

How Native English Speakers Can Be Better English Teachers in Russia

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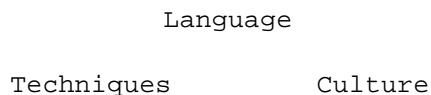
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Native speaking English language teachers are very much needed in Russia and in most cases they are met with traditional Russian hospitality, get a decent pay according to Russian standards and receive good evaluations and references. Behind this generally welcoming attitude there may often be a certain critique, which for face-saving reasons and culturally conditioned politeness may not be made explicit. One of the chief values of native English language speakers as teachers lies in their command of English and demonstration of their teaching techniques as a glimpse of "foreign" teaching methodology. In some instances, due to cultural differences and differences in expectations, these teachers are not as effective as they could be.

Triangle of Success

There seem to be three essential components that contribute to the success of teachers in Russia (and most probably in other countries too)



As it follows from the teachers' and learners' interviews, the missing link on the chain of success is the "culture", meaning teaching culture or socially expected classroom experience.

Native speakers of English as teachers usually demonstrate good standard English, along side with idiomatic language and slang. An interesting turn of attention in the Russian audience has recently been towards authentic behaviour (gestures, exclamations, explaining everyday behaviour, e.g. how to wait in line "in the American way" etc.). In most cases, however, they miss the point that the learners and teachers in Russia need primarily the language of general use. Interest-arousing cases can't make up for the rest of the language needed and become a "sore" when they top out too much.

Native speaking teachers of English often demonstrate teaching techniques, which seem interesting and are treated with enthusiastic welcome. The chief reason of it, however is the novelty of these practices and teachers/learners expectations of a miraculous result, supposedly achieved with the help of these techniques. When with the time, however, the audience feels that the chosen way of instruction does not meet their expectations of how language should be taught, muffled objections can be raised and subdued requests can be voiced about the change of tactics. This change is not likely to happen in most cases for the simple reason of the teacher being unaware of what has actually gone wrong. Another possibility is that the teacher may not be aware of the critique and lack sufficient feedback from the classroom.

The Hypothesis

The hypothesis of this research was that the chief reason why native speakers of English fail as teachers in Russia consists in their lack of knowledge about the Russian teaching culture.

The Subject of Research

The subject of this research was to study the Russian teaching culture and to work out recommendations for native speaking English language teachers, who want to go to Russia to teach effectively.

Teaching culture is a part of the general national culture. It comprises the following components:

- Organisation of the lesson.
- Expectations of learners (and of their parents) about the teaching ways deemed as relevant.
- Teachers' professional beliefs.

Method of Research

Observations during the lessons were made and teachers'-learners'-parents' interviews taken in the three Russian provinces of Tambov, Ryazan and Samara in the period between 1995-1998. Moscow teachers and learners of English at different levels as well as their parents were also interviewed.

This helped to draw conclusions on what can be taken into account to enhance the effectiveness of English language teaching by native speakers coming to work to Russia.

Organisation of a Lesson in Russia

A lesson of English in Russia (as well as of other subjects) will usually though not strictly always have the following features:

- A lesson usually has three-stages, including homework check up, presentation of the new material and reinforcement of the new material
- The teacher, who signals when a particular learner is invited to speak, will regulate learners' participation in the lesson.
- Learners' contributions in the lessons are called "answers", meaning that usually they come as a response to a teacher's question.
- Learners work much individually and lack social skills of communicating with each other in the lesson.
- In pairs and small groups learners need a very detailed description of what they are supposed to do, otherwise tending to work individually and/or waiting to be asked by the teacher and to give the prepared answer.
- At the end of the lesson, each learner usually gets a mark on a five-point scale with a detailed comment from the teacher.
- Whole-language approach is not universally supported. A good lesson is considered to be competence-building. In every lesson, the teacher is expected to organise balanced activities in learning lexis and grammar, as well as in speaking, listening and reading. Writing is usually confined to home assignments.
- A lesson is usually result-oriented and it is the result, which is considered primary, not the activity, which may be very motivating and activating the learners.
- A lesson is usually declared as communicative though in reality, teachers and learners spend a lot of time dealing with grammar structures, bilingual exercises and text understanding.

Failure to meet these commonly held ideas of how a lesson should be organised, may cause doubt in learners as to whether they will benefit much from the untraditional lessons. First reactions to novel lesson organisation may be very positive and enthusiastic.

Russian Learners' Expectations of Teachers

- Be strict towards the class
- Be kind towards individuals
- Help students overcome learning problems even if it requires sacrificing one's own time after classes
- Be lavish in giving higher scores thus crediting learners
- Empathise with the learner
- Coach learners for the exams or test papers
- Be always available, even on the home telephone for consultations
- Translate the material into a digested form

Learners' parents also share the expectations mentioned above. Many complaints voiced by parents concerning the teachers both local and foreign refer to a teacher's ...

- failure to keep order in the classroom

- failure to understand the difficulties experienced by a certain learner and to encourage him/her
- failure to invite problem learners for additional classes and/or visit problem learners at home for additional instructions often without pay
- failure to give a learner a higher score just to encourage him/her even in the event of an obvious failure
- failure to understand what the learner and the parents feel in a challenging situation and to give support
- failure to train individual learners or a group of learners for a certain type of exam (say, university entrance exam) in some cases without pay
- failure to warn parents well ahead of time about possible academic failure of the student even when the learning outcome is not yet certain (permanent individual contacts with parents are advisable as well as inviting all the parents, usually on a Friday night, to school once a month for feedback and discussions)
- failure to help a learner on the home telephone if required
- failure to rearrange the teaching material into an adapted form making it easier to learn

Schools and teachers are held responsible for the academic performance and behaviour of learners, though there are attempts to find a more balanced approach to responsibilities shared by the school, the learner and the parents.

