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## WHAT A MODERN INTERCULTURAL-BASED RFL TEXTBOOK SHOULD LOOK LIKE<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

The outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war and the cancel culture that consequently affected Russian culture confront us with the need to question how Russian culture should henceforth be presented, starting with the very textbooks of Russian as a foreign language (RFL), which have always performed the task of conveying to learners a certain image of Russia.

This article is devoted to the topic of the modern intercultural RFL textbook. The research question is: what should RFL textbooks look like henceforth? Additionally, what principles should they be based on and what content should they present to enhance a non-stereotypical idea of the Russian world?

This article is divided into four parts. Part 1 introduces the topic, the research question, and the work structure. Part 2 offers the theoretical framework, within which a new idea of the intercultural dimension is outlined, which is complex, historicized, flexible, and transnational, and where the multiple identities of individuals play an important role. In Part 3, the principles on which this new RFL textbook is based are identified. General principles of a formal-compositional nature, based on theories, methodologies, and practices of foreign language studies and RFL, are distinguished, as well as intercultural-specific principles of a content-based nature, built on the new conception of the intercultural dimension previously illustrated. Finally, in Part 4, conclusions are drawn. The author also expresses her hope that this article will pave the way for new avenues of investigation related to RFL textbook theory.

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KEYWORDS: textbook for teaching Russian as a foreign language, intercultural textbook, interculturalism.

## 1. Introduction

The outbreak of war in Ukraine last February has unleashed, in some European countries which are supporting the Ukrainian government, an unprecedented “cancel culture” against Russian language and culture, namely a modern form of ostracism which can be described as “attempts to ostracize someone for violating social norms” (Norris 2020: 2). Sadly emblematic is the Italian case, in which Russian cultural world has been seriously ‘canceled’, i.e. condemned for being identified with Putin’s politics (Торресин 2023а).

Given this situation, it is legitimate to ask whether and how the teaching of Russian as a foreign language (RFL) should change and how it should be conceived. Specifically, the question is: what should RFL textbooks look like henceforth? That is, on what principles should they be based and what content should they present to enhance a ‘real’ image of the Russian world, beyond positive (e.g. *russkaya dusha*) and negative stereotypes (e.g. popular culture clichés about Russians and Russia)?

The fact that textbooks are still the fundamental means of conveying a certain idea of Russia (Мирославская 2008) should not surprise us. The RFL textbook, similar to other foreign language textbooks, has always acted as a “test-bed” (Арутюнов 1990: 16) not only for language practice but also for the target culture.

In our difficult times, the role of the RFL textbook acquires even more importance, because it is entrusted with becoming the conduit between learners and a criticized, even banned Russian culture, which yet *can* and *must* continue to be learned.

If past textbooks were built on a simplistic and essentialist view of culture (Торресин 2022), the modern RFL textbook should be conceived on a different intercultural basis, to portray a historicized and contextualized image of Russian culture.

This article aims to trace the main characteristics of such an intercultural-based RFL textbook. After outlining the theoretical framework (§2), the basic principles for a modern RFL intercultural-based textbook are stated (§3) and finally, conclusions are drawn (§4).

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. RFL textbook

The RFL textbook—like other foreign language textbooks—is a basic “teaching tool” (*sredstvo obucheniya*), which contains samples of spoken and written language, linguistic and country-specific material, and performs the function of guiding learners’ work through a specific “learning method” (*metod obucheniya*) (Азимов – Щукин 2009: 332).

Since the 1970s, when the textbook theory began to be consolidated in the USSR, the RFL textbook has been examined from different perspectives ranging from linguo-country (Верещагин – Костомаров 1973) to imagology (Милославская 2008) and intercultural studies (Бердичевский – Голубева 2015).

Beyond the specific approaches used in the textbook theory, for obvious reasons of the importance of the textbook in concrete teaching practice, from the very beginning of the textbook theory (Трушина и др. 1977) to the present day (Коздра 2019), special attention has been paid to the structure and content-formal features of the RFL textbook.

Among the functions performed by an RFL textbook, which also affect its properties, the “informative” one (Азимов – Щукин 2009: 332–333) is crucial. According to this function, a textbook should give learners an idea of the target language and culture (Пашковская 2019: 14); that is, it should have an intercultural dimension.

We will revert in the next sections to the issue of interculturalism and the RFL textbook’s connection with it, relating to its structure and characteristics.

