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### Author

Smith, Irina

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## **Culture Clash in the English as a Second Language Classroom: Russian Students in America**

- **Russian-speaking English as a second language (ESL) students represent one of the fastest growing language groups in California and form the majority of the community college population in the Sacramento area. Many American ESL teachers find themselves unprepared to deal with this unique group of learners. Based on an ethnographic study, this article examines how cultural differences between the Russian-speaking students and their North American teachers often lead to conflict in the ESL classroom. Russian students are frequently not aware of the extent to which they create classroom conflicts. This article argues that teachers can help mainstream their Russian students into the American classroom culture by adopting a direct, pro-active teaching approach. In conclusion, the author provides practical suggestions to teachers working with Russian-speaking students. The sources of data include classroom observations, a demographic survey, and informal interviews of ESL instructors and their Russian-speaking students.**

**A**ccording to Macias (1995), Russian-speaking ESL students represent one of the fastest growing language groups in California. Many American ESL teachers, however, find themselves unprepared to deal with this unique group of learners. The following article is based on an ethnographic study I performed of recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union studying ESL in community colleges and adult education programs in the greater Sacramento area.

I became very aware of this problem in March of 1998 while attending the 32nd Annual TESOL Convention held in Seattle, Washington. There, as a result of networking with American ESL instructors employed in programs serving considerable numbers of Russian-speaking students, I learned of numerous misunderstandings and conflicts that appear to take place on a regular basis in their classrooms. A number of ESL teachers expressed frustration in dealing with Russian students who cheat on tests, demand specialized instruction, refuse to ask or

answer questions, show prejudice towards students of other ethnic backgrounds, challenge teachers' authority, and are overall aggressive and unwilling to cooperate.

As a native Russian speaker who emigrated from Russia just seven years ago, I was shocked to discover that American teachers viewed my fellow Russians so negatively. My experiences teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Russia to Russian-speaking adults had resulted in a very different attitude. Looking back on almost seven years of teaching and tutoring in Russia, I remember most of my students as highly cooperative, eager to please the teacher and to help each other, hardworking, motivated, polite, respectful, and appreciative of the instruction provided. Why is there such a discrepancy between my experience teaching EFL in Russia and the experience ESL professionals have teaching Russian students in the United States? I believe this discrepancy reflects a culture clash caused by fundamental differences between the North American and Russian cultures. These differences account for conflicts that arise in educational settings where students bring with them expectations and practices that do not fit into the American classroom culture.

Although researchers in the fields of cultural anthropology and social psychology have given a lot of attention to the study of culture and its influence on human behavior (Gudykunst, 1991; Hall, 1980; Hall & Hall, 1987; Hofstede, 1991; Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961; Trompenaars, 1993), second language research hasn't directed much attention to the role that culture plays in the dynamics of classroom interaction and in the process of second language acquisition. Empirical studies in this area are scanty and are centered mostly on the influence of culture on the choice of learning strategies used by students of different cultural backgrounds. For example, a study by O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanaraes, Russo, and Kupper (1985) showed that the cultural value learners attach to certain learning strategies influenced their classroom behavior. O'Malley et al. found that Asian but not Hispanic students resisted using cognitive and metacognitive strategies during training as these strategies violated their culturally-based reliance on rote memorization. Similarly, Politzer and McGroarty (1985) revealed culturally-based differences between their Asian and Hispanic subjects in their reported choice of learning strategy. Finally, other studies have investigated the effects of learners' beliefs about language learning (many of which are culture specific) on second language acquisition (Abraham & Vann, 1987; Horowitz, 1987; Wenden, 1986; Wenden, 1987). However, none of these studies have provided a comprehensive explanation of the nature of these beliefs and their underlying cultural assumptions.

The inception of global market economies in the last two decades has made understanding cultural differences essential for success in international business and intercultural communication (Fisher, 1988; Gudykunst, 1991; Hall & Hall, 1990; Harms, 1973; Harris & Moran, 1991; Hoecklin, 1995; Mole, 1991; Skabelund, 1993; Stewart & Bennet, 1991). Realizing that cultural misunderstandings can jeopardize business success, Brake and Walker (1995) offered a classification of cultural orientations that makes it feasible to study a given culture and to compare different cultures.

Using Brake and Walker's cultural orientations, Buckley (1998) developed a framework for studying the classroom impact of different cultural characteristics. This framework is of great pedagogical value because it allows for the experimental study of a particular culture as well as for comparisons across cultures. Unfortunately, there haven't been any conclusive studies to date comparing cultural assumptions that underlie classroom behavior of the Russian students with the cultural orientations of their American ESL teachers.

Most of the literature on Russian culture that I reviewed did not further an understanding of the role culture plays in determining classroom behavior since the sources focused primarily on Russian history and the ideological differences between the American and Soviet systems. Richmond (1992) provided a useful description of the Russian culture; however, his book didn't address the issues of how different cultural characteristics may manifest themselves in the classroom. Knutson (1997) described Russian culture using Hofstede's (1991) and Kluckhohn's (1961) value orientations, but the description is based on personal, anecdotal experience and is not founded on empirical research. Thus, based on this survey of the literature, it appears that research on Russian student behaviors, in ESL settings or in Russia, is unavailable. It is clear, therefore, that more formal studies such as the current one are needed to support and expand on the anecdotal evidence to date.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of my project was to study how cultural differences between Russian students and their American teachers lead to conflict situations in ESL classrooms. I further sought to offer practical suggestions to ESL teachers working with Russian students, thus enabling them to deal effectively with potential conflicts.

### **Subjects**

Two groups of subjects participated in this project: American ESL teachers and Russian-speaking ESL students. There were 20 ESL teachers (10 teaching at the adult school and 10 at the community college level). Among 23 Russian-speaking ESL students, 11 studied at an adult school and 12 at a community college. The students' ages ranged from 18 to 85 years old. Both teachers and students lived in the greater Sacramento area.

