

***Construxercise!*: Implementation of a Construction-Based Approach to Language Pedagogy**

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1. Introduction

Language is a tool for communication. The ability to speak, to engage in a meaningful conversation, and to comprehend the speech produced by native speakers is the main purpose of second language (L2) learning, and Russian is no exception. A recent survey of the current students and alumni of the Russian program at UiT The Arctic University of Norway (UiT) administered in December 2021 revealed that our students would like more training in practical speaking and writing skills as well as more focus on conversational Russian.

This challenging demand arguably exists in many Russian programs and is faced by most instructors of L2 Russian, simply because the process of organizing speaking practice in the classroom without digressing into instruction on grammar and vocabulary is not straightforward. Existing textbooks on conversation tend to offer long texts with questions for discussion, grammar exercises, and long glossary lists for memorization and require from the instructor a great deal of effort to create an active discussion in the classroom (compare Bjerkgeng & Bräger, 2004; Bondar' & Lutin, 2006; Černyšov & Černyšova, 2018; Dengub & Nazarova, 2021). Sending students to a Russian-speaking country and hoping that they will figure out the speech patterns of Russian on their own is just as insufficient if not preceded by explicit instruction on how Russians speak.

The goal of this article is to advocate a construction-based approach to language pedagogy and argue that this approach can serve as an efficient alternative way to organize conversational practice in L2 Russian. We explore the benefits of this approach by building a new educational resource for learning and teaching Russian discourse

constructions called *Construxercise! Hands-on learning of Russian constructions*.¹ The resource was built in close collaboration with students and is inherently both student-driven and student-oriented. It offers over 150 practical exercises that strengthen spoken and written text production skills and can be used both in the classroom or for self-guided study. The exercises are grouped by lessons and by the functions they perform and target common tasks that every student is expected to solve, namely, how to clarify their point, add information, provide an example, express an opinion, and so on.

Remarkably, discourse constructions are traditionally thought of as linguistic devices that can primarily benefit L2 learners who have already reached an advanced level of language proficiency (Shekhtman et al., 2002), whereas beginners and intermediate learners are expected to focus on acquiring the “basics” of grammar and vocabulary instead. In reality, less-advanced learners (A1–B1) are no less eager to practice their conversational skills than their more advanced peers. The need to address this challenge is even more important given that beginners and intermediates (a) comprise the predominant category of learners and (b) are likely to drop the study program altogether if they don’t get a chance to practice speaking. In this article, we explore the benefits of teaching Russian discourse constructions at relatively early stages of learning L2 Russian and argue that the proposed novel educational materials make this endeavor highly promising.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the notion of a construction and the benefits of the construction-based approach to language learning. Section 3 details the methodology used in building the *Construxercise!* resource. Section 4 presents the final product, explains the structure of the interface, and discusses the target constructions. We show how constructions yield templates for text production in Section 5. Finally, we summarize our findings and insights in Section 6.

2. A construction-based approach to language pedagogy

Any language provides a potentially unlimited number of possibilities for combining words into sentences and generating new utterances. Yet,

¹ *Construxercise! Hands-on learning of Russian constructions* is available at no charge at <https://constructicon.github.io/construxercise-rus/>.

in practice, the linguistic behavior of language users is very restricted: speakers employ a limited number of specific patterns that are frequent in use and entrenched in their minds. A growing body of studies shows that over 80% of spontaneous speech production of native speakers is predominated by prefabricated units, or *chunks* (see Dağbrowska, 2004, p. 19, for literature overview), and that these “chunks” are highly beneficial for L2 learners to master (Smiskova-Gustafsson, 2013).

Constructions are conventional recurrent patterns that exist at all levels of linguistic complexity and typically comprise prominent structures of phrases and sentences that speakers operate with. Lack of knowledge of constructions creates a barrier that prevents L2 learners from achieving native-like fluency. Furthermore, Russian constructions are often nontransparent for L2 learners. Compare the typical Russian multiword constructions listed in the following examples.² Note that constructions can be more schematic (examples [1–3]) or more idiomatic (examples [4–6]):

(1)	ID 1944	NP-Асс зовут NP-Nom	<i>Мою дочку зовут Маша.</i> “My daughter’s name is Maša.”
(2)	ID 339	у NP-Gen быть NP-Nom	<i>У Паши есть кот.</i> “Paša has a cat.”
(3)	ID 484	NP-Dat Сор пора VP-Inf	<i>Мне пора идти в школу.</i> “It is time for me to go to school.”
(4)	ID 365	что касается NP-Gen, то Cl	<i>Что касается спорта, то я никогда не любил бегать.</i> “As far as sports are concerned, I never liked jogging.”

² Here and elsewhere in this article, we present Russian constructions following the convention in the *Russian Constructicon* (see Section 2), by providing the identification number (ID), the general morphosyntactic formula (boldfaced), and a representative illustration (italicized) for each construction. The idea is that the students can take advantage of both resources, and these resources complement each other. All constructions that are featured in *Construxercise!* are described and illustrated in the *Russian Constructicon*. The latter resource adopts common syntactic abbreviations widely used in other constructicon resources (e.g., NP for noun phrase) and abbreviates the names of morphological categories according to the Leipzig Glossing Rules (e.g., Gen for the genitive case). To minimize the inconvenience these abbreviations can cause for users of the *Construxercise!* resource, we provide necessary explanations under the tables and in the instructions for the tasks.

