Pallas University of Applied Sciences

Department of Media and Advertisement Design

A Comic-based Textbook of Spoken Russian

Undergraduate Thesis

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Tartu 2020

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of the project is to create a textbook of spoken Russian in a form of comics. Theoretical part provides an overview of the related work and defines the principles that are later implemented in the development of the textbook.

Who is the audience?

Textbook is targeted to learners who can already read Cyrillic characters and are acquainted with the basics of Russian grammar and vocabulary. The textbook can be used at higher-level courses at school, in bachelor-level programs, or in self-directed learning. In terms of socio-demographics, the readers are mainly young people, aged 16-21, who study Russian and are willing to try new forms of learning.

Why comics?

In my opinion, comics can teach us many things, including foreign languages. Comic books are characterized by simple language, clear presentation (thanks to the visuals) and uncomplicated, captivating and easy-to-follow plot. This make comics an attractive option for teachers and students who can prefer them over fictional narratives. According to the statistics, many people read comics and consider them as an important channel of information. According to Comichron.com, comics and graphic novel sales in North America totaled $805 million in 2012 and $1,095 billion in 2018. Arguably, comics are also popular in other countries, which means that some Russian language learners already like and read comics. In the first chapter, I give an overview of studies that analyze the educational value and social impact of comics.

Why spoken Russian?

I hold a degree in Russian and Slavic Philology and have taught Russian language myself. I believe that the ability to express oneself and communicate with other people in a foreign language is the most precious skill one can develop while learning a language. Unfortunately, Russian language textbooks are rarely focused on language as it is spoken in real life or are drastically outdated.

Why teach spoken Russian with comics?

Year before starting this project, I made a short comic book tackling a classic "In a café" topic. The book was successfully tested in a small group of my course mates who learned Russian under my guidance and with 10th-grade students of Jaan Poska Gymnasium in Tartu.

Teaching a language with comics can be considered as edutainment, or education through entertainment (Techopedia). Also, it is an example of multimodal pedagogy, which has been widely discussed by Gunther Kress (2010). Multimodal theory focuses on the use of multimodal modes in human communication and expression: verbal, visual, audial, spatial, etc. When students interact with the interesting content, they can seamlessly acquire new knowledge and keep up the motivation for going further. And happy students learn better than bored ones.

What is special about Russian language in Estonia?

Since I live in Estonia, I am particularly interested in reaching the local audience. Estonian society has been bilingual for a long time and now is becoming even trilingual; many locals are able to understand Estonian, Russian and English. Most Estonian schools provide an option of learning Russian language since a 6th grade. Yet, not many young Estonians are able to speak Russian, unless they have Russian-speaking relatives and friends, or have studied in Russia. Many Estonians that I've met are either motivated to learn Russian, or they can at least agree that good command of Russian is an advantage on the labor market.

Poor knowledge of Russian language among young Estonians can be linked to the insufficient quality of textbooks published in Estonia (Eslon 2016; Schmidt 2003). In my own experience, they can be useful for explaining Russian grammar and phonetics to Estonian speakers. Nevertheless, the explanations are too complicated for people who (unlike me) have never studied linguistics. Provided examples and texts are often boring, obscure and contain uncommon words. Even though it is possible to learn grammar based on these textbooks, it is highly unlikely that anyone would start speaking Russian using given vocabulary. As a result, hardly any Estonian natives under 40 years old can actually speak Russian after having learned it only in the gymnasium (Eesti integratsiooni monitoring 2015; Mellik 2010). Yet, same people usually have a very good command of English (at least B1.2). On the one hand, this is explained by the school curriculum, which offers

English-language courses from the 1st grade, while a second foreign language is taught from the 6th grade (National curriculum 2014). On the other hand, this may be not the only reason. From a cultural perspective, English is considered more attractive: the most successful movies are produced in Hollywood, the most popular blogs, video games and comics are available in English. The vocabulary of Estonian-speaking teenagers is full of English words and terms. The youngsters dream about going to US and UK, and almost never – to Russia. Whereas young people in Estonia look up to Western culture in many aspects of their lives, Russian culture is not only unpopular, but also problematic and full of ghosts of the past. In addition to that, English language textbooks are not only more numerous than Russian ones, but also tend to have better design (see Appendix 1) and contain more interesting and relevant information.

What problems do I want to solve?

I aim to create interesting content for young people who are motivated not only by practical issues, like finding a job. I want to create a book that people would not be able to close until they know how everything ended. Also, I will keep in mind that Estonian language (as well as other non-Indo-European languages) is very different from Russian language. Language learning is inseparable from understanding a foreign culture, which is not easily done through a textbook or a school course. It is hardly possible to teach spoken language without providing any cultural context, otherwise students will be able to speak, but not understand many things. One of my goals is to incorporate cultural realia in the comics. Whereas more well-known traditions (such as national holidays) are extensively covered by existing textbooks, I will concentrate on the everyday context.

Development of the comic book is based on the principles elaborated in this paper. Chapter 1 is focused on the use of comics in education: Subchapter 1.1. gives an overview of previous studies, while Subchapter 1.2 discusses possible topics that can be used for teaching Russian vocabulary. Chapter 2 deals with comics theory: in Subchapter 2.1., I derive the visual and storytelling principles of comics from Scott McCloud's work; in Subchapter 2.2, I define the instruments, colors, style and storyline of my comics. Chapter 3 follows the process of creating characters (3.1.), putting together the story (3.2.), combining aesthetical and language teaching decisions (3.3.), testing the book and making final adjustments after

testing (3.4.). Conclusion brings together all the results and some reflections on the future perspectives.

My textbook is developed in accordance with the requirements of language teaching and comic book design and is compliant with Estonian Ministry of Education and Research's guidelines on educational materials (Haridus- ja teadusminister: 2016).

