

## **Business Language in Focus**

### ***From Doubter to Believer in Business Language Teaching***

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"It simply can't be done." When I first approached language teachers at my university about the idea of developing a business language course for their program, this was the common—and rather definitive-sounding—refrain. Thus, I was not surprised to hear this same response from Richard Robin, my colleague heading up the Russian language program. Now, just a few years later, with not one but *two* business Russian courses in his curriculum and a Business Russian textbook about to be launched, Prof. Robin speaks with reverence of his "conversion experience," the focus of this month's *Business Language in Focus* column.

What makes someone a believer in business language teaching and learning? What moves them from doubt or disbelief to a firm conviction that business content and language learning can be combined? Every language teacher's situation and story is different, and it is worth examining what the factors were in each.

In the case of Prof. Robin, the skepticism about Business Russian was strong and vocal. "Give me a break," he said bluntly. "How can students talk about business if they can't even use the Russian word *to put* correctly?"

A tenured full Professor of Russian and International Affairs at the George Washington University, Robin has decades of teaching experience under his belt, and his leadership in the field of Foreign Language Pedagogy is indisputable. His achievements and accolades include certification as an ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interviewer and selection as College Teacher of the Year (2006) by American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages. He has won technology awards (MERLOT Best Language Website, 2010) and is regularly invited to lead workshops here and in Russia. In short, Robin is well known and highly respected in the U.S. and abroad for his depth and breadth of expertise in these areas. I would argue, however, that an equally important factor in his "conversion" to becoming a "Business Language Believer," was his *willingness to learn*.

Putting aside his skepticism, he agreed to attend a weekend-long seminar on international business and business language teaching at Ohio State University in 2006. According to Robin, that experience fostered two realizations that sparked both his interest and inspiration to explore business language teaching further.

Robin notes that first and foremost his own preconceptions about business languages were misplaced. "Teaching business doesn't necessarily have to mean teaching about the stock market," he said. "It can be about other kinds of transactions, even as simple and straightforward as buying apples on the street. Such transactional situations are something we language instructors do on a daily basis, as early as first year."

Second, he quickly saw that the kind of content he could choose to focus on in a business Russian course would allow him to access and focus on certain grammatical structures. While he

initially assumed that learners would have to "have the grammar down" before plunging into business content, he was now realizing that it could be introduced at a lower level. "I felt it would be best to think in terms of a third-year course, where students have mastered about 50% of the grammar." By that point, "students are mostly missing verbs and the complex notions such as aspect," Robin believes.

Armed with this new Weltanschauung, Robin saw it as possible to take traditional topics such as daily routine, hobbies (likes/dislikes), etc., and place them into the context of business, giving them what he calls the business "vener." For example, the typical language class question "What types of movies do you like to watch?" becomes in the business language context "Which U.S. movies do you think are likely to be most commercially successful in Russia and why?"


Robin has also found success using teaching methods commonly used in business schools. He was first introduced to business case pedagogy through several GW-CIBER business case workshops and online teacher education materials, such as the [e-Handbook on Teaching with Business Cases](#) (Gonglewski & Helm, 2011). Steeped in that experience, Prof. Robin then went on to develop, with funding provided by the GW-CIBER, several business Russian cases, including one focused on an annual Russian Rock festival.

**КЕЙС: НАШЕСТВИЕ**

**Содержание**

- Введение**
- Предыстория
- Начало Нашествий
- Инфраструктура
- Порядок и власть
- Эммаус
- Погода
- Нашествие как промо
- А дальше?
- Подводим итоги
- Наше радио и
- Нашествие в цифрах
- СЛОВАРЬ
- Sitemap

**Введение**



**Уходило лето 2007 года** — первое лето за семь лет, когда Наше радио не проводило рок-фестиваль Нашествие. «Главное приключение лета» — так именовался фестиваль под открытым небом, детище основателя Нашего радио Михаила Козырева. было отменено. согласно информации

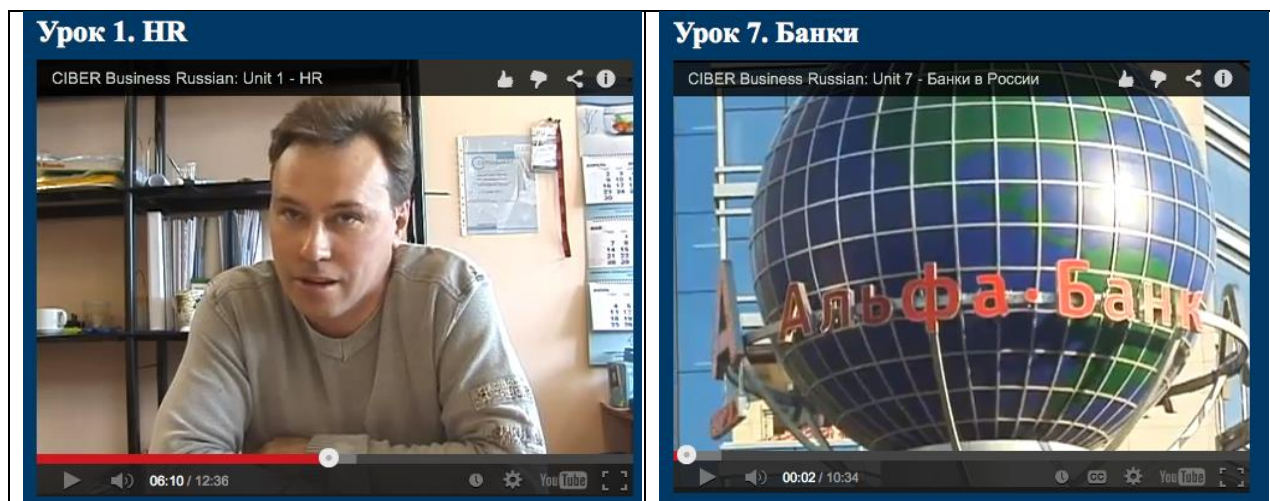
Robin's Business Russian case is available [online](#) and includes abundant video material

Cases provide a rich context for role plays, what business pedagogues more commonly refer to as *simulations*. Using simulations appealed to Robin because "in simulations, students have to prepare themselves for what they will need to say. This helps them build a repertoire, and this is one of our goals at the third-year level, to help them get to the ACTFL Advanced Low level."

Another factor in the conversion is the natural fit between International Business and the topic of cultural differences. "Even though many of our students have been abroad, they aren't always aware of how cultural differences actually affect life in the workplace," Robin stresses. "Aspects such as having personal (sometimes even familial) contacts, and networking are more important in Russian than in the U.S."

Once his conversion had begun, there was no holding Robin back. Since no materials for Business Russian existed, he knew he would have to develop them on his own. For the author of several Russian language textbooks (including the best selling *Golosa*, published with Pearson), Robin had no qualms about taking on the challenge.

Again using GW-CIBER funds, he and colleague Galina Shatalina wrote a Business Russian textbook focused on four chapters, which he later expanded to seven. An overview of the content can be seen on the website he developed which currently hosts the accompanying video materials to accompany each chapter. Robin and Shatalina are now finishing up the last chapter of the work, which they plan to publish as a Kindle book.



*Video chapters support the content, specific lexical items, and grammatical tools in every chapter of Robin and Shatalina's forthcoming Business Russian textbook*

Now a staunch believer in the power and prospects of business language teaching, Prof. Robin even dabbles in evangelism: "I want to get the word out that it's doable and even fun to teach business language."