- | | | | |
|-----|--------|--------------------------------------|--|
| (5) | ID 33 | без пяти минут
NP | <i>без пяти минут врач</i>
“a doctor to be” |
| (6) | ID 460 | NP-Ном Сор что
надо | <i>Праздник что надо!</i>
“The party is super-duper!” |

Many constructions contain both fixed lexical parts and open slots that can be filled with various lexemes. For example, in the construction *что касается NP-Gen, то Cl*, the words “*что касается*” and “*то*” are fixed elements, while NP-Gen (= noun phrase in the genitive case) and Cl (= clause, sentence) are open slots that can be filled with various words. Thus, this construction provides a structure that can be used to build an entire sentence, for instance, *Что касается спорта, то я никогда не любил бегать* [As far as sports are concerned, I never liked jogging] or *Что касается музыки, то мне нравится классика* [As far as music is concerned, I prefer classical music].

The constructionist approach to language originated in the 1980s and has developed into a recognized linguistic movement shaped by the Construction Grammar theory (Croft, 2001; Fillmore et al., 1988; Goldberg, 2006), in which constructions are viewed as the central unit of language structure and language description. *Constructions* are defined as form-meaning (or form-function) pairings that are learned in the process of language use. Constructions vary in the degree of their schematicity or idiomatity and can be more or less compositional: they can represent properties of specific predicates (as in example [3]), basic grammar rules (as in example [2]), more complex discourse patterns (as in example [4]), more metaphorical phrases (as in example [5]), or structurally irregular patterns (as in example [6]). In each language, constructions comprise a structured inventory, a *construct-i-con* (a term coined by the same principle as *lex-i-con*). The same term also refers to the practical representation of such an inventory in the form of an electronic database, where the constructions of a single language are collected and thoroughly described. Today, constructicon resources exist for six languages: English, German, Swedish, Brazilian Portuguese, Japanese, and Russian (Lyngfelt 2018).

The *Russian Constructicon* was built over several years and launched in 2021. It is a free, open-access electronic resource designed

for both researchers and L2 learners of Russian.³ It offers a large searchable collection of over 2,200 Russian grammatical constructions accompanied by thorough descriptions of their meanings and corpus-based illustrative examples of their use (Endresen et al., 2020; Janda et al., 2020). The interface of the *Russian Constructicon* has various search possibilities, including the one shown in Figure 1, in which users can find relevant constructions by searching on the “Home” page for exact strings of words in the formula or the illustration. In the window on the right, users can also scroll through the entire list of constructions and quickly find a relevant item by its ID number.

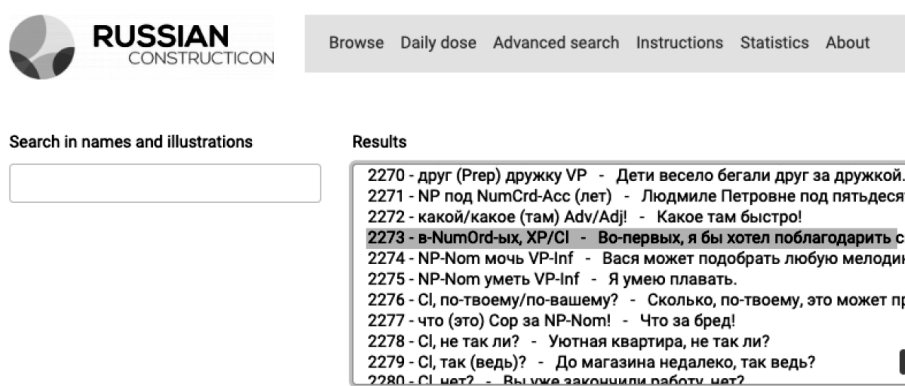


Figure 1: Interface of the *Russian Constructicon* opened on the “Home” page

We argue that the construction-based approach to language learning is highly beneficial for L2 learners because it focuses instruction on the most strategic constructions widely used by native speakers (see also Janda et al., 2020; Nessel et al., this volume). This approach is more efficient than traditional instruction because it provides learners with ready-to-use communicative patterns that can be easily employed for building sentences and texts. The construction-based approach involves both grammar and vocabulary but shifts the focus to conversation.

The focus on strategic constructions is especially relevant for L2 Russian, because it can significantly speed up the learning process. It normally takes time to learn the basics of grammar to be able to produce

³ See <https://constructicon.github.io/russian/>.

meaningful utterances in a language with highly complex morphology like Russian. Yet, the sooner students start practicing their conversational skills, the better. The construction-based approach supports active speaking and writing even at early stages of L2 learning. Shifting the focus of instruction to text production tools and communication skills can potentially change the entire experience of L2 learning by making it more efficient and rewarding.