### 2.2. Intercultural dimension in RFL

In RFL, intercultural dimension is generally associated with ‘intercultural communication’ (*mezhekulturnaya kommunikaciya*) and ‘intercultural communicative competence’ (*mezhekulturnaya kommunikativnaya kompetenciya*), as well.

Intercultural communication is commonly understood as “an adequate mutual understanding of two participants of a communicative act who belong to different national cultures” (Верещагин – Костомаров 1973: 43; hereafter, the

translations are mine). The condition and goal of intercultural communication is intercultural communicative competence, interpreted by RFL scholars as “the individual’s ability to exist in a multicultural society, to be successfully understood by representatives of other cultures and by representatives of one’s own culture” (Азимов – Щукин 2009: 134).

Although in a previous work of mine (Torresin 2022a) I have shown how the intercultural dimension in RFL is embedded in nationalist and essentialist discourses, as well as in a simplistic and unproblematized idea of culture, despite shareable criticism of the concept of interculturalism, seen in general as a form of colonialism (Aman 2013), I believe that it is possible to continue to speak of interculturalism; however, it is also necessary to do that under a new light, in different terms.

Here, drawing from the valuable contribution of intercultural language education studies (among others, Kramsch 1993; Byram 1997; Coperías-Aguilar 2002; Soler – Safont Jordà 2007; Deardorff 2009; Дурбаба 2011, 2016; Corbett 2022), by ‘intercultural communication’ I refer to elastic, fluid, and dynamic contacts in a given socio-cultural context (not fixed but historicized, i.e., subject to change) between (at least) two participants in (at least) two different cultures (not necessarily national but also transnational), who bring into play, in their mutual relations and concerning their own culture, their own individualities, specificities, and “multiple identities” (UNESCO 2013: 10), which may vary their positions (see also Torresin 2022a: 23–24; Торресин 2023b).

Given this definition, we understand ‘intercultural communicative competence’ as both the condition and outcome of intercultural communication thus conceived (Torresin 2022a: 22–24).

In this article, I bring into the RFL discourse on the intercultural dimension three assumptions, inspired by the above-mentioned research on intercultural language education and supranational guidelines, which are nevertheless new to the RFL’s own view of interculturalism outlined above:

1. My concept of interculturalism is based on a complex, historicized, and flexible idea of culture, i.e., culture – which is “difference, variability” (Kramsch 1993: 1) – is subject to change, dynamic, and fluid;
2. It is transnational, i.e., intercultural communication occurs between two or more “intercultural speakers” (Byram 1997) belonging to different cultures, which are not necessarily national (“national

traits”, as writes Kramersch 1993: 206, “are but one of the many aspects of a person’s ‘culture’”);

3. It upholds the centrality of individual peculiarities, i.e., individuals are not mere representatives of a supposedly fixed and essentialized culture but possess “multiple identities” (UNESCO 2013: 10).

Having thus updated the RFL view of the intercultural dimension, I proceed to discuss my concept of the modern RFL textbook as an intercultural textbook.

### 2.3. RFL textbook as an intercultural textbook

Given that, in modern RFL textbook theory, the three trends of textbook analysis previously highlighted (linguo-country studies, imagology, and intercultural communication) continue to coexist, I rely here on the intercultural approach (as explained in §2.2), as it seems to perfectly encompass instances of both linguo-country studies (i.e., ways and forms of the interrelation of culture and language) and imagology (i.e., the issue of cultural stereotypes and commonplaces).

A second reason for this choice is that the modern RFL textbook is historically situated in a “post-communicative” period (Бердичевский – Голубева 2015: 14) shaped by intercultural dynamics; hence its intercultural nature (Бердичевский 2012).

After all, this interpretation of the textbook as intercultural is confirmed by Rubdy (2014) and other scholars of language education, who feel that textbooks should create conditions for the development of intercultural communicative competence.

Once we have clarified the link between the RFL textbook and interculturalism and, in essence, the intercultural nature of the modern RFL textbook, the real question now is: on what principles should such a textbook be based?

In RFL studies over the past decade, there have been some good attempts to describe the content-formal characteristics of an intercultural textbook (see, among others, Бердичевский 2012), but these generally remained within the limited and partial view of the intercultural dimension proper to the RFL itself.

In the next chapter, I illustrate my idea of what an intercultural RFL textbook should look like, based on the new idea of interculturalism outlined in §2.2.

