

MY JOURNEY THROUGH “LEARN-RUSSIAN LAND”

by Charles Cole
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My 35-year odyssey from *tabula rasa* to near-native proficiency in Russian formally began in 1966 upon my enrollment in the Russian Basic Course at the Defense Language Institute (DLI). But in a deeper sense, my journey started much earlier when I first entered a Latin classroom in ninth grade. Unlike most of my fellow students, studying Latin vocabulary, learning Latin grammar and practicing these elements of the language in classroom and homework exercises were arguably my favorite school-related activities and I seem to recall performing them enthusiastically and with ease.

Four years and several more Latin courses later, I can honestly say that I was thoroughly prepared to begin studying Russian in 1966. I had learned well how to study a foreign language, especially one with a fusionally inflected system of morphology. During the early phases of my DLI Russian course, it seemed I never had to ask questions such as why a certain case was used to express a given idea. Instead, I would simply learn the Russian forms and proceed to apply them to the linguistic tasks at hand.

At the end of my initial 9-month intensive course, I was selected to extend my stay at DLI by an additional 9 months. The goal of the institute’s language programs in those years was to provide students with a **thorough** grounding in the basics of a language, i.e. rudimentary phonology, morphology, and syntax, as well as a respectable inventory of high-frequency vocabulary. Our teachers spent countless hours with many of us on activities designed to ensure that the foundation we constructed at DLI was solid and of a quality which would permit the subsequent building of a multi-storied edifice which could be relied on not to crack or collapse due to structural defects in the basement.

Such activities included listening to recorded passages and following along printed, verbatim transcripts. Each passage was recorded three times, once at a very slow rate of speech, again at a speed resembling normal conversation, and a third time at a very rapid rate of speech. Our task was to listen to the passages until we could internalize the sound system and begin developing a “feel” for the Russian language. The teachers were providing us with “ear training” to allow us to gradually get used to the sound of natural native-to-native Russian discourse.

The teachers also used old, reel-to-reel recorders to allow us to record our own speech for subsequent analysis. Early in the program this involved reading aloud short passages from the textbook. A native speaker would record the same segment of text (often a dialog which we had memorized), then sit down with us and compare and analyze the sounds, the intonation contours, and other discourse features involved in the segment, contrasting the native speaker model with our recordings. Later in the program, they also

taped short, spontaneous conversations between some of the students and then conducted analysis sessions as described above so as to provide us with meaningful feedback as to how our speech was progressing and to focus our attention on developing self-correction techniques to avoid fossilization of incorrect speech patterns.

Such activities, which many would assail today for not being “authentic, real-world communication” and thus not “communicative”, paid huge dividends for us, since they helped us acquire a solid foundation upon which we were later able to rely. I am totally convinced that without these **learning** activities, I would not have achieved the level of proficiency which I possess today.

The linguistic competence I attained at DLI provided me with the requisite foundation upon which I was later able to build as I transitioned from a classroom- based, cognitive-oriented learning environment to a task-based, individualized, input/intake acquisitional environment which included ever-increasing opportunities to interact and communicate with native speakers of Russian in a wide variety of contexts.

As I recall, my motivation to study Russian at DLI was both intrinsic and instrumental. As to the former, as described above, since my youth studying foreign languages has always been easy and pleasant for me. As to the latter, I can only say that in 1966 studying Russian in Monterey, California was perceived by the vast majority of my contemporaries as immeasurably preferable to the primary alternative of the time — service in the Republic of Vietnam!

Upon completing my DLI training I was transferred to Germany where I used Russian on a daily basis as part of my military duties, albeit these were limited to listening comprehension. Upon leaving active military service, I returned to college to pursue a degree in Russian and German. After graduation two years later I was selected to serve on a 6-month cultural exchange exhibit touring the erstwhile Soviet Union with the United States Information Agency (USIA). Upon reflection, I believe this total immersion experience came at precisely the optimum time for me in my Russian learning career and contributed significantly to my achieving near-native proficiency some years later.

Upon completion of my USIA service, I was hired to teach Russian at DLI, where I have actively used the language in the majority of my job assignments for the past 28 years. My second great immersion experience came when I married a native speaker of Russian. Whatever gaps in knowledge or stumbling blocks to my ability to communicate actively and proficiently in Russian may have survived my first immersion experience rapidly vanished, thanks to the bilingual and bicultural nature of my family life.