The idea of applying the construction-based approach to language pedagogy is not new. Though the concept has been discussed in previous literature, it has never been fully implemented (Ellis, 2013). The creators of the *Swedish Constructicon* also see this approach as one of the priorities of their work (Lyngfelt et al., 2018). When it comes to L2 Russian, in some parts of grammar it is not possible to avoid constructions, and they are introduced in most textbooks (compare the use of modals like *можно* [possible], *нужно* [necessary], and *должен* [must]). If we consider specifically textbooks on conversational Russian, we observe that some of them do introduce constructions sporadically, although constructions are not the main focus of instruction. For example, we find minimizing constructions like *ни копейки* [not a kopeck], *ни слова* [not a word], and *ни шагу* [not a step] in the textbook *Поехали!-2* (Černyšov & Černyšova, 2018, p. 12), which also includes a small section on the reduplicative construction exemplified with *Идея как идея* [The idea is neither good nor bad] (Černyšov & Černyšova, 2018, p. 10). Some discourse constructions like *в конце концов* [at the end of it], *в основном* [mainly], and *как правило* [as a rule] are presented in the textbook *Этажи* (Dengub & Nazarova, 2021, p. 260), but they are presented as set expressions and are accompanied only by English glosses, without any exercises or explicit explanation of their use.

Instead of working with constructions, most textbooks on conversation provide a text for reading and a list of questions for discussion. The same pattern is often used for text production tasks: the authors of a textbook define a topic and provide some questions that the students can answer in their essay, but supporting language tools for text production are missing (cf. Bjerkeneg & Bräger, 2004; Bondar' & Lutin, 2006; Černyšov & Černyšova, 2018; Dengub & Nazarova, 2021).

In this light, *Construxercise!* fills an essential gap in existing educational resources for L2 Russian. *Construxercise!* is the first attempt

to consistently explore the potential of the construction-based approach in language pedagogy on a large scale. We shift the focus of instruction from grammar and vocabulary to constructions, introducing them through a series of exercises, and test whether consistent instruction about discourse constructions improves our teaching of conversation and text production skills.

Our focus on a specific type of constructions, namely, discourse constructions, partly overlaps with the Shekhtman Method of Communicative Teaching (Shekhtman et al., 2002; see particularly the tactics of embellishment, complication, answer expansion, and the use of “islands”). However, Shekhtman et al. have specified that their techniques are effective for teaching communication (rather than language system) and benefit “superior-level” learners by bringing them to even higher (“distinguished”) levels of language proficiency. Moreover, Shekhtman et al. (2002) stated that the implementation of this method requires individual instruction or instruction in small homogeneous groups of students.

In contrast, the novelty of our resource lies in providing for students the ability to practice conversational and communicative skills by means of learning discourse constructions at much earlier stages of L2 acquisition (A2–B1). We offer exercises that do not require sophisticated vocabulary or advanced grammar but let the learners gain self-confidence by upgrading the coherence and fluency of their speech production. Moreover, our exercises can be used in nonhomogeneous groups of students, which is a much more realistic picture of L2 classrooms. Finally, we argue that the benefits of the construction-based approach to language learning extend far beyond discourse constructions: this approach can be employed in teaching more “basic” (or “fundamental”) grammar phenomena (e.g., constructions in examples [1–3]) and can enhance development of conversational and communicative skills from the very start of learning L2 Russian.

3. This project: Methodology

Our methodology to a large extent evolved alongside the project. The project proceeded over the course of six months in 2022. In this section, we break this process down into five stages (see Figure 2) and explain our focus, priorities, and insights at each stage.

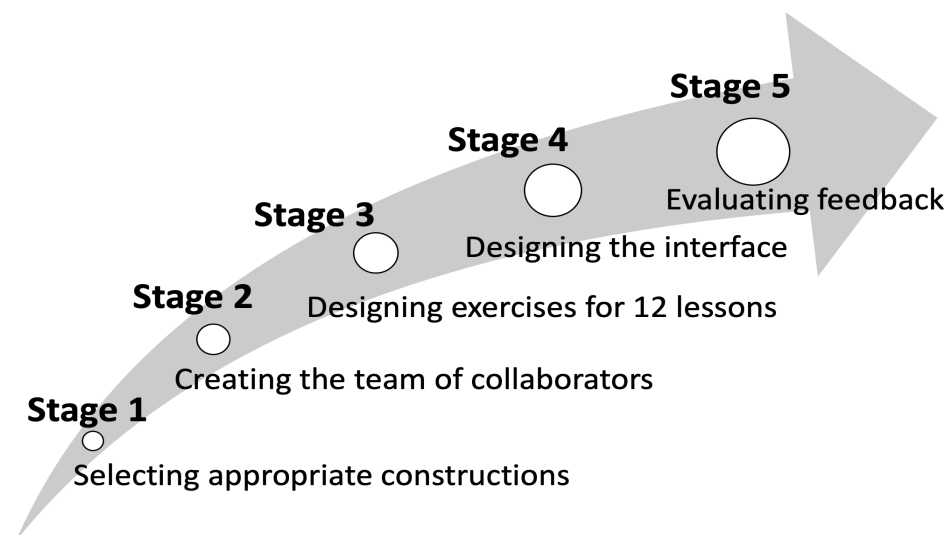


Figure 2: The five stages of the creation of the Construxercise! resource

Stage 1 was primarily devoted to preparatory work: we chose the relevant groups of constructions from the *Russian Constructicon*, developed their linguistic descriptions, and organized them in a single database. In each group of constructions, we selected the items that correspond to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) A1 to B2 levels of language proficiency. We selected representative and frequent constructions that are useful for L2 students of Russian to master.⁴ These constructions help to organize a speaker’s monologue or dialogue. Most of the selected constructions are stylistically neutral and are widely used in texts of various registers, genres, and topics.

