

Expats, Russians Search for a Common Language

By [Luc Jones](#)

July 09, 2012

The  **Moscow Times**

Russians are always curious how they and their country are perceived by foreigners, especially from the West. The general misconception is that Russia is cold and gray for 12 months of the year, everyone drinks vodka, nobody ever smiles and hardly anyone speaks English.

While all stereotypes hold some truths, the part about the generally poor level of spoken English rings louder than the rest. Why is it that a large portion of the world speaks English, but outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg, proficiency in English is virtually nonexistent?

One reason is that the post-World War II generation learned German as the preferred foreign language in high school. Even when the Soviet educational system gradually began to favor English, the emphasis was on reading and writing, not speaking the language. This is understandable; it's not as if there were many foreigners to converse with during the Soviet period.

In addition, English was largely viewed as a waste of time since travel outside the Soviet Union was off-limits to all but a tiny fraction of the elite. In the words of one Russian pensioner, "I might as well have studied Martian than English. I was better off learning how to fix my television or car."

Many Russians who don't speak English, or speak it poorly, usually refer to the poor level of language education they received in school. This is a valid reason. Much like during the Soviet period, high school English is usually taught by teachers who may know the grammar rules well, but whose written and oral English language skills leave a lot to be desired. This poor level hardly stimulates high school students to advance in English.

Another problem that gets in the way of Russians learning English is the traditional pofigizm, or an attitude of "I couldn't care less." During a recent interview with a candidate, I asked her why she didn't speak English, a key requirement from the client's side that was included in the job announcement. She self-assuredly replied, "Если понадобится я его выучу" (If it's really necessary, I'll learn it"). It obviously never occurred to her that it might make her a more attractive candidate to a potential employer if she already had a good grasp of English.

For an expatriate with little or no Russian who needs to communicate in English with local staff, here are a few pointers to make life for you and your employees easier and more productive:

- If Russians don't understand you, they will almost never admit it or ask you to repeat or explain yourself. Don't assume that you've been understood, even if someone says they understand.
- ❑ Avoid excessive use of colloquialisms and slang, unless they are in very common usage.
- Russians struggle with phrasal verbs with a preposition after them because they have many meanings, some often hidden or less common. For example, use "postpone" rather than "put off," and "invent" instead of "come up with."
- Whereas in English we reply "yes, it is" or "no, it isn't," in Russian you can respond by saying "no, it is," or "yes, it isn't." So double-check if you didn't get the answer you were hoping to hear

It's also worth bearing in mind that many Russians genuinely believe that all foreigners in Russia should speak Russian. At first glance, this may appear somewhat arrogant. But you shouldn't forget that native English, French and many Spanish speakers hold a similar, quasi-colonial view. Only a small percentage of these people speak a second language.

Nonetheless, to make the most of your professional experience in Russia, it may be high time for you to finally sign up for those Russian classes that your assistant keeps bugging you to attend.

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