



PHONETIC PERCEPTION AND PRONUNCIATION DIFFICULTIES OF RUSSIAN LANGUAGE

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7790565>

Annotation: This article describes at the most important problems from previously discovered issues of learning Russian, conclusions made would help professors know the future steps to be taken in assisting students in becoming proficient in Russian. Two groups of students were studied: a group only recently introduced to proper pronunciation and another group who worked extensively for three months on techniques for proper pronunciation. From the two groups of participants, recordings were used to compare the groups to see which problems were apparent at the beginning and which problems continued into higher levels of learning. For both groups, the most important problem was word stress. Other issues found included vowel reduction, palatalization of vowels, assimilation of prepositions to the following word, and intonation. However, the group who worked extensively on these pronunciation issues showed far more improvement than those only introduced to the concepts. It was also discovered that these issues are not resolved subconsciously, and a great deal of time must be spent focusing on them to ensure pronunciation problems do not continue into the more advanced levels of Russian learning.

Key terms: Russian language, pronunciation difficulties, intonation, word stress

Introduction . The Research Learning a second language can be difficult. Many things influence our ability to become fluent in another language, most importantly the influence of our native. Pronunciation and phonetic perception contribute to the majority of issues people have. Without being aware of these problems, a student of Russian may continue to make these same mistakes and never achieve complete fluency in the language or naturalness to their speech. Through correct pronunciation and a proficiency in listening, speakers can express themselves in an eloquent way and forego the embarrassment of being misunderstood or misunderstanding another. It is believed that through awareness, aspects of the language can be focused and improved upon to allow a student to excel in the Russian language.

Understanding the problems discovered will allow instructors of Russian to address these issues and enrich the experience of future students at the University and hopefully beyond. Previous research has been completed on the difficulties of Russian language, as is pointed out in the section titled "In-Depth Look at the Problems of Russian Learning"; however, research has not been completed. Limiting the research to a specific group allows for the conclusions made to specifically help the Russian professors improve the Russian language courses.

Some of the most notable differences discovered between English and Russian are the vowels, stress of the words, consonant devoicing and voicing assimilation, unfamiliar consonants, and

intonation. The students from a special course with the focus on pronunciation and intonation (Group A) were compared to students in a regular class (Group B). Voice recordings from each group were used to determine what the issues were for students and to compare the groups to see which problems persist and which problems subside with practice. Recordings of Group A were collected over a period of three months to help identify improvements in Russian pronunciation. Also, a questionnaire was completed by Group B to acquire insight into listening difficulties of Russian. The most important problems are noted, which will help the professors at the University understand the particular problems of students. The goal is to help students understand, by knowing these issues, the problems of learning Russian and give them better pronunciation and phonetic perception of the language. In-Depth Look at the Problems of Russian Learning .It has been previously determined that some of the difficulties English speakers have in learning Russian are issues with vowels, stress, unfamiliar consonants and pronunciation rules, and intonation.

Russian has only five (Bauer, 2007). Of all the vowels in both phonetic systems, the only one that Canadian English does not have is [ɨ], represented by the letter “ы” in Russian. Although Russian vowels are much simpler than those in Canadian English, it is the influence of these vowels on the surrounding consonants and the influence on the vowels by the stress of the word that create trouble for students learning Russian. Russian language has ten letters for its five vowel sounds: а, о, у, э, ы and я, ё, ю, е, и. The pair а-я represents one vowel sound. Other pairs representing the same sound are о-ё, э-е, у-ю, and ы-и. The second letter of each pair shows that the preceding consonant has a [j] pronounced directly after it and before the vowel.

This is called palatalization. The word for “forest” in Russian is “лес,” pronounced [ljes] with a palatalized (or soft) consonant “л” in front of the letter “е.” This palatalization is difficult for native speakers to produce; often, a speaker will revert to the more familiar English sound.

However, this creates improper pronunciation as well as a possibility of incorrect meaning as these sounds contrast in Russian. Words like лук – “onion,” pronounced as [luk], and люк – “hatch,” pronounced as [ljuk], for example, can be easily confused if palatalization is not taken into account. Stress also greatly affects the pronunciation of the vowels within a word. Vowels in Russian undergo what is called “vowel reduction,” where if the vowel is in an unstressed position, it has a different pronunciation. For example, when the [o] is in the unstressed position, it is pronounced [a]. So, the word for “summer” in Russian is “лето,” where stress is on the “е,” and is pronounced [ˈljeta]. Four Russian vowels (а, о, я, е) have a corresponding “reduced” value. In English, all vowels in an unstressed position are pronounced as a schwa [ə] (Woods, 1987). However, English speakers do not reduce all their vowels to schwas in Russian but instead, influenced by the orthography, want to say every vowel as it is spelt, incorrectly saying [ˈljeto] for “summer.” It can also influence how the speaker hears the word. If speakers continually do not reduce their vowels, they will no longer associate the correct pronunciation with the term. This would cause the speaker, upon hearing [ˈljeta], not to recognize it as meaning “summer” compared to their incorrect pronunciation of [ˈljeto]. Incorrectly pronouncing vowels by either not palatalizing or not reducing the vowels can cause an unintended meaning, creating confusion, and also cause a speaker to have a characteristic foreign pronunciation.