Our objective was to create construction-focused exercises that would help improve learners’ text production skills. We focused on discourse constructions because these constructions are particularly useful for empowering learners to actively engage in conversational and written genres. We used the multilevel semantic annotation of constructions available in the *Russian Constructicon*⁵ and selected the constructions that belong to the semantic types Discourse Structure (the

⁴ For example, for the function “Provide an example,” we prioritized the constructions ID 1841 *например*, XP/CI; ID 1840 *к примеру*, XP/CI; and ID 2350 *так*, CI but not ID 2351 *для примера*, XP/CI, and ID 2352 XP/CI (*за примерами*) *далеко ходить не надо*: CI, which are less frequent and more marked.

⁵ See <https://constructicon.github.io/russian/semantic-types/>.

subtypes termed Exemplification, Clarification, Topic, Topic Change, Sequence, Discourse Additive, Summary, and Subjectification), Epistemic Modality (the subtypes High and Low degree of certainty), and Degree of Accuracy. Overall, we selected a total of 57 constructions (see Section 4 for more details).

In Stage 2 we recruited the team of collaborators. For our purposes, it was crucial to combine both native and non-native perspectives on Russian and both student and instructor perspectives on the choice and presentation of the material. Therefore, our team included 10 active collaborators with highly diverse academic backgrounds and training. The group members had partly complementary and partly overlapping expertise, and each group member had a unique role in the project.

Two developers of the *Russian Constructicon*, Valentina Zhukova (PhD student) and Anna Endresen (postdoctoral researcher), contributed the scholarly principles of the construction-based approach to language pedagogy and description of the data. Together with Elena Bjørgve, senior instructor of L2 Russian, they selected the strategic groups of constructions for each lesson. Elena Bjørgve implemented the newly created exercises in the classroom. Two MA-level exchange students specializing in Teaching Russian as a Foreign Language (Daria Demidova) and Theoretical Linguistics (Natalia Kalanova), together with Zhukova, Endresen and Bjørgve, were actively involved in creating the exercises. Zoia Butenko, an exchange BA student, and George Lonshakov, an exchange MA student, both majoring in Computational Linguistics, created the code, architecture, and functionality of the interface. Another BA student, Tatiana Perevoshchikova, was also engaged in the work on digital representation of the lessons. David Henrik Lavén, a third-year BA student in the Russian program and a Norwegian-Swedish bilingual, provided detailed learner's feedback on all instructions, the exercise content, and the interface. Bjørgve, Endresen, and Lavén controlled for possible effects of Norwegian-Russian interference, such as false friends and other items that required extra annotation. Laura A. Janda, professor of Russian, was involved in the project at all stages, especially in the overall idea, design, and the English version of the resource.

The main result of this active collaboration with the students at both BA and MA levels and both non-native (Janda and Lavén) and native speaker (the remainder of the team) perspectives on Russian was

a fully-fledged resource that is intrinsically student-driven and student-oriented. The student collaborators contributed a very fresh, up-to-date, and creative view of the data, the task content, and the life situations that the exercises refer to. The student collaborators mostly belong to the same generation and are of approximately the same age as the target users of this product (learners of L2 Russian in our Russian program at UiT) and thus were able to supply appropriate contemporary cultural references for both the content and design. Participation in this project was highly beneficial for our student collaborators: it contributed to their professional career prospects and provided them with new experience.

In terms of management of teamwork, such a diverse group of collaborators who worked on rather different tasks required holding several meetings each week, focusing either on exercises or website design or the feedback on the instructions. Yet, this was worth the effort. Coordinating joint work, distributing tasks, exchanging opinions, and holding regular discussions ensured well-verified content and a robust final product. Overall, this collaboration has been highly successful and resulted in timely completion of the project.

Stage 3 was devoted to intensive weekly teamwork on creating exercises for the chosen constructions. The work proceeded over three months and involved five members of the team (Zhukova, Demidova, Kalanova, Endresen, and Bjørgve). Each week we created a new lesson that was introduced in the classroom the following week. Each lesson took approximately 45 to 60 minutes to complete and contained 12–15 exercises on five to six constructions. Overall, we created 12 lessons that contained over 150 exercises. The lessons were incorporated into the BA-level course Practical Written and Oral Russian in the Russian program at UiT. This course was taught by Elena Bjørgve in the Spring semester of 2022. Most students of this course are native speakers of Norwegian or Swedish. Immediately implementing the educational materials in class made it possible to promptly adjust our approach according to the needs of the students, and ultimately to develop an optimal structure for each lesson with the most favorable repertory and sequence of different types of exercises (see Section 4).

The students attended weekly in-person classes devoted to constructions over the course of three months. In each class on constructions, the students worked with a paper handout covering one

lesson. They did not use the *Construxercise!* website because it was in development, but they had access to the *Russian Constructicon*.

The students had very different levels of language proficiency in L2 Russian. The group included 11 students from the second and third years of the Russian program: most students were at the A2 or B1 level, and a few students were at a more advanced level (B2 or C1).⁶ The group also included two advanced heritage speakers of Russian. Our objective was to provide exercises that would benefit students of different levels sitting together in a single classroom.

To focus on the selected discourse constructions, we tried to minimize other linguistic difficulties caused by the lexical and grammatical properties of our texts. We adjusted the main body of the exercises to the A2–B1 level with the help of the “Tekstometr” software⁷ and in close consultation with Bjørgve. In addition, we provided bonus exercises that featured more advanced vocabulary and grammar suitable for more advanced students.