### **Scope of the Study**

In an attempt to include a variety of institutional settings, three community colleges, four adult schools, and a vocational training center were sites for the study.

### **Data Collection**

The students filled out a demographic survey to help me compile a demographic portrait of the Russian-speaking ESL students in the Sacramento area. A total of 147 students were surveyed during the fall 1998 and spring 1999 semesters, with most responses collected in the fall of 1998.

I interviewed both ESL students and teachers using a protocol of 10 questions (See Appendices A and B). Most interviews were taped and notes were taken concurrently with the tape recordings. Data analysis was carried out based on handwritten notes.

### **Data Analysis**

All of the conflicts mentioned by the subjects were extracted from the corpora and classified into categories. Based on my prior knowledge of the types of conflicts arising with Russians, I proposed eight potential areas of conflict: (a) cheating or plagiarism, (b) verbally aggressive and uncooperative classroom behavior, (c) obsession with grammar and bilingual dictionaries, (d) conflicts with other ethnic groups, (e) conflicts involving Russian male students, (f) conflicts based on universalistic versus particularistic distinction (Trompenaars, 1993); (g) disruptive behavior such as interrupting and speaking too much Russian, and (h) resistance to group participation. In analyzing the data, one additional type of conflict was identified: (i) conflicts due to strong religious beliefs.

In addition to classifying the conflicts, responses to interview questions 1 to 6 and 10 were recorded and analyzed for trends (Appendix A). Table 1 displays the instances of each category reported by the adult school and community college teachers interviewed

**Table 1**  
**Instances of Conflicts Arising With Russian Students**

<b>Conflict Categories</b>	<b>Adult School</b>	<b>Community College</b>
Cheating or plagiarism	5	8
Verbally aggressive and uncooperative	3	8
Obsession with grammar and bilingual dictionaries	6	6
Conflicts with other ethnic groups	4	7
Conflicts with Russian men	4	3
Conflicts based on universalistic versus particularistic distinction	3	5
Disruptive behavior	3	9
Resistance to group participation	0	0
Conflicts due to strong religious beliefs	1	4

## Organizing the Data

After reviewing all of my interview notes and tapes, I analyzed the incidents of conflicts and organized them into my pre-defined categories. I found plenty of examples of conflicts of each of the types identified in the Data Analysis section, except for “Resistance to Group Participation.”

Contrary to my expectations, Russians themselves stated that they love working in groups with other students. Although the teachers agreed that the Russians were a very cohesive group, they said that the Russian students loved mixed-group discussions when the teacher assigned them to work with students from other ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, the teachers stated that the Russians were very active in discussions and asked good questions, but they had a tendency to monopolize the discussions.

## Cultural Description of Each Conflict

Before discussing the findings of my study, I would like to offer a cultural description of each of the eight conflict types supported by my study. This description will consist of a cultural explanation and specific examples of each type of conflict. The cultural explanation is based on the results of the demographic survey conducted as part of this study as well as on my own knowledge of the Russian culture.

### *Cheating or Plagiarism*

**Cultural explanation.** In the Russian educational system, students view their instructors more as “adversaries” than as “friends” or “partners.” Students feel a moral obligation to help their fellow students “at war” with the instructor. Cheating, therefore, is not considered a moral vice but is a social phenomenon, a sign of camaraderie among students. It is important to remember that a student who declines to help his or her classmates is labeled “teacher’s pet” and may be boycotted or even physically hurt. In addition, the very intense nature of Russian exams, whereby it is possible for a student to do passing work during the semester and then fail the entire course by flunking the final exam, gives students further incentive to cheat.

**Examples.** Conflict over cheating and plagiarism was mentioned most frequently by my informants. Although many of them conceded that American students, as well as students from other cultural backgrounds, also cheat, they uniformly acknowledged that Russian-speaking students cheat much more frequently and do it less secretly compared to other students. Many teachers were outraged by the Russians’ blatant cheating: leaning over and looking at someone else’s test, whispering the answers, or talking about the test while in the teacher’s presence. Teachers also found it very irritating when a Russian student would ask the teacher or tutor during the test if a particular answer was correct.

One teacher relayed a different type of cheating that occurred when a student tried to help other students by giving them the essay question in advance. In this particular case, the student asked to be excused and left the

class after receiving the question. The teacher became suspicious and followed the student to another room where that student was sharing the essay question with two other students.

Different types of cheating occurred in the ESL lab setting. There, Russian students were often seen coming in, punching their code to register on a computer, then walking out and coming back a few hours later to check out as if they had spent all the time in the lab. Russian students were also caught working on homework for other classes in the lab and copying answers from other students' packets.

Many teachers were particularly disheartened by their Russian students' open denial of the fact that they were cheating. When caught red-handed, they would often say that they were just making notes or checking the other person's work. Often, students would treat their cheating casually and even make jokes about it. In one class, after the teacher noticed that the students were craning their necks to look at other peoples' papers, one student humorously remarked, "We must have a lot of giraffes in class." The joke was not well-received by the teacher.

### ***Verbally Aggressive Behavior and Uncooperative Classroom Behavior***

***Cultural explanation.*** This type of conflict stems from the differences in communication style between the North American and Russian cultures. On a communication style continuum that goes from the least direct to the most direct, Americans would be somewhere in the middle, whereas the Russians would be at the extreme right of the continuum. In conversations, Russians are very expressive and show strong feelings. Russians emphasize what they think, not how they feel. They respect honesty, sincerity, and straightforwardness, and place less value on seeking harmony. Russians enjoy debates and are very good at them. They often argue just for the sake of arguing, trying to get to the principle of things.