### **3. Principles of a modern intercultural-based RFL textbook**

#### **3.1 Outlining principles of a modern intercultural-based RFL textbook**

In my opinion, a modern RFL textbook should meet both general and intercultural-specific principles. The reason why, alongside intercultural-specific principles, we also have general principles, is simple. It has been argued that the textbook is the “micromodel” of the RFL learning system in general, reflecting all the components of the system itself (i.e., methods, pedagogical processes, etc.) (Бим 1975: 54). As far as the description of textbooks’ properties is concerned, by virtue of the interdependence between the individual parts of the system and the system as a whole, “one can only describe these properties on the basis of the properties of the system itself” (53).

Therefore, the content-formal structure of a textbook will consist of the union of the two blocks of principles we present (see Fig. 1).

The general principles, which are formal-compositional, based on theories,

methods, and practices of foreign language and RFL teaching, are as follows:

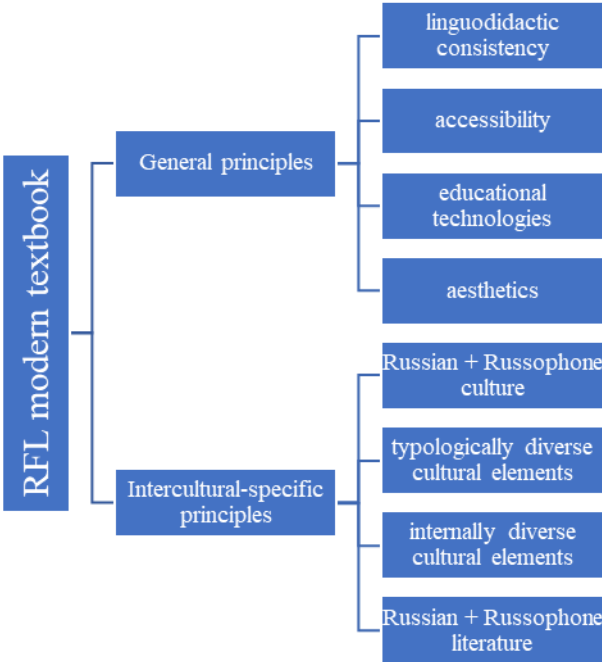
- linguodidactic consistency
- accessibility
- educational technologies
- aesthetics.

The intercultural-specific principles, which are content-based, are built on the dynamic and flexible concept of culture and intercultural dimension described in §2.2. They are as follows:

- Russian + Russophone culture
- typologically diverse cultural elements
- internally diverse cultural elements
- Russian + Russophone literature.

In the next sections, we detail each of the above-mentioned principles, coming to outline the content-formal skeleton of a modern intercultural-based RFL textbook.

Fig. 1: Principles of a modern intercultural-based RFL textbook



3.1.1 Linguodidactic consistency

The RFL textbook should be linguodidactic-consistent, that is, it should be consistent with the stated language levels, standards, and didactic approaches.

This means that, in essence, it should respect the theoretical and methodological conventions of both RFL and foreign language learning systems. Otherwise, the textbook will lose its reliability and, in some cases, even be ineffective for learning Russian.

For example, if a textbook is designed for an elementary level, it should not contain grammatical structures relating to an intermediate level (e.g. this is the case of Овсиенко 1995). Vocabulary and topics will also need to be adapted to the level of the textbook, and calibrated to the relevant standards

(*Gosudarstvennye standarty, Leksicheskyye minimumy, CEFR* etc.). Similarly, the stated instructional approaches and methods will need to be matched by the instructional design of the textbook: if, for example, it is stated that the textbook adopts a communicative approach, which values the ability to use language appropriately to make meaningful communication (Richards – Schmidt 2010: 98–99), a high percentage or prevalence in the textbook itself of formalistic exercises based on the grammar-translation method (252–253) will not be consistent with the textbook’s stated aims (see, e.g. Cadorin – Kukushkina 2003).

As we have seen, the linguodidactic consistency principle, which seems to be taken for granted by scholars, is not always observed in the creation of RFL textbooks; if it were, however, textbooks’ reliability and effectiveness would increase significantly.

### 3.1.2 Accessibility

The RFL textbook should be inclusive and accessible to all students with learning disabilities (Richards – Schmidt 2010: 329) through differentiation and stratification procedures (Tomlinson 2014; Caon 2017).

This implies that a textbook should be usable at multiple levels, both by a student who has no learning disabilities and another who does have them.

