

**Жура Екатерина Максимовна**

Московский государственный университет имени М.В. Ломоносова

Факультет иностранных языков и регионоведения

[ekaterina.zhura@yandex.ru](mailto:ekaterina.zhura@yandex.ru)

**Ekaterina Zhura**

Lomonosov Moscow State University

Faculty of Foreign Languages and Area Studies

[ekaterina.zhura@yandex.ru](mailto:ekaterina.zhura@yandex.ru)

**Особенности изучения иностранных языков в современной России  
сопоставления с другими регионами мира.**

**Foreign Language Learning in Modern Russia and the World: National  
Peculiarities in Aims, Reasons and Methods**

**Аннотация**

Цель работы – выявить особенности изучения иностранных языков в современной России. С этой целью был проведен опрос учащихся и выпускников средней и высшей школы РФ; иностранных студентов, стажеров и гостей российских вузов. Опрос касался длительности, причин выбора, целей и способов изучения иностранных языков и культур. Сопоставление ответов представителей разных регионов выявляет особенности данного процесса в России.

**Abstract**

The aim of the research under consideration is to figure out the cultural peculiarities of studying foreign languages in modern Russia. To achieve this aim a survey concerning the aims, reasons and ways of studying foreign languages and cultures was conducted. It was aimed at schoolchildren in Moscow, students, graduates and postgraduates, international students, visitors

and trainees of higher linguistic institutions in Russia. Contrastive study of the answers given by the respondents from various world regions helped to single out the peculiarities of foreign language studies in Russia.

**Ключевые слова:** иностранные языки, изучение, Россия, мир, особенности

**Key words:** foreign languages, studying, Russia, world, peculiarities

## **Introduction**

The article under consideration presents the results of a survey conducted in order to single out cultural peculiarities of Foreign Language Learning (FLL) in Russia. To single out these peculiarities i.e. to find out what is national about learning foreign languages and cultures in Russia I studied the choice of languages, the length of study, reasons, aims and ways to study foreign languages and cultures in Russia and the world.

Three groups of respondents have been defined: 1. Primary and secondary schoolchildren in Moscow; 2. University students, graduates and PhD students of the Russian Federation; 3. University International students, graduates, PhD students and trainees in the Russian Federation.

The article under discussion considers the results of polling 144 respondents from the 1<sup>st</sup> group, 47 – from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 44 from the 3<sup>rd</sup>.

The following terms are used in the research.

International respondents represent the following countries: the USA (38%), Italy (11,3%), the People's Republic of China (20,4%). Each of the following countries presents for 4,5%: the Czech Republic, the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), the Republic of Austria, the Commonwealth of Australia,

Hungary, the Republic of Cyprus, the Federative Republic of Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Iceland, the Republic of Haiti, the United Republic of Tanzania.

The native language of international respondents has been taken into account as it could be English or one of the European languages, which might make some difference to the statistics. As for the native language of Russian respondents, I stopped keeping statistics on it as it never coincided with ones under study.

The questionnaires for both groups of Russian respondents were in Russian, for international – in English. The subject matter was the same for all the groups: the choice of languages, the length of study, reasons, aims and ways to study foreign languages and cultures. There could be one answer only to the questions regarding First, Second (Third and Fourth) studied languages for Russian tertiary school respondents; about the age, native country and language for all the groups.

Questions concerning studied languages for Russian secondary schoolchildren and international respondents; aims, reasons and ways of studying languages, cultural aspects of interest for all the groups supposed several answers. That is why in these cases total figures regarding one group may outnumber 100%.

Methods of the research: live and online polling; comparing and contrasting the results.

## **1. Key terms**

It is necessary to comment on the terms, “First Foreign Language”, “Second Foreign Language”, “Third Foreign Language” (hereunder – First/Second/Third language) to avoid any misconceptions.

In the work under consideration the term “The First Language” applies to the language that is taken up by Russian respondents first of all – in primary schools and even kindergartens. School-leavers take an exam in this language and concentrate on it having become students. A

language studied in addition to the latter is called “The Second”. The First and the Second languages are usually obligatory subjects at schools and universities. In addition to them, some students set forth to learn the Third and even the Fourth foreign language, which is optional.

Next, I would like to comment on the international terms “Language 1 (L1)” and “Language 2 (L2)” and define them through the terms L1 and L2 speakers. As D. Graddol points out, “There are three types of English speakers in the world today, each with a different relation to the language. **First-language (L1) speakers** are those for whom English is a first – and often only – language. These native speakers live, for the most part, in countries in which the dominant culture is based around English. These countries, however, are experiencing increasing linguistic diversity as a result of immigration. **Second-language (L2) speakers** have English as a second or additional language, placing English in a repertoire of languages where each is used in different contexts. Speakers here might use a local form of English, but may also be fluent in international varieties. The third group of English speakers are the growing number of people learning English **as a foreign language (EFL)**” [Graddol, 2000, 10].