***Examples.*** Conflict resulting from Russian-speaking students being overly direct occurred when they asked their teachers questions such as, "Do you believe in God?" or, "Are you a Christian?" Similarly, Russian students were often perceived as rude or pushy when they used extremely direct language such as, "I don't want to do this" or, "I want paper." As a group, they were characterized as having strong personalities, being very vocal, and thus frequently monopolizing discussions. Teachers reported that in classroom discussions, the Russian students would frequently dominate students from other cultures where acceptable classroom behavior was more restrained.

Uncooperative student behavior was also included in this type of conflict. For example, some teachers noticed that Russian students would openly do homework in class. Afterwards, they would turn it in to the teacher and expect the teacher to accept it.

Teachers also noticed that their Russian students very directly expressed their dissatisfaction or frustration with the teacher. They would refuse to do an activity if they thought it was not worth doing or to comply with a rule if

they thought it didn't make sense. For example, students in one adult education program wouldn't let the teacher separate spouses into different groups even though they belonged in different levels. Even after the teacher explained the necessity for placing students at appropriate levels, the students were very vocal about not wanting to move and continued to refuse to comply with the teacher's request.

The classroom behavior of the Russian students was characterized as aggressive when they sided with other Russian speakers against the teacher on a particular issue. For example, if one student confronted the teacher about a grade, other students would defend the first student and express their own concerns without giving the teacher a chance to give explanations or justifications. The teachers sometimes interpreted this type of behavior as a power struggle between the teacher on the one side and the students on the other. Many teachers mentioned being intimidated by their Russian students, especially when they turned as a group against the teacher.

### ***Obsession with Grammar and Bilingual Dictionaries***

***Cultural explanation.*** The survey conducted within the scope of this study showed that 56% of the participating Russian-speaking students had prior experience learning English or another foreign language in their home countries. This means that they had expectations about learning a foreign language, expectations that may have differed from those of their American instructors. In foreign language classes in the former Soviet Union, the study of grammar and vocabulary was emphasized. Students were expected to memorize big chunks of text, to memorize lists of vocabulary words, and to study grammar in depth using deductive approaches. Translating from Russian into English was important; therefore, the use of dictionaries was encouraged.

***Examples.*** Conflicts over the teaching of grammar and the use of bilingual dictionaries occurred when the Russian students challenged the teachers about grammar or vocabulary points. Sometimes they would refer to a book that had a different answer from the teacher's, sometimes actually bringing the book to prove their point. One Russian student insisted that the definition of "the English Channel" was wrong because, according to his Russian dictionary, the right word to refer to that body of water should be "strait," not "channel." He kept arguing, saying that the map was wrong and the teacher's book was wrong. He disrupted the class for twenty minutes over this issue.

Many teachers stated that Russian students wanted complete and direct answers to specific grammar questions and became very frustrated if the teacher failed to provide an adequate explanation. All the teachers agreed that their Russian-speaking students were a lot more focused on grammar than their other students. They wanted grammar instruction and were good at learning grammar rules and then applying them. These students preferred drills and paper-and-pencil activities. They loved fill-in-the-blank grammar exercises and fixing mistakes on the board. They also expected sufficient



teacher feedback and preferred that all of their errors be corrected, both in speech and in writing. It also seems true that, at least at the adult school level where grades are not assigned, Russian students liked quizzes and tests. One teacher mentioned that his students liked their exam every Friday; they took it seriously and loved to get feedback and learn from the exam. They also had difficulty getting away from direct translation and wanted to know the meaning of every word, heavily relying on their bilingual dictionaries.

### ***Conflicts with Other Ethnic Groups***

***Cultural explanation.*** According to the results of the demographic survey, 84% of these Russian-speaking ESL students belonged to the East-European Slavic ethnic group that includes Russians, Ukrainians, and Belorussians. They came from regions where their ethnic group most likely constituted the majority of the population. Thus, they had never had to deal with the challenges of a multi-ethnic society. A small group of students came from ethnic republics of the former Soviet Union where they were either considered inferior, as in the Baltic republics, or superior, as in the Middle Eastern republics such as Uzbekistan. As a result of this background, the multi-cultural society in the United States that claims equality for every race was a new experience for these students. They had little knowledge about the culture of many of the traditional California minority groups such as the Chinese or Mexican cultures. Many of them had never seen an African-American in person before coming to the United States.

***Examples.*** Although none of my informants could name an ethnic group with which the Russians seemed to have particular problems, some teachers noticed that the Russians seemed to be reluctant to be in groups with Asians due to difficulty in understanding their accents. Accent was also the reason some Russian students reported not wanting to work with Vietnamese tutors in the lab. One teacher observed that the Russian students tended to give up on their Asian group mates who were generally quieter and not always ready to share their opinions on a topic with their less-inhibited Russian partners.

In addition, most of the teachers stated that the Russian students' tendency to speak Russian excessively during class made the other students feel uncomfortable. Some teachers noted the Russians had "an air of superiority" and were unwilling to socialize with other students. Other Russian students demonstrated prejudice and bias towards a specific group. For example, some teachers stated that Russian-speaking students were heard saying negative and stereotypical things about a particular race, such as calling all African-Americans "lazy and dishonest." Fortunately, all my subjects agreed that these feelings of prejudice were much more pronounced in students who had been in the American educational system the shortest amount of time and that better integration with other students evolved with time. The consensus was that the longer the Russian students had been on campus, the less prejudice they showed towards other ethnic groups.

### ***Conflicts Involving Russian Male Students***

***Cultural explanation.*** Russian men feel superior to women. Traditionally, gender roles in Russia have been clearly defined, and some jobs and responsibilities, such as household duties, are considered strictly woman's work.

***Examples.*** Gender conflicts fall into two types: (a) reluctance of Russian men to participate in certain activities that they consider beneath themselves and (b) open confrontations with female teachers. Several adult education teachers reported that Russian men especially lacked the discipline to concentrate and do the work required of them in the classroom. They seemed to be more interested in technical matters and often were characterized as wanting to play around and visit during class time.