Based on my own experiences and on those of others whom I have observed and with whom I have interacted over the years, I have come to believe that a gradual, multi-year, longitudinal approach to learning and acquiring a foreign language is clearly the most effective, albeit costly, way for one to achieve near-native proficiency in that language.

This is especially true as relates to highly inflected languages such as Russian, particularly for American students who begin the effort at an age beyond that of hemispheric lateralization.

Conversely, I have also personally witnessed numerous campaigns in search of the Holy Grail of Natural Acquisition (versus the “old model” of conscious learning). In my opinion, these crusades have resulted in finding only a subcategory of fleece with little or no resemblance to the golden variety! Countless cross-sectional research studies have been assembled into a montage whose “findings” have been cobbled into a quilted patchwork of “state-of-the-art” practices and techniques in the search for a magic methodological bullet to accelerate the acquisition process, to make the endeavor “fun” for all learners, and to short-circuit the heretofore excruciatingly tedious and very rigorous process traditionally followed by millions of language learners over many centuries.

On the surface, such “cutting edge” methods are intuitively quite attractive. The findings of empirical studies supporting a “new paradigm” are enthusiastically embraced by a considerable majority of language teachers. At the risk of crossing the sensitivity line, I would suggest that in all likelihood one would similarly suspect overwhelming support from a vast majority of female members of the species *homo sapiens* for scientific methods promising to decrease the term of human gestation to, say, three weeks. Unfortunately, such a scientific breakthrough is as unrealistic as it is unforeseeable. I suspect that it is equally pollyannaish to expect similar results from the ongoing, often relentless efforts to “accelerate the language acquisitional process”.

The less-than-successful search for ways to make all language activities “fun” for all students at all times notwithstanding, I have become cautiously optimistic thanks to certain recent developments. While this may be yet another instance of Charlie Brown’s attempting in vain to kick a field goal, it seems that some governmental agencies are in fact beginning to acknowledge that genuine, “real world” missions involving the application of language skills do indeed require higher levels of proficiency than has heretofore been assumed. Hopefully such requirements will lead to a sober approach to designing and implementing a realistic continuum of foreign language training and education ***over the long term***. Such a realization would be a welcome sign to those of us who have expressed a decidedly minority opinion over the last two decades by advocating the establishment of high, demanding standards and the accompanying level of funding required to put in place serious programs to help capable, motivated students achieve those standards.

Of course, my optimism is tempered by the knowledge that this “new” discovery isn’t really all that new. Almost ten years ago DLI hosted a “Russian Curriculum Review” in which several of the institute’s customers and a number of academicians participated. Below is an excerpt from the report of the committee conducting the review.

“Competence in a foreign language ... is a product of a language learning *career*, not of the specific formal courses or programs which may be part of that career The *learner* bears the primary responsibility for learning Most Foreign Language Acquisition in fact takes place *outside* of the classroom, and as a result teachers are responsible primarily for graduating from their programs expert language *learners* and not necessarily expert language users.”¹ (Emphases added)

This is a very accurate description of the philosophy of the DLI which I attended in 1966 and 1967. How ironic that this approach was “re-discovered” 25 years hence in 1992! And how interesting that the principle underlying it is only now, almost another 10 years later, seeming to catch the attention of certain decision makers within the government language community!

The good news is that there are indeed people who can begin studying a language as adult learners and who do, after much effort and many years, achieve very high levels of proficiency. The not-so-good news is that no amount of revolutionary innovation, gimmickry, “cutting edge” methods, “faculty training” programs, shortcuts, or magic curricula will ever replace the tried and true formula for long term success – putting gifted, motivated learners together with dedicated teachers who know how hard this endeavor is, within an environment where the key decision makers understand that Rome was not, in fact, built in a day! The effort to learn a foreign language to a meaningful level of competence is an ongoing, ever-evolving process without a visible “goal line”. It is a process, not an event. Our profession would do well to adopt an approach similar to a certain American wine producer whose slogan once was: “We will release no wine before its time” (the operative word being time).

I feel fortunate indeed to have been afforded such an environment within which to study Russian. Thanks to the patience of my teachers, the encouragement of many others, and the opportunities to use the language which have come my way over the years, I was able to achieve a high level of proficiency in a very complex language. Hopefully the language community will one day find ways to provide more people with similar opportunities in the years to come.

¹ Source: “Report of the Russian Curriculum Review” held at DLIFLC in 1992.