To conclude, I would like to quote a study focused on the use of comics in classrooms that include ESL (English as a second language) speakers:

> "<…>The teachers also encouraged the use of comic books during sustained silent reading periods in the classroom. After eight months, the researchers found that students exposed to high-interest stories progressed in reading and listening comprehension at twice the normal rate. Furthermore, after twenty months, they found that the increase was even more dramatic and began to have a beneficial effect on other language skills, including writing and speaking". (Norton and Vanderheyden 2003).

1. TEACHING LANGUAGE WITH COMICS

The first part of this chapter offers an overview of studies on using comics in language teaching as well as recommendations on making learning process more entertaining, motivating and effective. The summary of each work is concluded with my suggestions on how given ideas can inform the design and content of my comic book.

The second part focuses on the selection of topics that should be covered in the book based on their relevance for teaching modern Russian.

1. 1 Studies on using comics and entertainment in education

In this section, I give an overview of four studies focused on comics as a language learning tool. These papers offer a pedagogical perspective on the topic, which I find important for my own project.

First study is an article *Comic book culture and second language learners* by Bonny Norton and Karen Vanderheyden (2003). The most useful aspect for me is a questionnaire of young second language learners. It is fruitful for my own project, as I want to create a textbook that would appeal to young readers and at the same time offer enough examples of spoken Russian. The article features two interviews: one is with an English language learner and a second with a school student (an English native speaker) who has both native speakers and non-native speakers of English in his class. Based on the interviews, the authors draw two important conclusions. At first, comics can help to learn a language in a short time, even if a foreign language is very different from one's own, like English and Korean. Secondly, comics help to connect young people and make the learning process more appealing to them. As a result, learning is less stressful and more effective, since students learn and remember more (see bellow in the discussion of the works by Burgess (Burgess 2015) and Domkar (Domkar 2010)).

Main material of the study is a popular series *Archie* that follows the lives of four teenage characters in the USA. The series was launched in 1941 and achieved success worldwide. The comics had attracted attention of earlier researchers, such as Wright (1976) who argued that visual parts of the comics help language learners to construct meaning. According to the latter, "if educators do not take seriously the social and cultural texts that are authorized by youth – which may simultaneously empower and disempower them – they run the risk of

negating and silencing their students" (Wright 1976, as cited in Norton and Vanderheyden 2003: 206-207).

The abovementioned questionnaire about *Archie* was aimed at the 5-7th grade students and included following questions:

- Why do you like reading Archie comics? *
- How old were you when you started reading Archie comics?
- How did you find out about Archie comics?*
- Do your friends like reading Archie comics?
- Which world would you rather live in – your world or Archie's world?
- Do you think Archie comics are helpful in learning English?*
- Do you read comics in your home language?*
- Should you be allowed to read Archie comics during silent reading?
- Do you talk about Archie comics with your friends?*
- Do Archie comics tell you anything about Canadian society?*

I added asterisk to the questions that are most important to my research; other are either not as important or relevant only for young learners.

With the questionnaire, Norton and Vanderheyden aimed to answer three questions:

1. What is the appeal of Archie comics for English language learners?
2. To what extent can the reading of Archie comics promote literacy development?
3. Do Archie comics foster social interaction between English language learners and their anglophone peers?

The first two questions give useful insight into pedagogical design of the comics: how to present the material and keep up motivation of readers. The third question is most relevant to my own study, as it confirms that comics are still an important part of youth culture. This supports my intention to incorporate cultural topics and phenomena into my comics, as it would help to bridge a cultural gap between Russian language learners and Russian natives (topic discussed further in subchapters 1.2. and 3.2.).

The answer to the first question is that the readers are attracted by humorous and entertaining style of the comics. Norton and Vanderheyden conclude that "the pursuit of pleasure and enjoyment is no less important for second language learners than for their native

speaking classmates" (2003: 208). Interviewed children admitted that their interest was kept up by the wish to know what happens next. As for the second question, 9/10 of participants agreed that simple language helped them to learn English, while pictures facilitated the understanding of story. The third crucial finding is that students consider comics as a way to adapt to a foreign culture. While reading the comics, they get to know the everyday activities of the Americans and immediately see the differences with their own cultural habits. Even though my comic book probably is not supposed to teach learners how to survive in Russia, these insights can be as well helpful. Giving enough cultural context is a crucial task, as "understanding the nature of the relationship between language and culture is central to the process of learning another language" (Research Centre for Languages and Cultures: 8).

The same study discusses not only *Archie* series, but also *Calvin and Hobbes*. To reach a better understanding of the topic and get the inspiration for my own project, I read several issues of the both.

While reading, I have noticed several tools that help to keep up the motivation of the readers. For *Archie* series, these are:

- Frequent plot twists on every page. For example, a tragicomical Mr Lorge's dream about losing his power and the manor (Archie 11, PAGE).

- Humor and jokes on almost every page. While reading Archie 11 (PAGE), it is funny to see grumpy Mr. Lorge confused.

- Special visual effects. In Archie 11 (PAGE), Mr. Lorge is depicted flying with the words in bold font around his body.

As for the *Calvin and Hobbes* series, I have noticed the following:

- Short format (one-page comics). This can indeed help to hold attention, even though I won't follow this format myself. For a purpose of language learning, it is more reasonable to create longer stories and repeat certain phrases. Yet, it is strategically better not to overwhelm the reader with didactic material in the comics.

- Humor and sarcasm. For example, a Christmas issue (December 24, 1995) plays with the idea that children should behave in order to get presents. The tradition is reduced to absurdity: Santa keeps a lot of records, spy on kids with TV screens and uses special terms to describe relationship with good and bad children.

- High quality plots. Some stories, (for instance, December 24, 1995) are detailed and almost cinematographic.

To sum up, Norton and Vanderheyden's research points out important aspects of effective learning material, which I will be taking into account when creating my comic book.