Males specifically were reported to hate rote work such as copying sentences or repeating after the teacher. They also didn't see "fun" things as useful and openly refused to participate in certain activities that they deemed childish or silly. Thus, they were not open to art projects or activities involving music, such as singing. One time a whole group of Russian men refused to participate in making decorations even though learning was involved (learning colors, following directions). They called the activity "garbage" and made it clear that it wasn't a man's thing to do.

Most major confrontations reported in the course of my study occurred between female American teachers and Russian men. For instance, one teacher reported that the only time she felt uncomfortable in a classroom situation was when a Russian man constantly challenged her in class. He would go to the board and write things down as if teaching the class. The teacher felt that he demonstrated he didn't automatically respect her as the teacher and wouldn't respect her until she earned it.

A different teacher reported that the only Russian student she had ever had a problem with was male. This particular student refused to read the assigned novel in class, came unprepared, refused to make a presentation based on the novel, and didn't contribute at all during the class discussions. In addition, the student developed an irritating habit of making an unacceptable and impolite disapproving sound when he didn't agree with another student. He also complained to the teacher's supervisor about her policy on late papers. The teacher characterized him as belligerent, defiant, uncooperative, and bordering on threatening.

### ***Conflicts Based on the Universalistic versus Particularistic Distinction***

***Cultural explanation.*** Trompenaars (1993) distinguishes universalistic versus particularistic cultures. In cultures that are predominantly universalistic, such as the United States, what is right and good can be defined, and there are no exceptions to the rules. In cultures that are predominantly particularistic, such as Russia and the former Soviet Union, what is right and good depends on the circumstances; rules are subject to interpretation. According to Trompenaars (1993), Russia and the United States are at opposite ends of the universalistic to particularistic continuum. Whereas Americans have a

tendency to adhere to rules on principle (such as standing in line or stopping at a stop sign when no cars are present), Russians tend to expect rules to be flexible depending on the situation.

**Examples.** This type of conflict occurs when students ask for special favors and refuse to accept “no” as an answer. For example, one Russian student became very frustrated with the teacher because she didn’t agree that a particular rule was meant to be broken. Specifically, the student wanted to borrow a tape that the teacher wasn’t supposed to lend to students because it was used for tests. Although the teacher explained several times that it was against school policy to lend the tape, the student persisted in asking. When the teacher finally mentioned her supervisor as the authority in this matter, the student simply said, “We don’t have to tell the supervisor, do we?”

Many teachers mentioned the tendency for their Russian students to appeal to them as a person and not as a teacher. When teachers tried to hold students accountable, they made excuses such as “I was under pressure” or “My baby was sick” and generally expected the teacher to interpret the rule in the context of a human relationship and make an exception. One teacher almost set off a riot when she introduced a new class rule regarding absences to her Russian students. According to the rule, students would only be allowed six absences during the semester; the reason for the absence didn’t matter and the teacher wasn’t going to accept a note or explanation. The Russian students became upset because the new rule threatened their particularistic value orientation by not requiring the teacher to evaluate absences in the context of a situation (e.g., their baby was sick and it was their seventh absence)

### ***Disruptive Behavior such as Interrupting and Speaking Too Much Russian***

**Cultural explanation.** Russian students are accustomed to very teacher-centered instruction. The relationship between teacher and students is very formal and students are expected to show great respect for their teachers. During class, students are only allowed to talk or contribute to discussion when called on. Students may overreact to the informal, student-centered style of instruction practiced in American classrooms and mistakenly interpret the perceived lack of order and hierarchy as anarchy.

**Examples.** Almost without exception, teachers who participated in my study reported that their Russian-speaking students liked to speak Russian during class. Most teachers said that they didn’t interfere when students used Russian among themselves to explain and clarify. Conflicts occurred during a listening-speaking course when students spoke Russian on unrelated subjects when they were supposed to be working on their oral English skills. Conflicts also occurred when students spoke Russian in a group with other students who didn’t speak the language, resulting in the others feeling excluded.

Although some teachers reported that the Russian students demonstrated traditional formal classroom behavior, such as raising their hand to speak or to ask permission to leave the class—behavior that seems out of place in the more informal atmosphere of an American classroom—more

teachers complained of the opposite tendencies. They mentioned that the specific requirements that are difficult for Russian students in an American classroom—for example, not talking while the teacher is talking, not cheating, raising a hand to ask a question, not doing homework during class—paradoxically are the very practices they *should* be used to given the more traditional classrooms of their home countries. It seems that it is very hard for the Russian students to understand that the American classroom is a mixture of structure and freedom. Coming from very rule-governed classrooms, they may find it difficult, at first, not to have to do the things they were used to (like raising a hand before speaking). As they learn more about the American classroom culture, which is so much freer than what they are used to, they may struggle to find a balance between what is acceptable and what isn't.

### ***Conflicts Due to Strong Religious Beliefs***

***Cultural explanation.*** The vast majority of Russian-speaking ESL students in the Sacramento area have strong religious beliefs. The survey conducted in conjunction with this study revealed that 75% of the students are Baptist or Pentecostal Christians. In addition, 13% of the students identified themselves with other Christian religions while only 3% of the students called themselves Atheists. Coming from a society without religious freedom, these students may feel that in the United States they should be free to talk about their faith in any setting, including school. They may also feel that the Christian mandate to spread the gospel gives them the right to talk openly about religion with their teachers and classmates.

***Examples.*** Religious beliefs caused conflicts when the students refused to participate in certain activities such as Halloween celebrations. In one classroom, the students had such a strong reaction to Halloween symbols (witches, ghosts, etc.) that they threw the decorations on the floor and even left class. In another classroom, the students refused to read a newspaper or listen to television as part of an assignment because these activities were not allowed by their church. When one teacher chose the topic of the future for a research paper and asked the students to write about changes that will occur in the future, one student said she couldn't do the assignment because Christ's impending second coming meant that there was not much of a future left.