Russian Teachers' Professional Beliefs

- A lesson should be mostly teacher-centred or else there will be little control and effect.
- The general attitude should be error-intolerant or else the learners will never get rid of the mistakes in their speech
- Learners' freedom for self-expression in the classroom should be restricted or else the class may get completely out of control
- Learners should be assessed day-by-day or else they will lack motivation to work in the lesson and at home
- Lesson should be home-task based or else there will be no consolidation of knowledge
- Class should be well-disciplined or else learners themselves will suffer and learn little in the disrupted lesson
- Teaching languages should be recitative or else the learners will not remember much of the material
- Teacher should evaluate learners to inform them of their progress on a regular basis
- Learners' should be accountable to teachers or else how can the teacher be responsible for the learners' proficiency?

These beliefs are commonly held by the teachers in Russia and shared by the professionals teaching different subjects.

In the Universities, a greater emphasis is put on learners' independence but this refers largely to student-teacher encounters during the lectures. Seminars and workshops, in many cases, have the features of a school lesson, though the faculty may deny this.

Helping Russian Teachers of English to Develop

One of the tasks of the native speakers of English coming to Russia from abroad is to help the local teaching community develop professionally. The following principles of this process may help prevent disappointment in this area of engagement:

- Instead of dumping an avalanche of information on the teachers, try to bring about changes in traditional teaching in very small steps
- Instead of viewing the local teachers as the recipients of change, turn them into the agents of change
- Instead of parting with the traditional past, suggest blending with the existing traditions, in which many local teachers firmly though covertly believe
- Offer active learning through one's own exploratory teaching experience
- Instead of emphasising weaknesses of local teachers, proceed from their field of excellence
- Develop in you teacher-trainees the personality role of a critical friend, rather than just a knowledgeable expert
- Instead of doing away with the local teaching culture, use the culture based approach and encourage integration of the existing practices with the new ways.

Experience shows that these principles usually help in introducing modern tendencies for English language teaching instruction in Russia. In the final account the teachers will demonstrate a fine blend of the modern and traditional features and this is to be expected as normal and justified.

General Interests

Russian teachers of English respond with interest to the ideas of:

- Humanistic teaching
- Communicative teaching
- Student-centred teaching
- Interactive teaching
- Game activities
- Role-play and problem-solving (communicative simulation) activities
- Teaching communicative skills and language competencies

These points can be considered while working out sessions with the teachers, meant to enhance English language teaching methodology in Russia.

The procedures of the sessions with the teachers may be as follows:

- Giving short theoretical input (tutor)
- Demonstrating a technique (tutor and teachers as assistants)
- Discussing pros and cons of the technique in small groups (teachers)
- Micro-teaching in small groups with peer observation (teachers)
- Possible video-taping episodes with micro-teaching (tutor and teachers)
- Reflecting and self-reflecting on micro-teaching (teachers)
- Adapting the technique for a particular course-book and classroom situation (teachers)
- Trying a technique in the classroom (teachers and learners)
- Reporting on the procedure, skills and competencies sustained in learners (teachers)
- Writing a series of similar techniques for a particular course-book in a particular classroom (teachers)

During this process the teachers actually create a teaching pack, which they view as their own product, in which they believe and which they are ready to implement and recommend to colleagues.

Coral Reefs in Russian School Education and How to Overcome Them

- Curricula are overloaded even at the primary school. The best way of dealing with it might be negotiating the curriculum with the school authorities who now have power to introduce changes at their school level
- A considerable number of learners do not cope with the heavy load but are still scored as "passed" and expect it. The best way will be to stop assessment by the teacher and to give regular self-tests instead. This will keep the teacher away from the role of a judge.
- Schoolteachers have little opportunities to develop and a limited access to modern Western literature on teaching English. A reasonable supply of books will definitely be appreciated and will guarantee a good start.
- Schools get practically very little funding from the state and lack even basic equipment. A cassette-recorder, a portable OHP, a portable classroom board with coloured markers or a flip-chart might be necessary to bring along or borrow from elsewhere.
- Schools in Russia are very much diversified with sometimes very unexpected profiles like a secondary school biased to training future pilots, or future lawyers, or businessmen, or diplomats, or doctors etc. These schools usually have an intensive language teaching programs. Program requirements should be specified in advance.
- There is a mass exodus from teaching profession of English language teachers in favour of careers in business. One may find oneself among the teachers without the necessary full professional background and not capable of using the language freely. A foreign English language teacher from abroad may feel it necessary to adapt the level of teaching in his/her own class to the teaching level in the rest of school and to make efforts to bring up the professional level in the rest of the teaching staff. English language learners in other classrooms would not like to be disadvantaged in any way.
- Russian classrooms are generally very well organised and reasonably well disciplined. There can be occasionally learners, who are emotionally disturbed and have behavioural problems. Teachers in Russia are not expected to deal with discipline problems alone. Classroom head-teacher and school head master usually feel it their duty and responsibility to intervene and help put the things right. It is not uncommon in most serious cases for the teacher to refuse to work in a certain classroom for the reasons of

bad behaviour of learners. This is usually met with understanding among colleagues, parents and many pupils.

Conclusion

The research shows that teaching culture indeed has a lot to do with success in profession especially when one works abroad in a strange environment. The initial hypothesis being proven, practical steps are now necessary to start training English language teachers from among the native speakers to work in Russia, which is a huge market for this kind of services.

I hope that the material presented above will help native speakers of English, who want to try their pedagogical talent in Russia, cope with the difficulties, caused by the local teaching culture and be very successful in all their professional undertakings.

Further Reading

Dunstan J. Ed. Soviet education under perestroika: papers from IV World Congress for Soviet and East European Studies, Harrogate. L. 1992

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