This is possible if the textbook allows for the differentiation of learning paths, which are adapted to individual peculiarities, abilities, intelligences, cognitive styles, and learning styles. The differentiation of learning can be carried out concerning content by proposing varied content. For example, a textbook can propose reading different texts, at the student’s choice, and/or differentiated activities (to be done simultaneously) based on the different needs of students, thus making the activities themselves more accessible (e.g. see Vanin – Zanivan 2020 and Torresin 2022b).

At the same time, tasks can be stratified, i.e., made more or less easy, to adapt them to the learner with learning disabilities: for example, in the case of visually impaired students, the textbook can provide an activity with larger text accompanied by larger pictures, thereby harnessing aesthetics (§3.1.4) for the benefit of learning (in this sense, Антошкина 2020 is a good but isolated example).

Although many linguists and educators rightly pose the problem of how to create the conditions for inclusion (Motschenbacher 2016), in RFL, this issue



has been generally ignored. However, it can no longer be neglected in our modern society.

### 3.1.3 Educational technologies

The RFL textbook should take advantage of educational technologies, i.e., digital tools (e.g. learning management systems, interactive whiteboards, etc.) that can be used to facilitate teaching and learning processes (Richards – Schmidt 2010: 190).

In other words, the textbook should include technology that allows students to curate and share knowledge, as well as to learn through guided practice with the teacher.

The inclusion of educational technologies in the textbook occurs in various ways. The first case is when a paper textbook has a digital version (e.g. VV.AA. 2017–2020). In some cases (e.g. the above-mentioned Torresin 2022b), the digital version of the textbook can be enjoyed on a learning platform with opportunities for interaction with the content, with peers, and teacher. For instance, learners can underline, take notes, comment on the content and ask the teacher questions in special virtual spaces.

Educational technologies can also be integrated into the textbook. For instance, the textbook can be totally digital or include activities to be done in learning management systems (e.g. Moodle) or in online collaborative spaces (e.g. Microsoft Teams) (this last one is the case, for example, of AA.VV. 2017–2022).

In this way, besides keeping learners' motivation high by offering highly stimulating activities, the accessibility of the textbook (§3.1.2) is also promoted, enabling current differentiation and stratification procedures like those described above.

The educational technologies principle is very important for the modern RFL textbook, which must increasingly relate to the digital world. Moreover, educational technologies can make RFL learning more motivating, accessible, and effective.

### 3.1.4 Aesthetics

The RFL textbook should use aesthetics in a way that is both appealing to learners and functional for teaching/learning.

Thus, aesthetics plays a dual role in the textbook: while, on the one hand, it is connected with the beauty of the textbook (which, for example, is colorful, has a wealth of images, etc.), at the same time, it is also functional for teaching/learning. Examples are the use of images necessary for the performance of exercises or the use of colors to distinguish the various parts of the textbook (e.g. in Парецкая – Шестак 2017), or even the use of graphic devices such as boldface or the presence of tables and diagrams to facilitate the memorization of vocabulary and grammar structures (e.g. in Чернышов – Чернышова 2019–2021).

In short, this means that the look of a textbook should be enticing and motivating to the student and, concurrently, this same attention to the aesthetic-graphic aspects (pictures, tables, diagrams, colors, typeface, etc.) should also benefit learners in their learning, possibly even going so far as to ensure accessibility (§3.1.2) to learners with learning disabilities (e.g. with the choice of larger fonts or pictures, etc.).

The aesthetics principle is promoted by pedagogy, which highlights the power of visual materials on language learning (Wright 1989). However, not all RFL textbooks observe it (see, e.g. Эсмантова 2008–2011). Needless to say, this principle, combined with that of educational technologies (§3.1.3), can make the study of RFL more engaging.

### 3.1.5 Russian + Russophone culture

The RFL textbook should include both Russian and Russophone cultures.

In other words, the contents should cover not only Russian culture (i.e., the culture of ethnic Russians) but also Russian-speaking culture attributable to non-Russian ethnic groups. In fact, according to the 2010 census, in the Russian Federation, there are more than 180 different Russophone ethnic groups, which generally speak, besides Russian, other national/local languages, and have their own culture and traditions (*Statdata.ru*).

This principle is related to the idea of dynamism and non-essentiality of culture (§2.2). In the case of the Russian language, we have ethnic Russian

speakers, on the one hand, and Russophone people, on the other, who are participating in both Russian and Russophone cultures, having complex and “multiple identities”.