Because we had to incorporate our materials into the content of the existing course, we used topics and vocabulary that were already part of the curriculum, in alignment with the chapters of the textbook *Kak sprosit’? Kak skazat’?* (Bondar’ & Lutin, 2006). We designed our lessons according to these topics, broadly employed for conversational practice in Russian elsewhere (such as “Traveling abroad,” “Holiday celebrations,” “Personal appearance,” etc.; see Table 1 in Section 4 for the full list of topics). However, the sets of constructions introduced in our exercises are not restricted to these topics. All of the constructions exhibit a wide scope of use and are frequently employed in authentic Russian texts of various genres and types.

All lessons have a similar organization (see Section 4) and end with a written homework assignment that consists of producing a short text using newly learned constructions. These texts helped us to ensure that the students successfully understood and learned the new material on constructions introduced in class.

Stage 4 focused on designing the interface and took place in parallel with Stage 3. We built the website with Github Pages software⁸

⁶ The students’ language proficiency levels were established not on the basis of where they are in the program but rather on their instructor’s (Bjørgve’s) evaluation.

⁷ See <https://textometr.ru>.

⁸ See <https://pages.github.com/>.

in compliance with open-access principles. The code can potentially be used for building similar resources for other languages. The central ideas that motivated the work on the interface were (a) user-friendly design so users can easily find what they need, (b) architecture that can accommodate various types of exercises, and (c) interactivity that makes it possible to do the exercises in real time and check whether the given responses are correct.

In Stage 5 we collected and analyzed the learner feedback and defined future steps for improving the resource. We asked the students who attended the course to complete a short questionnaire and evaluate the classes devoted to the study of constructions. The form contained eight statements accompanied by a 5-point Likert scale, with the options *Completely disagree*, *Partly disagree*, *Neither agree nor disagree*, *Partly agree*, and *Completely agree*. The ninth question was an open-ended question that invited the students to suggest specific improvements for construction-based classes and exercises or provide any other comments.

Overall, the students' feedback was highly positive. The results of the survey showed that the students found learning discourse constructions interesting (100%) and useful (100%) and would recommend our exercises on constructions to other students (100%). Most students liked to study constructions (75%) and agreed that the classes improved their communication skills, made it easier to speak Russian (87.5%), and gave them confidence to do so (87.5%). Some students specifically praised our exercises for having "more natural language" and providing clear explanations.

The students also mentioned that the classes could have been better integrated into the Russian study program. They pointed out that the course in question is considerably loaded with grammar and vocabulary information and translation assignments that make it difficult to spend enough time on discourse constructions. They suggested that it would be preferable to (a) have a course built entirely on constructions and (b) include constructions in several parallel courses and thus set aside more time and attention in the program to work on them.

Björgve provided us with positive feedback on behalf of the instructor. She confirmed that the exercises indeed succeeded in engaging her students in lively conversations and supporting the primary focus of the classes on speaking Russian.

Taking into consideration the feedback from the evaluation questionnaire survey, we plan to improve the resource by adding a few more features, for example, a video instruction manual as well as short videos about relevant constructions for each lesson. We also concluded that the abbreviations used in the morphosyntactic formulae of the constructions should be explained each time in the task instructions.

The experience we gained creating the *Construxercise!* resource shows that teaching discourse constructions is a promising approach in language pedagogy and should be explored further. Constructions work well for promoting conversational practice and text production. Discourse constructions can also be included in listening comprehension and reading exercises. The explanation of vocabulary and grammar rules could be reorganized to involve the constructions they are frequently embedded in. We can expand the *Construxercise!* resource to other semantic types of constructions that convey relevant cognitive concepts often included in conversational topics: many assessment constructions evaluate or describe personality, professional skills, or importance (Endresen & Janda 2020), while other constructions specify means of transportation, temporal relations, price, and so forth.

Another important insight we gained from this project is that the construction-based approach is flexible enough to accommodate learners of different language proficiency levels in a single class. The *Russian Constructicon* contains constructions that correspond to all levels of language proficiency (from A1 to C2), so there is always something to learn, even for advanced students. And, even when working on the same set of constructions, it is possible to regulate the appropriate level of training exercises in terms of vocabulary and grammar and thus make the materials appropriate for different levels and needs.

4. The product: *Construxercise!*

In this section we discuss the major characteristics of the *Construxercise!* resource and explain how it is organized. We especially focus on the key properties of the interface: its multifunctionality, interactivity, and clear, concise language of instruction.

Construxercise! is designed to be a useful practical tool for both learners and language instructors of L2 Russian. The proposed exercises are multifunctional and can be used both in the classroom

and for self-guided study. The interface contains four pages: “Home,” “Lessons,” “Functions,” and “About.” The “Home” page (Figure 3) briefly summarizes the major purpose of the resource, whereas the “About” page provides more detailed information about target users, the notion of construction, and the architecture of the website.



Figure 3: User-friendly interface of the *Construxercise!* resource opened on the “Home” page

Construxercise! is a free, open-access website containing over 150 exercises on Russian discourse constructions that organize the flow of speech and help learners to achieve native-like fluency in speaking and writing. The website has an interactive interface that allows users to complete the exercises online or download a printable version of each lesson or function. Users can type in their responses on the website, check if the responses are correct, and view the correct responses and an explanation. All information is provided in English, Norwegian, and Russian. All constructions introduced in *Construxercise!* are thoroughly described and illustrated in the *Russian Constructicon* (see Section 2).