The second study, Jan Domkar's MA thesis (Domkar 2010) discusses the use of English comics for teaching English in Czech public schools. In line with Krashen (1994:4), Domkar states that the educational function of comics is to utilize the information and its context. For me, it means that comics can help to make a step from learning vocabulary and grammar to practicing the language in real situations. Another important finding is that comics can minimize the level of stress and keep up the motivation during the process of learning. As a result, students are motivated to read even more difficult texts than their level would usually allow, since they are engaged in the story and can compensate the lacking knowledge by interpreting the pictures (Domkar 2010:9). Apart from understanding what the characters are saying and what is going on in the story, students simultaneously acquire syntactical structures, which is critical for speaking (Ibid., 9). According to the author, authentic texts engage students better than adapted literature, and I can totally agree with that.

The third text is a collection of articles focused on the use of technology and multimodality in language and literature courses. Most papers are written by educators who reflect on their own classroom experience. For instance, Galaktionova describes a pilot study focused on the interaction of 13-15-year-old students with the "texts of new nature"[1] (Galaktionova 2016:13-16). The latter are defined as non-linear, fragmentary and hypertextual, and exemplified by hybrid narratives, mass culture literature, comics, fantasy, etc. (Tšernjak 2016: 10). The study shows that teenagers prefer visual format of communication over other ones, including auditory. This supports my hypothesis that comics can be a preferable means of education for young people. Danilova (2016: 54) stresses the educational potential of comics, arguing that children better remember the information perceived via pictures and not via texts. According to the study, comics is a relatively new tool for literature and language learning and the methodology still needs to be developed. I see myself as the one who tries to do such a thing.

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[1] The term "texts of new nature" is mostly used in Russian academic context; a similar concept is widely known as new media.

Finally, I review a book by school history teacher Dave Burgess, "Teach like a pirate: Increase Student Engagement, Boost Your Creativity, and Transform Your Life As an Educator" (2012). In the book based on Burgess' seminars for educators, the author provides practical tips on how to conquer attention of the audience and make them remember the information you give. While tips are mostly meant for lectors, these can be used in other contexts, including my project.

First of all, Burgess suggests preparing everything in advance, in order not to lose students' attention, while they are looking for paper or pencils (Burgess 2012: 54). In the case of comics, that can mean including a dictionary and spare pages or lines for writing down unfamiliar words, since I do not want students to get distracted by searching a dictionary or a piece of paper.

I need to say, I already used this approach in my earlier comic book (Lambaliha 2019) that included Russian-English dictionary at the back and the list of difficult words after every panel (with empty space for the translations to be written in by students). During the testing at Jaan Poska Gymnasium, students were asked to create their own comics, and, according to their feedback, these additional features did help a lot.

Burgess argues that students can draw or make something related to the topic of the lesson, in order to better understand and remember the content (2012: 60). I plan to include several activities to my book: for instance, some pages can have empty word balloons for readers to fill them themselves. Situations should be visualized in a way that would stimulate the use of the phrases that reader just learned.

Burgess highlights that every lesson should be related to the everyday life of learners. For instance, teacher can refer to the news or popular culture, in order to increase the interest and engagement of students (Burgess 2012: 65). Likewise, I am going to include some topics that are relevant for young people (further discussed in 3.2.)

Mystery is another trick that Burgess recommends to educators. He advises teachers to intentionally conceal some pieces of information, to keep students intrigued and motivated till the end of the lesson (Burgess 2012: 70). This corresponds to the ideas discussed in the study by Norton and Vanderheyden.

1.2 Choosing the topics

My comic book is not only an independent learning material but also an addition to existing Russian language textbooks. To establish this connection, I explored the topics, dialogs and discussions present in three Russian language textbooks (also see Chapter 3). First textbook (Mihaleva et al 2011) is targeted to beginners (0-A1 level), while other two, dedicated specifically to the spoken language (Senn, Rozhdestvensky 1977), (Rubinstein 1997)– to intermediate level students (A2-B1).

First textbook is aimed to native speakers of any language and covers following topics: *At the shop (food, clothes, essentials); The weather; What time is it; Let's get to know each other (job, hobbies, daily routine); Culture (At a museum, cinema, events); Places and situation (Where is it situated? Where do you live? Where were you?); Dreams and memories; Movement (Where? How do you get there?); Birthday party (congratulations, gifts, age); Maslenitsa; Guided tour; At the café; Love, dating; Friendship and describing a person; Colors; Health (At the hospital, medical services, catching cold, calling a doctor);* (Mihaleva et al 2011).

Second textbook (Rubinstein 1997) is English-based, focused on conversations and covers 30 topics: *Biography; Army and life of a military; Fashion and looks; Temper; Education and job; Family; Habitation; Home and hometown; Weather and climate; Clothes; Shopping; Food: At the grocery store; At the restaurant, cooking; Utility services; Holidays; Hobbies; Radio and TV; At the library; At the Post office, telephoning; Sport; At the cinema; At the theater and concert; Zoo, aquarium and circus; At the museum; Trips: On the plane, By car, By train and By ship; Tourism, at the custom office and at the hotel; National holidays, parties and traditions; At doctor's appointment.*

Third textbook (Senn, Rozhdestvensky 1977), not language-specific, is focused on speaking and covers 10 topics: *Home renovation; Children clothes; At the concert, theatre, circus, cinema; Sport; Utility services; Visiting friends; Shopping and money exchange; Waiting in a line, ordering a product; Buying consumer electronics, redelivery; At the post office.*

While few topics appear only once (dreams, army, redelivery, waiting in line), many of them are discussed in every textbook with slight variations (for instance, describing a person and temper, visiting friends and party, going to different places – zoo, circus, theatre etc.).