I can assume thereby that what is read under the international term Language 2 (a second or additional language) is equivalent to the term “The First (Studied) Language”: It can as well be said that Russian language learners related to the third group of speakers named above who learn English as a foreign language.

## 2. Studied Foreign Languages

The figures in the table below and hereunder are given in percents.

Table 1. Studied foreign languages.

Languages	Primary and Secondary School, RF	Tertiary School, RF			International Respondents	
		1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Native lang.	Studied lang.

English	100	78	16,6	2	40,9	68,1
French	27,6	14,4	23,6	9	4,5	11,3
German	31,9	8,3	20,8	7,6	8,3	6,8
Spanish	23,4	4,8	18	9,7	2,2	27,2
Italian	4,2	2	11,1	3,4	11,3	2,2
One of the Slavic	-	0,6	-	-	-	-
Russian					-	65,9
Chinese/Japanese	2,1	-	-	6,2	20,4	6,7

The figures above indicate that English proves to be the most widely spread studied language nowadays both in Russia and abroad. In Russia English in most cases is the First language. As a Second Foreign language Russian learners mainly choose French or German. This combination is the most common and can be traced back to the past: German, French and English have been key foreign languages for Russia since 17-18<sup>th</sup> centuries (Pavlovskaya, 2003).

Spanish or Italian are taken up less frequently. Anyway, if English has not been taken as a First language, it is later on studied as a Second or Third or sometimes Fourth language.

In other countries the choice of languages to study depends much upon the region. For example, in the US L2 is usually Spanish. One of the respondents from the USA commented that «knowing it [Spanish] is a must in the USA». In China L2 is mostly English, together with one of the European languages or Russian as L3.

The reasons for a significant number of Russian language learners are the following. First, the poll is carried out in Russia where international students have come to study the language. Second, 20% of respondents are from China, where studying Russian is a tradition traced back to the Soviet times, which I discovered during my visit to China in August, 2012. Anyway, for people in other countries English is either their mother tongue or one of the studied

languages. All in all, regarding both Russia and the world it looks like nowadays "there are no clear rivals to English" (Graddol, 2000, 44).

### 3. The Length of Studying Foreign Languages

Table 2. The length of studying foreign languages.

	Primary and Secondary School, RF	Tertiary School, RF	International respondents
Less than 5 years	85,1	5,4	93,1
5-10 years	95,7	16,3	38,6
10-15 years	17,2	37,4	40,9
More than 15 years	2,1	19,7	13,6

First, I would like to underline, that in this paper the length of study is regarded as a criteria influencing the reasons and shaping the aims of studying foreign languages, but not as an indicator of a language command level. Sometimes people indicated a time period during which they have been studying each of the languages (for example, English – 10 years, French – 5, German – 2) and in these cases total figures for one group of respondents may outnumber 100%. The survey revealed that in Russia people start studying foreign languages earlier than in other countries and devote more time to acquiring language skills.

### 4. The Reasons For Studying Foreign Languages

Table 3. The reasons for studying foreign languages

		Primary and Secondary School, RF	Tertiary School, RF			International respondents
№	Variant	All the languages under study	1 <sup>st</sup> FL	2 <sup>nd</sup> FL	3 <sup>rd</sup> (4 <sup>th</sup> ) FL	All the languages under study

1	I just like the language and/or the culture of the countries where it is used as a means of communication	55,3	35	59	36,6	59 / 61,3 <sup>1</sup>
2	My parents want(ed) me to do it / It is/was obligatory at school	19,1 / 46,8 <sup>2</sup>	36,8		4,4	11,3 <sup>3</sup>
3	I realize it is “a must” nowadays (I need it for my studies and future career)	93,6	25		31,6	31,8 / 40,9 <sup>4</sup>
4	The most promising/beneficial for political/economic reasons	36,1		28		
5	I’d like to visit and /or probably move to the country where it is used as a means of communication	59,5		11,1	2,9	
6	Other		26,3	16,6		

According to the results, for the majority of Russian University students and graduates the main reasons for choosing this or that foreign language are the following: understanding that language skills are “a must” in modern world; **good** language skills are required to get a good job and more job opportunities. An interest towards the country where the language is used as a means of communication also matters. For the majority of Russian schoolchildren the first and foremost motives are travelling and getting a well-paid, prestigious job. Whereas for international respondents the variants “I just like the language” and “I’m interested in a country

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<sup>1</sup>In the questionnaire for international students the variants “I just like the language” and “I’m interested in a country where it is used as a means of communication” are given as two separate points.