The exercises are grouped by lessons and by functions. On the “Lessons” page, the user can find 12 lessons for the topics listed in Table 1. Each lesson introduces a group of five to six constructions using vocabulary and grammar connected to a given topic.

Table 1: Overview of 12 Lessons Available in the Construxercise! Resource

Lesson number	Topic of the lesson
1.	Знакомство. Introducing oneself.
2.	Поездка за границу. Traveling abroad.
3.	Устройство на работу. Getting a job.
4.	Поход к врачу. Going to the doctor.
5.	Закрепление уроков 1–4. Review lessons 1–4.
6.	Транспорт. Getting around.
7.	Праздники. Holiday celebrations.
8.	Еда. Cooking and eating.
9.	Внешность. Personal appearance.
10.	Характер. Describing personality.
11.	Одежда. Getting dressed.
12.	Закрепление уроков 6–11. Review lessons 6–11.

Each lesson opens with an overview table of constructions followed by two microtexts, in which nearly every sentence contains a new construction, as illustrated in example (7) from Lesson 1.⁹

(7) Познакомьтесь! Матвей Белов – студент медицинского факультета. **Кроме того**, Матвей занимается каратэ и хорошо плавает. Матвей **не только** учится, **но и** работает санитаром в больнице. Это полезный опыт, **к тому же** неплохая зарплата. **Кстати говоря**, в этой больнице лежала моя тётя. Она говорит, что Матвей – замечательный санитар и, **плюс ко всему**, у него очень хорошее чувство юмора.

“Let me introduce Matvej Belov to you! He is a student at the Department of Medicine. **In addition**, Matvej does karate and swims well. He is **not only** studying **but also** working as a hospital

⁹ We are aware that having a construction in each sentence might make our microtexts linguistically dense. Moreover, we chose simple vocabulary and word order. We prioritized short texts to reduce the time spent reading. The “naturalness” of texts was verified against a panel of native speakers.

attendant. This gives him useful experience, and the salary is not bad **either**. **By the way**, my aunt was a patient in that hospital. She says that Matvej is a wonderful hospital attendant, and **on top of that**, he has a very good sense of humor.”

In example (7), all five constructions introduce additional information and thus perform the same function, and the lesson is devoted to the subtle differences in their use. Usually, a lesson contains constructions from several functions. After reading the microtexts, users master the new constructions through a series of exercises that fall into three main categories: (a) “guided-practice” exercises that focus on linguistic properties of constructions and require filling in the blanks, choosing the appropriate continuation of a sentence, reformulating a sentence using a certain construction, and so on; (b) “partly guided practice” exercises that ask the learner to choose an appropriate construction from a list of options or to complete a sentence; and (c) “self-guided practice” exercises that imitate communication and contain problem-solving tasks inspired by real-life situations (participating in a job interview, ordering in a restaurant, explaining a health problem to a doctor, applying for a tourist visa, etc.). All exercises proceed from easy to more complex and from usage-oriented¹⁰ to communication-oriented. Each lesson culminates with exercises that engage students in producing a dialogue or monologue using newly learned constructions and key words. Most exercises and texts are short. The exercises are ordered in such a way that the students get a variety of types of activities to avoid getting bored.

Users can also access the exercises on the “Functions” page, where the constructions are grouped according to their purpose in the discourse: to express one’s opinion, to add information, to clarify one’s point, and so on. We list a few constructions for each function in Table 2. The full lists of constructions for each function are available on the website, yielding 57 constructions in total.

¹⁰ Usage-oriented exercises focus primarily on the linguistic properties of the constructions.

Table 2: The Nine Functions of Discourse Constructions in the Construxercise! Resource

ID	Construction	Illustration
FUNCTION 1: Пояснить. Clarify your point.		
1087	иными/другими словами, XP/CI	<i>Наш корреспондент выехал в аэропорт, чтобы взять интервью. Другими словами, задать несколько вопросов.</i> “Our correspondent drove to the airport in order to conduct an interview. In other words , in order to ask some questions.”
1833	XP, а именно XP	<i>Он мне подарил книгу, а именно энциклопедию о динозаврах.</i> “He gave me a book, namely , an encyclopedia of dinosaurs.”
FUNCTION 2: Привести пример. Give an example.		
1840	к примеру, CI/XP	<i>Вот, к примеру, мне нравится Мерилин Монро.</i> “ For instance , I like Marilyn Monroe.”
2350	так, CI	<i>Кошки намного хуже нас видят цвета. Так, красный цвет им недоступен.</i> “Cats are much worse at seeing colors than we are. For example , they can’t see the color red.”
FUNCTION 3: Добавить информацию. Add information.		
1872	(и) кстати (говоря), CI	<i>И кстати, он пришёл без подарка.</i> “ And by the way , he came without a present.”
1874	(Так) мало того – CI	<i>Мало того, Маша привела с собой друзей.</i> “ And to top it off , Masha brought some friends with her.”