Stress is even used to differentiate words that have identical sound structures. This great variability of stress in Russian is lost on native speakers. There is no fixed stress in English,

but there are more set rules as to where the stress can fall. Generally, stress falls on the base syllable, the first syllable not including prefixes (Woods, 1987). If stress is placed on the wrong syllable in English, it may sound strange, but a native speaker can generally understand the intended meaning. In Russian, changing the placement of stress can dramatically change the meaning of a word. Incorrectly stressing the word in Russian is increased for English speakers because there is no rule to explain what syllable the stress falls on (Avanesov, 1964). Influenced by English stress, people learning Russian may put the stress on the base syllable if not aware of the proper stress pattern for a certain word. English stress particularly influences words that sound similar in both Russian and English. The Russian term may have a different stress pattern, and English speakers make the mistake of pronouncing the Russian word with English stress. The word for “student” in Russian is “студент,” pronounced [stu' d j ent]. In Russian, stress is on the second syllable whereas in English, stress is on the first syllable. This creates confusion and causes incorrect stress of the word “student” in Russian for English speakers. It is also because of this nonchalant feeling toward stress that English speakers also find it hard to hear stress. Because stress is not as important in English as it is in Russian, speakers have not been raised to be able to differentiate stress in as dramatic a way as a native Russian speaker has. A similar phenomenon can be noted for tone between English and Mandarin speakers, where English speakers have difficulty hearing lexical tone and Mandarin speakers depend on it for contrast in their language (Bauer, 2007). Also uncharacteristically like English, Russian does not consider link words and particles, particularly prepositions, as independent words with their own stress but attached to the proceeding independent word. Together, a particle and a word form a single phonetic word, the stress of this phonetic word never on the preposition (Avanesov, 1964). English speakers learning Russian constantly want to pronounce prepositions as a separate word, giving it its own stress and not pronouncing it with the next word. This is incorrect and gives a very halting and unnatural speech pattern. Moreover, as our research shows, pronouncing prepositions as separate words can cause troubles hearing prepositions: Students expect to hear prepositions as independent words and often do not recognize them in the natural flow of speech. Correct stress is not only important for sounding more natural when speaking Russian but is also imperative for expressing the intended meaning of a word.

Other unfamiliar aspects difficult for English speakers are the hushing sounds. These include the letters “ш,” “ж,” “ч,” and “щ,” pronounced [ʃ], [ʒ], [tʃ], and [ʃʃ] respectively. Although English does not have letters for these sounds, it does have very similar sounds. The sound [ʃ] in Russian is similar to the sound [ʃ] in English, and the sound [tʃ] similar to [tʃ]. Although quite capable of pronouncing all four of the unfamiliar sounds, an English speaker finds it hard to differentiate them when hearing or pronouncing them correctly in spontaneous speech. Of particular difficulty are the two sounds [ʃ] and [ʃʃ], a contrast not found in English. The last difference considered in this analysis is English and Russian intonation. English intonation is characterized by a fall in tone for statements, exclamations, wh-questions (questions including the words “who,” “what,” “where,” “when,” “why,” and “how”), and commands and a rise in tone for yes-no questions. Wh-questions can also be said with a rising tone to be portrayed as more kind, gentle, and sympathetic (Wells, 2006). Russian intonation can be divided into seven Intonation Contours (ICs):

IC-1 for statements, where there is a fall in tone

IC-2 for questions with a question word (similar to wh-questions) with a fall in tone

IC-3 for yes-no questions, where there is a dramatic rise and abrupt fall in tone within the stressed syllable

IC-4 for questions beginning with the conjunction “a” meaning “and” with a fall and rise in tone

IC-5 for exclamations and expressing delight with a rise at the very beginning of the statement and a fall at the very end

IC-6 for exclamations where there is a sharp rise on the center of the statement and the tone does not drop

IC-7 used to show disagreement or sarcasm with a sharp rise on the stressed syllable and a fall in tone for the following word

Improvements of the Focus Class. For this section of the research, only Group A (Focus Class, who focused on proper pronunciation) was analyzed for improvements in the three months that the recordings were conducted. The earlier recordings were compared to the later recordings to see what improvements the participants made after they had spent time focusing on proper pronunciation. The table below shows the problems at the beginning of the research in the left column and the corresponding improvement of the problem after pronunciation focus to the right.

Problem at the Beginning : Participants consistently put the stress on the wrong part of the word, Not remembering to reduce all vowels, Speech is halting with large pauses between words and the words themselves were pronounced in a forced manner, Issues with palatalizing where participants forget and pronounce without palatalization, Prepositions consistently pronounced as a separate phonetic word, Always using English intonation during Russian speech,

Improvement made After: Improvement made to putting the correct stress on a word, Most participants remembering to reduce vowels and also improvement as to knowing what sound the vowels reduce to, Speech sounds more natural, less forced with a flow to their words and almost all participants not putting pauses between words, Majority of participants all remembering to palatalize consonants preceding certain vowels, All one phonetic sound prepositions consistently pronounced with proceeding word, Mostly use Russian intonation with only a few issues as to the details of the contour structure

The research found that most participants showed considerable improvement after their time spent focusing on proper pronunciation. Minor issues that still remained were putting the proper stress on a word, remembering to reduce vowels as well as not putting stress on the unstressed vowels, and knowing which word to properly stress at the center of an intonation contour. These are important issues for professors at the University to address in a more detailed manner to ensure these problems do not continue further.

Conclusion. It has been previously discovered that learners of Russian have difficulties with the unfamiliar phonetic rules of the language including stress of words, vowel reduction, consonant devoicing, voicing assimilation, unfamiliar consonant sounds, and intonation. This study found that participants had difficulty with all the above issues when they started learning Russian, and it is only when these pronunciation problems are pointed out and worked on specifically that participants will improve and no longer make mistakes. Previously undiscovered, the largest problem area for students of Russian is word stress.

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