

From American High School to St. Petersburg

By Jan Kagel

When Scott Seidenberger arrived in Russia, he didn't know a word of Russian. Alone in a country he was unfamiliar with, trying to find his way around and communicating was difficult. But after only a month he had already gotten a good feel for the language, and after two he had no more problems ordering food, talking to his host family, asking for directions, or making small talk. The National Security Language Initiative for Youth (NSLI-Y) had sponsored the 17 year old high school student's trip to Russia, including the stay at a Russian speaking host family and a school for him to learn Russian.

The NSLI-Y organization sponsors students to immerse themselves in a foreign language considered to be an integral part of the global economy and international diplomacy, but isn't taught in enough schools or learned by enough U.S. citizens. Students can spend a full year, a semester, or a short summer studying in an eligible country. All costs including travel, food, accommodations, and tuition are fully covered by the program. According to NSLI-Y, the speakers of the languages that their initiative supports are all "[...] actively sought by universities, government agencies and the business sector for their skills, experience, and knowledge."(NSLI-Y)

So why is Russian valued so highly?

Russian is spoken by around 300 million people around the world, which makes it the fifth most widely-spoken language in the world. It is the official language of Russia, which is not only one of the world's main political powers but also the largest country in the world with the eleventh-largest economy and an enormous amount of natural resources. Russian is also the official language or an official language in Belarus, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan and many more countries have large populations of Russian speakers, especially within the states or former satellite states of the former Soviet Union. Thus, Russian is a very important language for which any country should have a supply of highly-qualified translators or interpreters.

Yet, Russian is not the easiest language to learn, especially for native English speakers. The language has a complicated grammatical structure where the words change according to one of Russia's six cases (English has only three), genus, number, and so on. Then there is the large number of exceptions that one must learn. One of the biggest problems in learning to speak Russian, especially for native English speakers, is proper pronunciation. This is primarily because it is not uncommon in Russian for there to be several consonants to be written next to each other, which might seem impossible to pronounce to an English speaker learning Russian as a beginner. Also problematic is the Russian vowel bl, which has no English equivalent.

The number of Russian learners in America has dwindled since the fall of the Soviet Union. But statistically it is hard to bridge the gap to do business in many eastern European countries, including Russia, without breaking the language barrier first, as only a very low percentage of

eastern Europeans feel confident speaking English and would prefer to deal with a business partner that speaks their own language.

Scott Seidenberger, the study abroad student to Russia, was given the choice from a list of countries including India, China, Jordan, Tajikistan, South Korea, and Russia. He picked Russia because he felt less of a connection to the other countries on the list. The teenager, originally from Pennsylvania, moved to a small Russian town called Gatchina, located 20 minutes by bus from the metropolis of St. Petersburg. Because of their proximity, Scott was able to experience two very different sides of Russian life: rural and metropolitan. While the city of St. Petersburg is very modernized and offered modern public transportation systems and American fast food restaurants, in Gatchina many of the residents had never met a US citizen before. With this program, there are two possible destinations for students interested in visiting Russia. Besides Gatchina there is also the city of Nizhny Novgorod, which is Russia's fifth largest city. Despite the United States and Russia being on opposing sides during the Cold War, Scott said that everyone was very welcoming and eager to hear something about his country.

Another visiting student, Chevy Chase, who had spent the summer of 2010 in Russia with the same program, said about her experience, "This was the opportunity of a lifetime.... The experience of living with a Russian host family was invaluable, and I'll cherish the friendships I made there for the rest of my life."

Scott also gained very important life experience during his months in Russia, as well as a unique political perspective of the relationship between Russia and the United States. He grew attached to a country that he knew nothing about upon his arrival just a few months before. After his two-month stay in Russia, his host brother told Scott that he was welcome to come back any time, since he has a home now in Russia.



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