2. COMICS THEORY

This chapter gives an overview of comics theory from the perspective of foreign language teaching. This neither include history of comics, nor the analysis of artistic tools; more comprehensive studies of comics have been done by McCloud (1993, 2000, 2006) and Koppel (2019). I focus only on the theoretical aspects that are directly related to my goals, such as suiting panel to panel transitions (McCloud 2006: 15) or developing word-picture combinations (1993: 153-155), etc. The problems of the artistic style are beyond the scope of my work, since I explore comics as a design tool and not as *l'art pour l'art* (Britannica). At the same time, I admit that esthetic factors are no less important than functional ones. Since my goal is to create a comic book with a simple and understandable story, I aim to find the best way to combine pictures and words. Specifically, phrases should be correct and authentic, while pictures should provide a visual translation: for instance, facial expressions emotions and body postures can substitute missing modalities, such as intonation, and help to find a right meaning of the phase. In the following subchapters, I give an overview of McCloud's work, specifically *Making comics* (2006) and *Understanding comics* (1993). These books offer insights into development of the plot and visual aspects of the story, as well as help to reach clarity and orderliness.

2.1. Understanding and making comics

Scott McCloud is a well-known American cartoonist and comics theorist (McCloud.com: About). In *Making comics*, he describes main aspects of comics as a visual storytelling tool: pictures, frames and panel-to-panel transitions, story and tools of storytelling, written word and its interaction with the visual part, story world, drawing tools, and even marketing.

McCloud defines five types of choices that each artist has to make in order to decide how the certain comic book would look like: these are the choices of moment, frame, image, word and flow.

Choice of moment

If one seeks clarity, the story's moments "should be like a dot-to-dot puzzle" (McCloud 2006: 14). This means that every frame shows a significant moment of the story, and several moments are combined into a clear line of narration. To avoid misinterpretations, an artist adds as much panels as needed, rather than aims for the compactness. If the choice of the

moment should "represent the most direct efficient route to communicate my simple plot" (McCloud 2006: 12), this can be facilitated with certain types of panel-to-panel transition: action to action, subject to subject and scene to scene transitions (McCloud 1993: 70-89).

Choice of frame

There are plenty choices of frames discussed by McCloud: pictures could be zoomed in and out, and composition viewed from different angles. All these choices affect the meanings of one's story (McCloud 2006: 19-27).

Choice of image

Choice of image, or a choice of style, influence the clarity of the story. All the details should be correct and recognizable: for instance, a reader should perceive a drawing of a cat as a cat, and not as a dog (McCloud 2006: 27-30).

Choice of word

Since my comics is also a textbook, the verbal part is even more important than in other comics. The main aim of the visuals is to wrap up the basic vocabulary and provide sufficient clues for understanding situations. For example, in terms of McCloud's classification (1993: 153-155), duo-specific comic book means words and pictures convey almost the same meaning. For instance, if a character has dirt on their boots, they say: "Oh, my boots are dirty". That will help readers to understand the words "boots" and "dirt", if they don't know them yet. Some panels could also be word-specific, when message is conveyed via words, as pictures merely illustrate it.

Choice of flow

This step consists in putting everything together, including panels and every element within them. To keep things simple, I will put panels from left to right, so that way every reader could understand the direction and read without interruptions. Within the panels, I will mostly use centered composition. While seeking clarity, McCloud also highlights the importance of intensity, defining it as "joy of personal flair, <…> taking readers on a thrilling ride and celebrating virtuosity of technique" (McCloud 2006: 52). In my project, I do not aim to reach this goal. Yet, I find crucial the remarks of McCloud on facial expressions and body language. In our everyday lives, we unconsciously use facial expressions to communicate with each other and we know how to read and express them

(McCloud 2006"81). In my comics, I should be able to recreate facial expressions and body postures in the way they would manifest in an actual conversation. Some examples of how I studied facial expressions and body language based on McCloud's books can be found in Appendix 2.

3. CREATING A COMIC-BASED TEXTBOOK

Sometimes comic books tell a story that is complicated and serious like *Maus. A Survivor's Tale* (Spiegelman 1991), or not easy to read and open to many interpretations like *Raña*, or sends reader to other works of art like *Kahe heli vahel* (Sildre 2018). Unlike them, my comic book should be built on the principles of clarity and unambiguity. As a textbook and a guide to spoken Russian language, it aims to be simple, non-exhausting, interesting and captivating; visuals should help to understand the situation, if the reader lacks some vocabulary.

The plot of the comic book can be developed according to different principles. For example, a grammar-based script would help students to remember the rules of Russian grammar. Russian language textbooks usually provide sufficient amount of grammar instructions, and many books are focused on specifically grammar. However, these textbooks often lack examples from spoken Russian language and relevant contemporary vocabulary. To fill this gap, I decided to make my textbook topic-based (the list of the topics is given in in Subchapter 1.2).

I let myself interpret the topics from the perspective of an artist and language teacher; also, I may add some new topics while writing the synopsis and sketching the first version of a book.

The first part of this chapter is dedicated to three things: style, tools and technics, that are to be chosen based on the previous research (Chapters 1 and 2). The second part of this chapter covers the process of character design – how the characters should look and behave. The third part offers a synopsis of the book that has been developed while I was collecting background information on teaching with comics and sketching my story. The third part analyzes the feedback received from school kids after test reading of first two chapters of my book and covers the editing process. The final part focuses on developing a cover for the comic book.

3.1. Style, tools and technics

The subchapter discusses three problems related to the visual appearance of the comic book: style, tools and technics. My comic style has been shaped during the studies at the Pallas University of Applied Sciences and is exemplified by my earlier comic book (Lambaliha

2018) and other works (See Appendix 3). The frames are drawn according to duo-specific choice of word (see Subchapter 2.1), so the text has the same meaning as the visual, which helps readers to acquire new words. Visual translates the words using clear facial emotions of the characters and through their gesture.

The drawings in my comic book are black and white, with two colors added as fill colors (See Appendix 4). These are CMYK (33:0:53:0) and CMYK (40:80:45:50), complimentary warm yellow-green and colder red-violet colors that match each other well. Letters are handwritten and in uppercase, while only "I" is in lowercase to make design of the text more distinctive (SHMiNDER).

