

# Language Policy and its Reflection in Teaching Russian at the Czech University of Life Sciences (CULS) in Prague

Drahoslava Kšandová, Kateřina Elisová

**Abstract:** Nationwide teaching of Russian within all types of schools ended in the Czech Republic after 1989. Russian, along with other foreign languages then ranked among the optional subjects. This also happened at our university after the revolution where teaching of Russian was not interrupted, even though the number of students dropped drastically. A significant increase in the number of students interested in the Russian language was observed at the turn of the millennium. Students have perceived that Russian is among the most widespread Slavic languages and as a world language; it is used in various spheres of international communication.

**Key words:** communicative goal, curriculum, language competencies, Russian and the labour market, the Russian language at CULS, students' motivation, the status of the Russian language in the world

## Introduction

Russian is one of the Eastern Slavic languages. It is significantly widespread because the number of people who speak the language ranks 6<sup>th</sup> and the number of native speakers 8<sup>th</sup> in the world. In Russia, the Russian language is the mother tongue for 137.5 million people (2010)<sup>1</sup> and in the world the Russian language is spoken by around 260 million people (2014)<sup>2</sup>. Russian is the official language not only in Russia but also in Belarus (as one of the two official languages), Crimea, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It has the status of official language in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as well. According to the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic, Russian is used as the official language. In some post-Soviet countries, Russian has lost its official status. But de facto it is still an important language of these countries. It is a non-official but nevertheless fairly widespread language in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Turkmenistan and Mongolia.

It is the official language in some regions, e.g. in two regions of Moldova, or in 8 regions and 9 cities of Ukraine. In some countries of the former USSR, Russian still performs a social function, e.g. in Tajikistan the communicative function of the Russian language among various ethnicities is enshrined in the Constitution and Russian is officially used in the process of creating laws. In Uzbekistan the Russian language is used in registry offices and in notary services.

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<sup>1</sup> Всероссийская перепись населения 2010.

<sup>2</sup> [www.ria.ru](http://www.ria.ru)

On the basis of the political importance of Russia, the Russian language belongs among the six official languages of the United Nations. It has gained official status in several international organizations, e.g. the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the World Health Organization, and UNESCO.

We must remember that Russian is also the “language of science”. According to data from the electronic “Index Translationum” the Russian language occupies 7<sup>th</sup> place among the languages into which books are translated and 4<sup>th</sup> place among the languages from which books are translated. In 2013, it became the second most popular language of the Internet<sup>3</sup>.

## **Materials and Methods**

With respect to the nature of the contribution, the research it is based almost exclusively on related literature, specialized web portals and relevant web sides. The most commonly used methods for creating the text were synthesis, analysis of secondary data, analysis of primary data, compilation and comparison. Implementing the mentioned methods, we have characterized language policy and its reflection in teaching Russian at CULS Prague.

We received the information from the questionnaire in printed form presented to the students of all language levels. The responses were collected anonymously. The data obtained was processed in the same way. The questionnaire was divided into three parts. The questions were formulated clearly and concisely, and we required clear answers. In the first part, the students answered questions as to whether they had studied Russian at elementary school, secondary school or somewhere else. In the case of a positive answer, we wanted to know how long they had been studying Russian and whether they had passed the leaving exam in the language.

In the second part, we were interested in answers as to which language competences are for the respondents the most important and which are less important. In the last part, the students had to state one reason that led them to study Russian at the university.

Before 1989, foreign language teaching in our country was limited exclusively to Russian. Russian was a compulsory foreign language in all types of schools. A student could choose a second foreign language at secondary education (mainly grammar schools) and two foreign languages were also taught at universities.

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<sup>3</sup> [www.irucz.ru](http://www.irucz.ru)

After 1989, the Russian language was placed on an equal level with other foreign languages and – as other foreign languages – became optional. Under the new conditions, however, Russian suffered a palpable blow. Teaching Russian completely disappeared from the majority of schools since demand for Western languages increased as borders had opened. The popularity of Western languages was affected to a considerable extent by their real use and a foreign language finally started to fulfil its basic function – it became a tool of professional contacts. “In recent years, Russian has acquired the status of a required (and also exotic) language which is further enhanced by the use of the Cyrillic alphabet, the geographical location of Russia and the political and economic situation in Europe.” (Koryčánková, 2016, s. 90)<sup>4</sup>

Improving the quality of teaching foreign languages is engaged in the area of education policy, which sets the priorities, content and goals of language education. Changes in the concept of language education are associated with the need to develop the language and communication skills of students and at the same time these changes respond to the demands of the Council of Europe and the European Commission to support the teaching of other foreign languages. Every European citizen should be able to communicate on different levels according to their needs at least in two languages other than their mother tongue.

