



Getting lost, being charged extortionate “foreigner prices” for everything from taxis to tomatoes at the market, and ordering less than appetizing dishes from Russian menus (“yaichko pod mayonaisom” is actually lamb’s testicle with mayonnaise, but can easily be confused with a harmless egg, “yaitso”) – the risks and hassles are endless. Ex-pats with limited Russian quickly get used to the impatience of shop-owners and officials, who blankly refuse to understand when accent and accuracy are not quite correct. And when Russian colleagues are roaring with laughter, one is never quite sure that the source of the hilarity is not the dumb, non-Russian speaking ex-pat.

Learning Russian is therefore highly advisable, both for foreign residents in Moscow and anyone who comes here regularly on business. But given the undeniably arcane and demanding nature of the language, how does one go about achieving a reasonable level of fluency?

Rather than struggling alone with a “teach yourself” book, it is well worth taking a course with an experienced and qualified teacher who can not only push you when your patience and motivation start to wane, but also clearly explain the more frustrating grammar rules. One well-established school that specializes in Russian language courses for businessmen, as well as general courses for all comers and academic programs, is Language Link, a British-American owned institute operating in Russia since 1994. The Head of Language Link’s Russian Department at their main school on Novoslobodskaya street, Maria Finashina, explains some of the possible routes to successful language learning.

“Language Link’s students vary greatly in age, ability level and interests, as well as the time they have available for learning Russian. Some people prefer to work one-to-one with a teacher at their own office, so they can call us to arrange lessons whenever a window of opportunity arises in their schedule. Other students find that by regularly attending group classes, even just twice a week, they quickly see an improvement in their communicative ability. Short-term intensive courses can be a great way to make a big jump in fluency too. On our summer intensive courses, students spend 3-4 hours in the classroom every day without the usual distractions of work, so by the end of a month-long course they have made considerable progress”.

According to Maria, the most important factor in choosing a Russian course is to look for a teacher who will be fun as well as firm: “Both students and teachers have to approach language learning with enthusiasm. Studying Russian can be really enjoyable when lessons are discussion based, and students are constantly encouraged to speak on topics that interest them. Nobody can make Russian an ‘easy’ language, but a communicative approach to teaching and flexible syllabi can at least make the learning process a pleasure.”

From “MENEGER” and “REKRUTING” to the infamous “BIZNES LANCH”, the language of doing business in Russia has a comfortingly familiar ring for English-speaking ex-pats. Foreign “BIZNESMENY” might be tempted to think that it’s not worth sweating over the mind-bending complexities of the Russian language just to work in Moscow.

Every day, more and more Russians are poring over their English textbooks on the metro. Could globalization eventually lead to the extinction of Russian altogether? To be replaced by a more convenient language, say, English, for example? For those of us who have ever confused our “bukhgalter” (accountant) with a “biustgalter” (bra), or spent painful minutes miming “where’s the toothpaste” in our local supermarket, that idea sounds appealing.

Unfortunately, while the number of anglicisms is undoubtedly on the rise, you don’t have to spend much time in Moscow to realize that it is still not the easiest home for non-Russian speakers.

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