Conflicts due to strong religious beliefs manifested themselves profoundly in writing classes. Some teachers reported that the students were not comfortable with certain essay topics. For example, the topic of whether or not people should live together before they marry caused a strong negative reaction. Many teachers mentioned that the Russian students believed that the Bible could be used as the sole supporting document in their essays and struggled to find other support for their positions. In addition, students were very surprised when some of the teachers didn't let them quote from the Bible at all.

## Findings

My first conclusion concerns the Russian students' perceptions of their impact in an ESL classroom. The analysis of my data revealed that the Russian students don't seem to be aware of the extent to which they create conflicts. With very few exceptions, most of them stated that they had no conflicts with their teachers or with other students in the class. Therefore, the discussion of the conflicts presented in this paper is solely based on the data collected from the American ESL teachers who participated in the study.

### *Conflicts with Other Ethnic Groups*

Although many teachers pointed to the difficulty the Russian students have in working with other ethnic groups, both students and teachers indicated that there are more conflicts within the Russian-speaking group itself than with other students. Many teachers perceived tension between different ethnic groups of the Russian-speaking student population and between individual students. Specifically, they reported loud arguments in Russian, between groups of students or between certain individuals, that left the teacher guessing about the nature of the argument.

It is important to note that some of the teachers didn't notice any conflicts between Russian students and students from other cultural backgrounds. They characterized their Russian speakers as respectful and polite to other students and stated that they got along well with other ethnic groups. One teacher mentioned that her Russian-speaking students were very kind to the Vietnamese and on one occasion patiently helped those students with less educational background to organize binders with dividers. This and similar testimonies of good relationships between the Russian students and students from other ethnic backgrounds should be encouraging to teachers, suggesting that emphasis on mutual respect and cooperation produces positive results.

### *Conflicts Due to Religious Beliefs*

In analyzing my data, I identified a conflict resulting from the Russian-speaking students' strong religious beliefs. These students, the vast majority of whom are either Baptist or Pentecostal, were characterized as "aggressive Christians" by one teacher. Classroom conflicts arose when the students asked their teachers directly about their beliefs, refused to participate in certain activities, and used the Bible as the only reference in their essays. According to one teacher, the more the students were fundamental in their religious beliefs, the more they were close-knit and reluctant to establish contact with other students in the class. Statements like this one suggest important implications for second language acquisition. If students choose to interact mainly with those who share their language and their beliefs, their opportunities for using the target language for communication in the classroom will remain limited, which will, in time, hinder their language acquisition.

Another interesting finding was that teachers who shared the Russian students' Christian beliefs had a better bond with them. These teachers mentioned

that as Christians, they identified very strongly with the Russian students' family values and with their desire to lead a life pleasing to God. They also felt that sharing faith gave them more freedom to confront the students on some moral issues such as cheating and staying on welfare. Overall, these teachers characterized the Russian students as wonderful and said that they enjoyed working with them. It could be that having a common belief in God smoothed over the cultural differences that existed between the American teachers and their Russian students, leading these teachers not to perceive conflicts.

### *Assimilation into the American Classroom Culture*

Surprisingly again, my results showed that the Russians seemed to assimilate into the American classroom culture much more easily than other students, especially more easily than the South-East Asians and Hispanics. The majority of the teachers mentioned that it took the Russian-speaking students a year or less to feel comfortable in the American classroom and to understand what was required of them. The teachers ascribed the students' easy assimilation into American classrooms to their exposure to formal schooling in their home countries, stating that they bring with them traditional ideas about classroom behavior that fit well into American classroom culture. According to one teacher, the Russians understood homework and classroom rules and were programmed to be good students.

One reason the Russian students' experienced relatively easy assimilation into American classroom practices might be due to the relative sense of belonging and acceptance that they feel in the U.S. because they are white. P. McNulty (personal communication, February 29, 2000) suggested that "in spite of their immigrant status, and the fact that Russian culture is often very different from American culture, Russian students may find that white teachers may tend, subconsciously, to treat white ESL students, including Russians, as people with whom they anticipate having a more comfortable, almost 'insider' connection." Although the issue of "white privilege" wasn't explicitly raised during the interviews, I felt that it was alluded to by some of my informants, especially when physical likeness was used as the explanation for the similarities between the two cultures.

### *Language Learning Abilities and Language Difficulties*

Analysis of the answers to questions numbered 2 and 3 of the informal interview (Appendix A) showed that while some teachers felt that Russian students were similar to other student groups in their range of abilities and learner styles, others felt that the Russian students learned faster and better than other students. Many teachers attributed the Russian students' success in language learning to their strong literary background, which trained them to be particularly adept at analyzing. Some even said that the Russians were much more successful in language learning compared to the non-Russian students. It seemed that the Russian students received the highest evaluations of their language-learning abilities when they were compared with the South-

East Asians, many of whom were not literate in their first language and hadn't had formal schooling prior to coming to the United States.

As far as language difficulties are concerned, the teachers almost unanimously mentioned difficulties with spelling, word order, articles, prepositions, verb tense errors (especially with the perfect tenses), and singular versus plural noun errors. In pronunciation, the teachers specified difficulties with the following consonants: /θ,ð/, /r/, and the distinction between /v/ and /w/. They also reported difficulties in both articulation of and discrimination between the following vowels: the low front vowel /æ/ as in "pan" and the mid front vowel /ɛ/ as in "pen," the low mid-central vowel /ʌ/ as in "sub" and the mid-central reduced vowel /ə/ as in "subtract," and the lax high-front vowel /i/ as in "bit" and the tense high-front vowel /iy/ as in "beat."