FUNCTION 4: Ввести тему. Introduce a topic.		
6	(а/так) что насчёт XP?	<i>Что насчёт пятницы? Какие у тебя планы?</i> ¹¹ “How about Friday? Do you have any plans?”
365	что касается NP-Gen, то CI	<i>Что касается спорта, то я никогда не любил бегать.</i> “As far as sports are concerned, I never liked jogging.”
FUNCTION 5: Упорядочить аргументы. Structure your argument.		
2273	в-NumOrd-ых, XP/CI	<i>Во-первых, я бы хотел поблагодарить своего тренера.</i> “First of all, I would like to thank my coach.”
2353	С одной стороны, XP/CI. С другой (стороны), XP/CI	<i>С одной стороны, мои знания были глубокими, с другой стороны, односторонними.</i> “On the one hand, my knowledge was deep, but on the other hand, it was one-sided.”
FUNCTION 6: Подвести итог. Draw a conclusion.		
1839	таким образом, CI	<i>Таким образом, наша команда за год добилась важных результатов.</i> “Thus, our team achieved important results in the course of one year.”
836	в целом CI	<i>В целом кино достойно просмотра.</i> “On the whole, this movie is worth watching.”
FUNCTION 7: Выразить своё мнение. Express your opinion.		
11	(как) по мне, (так) CI	<i>Как по мне, это ещё не беда.</i> “In my opinion, it is not such a big problem.”
2222	честно говоря, CI	<i>Честно говоря, я с вами не согласен.</i> “To tell the truth, I don’t agree with you.”

¹¹ We represent this open slot as XP, because apart from NP-Gen illustrated in the table, it can be filled with an infinitive (*Что насчёт пойти в бассейн?* [How about going to the swimming pool?]) or an adverb (*Что насчёт завтра?* [How about tomorrow?]).

FUNCTION 8: Узнать мнение собеседника. Ask someone for their opinion.		
2281	СІ, не правда ли?	<i>Интересный художник, не правда ли?</i> "He is an interesting artist, don't you think? "
693	а NP-Ном не думать-Prs, что СІ?	<i>А ты не думаешь, что это слишком дорого?</i> " Don't you think it is too expensive?"
FUNCTION 9: Смягчить категоричность высказывания. Hedge.		
1133	мягко говоря, СІ	<i>Он, мягко говоря, не подарок.</i> " To put it mildly , he is no joy to be with."
934	грубо говоря, СІ	<i>Разница совсем небольшая. Все видят, грубо говоря, одно и то же.</i> " The difference isn't so big. Roughly speaking , everyone sees the same thing."

These discourse constructions are simple to use because most of them are **clause + modifier constructions**, meaning that the fixed lexical element of the construction is an adverbial that modifies an entire clause. The fixed lexical elements in these constructions are mostly parenthetical (the Russian term *вводные слова*) and do not disturb the overall syntactic structure of the sentence they are inserted in. This makes these constructions relatively easy to learn even at early stages of L2 acquisition. At the same time, these constructions are widely used and can express a variety of pragmatic and semantic nuances. Moreover, the constructions can function to scaffold text, by providing milestones or control points in text production.

5. Strategic sets of constructions as text templates

Constructions serve as building blocks and help speakers generate a monologue or dialogue on the fly. Combining constructions in strings yields strategic templates of text organization at the microlevel. Such templates can be employed for producing texts of potentially any topic and genre.

One way to practice this in class is with the *Снежный ком* [snowball] exercise, in which a text is generated jointly by a group of students. Each student repeats what has already been said by their

peers and adds a new sentence at the end. The entire sequence of relevant sentences is repeated several times and helps the students to learn the template. We provide an illustrative example for a template from Lesson 5: after having introduced a topic, the speaker lists several arguments, adds some information, expresses their opinion, and draws a conclusion (Figure 4).