Every frame is first sketched with an NB graphite pencil, whereas ink lines are applied on top. For the line drawing, I chose two black ink pens: Pilot lettering pen (1.0 mm) for the main lines and Artline Drawing System black pen (0.5) mm for the text. Background and objects out of focus are made with the same graphite pencil. All frames are drawn on common office A4 white paper, and graphite lines are cleaned with an eraser. After that, all the frames are corrected, cleaned and colored in Adobe Photoshop CC. The layout of the book is developed in Adobe InDesign CC. A page dimension is 25.7 cm x 16.8 cm – a standard size of a Marvel comic book, as I want my book to look less like a textbook to catch the interest of my audience. I have left some empty lines under the frames for readers to write down and translate new vocabulary (See Appendix 5 where I show the process from a storyboard to rough pencil sketches to pen sketches to ready frames).

One copy of the comic book has been printed so far for purpose of presentation. The cover is printed on coated paper and the inside pages – on uncoated paper.

3.2. Character design

Well-developed characters of a comic book are relatable to readers and help them to feel connected to the story (see Subchapter 2.1 for more detail).

I created six characters for my book, since I found this number most suitable for reaching the educational goals. On the one hand, with a bigger amount of characters it is easier to repeat words and phrases: characters might be in need to say the same words or they can be placed in similar situations. On the other hand, it gives an opportunity to offer a variety of phrases on each topic.

Additionally, readers can easily remember all the six characters and be able to distinguish them from each other. According to Miller (1956), humans can hold about seven items in their short-term memory (Miller 1956); having one character less seemed to be a good choice.

All the characters are 18 to 22 years old, which is the same as the age of my target audience (yet, I made my characters older than 18 in order not to encourage underage readers to use dating apps). The characters possess features that belong to the real people I know – this helps to make the characters more real and relatable to my readers.

Ksyusha (Ksenia) is a 20-year-old ambitious and straight-forward video blogger. She does not look Slavic, since there are a lot of different nations living in Russia and I took a chance to show it in my comic book.

Gvidon, 22, is a shy and nice person, who always blushes and doesn't know how to talk to people or on camera. His name is uncommon and comes from a fairytale written by prominent Russian poet Alexander Pushkin: by including this intertextual link I encourage my readers to learn more about Russian culture. Gvidon's extravagant name is inconsistent with his shy personality; he is an interesting person who opens up only in comfortable situation.

Yana, 18, is a thin, strong, self-confident, phlegmatic and a little bit weird girl. She doesn't talk much, but if she does, it's explicit.

Zhenya (Yevgeni), 19, is a loud, extravert, funny plus-size character, who likes to make jokes and thinks positively.

Venya (Veniamin), 18, is a fashionable and well-educated person, probably a Jew, representing Jewish community of Russia. He is a little bit narcissist. If my positive narrative needs a villain, he and Ksenia can fill that gap.

Sonya (Sofia), 20, is a weird and funny person with marginal or unusual interests (astrology, some kind of a mysticism, Hindu language). She is not like all other characters and actually looks like an anthropomorphic rabbit. Her personality was inspired by Frankie Bergstein from a TV-show "Grace and Frankie" (Grace and Frankie: 2015-2019).

Whereas readers as well as characters of comic books are still predominantly male (ICv2: 2017), half of my characters are female and half male. Yet, more women than men are

applying to universities and getting degrees worldwide, which means that at least half of my potential readers are women who can recognize themselves in my characters.

The stages of character design are included in Appendix 6.

3.3. Synopsis

Making comics takes not only researching and planning, but also being creative. Based on the research made in Subchapter 1.2, I selected topics that, to my mind, would help to fully express my creativity, imagination, experience and style:

- Describing and getting to know a person
- A temper and emotions
- Visiting friends

All these topics (and more) will be incorporated in the plot of the book. While my comic book is not focused on grammar, students are nevertheless advised to have at least A1-level of grammar to use it as a study material.

I choose to create one long story instead of several short ones, since it allows to include all the vocabulary I need and to repeat the words and phrases more than one time. Moreover, a longer narrative unwraps more smoothly, which helps to hold readers' attention.

In order to make the book relatable to my audience, I chose a hot topic of online dating: one character reviews *Tinder*[2] accounts of the rest. The plot is inspired by the *Try Guys* video about Tinder (Try Guys 2017), where four men create accounts and get comments from a dating professional.

In the first part, I introduce my characters to readers, so that they can remember their names and personalities. A reader sees the characters (Sonya, Venya, Gvidon, Yana and Zhenia) arriving one by one to Ksenia's apartment and saying "hello" in different forms of spoken Russian. After that, Ksenia goes through their *Shminder* accounts that include age, a credo as well as several pictures – that's how a reader gets to know them.

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[2] *Tinder* is an online dating app that allows users to anonymously swipe to like or dislike other profiles based on their photos, a small bio, and common interests. Due to the copyright issues, it's called *Shminder*, which is also a laconic and memorable word. Specially for my book I created a logo for this non-existent app to make my project more recognizable. Logo design is included in Appendix 7.

Each of the following parts are focused on one character, whose profile is being reviewed by Ksyusha. She comments on their photos and credos and ask questions; her friends try to give reasons for their choices, if she is not satisfied. These parts cover basic vocabulary of the following topics: Russian names (whole names and short names – diminutives), describing a person, introducing yourself, hobbies, love and relationship, asking and answering questions, negative and positive reaction on a comment, universal rules of chatting in Russian. I was also able to include cultural references into my book, such as a literary name Gvidon and a quote by a Russian poet of Polish-Russian origin, Vladislav Khodasevich.

I hope that visual images can get stuck in mind of my readers and facilitate the remembering of Russian words and phrases needed in a specific situation, as in the cases reviewed in Subchapter 1.1. Build on the research made in Subchapter 2-1, I want to provide enough useful phrases without overloading the reader. To do so, I will build a story world that readers can personally relate to and tell the story from the perspective of different characters.