In the RFL textbook, this means that it will be necessary to present, for example, texts and/or discussion opportunities for the development of intercultural communicative competence that enable the learner to learn about both the proper Russian world (e.g. Russian traditions) and the Russian-speaking world (e.g. traditions of Russophone ethnic groups living in the Russian Federation), on the example of AA.VV. 2017–2022, *Парецкая – Шестак 2017* and a few other textbooks.

Of course, learners are more likely to come into contact with Russians than, for instance, Chuvashes or Bashkirs. However, the RFL textbook so designed will enable them to have a non-stereotypical look at the language and culture(s) they are studying.

It must be pointed out that learners, on the basis of the idea of interculturality we have already outlined, should be given the opportunity to effectively develop a cultural knowledge about Russia that does not imply mere familiarization with different aspects of Russian and Russophone cultures, conceived as two isolated worlds. Conversely, opportunities should be created for interactions between the student’s starting culture(s), the Russian culture and the Russophone culture (e.g. through intercultural games and roleplays).

In short, the Russian + Russophone culture principle opens the eyes of students to the complexity of the target culture, making them view it from other perspectives.

### 3.1.6 Typologically diverse cultural elements

The RFL textbook should include typologically diverse cultural elements, that is, non-monothematic and differentiated cultural topics.

In summary, this principle is based on the variety of topics covered, which should convey the complexity of Russian and Russophone cultures (according to the principle explained in §3.1.5). Thus, the teaching of the Russian language and culture is confirmed to be a teaching that spans multiple disciplines and cultural fields (from an obviously transdisciplinary perspective), from

literature to history, geography to art, filmmaking to music, and so on, considering both Russian and Russophone dimensions.

In practice, as I have argued in previous research (Торресин 2022), this means that the RFL textbook should not limit itself to present uncritically a few chosen topics (like Shibarova – Yarin 2018 and other textbooks) but should try to account for various cultural domains of the target culture, to offer the student a varied picture of the Russian and Russian-speaking worlds (like that provided by AA.VV. 2017–2022).

As with the previous principle, also in this case the RFL textbook will favor a dynamic view of culture: that is, learners will come into contact with a wide range of cultural topics, which will not be presented as separate but will interact with each other (e.g. through activities such as debates and simulations).

The typologically diverse cultural elements principle ensures some variety in the cultural topics presented by the textbook. Moreover, this principle guarantees from the content point of view, along with more formal-compositional principles concerning the educational technologies (§3.1.3) and aesthetics of the textbook (§3.1.4), the maintenance of the motivation of the learner, who is given the opportunity to range thematically among different cultural aspects, related to both Russian and Russophone cultures.

### 3.1.7 Internally diverse cultural elements

Along with typologically diverse cultural elements (§3.1.6), the RFL textbook should also include internally diverse cultural elements, that is, within a single cultural area, topics should be non-mono thematic but differentiated.

Such a differentiation should be understood primarily in a historical sense, i.e., chronologically (older-newer), but it also touches on the peculiarities of the cultural and socio-political context in which the cultural aspects proposed by the textbook are placed.

This means that in a textbook, for example, concerning the literary cultural area, some sampling of not only twentieth-century but also contemporary literature should be offered. Similarly, if we talk about art, a good modern textbook should contain elements of both ancient Russian art (e.g. icons) and more modern Russian art, e.g. of the Russian avant-garde (Malevich, Kandinsky, Chagall, etc.). A third example: of history, on the other hand, it will certainly be useful for learners to read about the Russian Revolution, but more recent historical events (e.g. Gorbachëv's reforms known as *perestroika*) should also

find a place in the textbook. Two good examples of this principle are Jouan-Lafont – Kovalenko 2005–2006 and Bonciani et al. 2016, whereas other textbooks (like Khavronina et al. 1998–2002) are poorer in terms of the cultural texts and activities offered.

Similarly to the previous two principles, this principle states that the RFL textbook should not only allow for a layered knowledge of Russian and Russophone cultures (§3.1.5) in their extreme internal variety, but will also ensure that these two cultures dialogue with each other (e.g. through intercultural quizzes and jigsaw activities).

Exactly as with the typologically diverse cultural elements principle, the internally diverse cultural elements principle also provides the RFL textbook with cultural variety, boosting learners' motivation. Through this principle, the student can explore different cultural aspects of Russian and Russophone cultures by encountering older or more recent events and shedding any initial preconceptions.

### 3.1.8 Russian + Russophone literature

Among cultural elements, the RFL textbook should assign Russian and Russophone literature a key role.