In language modalities, some teachers noticed the most difficulties with writing. They said that many students were unable to avoid direct translation. They used Russian dictionaries too much and often selected inappropriate words. However, another group of teachers felt that the Russian students wrote much better than other students and had the most difficulties with speaking. These teachers claimed that their Russian students didn't speak as well as they wrote and were very self-conscious about their accents. My Russian-speaking informants confirmed that although writing in English is difficult, their major problem is speaking, mainly because they have limited opportunities to communicate with native speakers of English.

### *Preferred Types of Activities*

American teachers were also asked for the types of learning activities their Russian students preferred. This question produced the most uniform responses. Without exception, the teachers stated that their Russian-speaking students responded the best to drills and paper-and-pencil activities. The teachers reported that the Russian students loved fill-in-the-blank grammar exercises and fixing mistakes on the board. It seemed as if paper-and-pencil activities were preferred even in a listening-speaking class. One teacher mentioned that the Russian students seemed to like the physicality of paper-and-pencil activities. Although their ESL lab had excellent computer programs, Russian students didn't like using them because they couldn't touch and feel them or take them home. These preferences may be explained by the students' prior exposure to language-learning activities in their home countries where teaching tools other than paper and pencil were limited, and computers for educational purposes didn't exist.

Many teachers also noticed that their Russian-speaking students liked writing on the chalkboard. Some favorite activities included fixing mistakes in sentences or writing quotes. These preferences also reflected what the students were used to in their home country. Adult education teachers also noticed that the Russian students seemed to like hands-on activities such as puzzles and competitive games. In fact, many adult education teachers felt that their Russian students appreciated all kinds of activities unless they



deemed them too elementary (for example, pronunciation practice involving minimal pairs). It seems as if the students resisted activities that they viewed as insulting their intelligence, often showing their resistance by facial expressions and whispering to other students.

Community college teachers also mentioned that the Russian students liked lectures and asked good questions afterwards. They also liked answering questions about a written text and responding to ideas in a writing class. However, they were extremely unenthusiastic about participating in peer reviews and preferred the teacher to be the expert. They also seemed nervous about presentations in front of the class but always met the challenge and did a good job. Overall, they seemed to utilize their first language to clarify and check for understanding effectively.

Another common finding was that although the Russian students appeared very serious-minded, motivated, and eager to get a good grade, in striving for success, they tended to compromise what they would do to achieve their goal. Cheating is one example of a specific behavior that seems to be driven by the desire to do well. To the frustration of their teachers, the Russian students didn't seem to realize that cheating would not help them learn the language and was not beneficial in the long run.

### *Similarity with American Culture*

Another surprise was the finding that the Russian students and American teachers viewed each other as being culturally very similar. Answers to my last interview question yielded almost uniform responses about the similarities between Russians and Americans. In fact, according to some informants, class differences within each culture are more pronounced than differences between the two cultures. In other words, middle-class Americans will feel much closer to middle-class Russians than to lower-class Americans. (Class in the former Soviet Union was based solely on one's education and occupation; the middle-class, also called the intelligentsia, included anybody with a higher education, for example, from a university or institute). Similarly, middle-class Russians find more similarities with educated Americans than with uneducated people from their own country.

I was very surprised that many teachers mentioned the physical resemblance between Russians (who are "white and physically big") and Caucasian Americans as the main reason for the cultural similarities. Interestingly, one teacher mentioned that because of their European background and their physical similarities with Caucasian Americans, she expected the Russians to be culturally similar as well and therefore expected them to act as if they were Americans. When cultural differences manifested through conflict, it surprised the teacher more and she may have reacted more strongly than to conflicts with students from other backgrounds.

Among other reasons given for the perceived similarities between these two groups was the value placed on education in both cultures. The Russian students were characterized as educated, sophisticated



about world events, and loving literature and understanding it deeply. Most teachers claimed that their Russian students assimilated easily into the American classroom culture and understood classroom procedures due to regular schooling in their home countries. Another reason mentioned for the similarities was the similar level of technological development in the United States and the former Soviet Union. Russian students were generally familiar with technology and didn't need to be told, for example, that a computer is useful.

Some teachers also mentioned that they viewed Russian and American cultures as similar because both cultures share a Christian tradition, have the same holidays, and hold the same family values. American teachers who shared the Christian faith with their Russian-speaking students said that their conservatism and desire to live a godly life was very similar to the American Christian community. The Russian students were also characterized as opinionated, stubborn, direct, not afraid to share their opinions or to speak up when something wasn't right—characteristics that many Americans also possess. On a personal level, many, although not all, teachers considered the Russians similar to Americans in being open, friendly, sociable, hospitable, outgoing, boisterous, and inquisitive. Some also mentioned the similar work ethics, similar food, and similar sense of humor.

### *Differences With American Culture*

Even though the Russians were perceived as being more similar to Americans than to any other cultural group, my informants were able to identify specific areas of differences between the two cultures. In fact, the very same attributes that were mentioned as similarities were also mentioned as differences because the Russians seemed to possess them to a greater degree than did the Americans. For example, the Russians were characterized as *more* conservative in both dress and political beliefs, *more* religious, *more* family-oriented, *more* direct (if not too direct), *more* respectful toward those in authority, and *more* hospitable than Americans.

Many teachers also observed that their Russian-speaking students were a lot more group-oriented and less individualistic than Americans. The Russian students valued group consensus and had very close friends. They were willing to do anything to help a friend to pass a class, which was exactly why cheating occurred on such a large scale, according to some teachers. The Russian students also seemed to oppose change and didn't accept it as intrinsically positive. For example, in one class, students felt frustrated when a teacher announced at the beginning of the term that they needed a certain number of lab hours and then later in the semester reduced the requirement. Other reported differences were that Russians didn't like ambiguity, preferred definitive responses, had a lack of initiative, were not accustomed to having choices and to the freedom to make decisions, and very often preferred having the teacher make decisions for them. These traits are probably

explained by the nature of the Soviet system, under which several generations of Russians had lived. These students were used to the government telling them what to do and to the teacher being the ultimate authority and expert in the classroom.