Last part contains a plot twist, which is a common feature of comic books used for entertaining readers (issue discussed in the Subchapter 1.1). Plot twist is situated on the last pages of the comics, which encourages readers to become intrigued and wait for the next book. While Ksyusha was demandingly judging others' profiles, she did not have one of herself, so Ksyusha's friends are surprised and a little bi angry. The frames should be filled by readers themselves. One of the pass that could be choosed by them is to draw other characters creating an account for Ksyusha, write the girl's credo and choosing photos of her. The captions should integrate the vocabulary acquired in course of reading. The teacher could suggest this ending to their students – or think about other opportunities to reinforce aquired vocabulary.

The book includes humour, which is an important factor in language learning (see Chapter one). I designed Zhenya to be loud and funny and Sonya to be ridiculous and different and they are both comical in conversation with Ksyusha.

3.4. Working process
The work on the book proceeded in following stages:

-     Reading articles and books on comics in education and theory of comics. Making conclusions on what I should include into my book on textual, visual and narrative levels.

- Developing the characters with personalities and physical features, which allows my readers to recognize themselves in them and connect to the story emotionally (Appendix 6).

- Coming up with the concept that allows integrating all the findings of the previous stages.

- Making a rough sketch of the whole story (see Appendix 5): adding and removing frames, changing captions in accordance with the topics that need to be covered, developing the artistic style.

- Drawing all the frames with graphite pencil and pen on paper.

- Scanning images, cleaning unnecessary lines in Adobe Photoshop, coloring, putting frames together in the comic book in Adobe InDesign.

- Coming up with the book title and book cover design (See Appendices 7 and 8).

- Creation of the Russian-English-Estonian dictionary, lettering, scanning and including into the book.

- Looking for sponsors and publishers at the same time as producing the book.

Whereas it is not easy to describe the creative process in more detail, I can still outline the main stages of the development. In the beginning, I had only fragmented ideas on my mind, which were combined into the story as I started working on the storyboard. The characters, in their turn, were based on the personalities of real-life people I know or famous TV-show characters. For instance, Ksenya's character is inspired by my friend, while Sonya is based Lily Tomlin's heroine from "Grace and Frankie".

Besides trying to be the most creative version of myself, I also had to keep educational requirements in mind. After the storyboard had been developed, I started sketching individual panels and working on character design. In the process, I sometimes changed the image or the text in the balloons, to follow the principles of *edutainment* and comics design. After creating a rough sketch with a graphite pencil, I drew everything with ink pens. That was a huge mistake which I only realized on the next step of editing: to draw on top of the pencil sketches, one should use a light table, otherwise it will be difficult to clean pencil lines in Adobe Photoshop or similar editors (erasers won't help much). Unfortunately, due to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Spring 2020, I could not use the light table at school or work, so I figured out a fast way of cleaning the pencil lines. Of course, one could also use a graphic tablet for drawing on top of scanned pictures, but for me it is much easier to draw with an analogue pen, while the result seems more esthetically satisfying.

3.5. Book cover design

The book cover features Ksenia and Sonya chatting with a phone on tripod situated in front of them. It looks like an actual frame from the comic book, so a potential reader can immediately catch a first glimpse of the story. Ksyusha is saying «привет!» ("hi!") with a word balloon above them and my readers will realize that this book is in Russian.

The book title which is placed above the picture is Шминдер (Shminder), which is also the imaginative app's name. Subtitle is «Учебник разговорного русского в форме комикса» (A Comic-Based Textbook of Spoken Russian).

Under the title and the comic frame there is «+ Словарь и задания» («+ Dictionary and exercises») note. Dictionary is a key advantage of my book, so that the readers don't need additional materials while reading my book.

The title and subtitle is duplicated in Estonian and English on the title page.

The back cover has an annotation of the comic book plot on it in Estonian and English.

Book cover design can be seen in Appendix 8.

3.6. High school students' feedback

Students of 11th (16-17 y.o.) grade from Jaan Poska Gymnasium in Tartu have tested the almost ready "Shminder" comic book (only parts of title pages were missing) in the Russian language course in May, 2020. It took two 60-minutes lessons for them to read the comics and answer the questions. Also, they collectively filled a questionnaire provided by me:

- How do you like the comic book overall?
- Did you understand the story?
- Have you learned some new words? Did the pictures help to understand the unknown vocabulary?
- Was it comfortable to read the comic book?
- Do you want to learn what happened next to the characters?
- What do you want me to change in my comic book and what did you like the most?
- Does it make sense to teach/learn Russian language with the help of comic books?

Their feedback was collected and interpreted by their teacher and my supervisor, Olga Gerassimenko:

"The students have liked the comics: both it's humoristic and parody plot and the learning value. Among new words that they have remembered from comics lessons the most common were colloquial words «бред» 'nonsense', «шум» 'noise' and «господи» 'lord' which are certainly going to be useful to them. They were very happy with vocabulary in the end of the comics and its organization in the chronological order of the comics plot. They said that the plot was amusing overall and a little bit confusing in Sonya's and Venya's story. It was not easy for them to read the comics letters because students are accustomed to the printed Russian letters or Russian cursive only, so sometimes it was difficult to read the letters inside a word but they were happy with clear word boundaries in the comics. They said the pictures did not help to understand the words but were fun to explore and very well thought-through (e.g., symbols used in Sonya's story). The students have been very positive on learning Russian through comics as it adds playfulness and it is easier to remember new words along with the situations they are used in".

The positive parts of feedback prove that my aim to create an interesting and humorous, yet useful textbook in the form of comics is reached. Students were satisfied with the book structure, chosen vocabulary and dictionary, as well as with the visuals and style. They also confirmed that the visuals helped to remember the vocabulary, while texts provided a context for understanding the meaning of words.

