

## **Business Language in Focus**

*Teaching Business Language with Business Cases — A Path to Paragraphing*

*Column Editor: Margaret Gonglewski, The George Washington University*

*Guest Author: Richard Robin, The George Washington University*

One year ago, the *Business Language in Focus* column of [January/February 2014](#) featured a recent “convert” to business language teaching, Richard Robin, Professor of Russian at the George Washington University. Now, with an additional year of experience under his belt in both teaching Business Russian and co-authoring a Business Russian textbook, Robin is even more convinced of the value of using business language content and teaching approaches. In this article, Robin notes a particular benefit of teaching with business cases, namely improved “paragraphing,” or: the development of the advanced language skill of producing longer, cohesive strings of speech.

### **“Paragraphing”: Moving beyond Sentence-level Speech**

One of the most challenging stages of the classroom language learning environment is the push towards paragraphing. In languages that the U.S. State Department classifies as “hard” or “very hard,” the initial attempts at producing consistent utterances longer than a short sentence usually begin in the third year of study. But here at GW, a sampling of proficiency interviews across a number of languages shows that progress toward connected speech is often slow and haphazard. However, in the Russian language program, the last seven years have shown us that a business-oriented third-year (intermediate) course whose main conversational vehicle is based on short business cases can jump-start paragraphing, as measured by oral proficiency assessments at the end of each semester.

### **Business Russian Course Content and Tasks: A Focus on Business Cases**

The GW Russian program sets aside the second semester of the third-year course — about 75 classroom contact hours — for “business-oriented language.” The “orientation” comes from materials developed through a grant from the Center for International Business Education and Research at GW ([GW-CIBER](#)) that produced *CIBER Business Russian* (Robin and Shatalina), available through Amazon Kindle. The CBR package concentrates on consumer-level business: jobs, travel, insurance, media, retail banking, and international trade. The sixth semester of Russian covers about half these topics; the remainder is covered in fourth-year Russian. Much of the materials focuses on what used to be daily topics talked about in discrete sentences, such as “My day at work” to “Jobs and careers; employment.” Similarly, what used to be a topic of one’s favorite film is turned into the more sophisticated discussion of which film might be successful in a Russian-speaking market. The insurance discussion involves daily topics such as driving and health.

The principal vehicle in each business unit is the business case. At the end of each unit, students see a short case based on realistic conditions. They are asked to consider the circumstances and to make a recommendation as to what should happen under those circumstances. To accomplish this, they must produce a few cogent paragraphs on the topic at hand. For example, in one business case, students are asked to advise a Russian division head what to do about an

American intern (someone like themselves) who cannot make the appropriate cultural adaptations to the workplace.

The concentration on cases works, at least as measured by independent proficiency testing. Consider the table below, which shows what percentage of the class reaches what level. The ratings in blue mark the period in which business cases became the backbone of the course.

**PARAGRAPHERS**

RATING	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
AM	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	4%	0%	0%	6%
AL	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	7%	10%	13%	13%	18%	0%	6%	6%
IH	25%	17%	20%	30%	30%	12%	29%	50%	37%	19%	35%	19%	44%	0%

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**NON-PARAGRAPHERS**

IM	58%	58%	60%	17%	17%	59%	50%	40%	49%	56%	35%	63%	50%	24%
IL	9%	25%	20%	0%	0%	0%	7%	0%	0%	0%	6%	19%	0%	18%
NH	8%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	7%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

“Paragraphers” are those above the red horizontal line who have reached Intermediate High or higher (Advanced Low or Mid), the point at which paragraphed speech predominates when paragraphs are called for:

PARA-GRAPHERS	25%	17%	20%	30%	30%	12%	36%	60%	50%	32%	57%	19%	50%	53%
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A summary of the total percentages of paragraphers for each year is shown in the above table. Before the introduction of cases, the majority of students in most classes never reached consistent paragraphing, whereas after business cases were introduced, paragraphing predominates in five of seven class years.

**How Using Business Cases Increases Paragraphing**

So why does a business-oriented course appear to produce greater amounts of paragraphing? It would be hard to argue that students come into the course burning to discuss business cases. Most of the students in the course are humanities majors, or in the social sciences and international affairs. Interestingly, despite the business-orientation, the course has drawn only a handful of students from the business school, one of whom has ever been included in the 50%-plus population of paragraphers. A possible answer is premised on a three things:

- Business cases provide more structure than freer-ranging discussions on politics and social questions. Each case has a beginning, middle, and end, and a limited number of options: should the CEO fire the intern, promote her, or do nothing? The semi-scripted nature of these situations is such that students are lulled into saying what they can, not what they can't.

- Cases have a definitive resolution. The class is divided into three parts: those for Solution 1, those for Solution 2, and the students acting as the deciders (the CEO's, i.e. the instructor's assistants). At the end of the case role-play, a decision must be reached.
- Students defend positions but not face. Roles in cases are assigned, usually arbitrarily ("The right side of the classroom defends outsourcing everything."). The issues discussed do not involve high levels of emotion. That means that learners don't spend a great deal of emotional energy on emotionally high stakes arguments or saving face.

True, a business-oriented language course in a general education language classroom will not produce a cadre of people ready to intern at a foreign office of Merrill Lynch. But in an upper division course in a hard language, students latch onto the skills involved in producing connected speech on topics other than themselves — something that all classrooms at that level should strive for.