<sup>2</sup>On the questionnaire for Russian primary and secondary students these are two separate points.

<sup>3</sup>The questionnaire for international students suggests the variant “My parents want(-ed) me to do it”.

<sup>4</sup>The questionnaire for international students contains two separate variants: “I realize it is “a must” nowadays” and “I need it for my (future) career”.

where it is used as a means of communication” are of almost equal importance, which indicates, among other things, that language and culture are inseparable for them.

I would like to support the assumptions with the comments given by Russian tertiary school respondents in terms of the reasons for studying a particular foreign language. (I’d like to give special thanks to Russian university students who commented a lot on the issue). **The First language:** «German: my granny wanted me to do it. She was worried that no one will be able to talk to my little cousin recently born in Germany. All my elder relatives either have already forgotten the German they studied at school (or just never knew it at all). So my grandma was afraid that no one would be able to communicate to the kid in case she didn’t speak Russian herself»; “My mum sent me to the English courses for the small kids. Now I enjoy studying the language and I would love to make it a part of my future career”; “When I was a school kid (I was in the 5<sup>th</sup> form), it did not matter what language to study”.

**The Second language:** “It was taught in the kindergarten”; “I started studying it at school”; “English: I decided that it is “a must” nowadays”; “Italian: first, I like lasagna! Second, it seemed that studying this language is not as trite as others. And I was right”; “It seems to be romantic and unusual”. It is worth mentioning that 50% of those who study French as a First language choose English as a Second noting that it is the most beneficial.

**The Third language:** “I am planning to take up Chinese and Portuguese as I want to have more job opportunities”; “I think that speaking just two foreign languages is not enough for an interpreter”; “I enjoy studying foreign languages and getting acquainted with the cultures of other countries”; “It may come in handy. You cannot get enough of foreign language skills”; “To broaden the horizons and improve my mental abilities”; “Feels like I have taken to studying foreign languages”.

From what has been said above the following conclusion can be made. In Russia the First foreign language is taken up at a very early age: languages are obligatory at primary schools and



sometimes at kindergartens. So, it is usually not for a child under the age of 7 to decide to start studying the First foreign language. It is understood that it happens due to the parents' wish or the decision of school administration. Teenagers may be motivated by an interest towards the language and culture of the country where it is used as a means of communication or if they need to take an exam in the subject to enter a university, or if they see a language as a tool of getting a well-paid job. That is usually about going to study the Second foreign language. Another significant cause for Russian schoolchildren for studying foreign languages is travelling (and sometimes possibility to move to another country). Moreover, for kids travelling is also an objective, not only a motive (consider tables 4 and 6).

All in all it seems that young learners and prospective students long for necessarily getting benefits from doing languages. L. Polubichenko points out that it happens due to the fact that “the school-leavers [in modern Russia] don't have a firm need in reading books, yet their attitude towards education is highly pragmatic, which makes them prefer Business English Studies, PR-technologies, advertising discourse and other things “of more vital importance” than studying literature” (Polubichenko, 2012: electronic source).

It should be emphasized that for university students and graduates travelling is a less important reason to take up a foreign language than to younger learners. A possible explanation for that might be the following: the former already have much of what the prospective students are only dreaming about. These are: receiving higher education, continuing to study foreign languages, travelling, having good job opportunities. These things seem to especially important for schoolchildren because they do not have them yet and a bit less important for students and graduates because they already have achieved some of them. It is also worth mentioning that even though students and graduates are 2-10 years older than schoolchildren, this age difference reveals sort of a generation gap and thus a different attitude towards studying.

## **5. The Objectives Of Studying Foreign Languages**

Table 4. The aims of studying foreign languages.

№	Variant	Primary and Secondary School, RF	Tertiary School, RF	International respondents
1	To know the world (culture, traditions, the mode of living etc) of the countries where this language is used as a means of communication	20,4	20,8	
2	To broaden horizons, to meet present day requirements	48,9	20,8	52,2
3	To get a prestigious, well-paid job	61,7	20,8	45,4 <sup>5</sup>
4	To be able to read books and watch films	51	18	
5	To be able to communicate to native speakers	55,3	17,3	22,7
6	To travel and/or probably move to another country	82,9	15,2	29,5/4,5 <sup>6</sup>

From the figures above it can be assumed that the cultural knowledge and broadening the horizons are almost equally important for all the three groups of respondents. That is also reflected in the following table.

Table 5. Cultural aspect that interests most.

	Secondary School, RF	Tertiary School, RF	International respondents
The mode of living	57,4	63,2	79,5
The arts	55,3	50	34
Beliefs	40,4	50	15,9
I don't care	4,2	14,4	4,5

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<sup>5</sup>The questionnaire for international students contains the variant "To get more job opportunities".