The critique is of advisory nature, but I will also comment on it. At first, I was aware that hand-written words in Russian are harder to read for students than typed text; yet, to my mind, hand-written text can be associated with spoken language, whereas printed text is mostly associated with written word. Moreover, hand-written font possesses aesthetic value. A solution for making texts in my comic book more reader-friendly is to create a font based on my hand-writing in the future (Scout McCloud and other artists used such fonts in their books).

Secondly, I can't agree with the students' claim that visuals didn't help to interpret the text, because it contradicts their other comments: pictures "were fun to explore and very well thought-through", "visuals helped to remember the vocabulary, while texts provided a context for understanding the meaning of words". Probably, my question was poorly worded in the first place: whereas is it not possible (and unnecessary) to duplicate the meaning of

text in visuals, the pictures should still be informative and not too conceptual; they need to support the narrative, which hopefully I have achieved in my comics.

To conclude, I think the students' enthusiasm in regard to learning language with the comic book is a success.

CONCLUSION

This work analysis the development of a comic-based language textbook from the perspective of contemporary pedagogy and comics theory. Theoretical framework is applied to the creation of the unique-styled comic book "Shminder" for teaching spoken Russian. The book can be used in high schools and universities in Estonia and around the world.

Two theoretical chapters analyze the principles for creating textbooks in the form of comic book that employ spoken language and are relevant to everyday lives of students. Apart from conducting an extensive background research, this task requires finding a balance between visual, narrative, entertaining and educational aspects. The resulting project belongs to the field of *edutainment* and is aimed at teaching in non-stressful, comfortable and even unnoticeable way. The plot and the storyboard of the comic book have been created with these principles in mind.

One of the most important parts of my work is testing a part of my comic book amongst high school students (…)

I would like to say that developing a textbook requires hard work. I wouldn't have to make so deep research to create a comic book without language teaching purpose. This isn't about just pedagogical part: the plot of my story itself and even the way I drew my characters were made while keeping in mind which niche in the modern education I try to fill – the same niche that includes Youtube and Tiktok bloggers, who teach me and supposedly my audience thousands of useful skills without us even noticing anything besides entertainment. I tried to bring joy back into learning process and hope I succeeded at least a little bit.

I would like to thank my supervisors Anna Ring and Olga Gerassimenko as well as other teachers from Pallas University and my wife for editing the whole work.

SUMMARY/RESÜMEE

Käesolev töö on pühendatud ühest küljest enda koomiksi stiili läbi töötamisele ja teisest küljest vene keele õpiku loomisele/tootmisele. On teada, et paljud vene keele õpikud nii Eestis, kui ka välismaal, ei ole väga korralikult koostatud, on vananenud ja puudub kõnekeele osa. Õpikud on igavad, elukauged ja seega kaob nii koolilastel kui ka tudengitel motivatsioon õppida vene keelt, kuigi tänases Eestis on paljud veendunud, et vene keele oskus on väga oluline. Oma tööga tahan täita just seda nišši kasutades korralikku teoreetilist baasi, professionaalseid nõuandeid ja oma vene keele õpetamise kogemust, luua huvitav ja informatiivne õpik koomiksi vormis.

Käesolev töö koosneb kahest osast: praktilisest ja teoreetilisest.

Töö teoreetiline osa on pühendatud koomiksi teoreetilisele baasile, mis seisneb keele õpetamises ja ka koomiksiteooria artiklite refereerimises ja läbitöötamises. Teoreetiline baas on väga oluline praktilise töö teostamiseks.

Praktiline lõputöö osa on vene kõnekeele õpik koomiksi vormis. Koomiksi nimeks on „Šminder" ja see on pühendatud noorte keskkonnas aktuaalsele *online datingu* teemale. Leheküljed on kujundatud selliselt, et iga lehekülje alaosasse on jäetud vaba pinda, kuhu saab kirjutada uued sõnad ja nende tähenduse. Koomiksi lõpus on vene-eesti-inglise sõnastik.

Koomiks on testitud Jaan Poska Gümnaasiumi õpilaste seas. Järgmiseks sammuks on luua koomiksi põhjal koos Haridus Ekraani (haridusekraanil.ee) tiimiga multimodaalne hariduskeskond, et viia läbi vene keele tunde.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Classical McMillan English textbook cover vs. cover of a Russian language textbook published in Estonia. English one is more colorful, a photo manipulation is used, while Russian one is stricter and text-based.

Online sources of the pictures: *McMillan.com, Apollo.ee*

Appendix 2

Examples of the facial expressions and body language studies based on McCloud's work (2006).