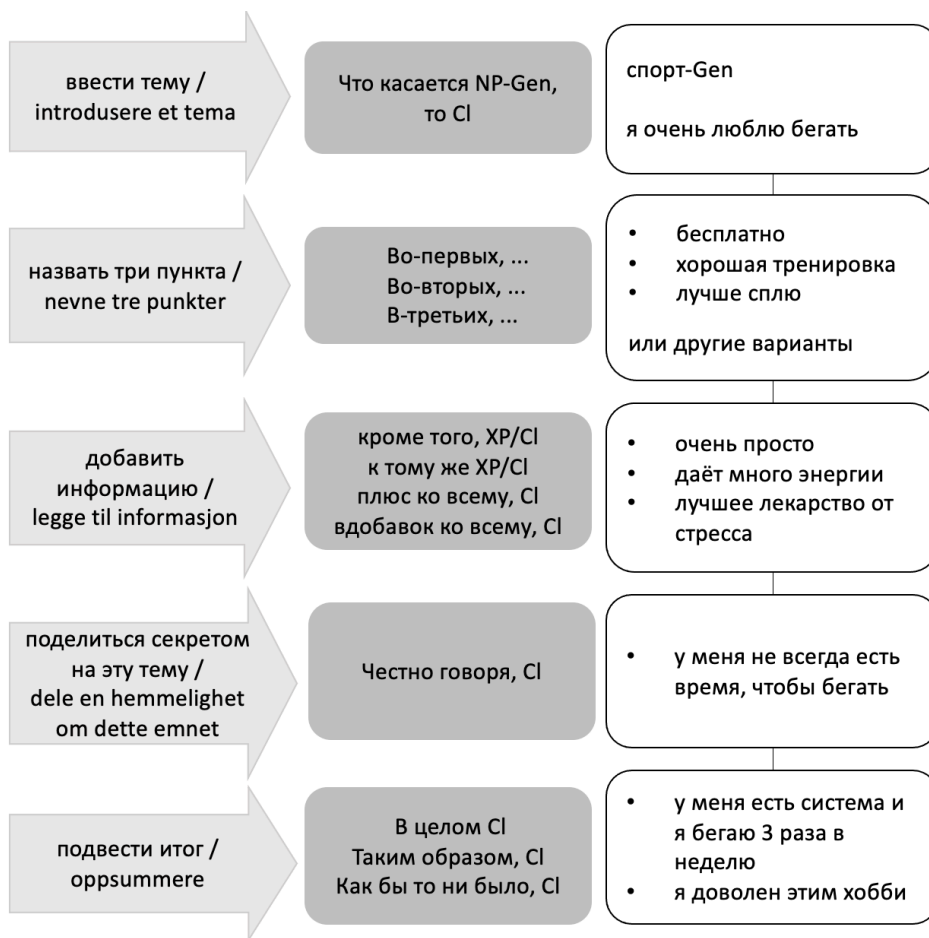


Figure 4: A template for text production task from Lesson 5 for Norwegian students

Using the structural template in Figure 4, students can generate texts on different topics, like sports (example [8]) or music (example [9]):

- (8) **Что** касается спорта, **то** я очень люблю бегать. Почему? **Во-первых**, это бесплатно. **Во-вторых**, это хорошая

кардиотренировка. **В-третьих**, бег улучшает настроение. **Плюс ко всему**, это лучшее лекарство от стресса. **Честно говоря**, у меня не всегда есть время, чтобы бегать. **В целом**, у меня есть система и я бегаю три раза в неделю.

*“As far as sports are concerned, I like to run. You ask why? **First**, it’s free. **Second**, it’s a good cardio workout. **Third**, running improves one’s mood. **Plus**, it’s the best stress reliever. **To be honest**, I don’t always have time to run. **In general**, I have a system and run three times a week.”*

- (9) **Что касается** музыки, **то** мне нравится рок. **Во-первых**, в рок-песнях интересные философские тексты. **Во-вторых**, это лучшее лекарство от стресса. **В-третьих**, рок всегда современный. **Кроме того**, я слушаю русский рок и учу новые русские слова. **Честно говоря**, не все рок-песни красивые. **В целом**, каждая рок-группа уникальна.

*“As far as music is concerned, I like rock. **First**, rock songs have interesting philosophical texts. **Second**, it is the best cure for stress. **Third**, rock music is always modern. **Besides**, I listen to Russian rock and learn new Russian words. **To be honest**, not all rock songs are beautiful. **In general**, every rock band is unique.”*

A simple template can contain one construction per function. The next step is to show the students that there is a range of possibilities for each function, and the speaker can choose from a list of competing constructions. Templates of constructions are the focus of our review lessons 5 and 12. The same principle to some extent is employed in each lesson, in which we provide microtexts featuring the five to six constructions to learn. We find that templates—useful strings of strategic constructions—are a promising aspect of the construction-based approach because they offer ready-to-use text structures that benefit learners at all levels.

6. Conclusions

The contribution of this article is threefold. First, we propose a new educational research-based resource for learners and teachers of L2 Russian, thus filling a critical gap in existing pedagogical resources.

Second, we explicate the methodology of creating this resource and show the benefits of collaboration between undergraduate and graduate students on the one hand and language instructors and researchers on the other hand. Third, we elaborate on the innovative construction-based approach to language pedagogy that makes second language learning more strategic, efficient, and student-oriented.

Our major objective was building a practical and useful tool for both learners and instructors of L2 Russian. This objective inspired and motivated the key properties of the new resource: multifunctionality, interactivity, and clear, concise instruction language. The resulting product is multifunctional because it serves the needs of different types of users and offers educational materials that can be used as either a central or complementary teaching resource and either in class or for self-guided study. *Construxercise!* is a free and open-access website that hosts over 150 exercises designed to improve the learner's text production skills both in speaking and writing by mastering 57 discourse constructions. The exercises challenge the learners with real-life problem-solving tasks that engage them in conversation. By means of *Construxercise!*, we show that it is possible and highly impactful for learners to train in speaking and writing even at early stages of learning Russian (A2–B1 levels) instead of postponing extensive conversational practice to later stages characterized by more sophisticated vocabulary and grammar.

The methodology we adopted in this project yielded a nontrivial outcome. The team possessed multifaceted expertise that shaped the resulting product in the best possible way. Joint efforts, distribution of tasks, and regular weekly meetings ensured verification of both task design and content. Having both native and non-native perspectives on Russian, as well as both instructor and student perspectives, was especially important to the success of the project and made the resource both student-driven and student-oriented.

The resource's focus on highly frequent and widely encountered constructions equips students with ready-to-use communicative units presented as clear sentence structures and phrase patterns. Moreover, constructions can be easily combined into strategic sets, or templates, that make the task of generating any text, oral or written, much easier. In addition to providing the crucial linguistic skills that make the speech of non-native

learners more fluent, coherent, and native-like, mastering constructions gives the learners an additional bonus, namely, the confidence to engage in conversation, a feeling of personal progress and enthusiasm to further practice speaking and writing in Russian, as demonstrated by our course evaluation survey. These practical implications produced by our project and the principles of learning a second language by its constructions can be further explored and promoted for the benefit of both learners and language instructors. These principles go far beyond learning Russian and can enrich and modernize instruction of any foreign language.

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