<sup>6</sup>In the questionnaire for international students the variants "Travelling" and "To move to another country" are presented as two separate points.

Evidently, the way people in other countries live is the most fascinating cultural aspect for language learners. Others do not appear as exciting as this one. This adds quite naturally to what L. Polubichenko says about the fading interest towards literature among young learners and an increasing focus on practical aspects of language and culture. It also seems that such a passion towards the mode other peoples live goes hand in hand with a wish for travelling and/or moving to these countries.

I would like to get back to analyzing the aims of studying foreign languages.

The figures in table 4 show that the polled schoolchildren are mainly oriented towards getting a good job, whereas university students value the knowledge itself as they might have already understood that good knowledge gives chances to get a good job and many of the items from one's wish list. Interestingly enough, international respondents are mostly aim to broaden their horizons. It seems to be quite natural as for about 60% of them an interest towards languages and cultures is a reason to start studying a language. One of the US respondents comments that their objective in studying foreign languages is «to become fluent and cultured».

International respondents are less motivated by communication to native speakers and travelling than the Russians. Moving to another country is also a bit less aspired.

## 6. The Ways Of Studying Foreign Languages

Table 6. The ways of studying foreign languages.

№		Secondary School, RF	Tertiary School, RF	International respondents
1	With a private instructor	65,3	33,3	2,2
2	At school and/or University	95,9	45,8	61,7
3	In the evening classes	36,7	22,2	2,2
4	I studied it myself using manuals, reading books, watching films, listening to music etc	30,6	19,4	20,4

5	I spent some time in the country where this language is used as a means of communication	10,2	18,7	13,6
6	I attended language courses in the country where this language is used as a means of communication	6,1	13,8	-

On the whole the first and foremost way for international audience to study a language is to learn it at school or university. This particular way leaves all the rest far behind. The situation in Russia is somewhat much different. Russian students use all the ways possible to study foreign languages and what is even more important, all these ways are almost equally popular among the learners. However studying languages at school and/or university is a little bit more top-rated than other ways, yet does not substitute them. As a school subject languages appear to be of crucial importance, and to play on the safe side learners apply to more than one way of acquiring it. However, it seems that international respondents treat languages as a regular discipline, rather than a fundamental subject. Languages are obviously important yet not that central as in Russia. However it should be stressed that the situation in the world depends much upon the region.

I would like to comment on the figures regarding Russian schoolchildren and students. First, it should be highlighted that even though both groups of respondents use many ways to learn languages, the key ones are studying them at school and with a private instructor. It is noteworthy that the variants “I spent some time in the country where this language is used as a means of communication” and “I attended language courses in the country where this language is used as a means of communication” are slightly more top rated among university students than among schoolchildren. I believe it happens due to the following. First, the students are obviously older than the schoolchildren. Second, many of the polled students have already been to other countries as exchange students, have tried summer jobs abroad or just have been there as tourists.

## **Conclusion**

From what has been said a following conclusion can be derived. In Russia foreign languages play a key role in school curriculum. All the ways possible are involved in order to master a language. Studying foreign languages and cultures is kind of a passion, a hobby and at the same time a contribution to future life and career. According to S. Ter-Minasova a love towards foreign languages in Russia may be considered to be a trait of Russian national character (Ter-Minasova, 2005). Regarded as a tool for getting all kinds of profits languages acquire a cultural value and are still “love for love’s sake” (Ter-Minasova, 2005, 445). It is noteworthy that foreign language learners in Russia are usually not satisfied with the knowledge of one and even two foreign languages and take up the Third and even Forth foreign language (mind table 7).

**Table 7. The number of languages studied.**

The number of studied languages	Primary and Secondary school, RF	Tertiary school, RF	International respondents
1	2,1	-	21,4
2	53,1	100	57,1
3	23,4	67,1	21,4
4	4,2	20,8	4,6

I would like to highlight that the overwhelming majority of all groups of respondents learns two languages. It is worth mentioning that much less Russian schoolchildren than international respondents study one language only, even though the former are significantly younger than the latter. The polled schoolchildren are aged 9-16 years (mainly 14-16 years), Russian tertiary school respondents – 17-25 years, international respondents – 13-42 years (mainly 20-26 years).

It seems to be interesting that the figures concerning two, three and four languages under study are almost equal for Russian schoolchildren and international respondents, yet the latter are older. What is more, the questioned schoolchildren are potential university language students, which means, that they will probably continue studying languages. I would like to highlight that much more Russian than international university students study 3 and 4 languages.

Nevertheless let us hope that, as S. Ter-Minasova notes, whatever the future of English language might be, it will inevitably become (or has already become) an incentive to continue studying foreign languages (Ter-Minasova, 2008).

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