

Phonetic Perception and Pronunciation Difficulties of Russian Language (From a Canadian Perspective)

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Abstract: This study looked at the most important problems from previously discovered issues of learning Russian, focusing on the students at the University of Victoria. 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, which, in Russian, differs greatly from English. 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. Future steps to be taken in research pertaining to Russian language learning would include how much emphasis instructors of Russian should put on these issues and when the problems disappear.

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

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 language. For Russian and English, there are considerable differences that make it difficult for a Canadian English speaker to learn Russian. 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. Looking at some of the differences between Russian and English and comparing these results to groups of students at the University of Victoria will allow for insight into the problems Canadian students have when learning Russian. 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 where the focus is primarily on Canadian students of the University of Victoria has not been completed. Limiting the research to a specific group allows for the conclusions made to specifically help the Russian professors at the University of Victoria 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. From this set of known difficulties, it is to be determined which of these are apparent in the students at the University of Victoria who speak Canadian English. 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.

The vowel system of Canadian English is extremely complicated in comparison to the Russian vowel system. English has approximately twenty vowels including diphthongs while 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 English 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 [lʲɛta]. 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 [lʲɛto] 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 [lʲɛta], not to recognize it as meaning “summer” compared to their incorrect pronunciation of [lʲɛto]. 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.

As already mentioned, stress is an important aspect of Russian. It is characterized as “free stress” so “it is not limited to any one part of a word. It may fall on any syllable or morphological element of a word” (Avanesov, 1964, p. 22) and may even change its position within one word for different grammatical forms. Stress is even used to differentiate words that have identical sound structures. This great variability of stress in Russian is lost on English 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 [stuˈdʲent]. 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 preceding 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.

Another process unfamiliar to English speakers is the change to voiced and voiceless consonants, dependent on their position. There are two voicing rules in Russian: word final devoicing and voicing assimilation. Word final devoicing occurs when a voiced consonant appears at the end of a word and is devoiced; a [v] sound becomes a [f], or a [g] becomes a [k]. Voicing is a very unusual process for English speakers to practice. The mistake often made is that, even if a consonant is in the final position, English speakers still pronounce it as voiced. Another process that students of Russian make more often is voicing assimilation. This occurs when two consonants are adjacent to each other; the second consonant will dictate the voiced quality of both consonants. An example of voicing assimilation would be a consonant cluster such as “вк.” The voiceless “к” [k] causes the voiced “в” [v] to become devoiced and the cluster will be pronounced [fk]. This will also occur across word boundaries, which is the most difficult concept for English speakers to grasp. The phrase “in Canada” in Russian—“в Канаде”—will be pronounced [f kaˈnadʲe]; the [k] influenced the [v] to become devoiced and pronounced as [f]. A voiced consonant influencing voiceless consonants to become voiced also occurs. Because of the unfamiliarity of the voicing rules in English, it is hard for students of Russian to adhere to

them easily.

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

Unlike English, Russian intonation can demonstrate different statements for just one single word, using different ICs. The word for “water” in Russian—“воды,” pronounced [vaˈdɨ], for example, can be expressed by three different ICs. Using IC-2 (Воды!) gives the meaning “Give me some water!”; using IC-3 (Воды?) would be a question as in “Some water?”; and IC-6 (Воды!) is used to exclaim about how much water there is, like “So much water!” Also in Russian, intonation can be used to differentiate between a statement and a question. The literal translation of “Ты студент” is “You student” pronounced [tɨ stuˈdɨnt], but it actually means “You are a student.” This phrase can be said with IC-1 (for a statement) or IC-3 (for a question). Here, the difference between a statement and a question is shown only by means of intonation. In English, that same sentence must be rearranged to portray a question as in “Are you a student?” and intonation can only be used to portray a question for confirmation. For

example, if a person was to say “I am a student,” another individual can say “You are a student?” with a rising intonation only for confirmation of the previous statement, not as a stand-alone question. Some of the other differences between English and Russian intonation noted by Bratus (1972) are no gradual descending scale (in Russian, the first word is often not the highest in pitch), fall of intonation in statements (the range of fall is greater in Russian than in English), steeper emphasis (there is a steeper rise in tone for the stressed syllable in Russian), stressed syllables (Russian only allows rise in tone to occur on stressed syllables, unlike in English, where unstressed syllables may have a rise in tone), and the fall-rise intonation (characteristically not used in Russian). The problem is speakers will transfer their native language intonation rules into the second language. Incorrect intonation causes English speakers to sound foreign and more likely to be misunderstood. It is not a quality often assimilated into speech unconsciously, and it is often not taught, although it plays an extremely important part in learning and understanding a second language (Wells, 2006).