As shown in the Eurobarometer survey (2012) language skills of Czechs have a declining tendency. The Czech Republic occupies the 19th position in foreign language knowledge out of 27 EU countries. The number of people who are able to communicate in at least one language has fallen by 12% since 2005. 49% of Czechs can speak another language than their mother tongue, 22% can speak two foreign languages, which is 7% less than in 2005<sup>5</sup>. In the EU (compared with the Czech Republic) the situation is as follows: 54% of citizens actively speak one language other than their mother tongue, 25% two languages and 10% three languages.

It was also one of the reasons why a second foreign language was introduced as compulsory at upper primary schools in the school year 2013/2014. The rise of interest in the Russian language at primary schools probably relates to the introduction of another compulsory language. According to the Institute for Information and Education, in the school year 2011/2012 there were 55,348 students of primary and secondary schools studying Russian, of whom more than 25,000 were from primary schools and grammar schools of the corresponding age levels. Two years later (2014/2015), the number of student at primary schools and grammar schools increased to 52,000.

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<sup>4</sup> The translations of all the quotations are inherent

<sup>5</sup> National Institute for Education

It is assumed that the increase of interest will also influence students at secondary schools and universities. It is a pity, however, that effort toward the multilingualism of students in some faculties of CULS is receding into the background and four semesters teaching of a foreign language is being replaced by two semesters.

## Results

The rising interest in Russian has been also visible at CULS since the academic year 2012/2013, when this language was chosen by 569 students in both forms of study (full-time and combined). In the next two years, the number of registered students did not change significantly. Since the academic year 2015/2016, in the context of demographic trends there has been a recorded decline of applicants for study at all universities, which was also reflected in lower interest in studying Russian at our university. In 2015/2016 384 students studied Russian, in the year 2016/2017 only 258 students in both forms of the study took the language.

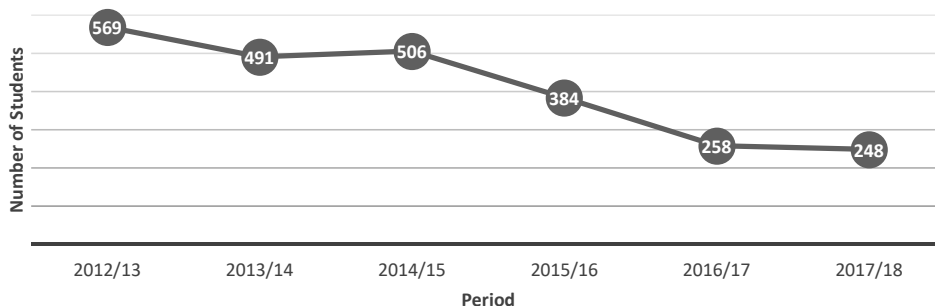


Fig. 1: *The number of students choosing Russian (in both forms of the study)*

On behalf of a growing interest in Russian from the full-time students who did not have a chance for contact with the Russian language in primary schools and secondary schools, Russian for beginners (A1 level) was included in the curriculum in the academic year 1999/2000. A significant interest in this level has remained to the present day. In the academic year 2015/2016 in the full-time form of study, the A1 level was chosen by 205 students, the A2 level was chosen by 45 students, and the B1 level only by 24 students.

However, a large number of the students – 53.3% – had already studied Russian at a primary or secondary school, or respectively at another university. 28.3% of the students stated they had been learning Russian for 4 years or more, and 11.96% of the students had passed leaving exams in Russian at the end of a secondary school.

The reasons why CULS students have been choosing the language are various.

Tab. 1: *Choice of the language level – Students of full-time study (source: own calculation)*

Language level	Number of students 2012/2013	Language level	Number of students 2015/2016
A1	339	A1	205
A2	45	A2	45
B1	35	B1	24

Language level	Number of students 2017/2018
A1	138
A2	30
B1	18

Tab. 2: *Previous study of the Russian language (source: own calculation)*

Yes	53.30%
Non	46.70%

For 21.7% of our students, the mastering of the basics of Russian is often easier than e.g. German or other Western languages. They stated that it is a Slavic language, related to Czech, and therefore easily manageable, and its study will not be difficult for them.

