

# Challenges in Teaching Russian Students to Speak English

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## Abstract

**Annotation.** *This paper addresses the challenges brought about by the fact that the English language in modern is mostly taught by non-native English speakers in the context of classic 'teacher-textbook-student' paradigm. It also highlights the significance of shifting from this teacher-centered approach to EFL teaching and learning process, and presents the results of a teaching experiment aimed at creating a student-centered environment in a language classroom.*

**Key words:** non-native-English-speaking teachers, teacher-centered teaching, student-centered teaching.

Cross-cultural contact, communication and interdependence have become integral parts of today's world, opening great possibilities for speakers of languages commonly acknowledged as lingua francs. English has been granted the status of global language used for international mediation over the past

several decades. While some important steps have been taken to improve English language learning in the Russian Federation, the evolution of the learning environment and the shift from teacher-centered to student-centered education are not rapid processes. Web-based teaching and learning methods and techniques are more and more often included into the curriculum, while the role of modern devices such as digital cameras and cell phone cameras seems to be underestimated. These gadgets are an integral part of many young people's lives nowadays, and our observations suggest that they stimulate students' productive communication skills, while the Internet is often perceived by them only as the source of information. However, research-based evidence that making video films in the ESL classrooms can motivate students, encourage and enable them to use English in a more natural way, and as a result enhance their English

communication skills is very scarce. Russian EFL teachers also face many professional challenges, the main of them being the dominance of traditional teacher-centered methods in language classrooms. When a teacher is put at the center of the learning process, he or she serves as the main source of linguistic and cultural information for students, as well as their main linguistic role model. We have assumed that such approach not only limits students learning opportunities, but also puts additional strain on a teacher. Our findings revealed that teachers who were observed demonstrated a distinct Russian accent when speaking English, which correlated with their foreign language competence and working experience, and could not be completely eliminated. It explained why outside natural foreign language environment, teachers often fail to evaluate the degree of their accent due to objective reasons, such as lack of academic placement in foreign countries, limited communication with foreign peers, and strong influence of their native language.

Some people say that the Russian language can be hard to learn. This is not really true, learning Russian is no harder than learning other languages. The main difficulty for a lot of people is learning the new grammar structure. If you have learnt other languages before you will already be familiar with some of these grammar concepts, such as gender and cases.

In fact, there are many things that make Russian easier to learn than other languages. The key is to use these things to your advantage. Here are some things that make Russian easier.

1. Once you learn the alphabet, you can pronounce almost all words quite accurately. With Russian the pronunciation is normally quite clear from the written form of the word.
2. Russian does not use complicated sentence structures like English. You can normally say exactly what you want with just a few words. For example, in English to be polite we would say something like “can you please pass me the salt”,

however in Russian they would say something simpler like “give salt please”. Speaking so directly may even feel unusual for an English speaker, however it is perfectly normal, just add the word ‘please’ to be polite. This makes it easy to say what you want in Russian, and it will probably be correct. Less words also makes listening to people easier, as you can just pick out the important words.

3. Russian uses the case system. Instead of having a strict sentence word order like in English, you just need to change the ends of the nouns. This makes Russian a very expressive language, because you can emphasize a point by changing the order of the words in a sentence. It also helps you understand what people are trying to say.

4. Russian does not use articles. (Like “a” and “the”)

5. Russian has fewer tenses than English. Russian does not bother with the difference between “I was running”, “I had been running”, etc.

English and Russian are very different in many important aspects. In particular the grammar systems show significant variations. English has a fairly fixed word order. Meaning is expressed through the addition of words (for example auxiliaries) and movement of words within limited boundaries. Russian, on the other hand, conveys meaning largely through changes in the composition of words (e.g., by inflections or the addition of prefixes and suffixes). Its word order is very fluid. Because of these differences Russians often find learning English a serious challenge.

Alphabet: Russian is written using the Cyrillic alphabet, some of whose letters are similar to letters in the Latin alphabet used by English. Russian learners of English may experience initial problems writing in English. These problems should decline as, following the fall of the Iron Curtain, Russians become more exposed to English in their everyday lives.

Russian and English convey meaning through the verb systems in different

ways. The Russian system is based in the concept of *aspect*: actions are either completed or not completed. This is shown by appending affixes to the verb stem. There are few auxiliary verbs. This contrasts with English which has progressive and perfect tense forms, and avoids the need for affixation or inflection by the extensive use of auxiliaries.

These differences result in problems in many areas. For example beginning learners often omit the auxiliary in questions or negatives: *How you do that? / I no have it*. The present simple is commonly used where the progressive form or perfect is needed: *She has a bath now / How long are you in Germany?*. In comparison with Russian the modal verb system in English is very complex. Mistakes such as *Must you to work on Friday? / I will not can come*, etc. are common among beginners. The lack of a copula in Russian leads to errors such as *She good teacher*.

Russian has no articles. This causes significant problems because the whole

concept of article use is alien to Russian learners of English, and the English article system itself is extremely complex. All Russian nouns are one of three genders. This results in problems such as: *Have you seen my book? I put her on the table*. Russian is a largely phonetic language. This means that a word's pronunciation can be predicted from its spelling and its spelling from its pronunciation. This is certainly not the case in English, and usually causes Russian learners serious difficulty and frustration. There are aspects of the Russian language which, if directly transferred into English conversation, may sound abrupt or impolite to English native speakers: *Would you like to play tennis tomorrow? - No, I wouldn't* or *Tell me where is the railway station, please*. or *Can you play the piano? - Yes, of course*.

The majority of Russian educational institutions have traditionally taught foreign languages through creating special artificial bilingual classroom environment, i.e. using a set of «pre-planned activities, highly monitored and

controlled». However, the possibility of developing bilingualism outside natural language environment is hotly debated among Russian experts in foreign language teaching methodology. Teachers role and functions in the EFL teaching process also change: instead of being the only source of knowledge and the subject of control for students, they organize students' individual cognitive activity, provide help, support and advice.

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