The Russians' communication style also seemed to differ from the American communicative style. Unlike Americans—who appreciate short, precise answers—the Russian students liked to digress and tended to take a long time to communicate their viewpoint. For example, one teacher mentioned that her Russian students tended to digress when given a topic to discuss. This teacher also mentioned that when given grammar explanations, these students tended to ask questions about other related grammar points, getting progressively further from the initial subject, so that the teacher constantly had to bring them back to the topic.

Another difference teachers noticed had to do with physical proximity. The Russian students seemed to stand much closer to others, closer than Americans find comfortable. Among themselves, the Russians were also more physical and would frequently shake hands and hug. Some teachers noticed that the Russian students weren't as concerned as the Americans about personal hygiene.

Some teachers also noticed that compared to Americans, the Russians didn't pay much attention to the number of calories in food and were more concerned with the nutritional value. They generally spent more time cooking food and enjoyed a hearty meal.

One teacher found this group of students “the happiest people I have ever seen.” They appeared peaceful and content, which the teacher ascribed to their religious devotion. This particular teacher shared this anecdote with me: When she asked her Russian students to describe the one thing in their lives they would like to change, they answered that their lives were perfect and they wouldn't want to change anything.

### *The Russians' Perception of How They are Viewed*

My study also revealed that the Russian speakers as a group are (a) aware that they don't have the best reputation, especially in community colleges and (b) are very much concerned about their reputation. A few years ago, a letter appeared on the bulletin board of one of the community colleges, written in Russian from Russians to Russians. The letter stated that the amount of cheating by the Russians was making them look bad and that it wasn't a Christian thing to do. Since that posting, cheating has decreased at that particular college. I also sensed a degree of frustration from the Russian students who were serious about their education with their expatriots who seemed to be attending college purely for financial reasons. Those students who were working hard to find a job and get off welfare felt that many others who were taking advantage of social programs and not putting forth an effort to become independent made the whole group look bad in the eyes of Americans.

### *Impact on the Pedagogical Choices of Teachers*

Finally, I noticed that the actions and expectations of the Russian students influenced their teachers' pedagogical choices and behavior. For example, due to her Russian students' resistance to art projects, one teacher started minimizing these activities in her class. A whole department eliminated the study and celebration of Halloween because of the Russians' strong opposition to the "ungodly" holiday. In another class, Russian students found a Cambodian ghost story offensive. The teacher decided not to use it again. Another teacher confessed that he avoided jokes about "sin" (drinking, smoking, etc.) in a class with a substantial number of Russian students out of respect for their religious beliefs. A writing teacher at a community college tried to be sensitive to the students' religious beliefs in choosing essay topics for the class. Some teachers mentioned that they also anticipated their Russian students' questions about the validity of different activities by providing explanations and rationale, something they wouldn't necessarily provide for other groups of students.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

Based on the results of my study, I would like to offer the following implications to ESL teachers with substantial numbers of Russian-speaking students:

**1. Teachers need to separate the Russians from each other and make them work with other ethnic groups.** My data shows that given a choice, the Russian students picked other Russians for partners. However, the students themselves stated that they found it most useful when the teacher separated them, forcing them to work with students who didn't share a common language.

In addition, small group activities should be carefully planned. Several teachers stated that their Russian-speaking students didn't like *unstructured* group activities and reacted to them by straying from the assigned task or talking in Russian on different topics. If a small group activity is planned, it is better if the students have time to prepare. For example, let them read an article at home in preparation for a class discussion.

**2. Teachers need to be tough and very direct about cheating.** The interviews showed that punitive measures, such as taking points off or failing the student, help reduce the amount of cheating. It is also helpful to let students know at the beginning of the course that cheating won't be tolerated. Direct rules explaining expectations about cheating stated *in direct language* are essential. Teachers might also try the following practical suggestions: (a) prepare two versions of each test (version A and version B); (b) before administering tests, collect blue books, put a stamp on them, and then distribute them directly to the students on the day of the test; (c) circulate throughout the room during testing.

**3. Teachers need to understand that many of the Russian students' attitudes toward other racial groups are a product of ignorance and do not necessarily reflect blatant prejudice.** The Russian students I interviewed all

said that they have made many friends with people from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds both in and out of class. They said that they enjoyed learning about other cultures and traditions. Teachers, therefore, should use caution when labeling their Russian students as “racist” and realize the difficulties the Russian students have figuring out how the American multicultural society works.

**4. Teachers need to explain to students the social consequences of showing prejudice to students from other cultures or different lifestyles.** Russians don’t understand racial and ethnic “taboos” and “political correctness” and need to be taught these concepts explicitly.

**5. Teachers should include activities that allow Russian students to get to know other students on a personal level.** Talking to classmates about daily life develops tolerance and understanding. Potlucks and parties are good activities for students to meet more informally. Grouping students into multiethnic groups by gender and age also encourages them to find common topics of discussion.

**6. Teachers should not let themselves be drawn into classroom arguments with their Russian students.** Russians like to argue for the sake of arguing, and teachers can save themselves a lot of frustration by postponing the argument until after class.

**7. Teachers should teach Russian-speaking students to use indirect language.** For example, students can be taught to say, “I don’t think you are right” instead of “You are wrong” (which is, by the way, perfectly appropriate if directly translated into Russian). Teachers working with Russian students need to know that the Russian language doesn’t use hedges and polite formulas to the extent that English does. Sentences like “I don’t want it” or “Give me my book” might sound rude or demanding in English yet are totally acceptable in Russian. Therefore, polite request formulas need to be taught.