1. Emotion of sadness reflected on a face of a character

2. Emotion of fear reflected on a face of a character

3. Emotion of shame reflected in body posture of a character

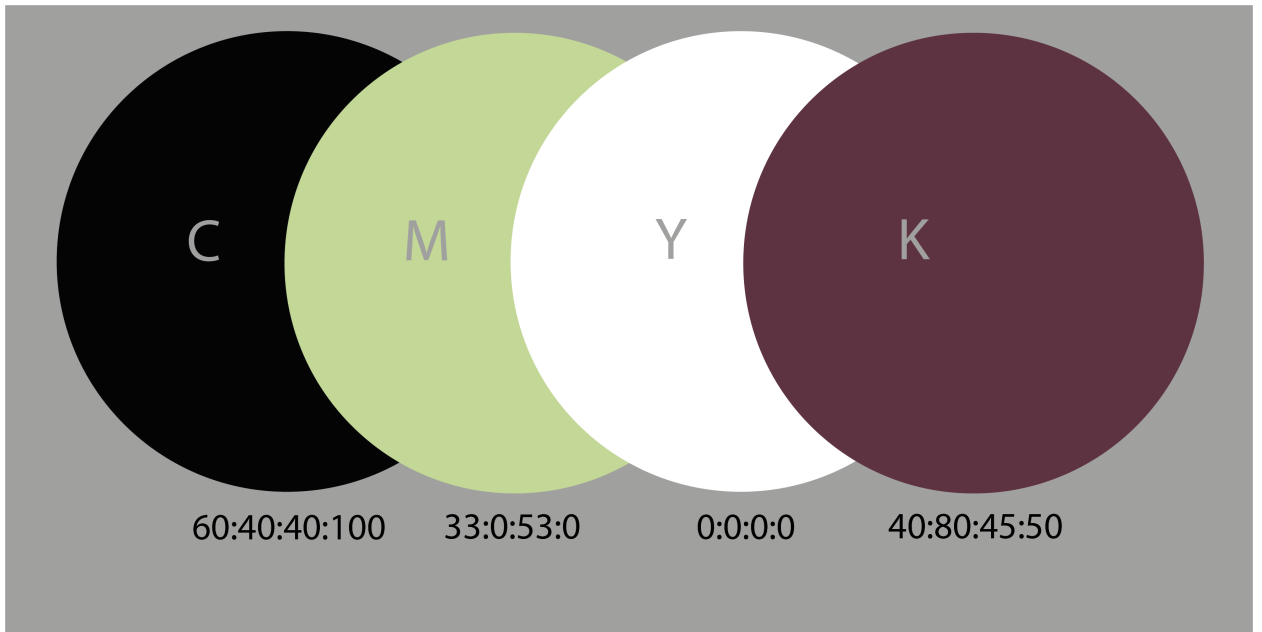4. Emotion of satisfaction reflected in body posture of a character

Appendix 3

Style examples.

More examples: Instagram

Appendix 4

Color theme.

Appendix 5

From storyboard to ready frames. Graphite pencil – ink pen – Photoshop.

Appendix 6

Character development on an example of Sonya: early phase. First I decieded, that she is going to look like hair and behave like Frankie from TV series "Grace and Frankie". In the beginning her face features were more animal like, but I chose to change them to look more human-like.
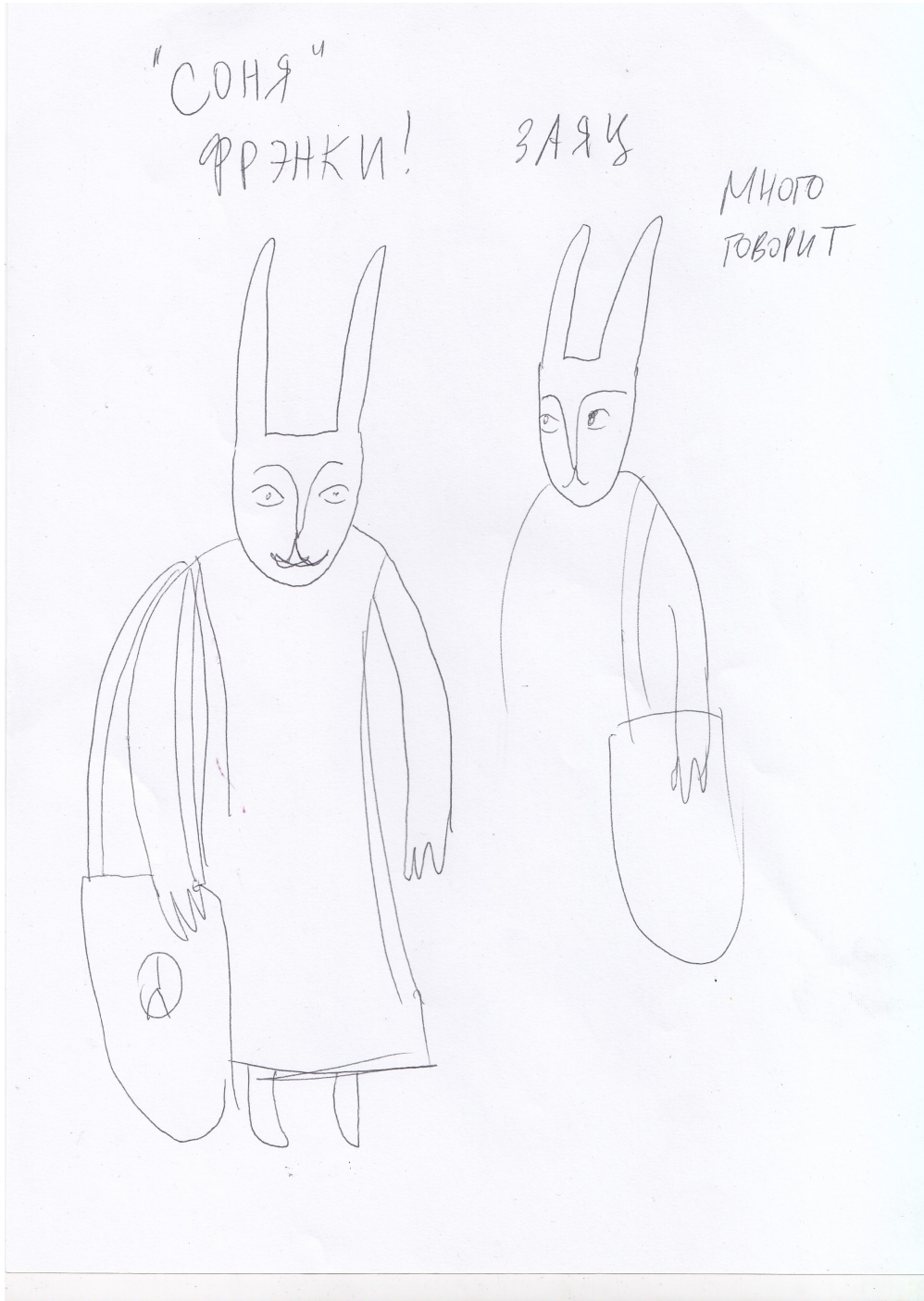
Appendix 7

Shminder logo design features my style and at the same time related to really existing dating apps.

Appendix 8

Book cover design