21.2% of the students consider Russian a pleasing, interesting and popular language. Only 14.7% of the students choose Russian with regard to employment and can see Russian as a language which is important, and knowledge thereof they have already used at work or will be able to use in the future. In the labour market, there is growing demand for employees who have at least basic knowledge of Russian, and ignorance of foreign languages causes young people to have difficulties in succeeding in the labour market. According to the job portal *Profesia.cz*, the jobs most in demand requiring knowledge of Russian are programmers, salespeople and mechanical engineers. Russian-speaking employees are in demand also by domestic companies which focus on the Russian market, cooperate with companies from countries of the former USSR, or have a Russian-speaking owner. 12% of the students study Russian in order to be able to communicate more easily with Russian citizens living in the Czech Republic, respectively studying at CULS, or they have Russian ancestors, or one of their parents is a Russian national. 10.3% of the students want to learn a new Eastern language, as opposed to Western languages. Only 4.3% of the students would like to deepen their knowledge and continue with the study of Russian which they started at secondary and primary schools. A pragmatic approach has won at the same number of students – they have chosen the Russian language as “coercion” because they did not want to study German, or a higher level of another foreign language. 3.3% of the students

believe that the Russian language will be useful when travelling. The rest of the students, i.e. 8.6%, reported that Russian is a world language, required to be studied due to the growing influence of Russia, or that they are interested in Russian culture and the Russian Internet.

Tab. 3: *Reasons of choosing Russian (source: own calculation)*

simplicity of the language and its proximity to Czech	21.70%
enjoyable, interesting language	21.20%
finding employment, opportunity	14.70%
communication with Russians in the Czech Rep.	12.00%
opposite to Western languages	10.30%
world language	8.60%
deepening of knowledge	4.30%
being forced	4.30%
travelling	3.30%

Compared with the citizens of the EU, the motivation of our students to learn a foreign language is different. The motivation to learn a foreign language, according to EU citizens is as follows: 32% of the respondents wish to use the language at work (27% of them prefer to work abroad), 35% of the respondents want to use a foreign language actively during their holidays, and 27% use a language for their personal use.<sup>6</sup>

## Discussion

Contemporary modern foreign language teaching aims to implement communicative, general educational and formative goals. The ability to communicate actively and to express an opinion is today the main objective of teaching a foreign language. “The methodology formulates the task of teaching Russian for the given category of students leading to participation in language communication, i.e. the task of learning to speak in Russian” (Česnokova, 2015, p. 13).

Communicative competence is conceived “as a readiness for communicative behaviour that enables a person to realize his/her communication needs in a way that corresponds to the given speech situation and behavioural rules, conditioned by socio-cultural norms” (Purm, Jelínek, Veselý, 2003, p. 229). Yet, we must realize that “the communicative method, prevalent today in teaching, cannot teach students to learn Russian at such a level that communication is grammatically correct and comprehensible to recipients. Methodology of work must consist in adequate

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<sup>6</sup> [www.czso.cz](http://www.czso.cz)

The survey was conducted in 2012 in all countries of the European Union, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia and Turkey with people from the age of 15.

association or alternation of individual methods and in their use in teaching specific skills and habits” (Dohnal, 2016).

Our curriculum for the Russian language is based on the *Common European Framework of Reference: Teaching, Learning, Assessment* European document, which describes the requirements for each of the language levels A1–C2, language skills necessary for successful communication, including listening and reading comprehension, communication skills (ability to initiate, maintain and terminate the conversation), requests for oral and written reproduction of the texts, the ability to express thoughts in oral and written forms and thus on the acquiring of the corresponding competencies. In terms of a communicative objective, it primarily means to develop the skills of listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and independent oral and written expression. Therefore, it is surprising that less than 6% of the students are interested in listening exercises included in the lessons since one of the other necessary skills is to be able to listen to original speech and to understand its content, and to understand the common spoken words of native speakers, radio, television, etc.

Tab. 4: *Use of language competences (source: own calculation)*

speaking	46%
reading comprehension	38%
writing	10%
listening comprehension	6%

“For the teaching of Russian it is necessary to make a rational choice of language minimum. This should include means from all linguistic plans” (Brandner, 2016, p. 64). When choosing a subject, we must realize that we are teaching at a university of non-philological orientation, that is, we cannot require students to acquire language as a system of linguistic phenomena, but as a means of communication in both written and oral forms.

However, student-beginners seem not to be aware of the fact that the study in the first semester requires considerable effort on the part of not only students but also teachers. The teacher as the organizer of the lesson has the most complex and demanding task. “The success of many activities depends on the good organization of teaching and on the fact that the students know exactly what to do” (Harmer, 1991, p. 239), which means that “the students need to be involved in active language activities in order to tune into the taught language” (Purm, Jelínek & Veselý, 2003, p. 216). The fundamental importance of “tuning” is also emphasized by Peterson. He understands it as a short period in the early phase of a lesson. “Such tuning can be accurately characterized by words: spontaneous, exciting lessons aimed at attracting students’ attention” (Paterson, 1996, p. 12).