The literary text is cardinal to RFL learning. This does not mean, though, that literature should necessarily be included in an RFL textbook as a content to be acquired (which would not make sense in contexts where literature is not taught), but it should be employed instead within a linguodidactic perspective (Кулибина 2000), for the development of language skills and intercultural communicative competence.

More specifically, as I have argued in a recent study (Торрезин 2023б), work on the literary text should be conducted by choosing texts by both Russian (e.g. Sorokin) and Russophone (e.g. Yakhina) authors. The Russophone element (§3.1.5) becomes inescapable concerning contemporary Russian-language literature, most of which is created by Russophones, i.e., authors who write in Russian but are not ethnic Russians. This point may seem trivial, but is not, since Russian continues to be taught from the perspective of national (i.e., Russian) literature (Torresin 2022a; Торрезин 2023б).

Instead, the application of this principle would ultimately bring greater variety to the texts offered by RFL textbooks or anthologies, which do not always systematically present literary texts (see, e.g. Atze et al. 1992) and/or mostly feature Russian authors (like the popular Кулибина 1998).

According to this principle, similarly to the other intercultural-specific principles, the RFL textbook performs an important intercultural function, since it gives learners the opportunity to engage interactively and dynamically with Russian and Russophone literature, as with the two complementary and interconnected faces of Russian-language literature (e.g. through intercultural readings and compare-and-contrast text activities).

Thanks to the observation of the Russian + Russophone literature principle by RFL textbooks, learners will be able to develop both linguistic and intercultural skills by building a varied and more objective picture of the linguistic-cultural richness of the Russian-language literary texts presented by the textbook they are using.

### 3.2 In summary

We have seen so far the principles to which a modern intercultural-based RFL textbook should adhere, identifying general (formal-compositional) and intercultural-specific (content-based) principles.

While the general principles here proposed are grounded in theories, methodologies, and practices of RFL and foreign languages studies, the intercultural-specific principles are built on the conception of interculturalism, as proposed in §2.2.

No single principle, taken individually, is sufficient to constitute a good textbook. Only from the combination of general and intercultural-specific principles can an effective, non-tendentious, and modern RFL textbook be created, which is in step with the times.

## 4. Conclusions

The formal-compositional and content principles for the construction of an intercultural RFL textbook elaborated here constitute a pioneering attempt, within the framework of RFL textbook theory, to devise a modern textbook that gives a non-essentialist and non-stereotypical picture of Russia's cultural world, in its two components of Russian and Russophone.

However, there is still much to be done. I hope that the textbook will not remain on the margins of the interests of future RFL scholars and that new avenues of investigation will open up that will allow us to move increasingly closer to the conception of a viable and optimal RFL textbook, even from an intercultural point of view.

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## КАКО ТРЕБА ДА ИЗГЛЕДА МОДЕРАН ИНТЕРКУЛТУРАЛНО ЗАСНОВАН УЏБЕНИК РСЈ

### РЕЗИМЕ

Избијање руско-украјинског рата покренуло је и поништавање, искључивање руске културе из ширег друштва. То нас суочава са потребом да се запитамо како да ту исту културу, од сада, представљамо, почевши од самих уџбеника руског као страног језика (РСЈ), чији је задатак увек био да ученицима пренесу одређену идеју о Русији. Стога овај рад разматра потребу за интеркултуралним уџбеником РСЈ. Из теме произилази и истраживачко питање: како би од сада требало да изгледају уџбеници РСЈ? И, детаљније, на којим принципима би требало да се заснивају и који садржај би требало да презентују да би унапредили нестереотипну идеју о руском свету?

Да би се одговорило на ово питање, рад полази од теоријског оквира, у коме се налази нацрт нове идеје о интеркултуралној димензији која је сложена, историзована, флексибилна, транснационална и где вишеструки идентитети појединаца играју важну улогу. Принципи који су издвојени јесу општи принципи формално-композиционе природе, засноване на теоријама, методологијама и праксама студија страних језика и РСЈ-а, као и интеркултурно-специфични принципи садржајне природе, изграђени на новој концепцији интеркултуралне димензије која је претходно илустрована. Наведени принципи представљају пионирски покушај да се осмисли модеран, одржив и оптималан уџбеник РСЈ који даје неесенцијалистичку и нестереотипну слику руског културног света – руског и русофонског.

**КЉУЧНЕ РЕЧИ:** уџбеник за наставу руског као страног језика, интеркултурални уџбеник, интеркултурализам.

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