**8. ESL lessons should include teaching sociolinguistic competence or the sociocultural rules of language and discourse.** According to Canale and Swain (1980), these rules constitute an important part of communicative competence. Teaching sociolinguistic competence should include teaching rules of non-verbal communication, such as appropriate gestures and eye contact in specific situations, as well as the importance of a smile to show friendliness. Interactive classroom activities, such as role plays, are one way to develop sociolinguistic competence in students as they provide opportunities for natural language use. For example, the teacher can model appropriate methods for resolving conflicts and misunderstandings by giving students a scenario such as, “You are not satisfied with a grade on your recent test. What should you do?” The teacher can then lead a discussion about proper ways to respond to this situation, acting as a facilitator and a cultural informant by providing students with sociocultural information and language.

**9. As much as possible, teachers should adopt a *pro-active approach* in dealing with their Russian-speaking students.** Having cultural knowledge about where conflicts are more likely to occur, teachers can anticipate these conflicts and raise the students’ awareness of culturally acceptable norms of classroom behavior with the help of role-plays or classroom discussions.

**10. Teachers need to make expectations and rules *explicit* and state them *in writing*.** For example, if there has been a problem with students doing homework during class in the past, teachers should state in their syllabi that homework is collected at the beginning of class. Teachers should be explicit about their classroom policies, for example, how they will treat late papers. Seeing rules *in writing*, Russian students will be more likely to treat them as laws to be obeyed. Teachers need to remember that Americans have a universalistic view of law and assume that if there is a rule, it can't be broken. In contrast, Russians have a particularistic view of law; even though a rule has been explained to them before, they may test it to determine if the same rule applies to the new context.

**11. Teachers should be strict and non-compromising when it comes to enforcing those rules that have been directly stated in writing.** Making an exception for an individual student gives that student the right to continue the unacceptable behavior. For example, if a teacher who requires that homework be turned in at the beginning of class sees a student working on homework in class, the teacher should refuse to accept the homework. Assuming the policy is consistently enforced, after a few attempts students will stop doing homework in class.

**12. Teachers should hold their Russian students to high standards of classroom behavior.** Teachers need to become stricter, more direct, more demanding, and less compromising in dealing with these students. Russians are accustomed to teachers who use corporal punishment or at least severe shaming in the classroom. In the United States, teachers are not accustomed to disciplining students; they try to give students the benefit of the doubt and appeal to their respect for regulations, a respect which Russian students simply don't possess.

Some ideas for how teachers can adapt to Russian students and Russian students can adapt to ESL classrooms are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
**Suggestions for ESL Teachers and Their Russian Students**

<b>Suggestions for Teachers</b>	<b>Suggestions for Students</b>
State rules directly and explicitly	Learn indirect language
State rules in writing	Practice formulas of politeness
Don't make exceptions	Practice small talk
Don't let students manipulate you by appealing to your feelings	Practice smiling and eye contact
Don't hesitate to confront students about their unacceptable behavior	Give others permission to have a different opinion

## Suggestions for Future Research

In this study, I have investigated the role of culture in creating conflicts between a select group of Russian-speaking ESL students and their American teachers. I have offered pedagogical implications for teachers working with substantial numbers of Russian-speaking students and have shown that these conflicts generally arise due to a cultural mismatch between the students and their teachers. I have also shown that another possible cause of these conflicts could be due to different assumptions about language learning held by American teachers and their Russian students.

Given my research findings, I would like to suggest further studies of Russian students beliefs about language learning. Such studies could discover if Russian-speaking ESL students *as a group* have similar beliefs about language learning, investigate how these beliefs compare to those of their American ESL instructors, and how variables such as gender and age affect their beliefs. A questionnaire such as The Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) developed by Elaine Horowitz (1987) could be used to assess the data. BALLI consists of 34 questions and examines beliefs in five major areas: foreign language aptitude, the difficulty of language learning, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivations.

### Author

*Irina Smith coordinates the refugee grant for the San Juan Unified School District. She has a master's degree in education from Russia and an MA in TESOL from California State University, Sacramento. She has made several presentations on Russian culture. Her current research interests include intercultural communication, refugee concerns, and program administration.*

### Endnote

The material contained in this article was presented at the CATESOL conference in Reno, Nevada, in April of 1999 and was the basis for the featured speaker talk at the Northern California Regional CATESOL conference in Oakland, California, in November of 1999. More information on the study discussed in this article is available in the master's thesis, "A Study of Russian-Speaking Students Studying English as a Second Language in California Classrooms" (Smith, 1999).

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**Appendix A**  
*Informal Interview Questions (ESL Teachers)*

1. How would you characterize Russian-speaking students in your classrooms?
2. How do their language learning abilities compare to other students?
3. What language difficulties do these students have?
4. What kinds of classroom activities do they respond better to?
5. How long does it take them to assimilate to American classroom culture?
6. What are the hardest things for them to get used to in an American classroom?
7. Describe any conflicts that arise between you as a teacher and Russian-speaking students in your class.
8. Describe any conflicts that arise between the Russians and students from other cultural backgrounds in your classroom.
9. Are there particular groups of students with whom the Russians seem to have more problems?
10. In what ways do you think Russians are similar to Americans? In what ways are they different?

**Appendix B**  
*Informal Interview Questions (ESL Students)*

1. How is teaching English as a Second Language in the United States different from the way foreign languages are taught in your country?
2. How would you characterize your experience of learning English in America so far (positive, negative, frustrating, rewarding, easy, difficult, etc.)?
3. What is the hardest thing for you in learning English?
4. What kinds of classroom activities seem most beneficial to you? Which ones do you consider a waste of time?
5. How long do you think it takes one to be completely comfortable in an American educational setting?
6. What are the hardest things for you to get used to in an American ESL classroom?
7. Have there been any misunderstandings between you and your ESL teachers? Explain.
8. Have you had any problems dealing with other students from your ESL classes?
9. What groups of people do you have the most difficulty working with during your ESL class? Why?
10. In what ways do you think people from your country are similar to Americans? In what ways are they different?