Therefore, from the first lesson, students have to acquire efficient strategies to master a foreign language, i.e.:

1. vocabulary and grammatical structures of the language
2. standard of literary language, including correct pronunciation
3. important syntactic structures and also some expressively coloured forms of expression, although the focus of the curriculum is generally based on stylistically neutral phenomena
4. sound and graphic aspects of the language

All above mentioned are used in the way that in accordance with the CEFR the students should be able to utilize the language means comprehensively both in speaking and writing. Furthermore, we emphasize the natural aspect of expression in line with current Russian. Acquiring vocabulary, grammar and phonetics in studying is not sufficient. It is not possible to learn a foreign language independently without broader linguistic, cultural and social contexts. To make the process of communication adequate, it is necessary to connect the content of the lesson with extra-linguistic knowledge, i.e. to familiarize students with important contemporary and historical Russian events. Finally, we must remember to consider the importance of the mother tongue. We show similarities and differences between the two languages, thereby trying to overcome language interference.

## Conclusion

The current dynamically developing world, as well as and life in united Europe, require new communication skills. Ability to communicate in a foreign language is important for the independent life of today's people, and for their easier and smoother integration into the workforce. Therefore, it is currently required to teach foreign languages with respect to the demands of society. As society has changed, the requirements for teaching foreign languages have changed as well. "Good knowledge of two foreign languages is a necessity nowadays, and knowledge of one so-called Western language together with Russian is for the graduates of secondary schools and universities a great plus in the labour market" (Koryčánková, 2016, p. 89).

It is a pity that the interest to study the Russian language at higher levels has declined<sup>7</sup>. This is in contradiction with the current methodology of teaching foreign languages, which highlights the aim "to enrich the student with new knowledge and skills while studying foreign languages and at the same time to improve as a personality" (Akišina & Kagan, 2008, p. 221).

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<sup>7</sup> In the academic year 2015/2016, when the survey was conducted, 8 groups of A1 level were opened, 2 groups of A2 level, 1 group of B1 level and 1 group of B2 level.



Students who choose the Russian language at level A1 can be divided into 2 groups, i.e. beginners and pre-intermediate to intermediate. Both groups have in common efforts to make learning easier. The beginners choose Russian because it is simple, easy to learn and relates to their mother tongue. However, from the above mentioned information it is obvious that a lot of effort must be made to master its foundations, so many of the students review their opinion at the end of the summer term. It is a pity that the students from the second group (we meet them in all languages) do not take advantage of the offer of the Department of Languages and choose a higher level B2 or the specialized course "Russian for Economists". They do not realize that good knowledge of two languages is currently a necessity, and that good knowledge of Russian guarantees lucrative jobs in international companies. For the students who have already been in contact with Russian, study may become ineffective, there can be stagnation or even regression of their knowledge and their motivation fades. The effectiveness of learning is limited by destructive competition, about which Kasíková (1997, p. 76) says "one of the characteristics of destructive competition is lack of power motivation."

The motivation for these students could be a change in the credit system, but in a non-philological university where language is not a key subject, the process is not yet feasible. It seems easier for the Department of Languages to participate in the creation of a computer programme that would automatically exclude accepted students with some knowledge of the selected language from level A1. "Only those students who are eager to learn something can be educated" (Paterson, 1996, p. 9).

Such a program would help not only the teachers, who could pay their attention only to the beginners and would not split their activity between the two groups, but also those students who have problems to evaluate their language skills.

Universities are also struggling with the lack of quality textbooks. For now, the only textbook of Russian used by our university is a Western-style textbook that treats language less traditionally, without a predominance of grammar, emphasizing the communicative approach and living language methodology.

Russian is a language that is returning. It is a language which is spoken in the world by 200 million people. It is a world language, and its knowledge is important for the citizens of Central Europe, because Central Europe is the link between the West and the East.

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## Authors

**PhDr. Drahoslava Kšandová, PhD.**, e-mail: [ksandova@pef.czu.cz](mailto:ksandova@pef.czu.cz), Department of Languages, Czech University of Life Sciences in Prague, Czech Republic.

The author teaches Russian and Czech classes at the Faculty of Economics and Management of the, Czech University of Life Sciences in Prague.

**PhDr. Kateřina Elisová**, e-mail: [elisova@pef.czu.cz](mailto:elisova@pef.czu.cz), Department of Languages, Czech University of Life Sciences in Prague, Czech Republic.

The author teaches Russian and English classes at the Faculty of Economics and Management of the, Czech University of Life Sciences in Prague.