions that ultimately hindered rather than facilitated gain.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

While preparation for and participation in debates on assigned topics proved beneficial to both Russian and U.S. students, the question arises as to whether limiting debates to predetermined topics possibly hindered rather than facilitated participants' development of compensatory strategies, such as repetitions, circumlocutions, avoidance, and the like. While some may perceive such strategies as disingenuous, in fact, they demonstrate a willingness on the part of the speaker to take risks and tackle difficult communicative tasks. Refusal to attempt to speak to a topic or reversion to concrete, factual language constructs indicative of Advanced-level proficiency only stymies progress. Perhaps in addition to

debating assigned topics, instructors might consider designating certain days for students to carry out impromptu debates with ten minutes preparation time. For pedagogical purposes, exercises addressing compensatory strategies ideally would precede each impromptu debate followed by a post-debate discussion of their utilization. Implementation of such an approach could impact participants' ability to respond to unfamiliar topics posed during the OPI and enable them to engage the interviewer head on rather than revert or refuse altogether.

In addition, questions of motivation arise when assessing participants' performance on both the OPI and WPT. Aside from whether Russian or English may or may not factor into an individual participant's future career plans, the more immediate issue of one's course grade offers a prime source of motivation. Participants in this research understood that sheer completion of the pre- and post-OPI and WPT would constitute a pass/fail grade rather than an actual raw score contributing to their overall grade for the course. As such, one could argue that participants felt less motivated to excel on either test than they might have, had their grade depended on it.

Research addressing these and related matters within the context of foreign language instruction in the university classroom extends beyond the scope of the current research, but certainly warrants future examination within the profession and across disciplines.

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