Methods

Participants

Participants only included native Canadian English speakers. There were two groups of students at the University of Victoria learning Russian. Both groups were involved in Russian language instruction during the course of the study. Group A consisted of students at all levels who decided to take a course on Russian pronunciation. Group B consisted of students at a 100 level (second semester of language learning in a regular class). In their Russian classes, Group A focused primarily on pronunciation (Focus Class) whereas Group B was introduced to proper pronunciation, intonation, and reading rules for two weeks at the very beginning (first semester) and then focused primarily on grammar and vocabulary for the remainder of their Russian instruction (Regular Class). Group A was also split for further analysis into two groups: an Upper-Level Group and a Lower-Level Group. The Upper-Level Group consisted of about half of Group A at a 300 and above level of Russian instruction and the Lower-Level Group were the remaining participants at 100 and 200 levels.

Below is a summary of the groups of participants and the recordings completed:

Group A – Focus Class (focus on proper pronunciation)

- **Upper Level:** 300 and 400 Levels
 - **Recordings:**
 - First month: Pronunciation
 - Second month: Pronunciation
 - Third month: Pronunciation and Intonation
- **Lower Level:** 100 and 200 Levels
 - **Recordings:** Same as Upper Level

Group B – Regular Class (only introduction to proper pronunciation)

- **100 Level (second semester)**

o **Recordings:**

Third month: Pronunciation and Intonation

Procedure

The known difficulties of learning Russian were first determined by observation and research into the issues. The researchers used their contact with Russian-learning students to observe and make notes of the difficulties encountered as well as relying on past knowledge of the subject. The data was then collected from participants, which consisted of voice recordings in Russian completed by students in their course work to be submitted for marks. The professors of the Russian classes chose the phrases to be recorded because of the use of difficult Russian pronunciation in the sentences. The recordings were then forwarded to the researchers for further analysis: three separate recordings from Group A over a period of three months and one recording from Group B near the end of their course. During the three months, both groups were involved in Russian language courses. Although Group A consisted of varying levels of Russian and Group B consisted of only beginners of Russian, the two were used to compare recordings to each other because Group A would have the advantage of more intensive instruction compared to Group B. The two different groups were anticipated to help demonstrate that the type of instruction Group A received was needed to overcome certain problems of learning Russian. The interest of this research is not in the improvement of Group B but, rather, the improvement of Group A compared to Group B. The recordings from Group B would help show what level all students would be before completing the intensive pronunciation course, and the three recordings from Group A would help show any improvements over the course as well the level of their Russian after the completion of the course.

The first recordings from Group A, collected in the first month of instruction, focused on pronunciation. They were used to analyze what phonetic issues were present amongst students and what issues previously known were present in the recordings. The analysis created a list of pronunciation problems to be used and compared to in future recordings.

The second and third recordings from Group A were collected in the second and third months of instruction, respectively. The second recording focused on pronunciation, and the third recording focused on intonation. Also in the third month of instruction, the recordings from Group B were collected which focused both on pronunciation and intonation. For the second and third recordings of Group A and the recordings of Group B, participants were asked to record the same set of phrases. This was done to allow comparison of the two groups on the same pronunciation and intonation problems.

From the list of pronunciation problems previously determined, the recordings of Group A were analyzed and general trends were determined amongst the problems encountered by

the participants. The data was then put into graphs to better represent the distribution of students' pronunciation. The same thing was done for Group B. Then, these two groups of data and graphs were compared to each other to see what problems both groups had.

Generalizations were made as to the problems present in Canadian English students' pronunciation of Russian. The data would also demonstrate which problems persisted into the more advanced levels of learning and if Group A, who were aware of pronunciation and intonation issues, showed more improvement.

The three recordings of Group A were then used to analyze the Upper- and Lower-Level Groups. All participants were compared from their first recording to their third recording to note improvements. The notes taken were then generalized into the improvements of the Upper-Level Group and the Lower-Level Group. This study was done to see if students at an upper level, not knowing extensively about proper pronunciation and intonation, showed a greater proficiency in the language at the start, from their first recording, than the Lower-Level Group. The comparison was also completed to determine the improvements of both groups through the three months of pronunciation instruction.

Group B also conducted a questionnaire in the first month of the study. The questionnaire was formatted to determine the difficulties of phonetic perception for students. The participants listened to a number of recordings of natural speech and were asked to indicate stress, prepositions, and hushing sounds, three known issues students have when listening to Russian. Firstly, the participants listened to a set of sentences and were asked to indicate stress on the highlighted word. Then they listened three times to a short dialogue between two native Russian speakers and were asked to write down the prepositions and the hushing sounds they heard. The results showed which problems of listening to Russian were present for Canadian students.

The study and comparison of these two groups of students showed the problems present for the English-speaking students at the University of Victoria learning Russian. The results would determine what actions instructors of Russian would need to take in the future to facilitate students' Russian language acquisition.

Results

Phonetic Perception (Listening)

The data from the questionnaires completed by Group B (Regular Class, where there was little focus on pronunciation) was used to determine the phonetic perception difficulties. In the question where participants were asked to indicate stress, the words were familiar to the students and stress apparent. However, a considerable number of students made mistakes and chose the incorrect stress, especially for longer words (refer to Figure 1 below).

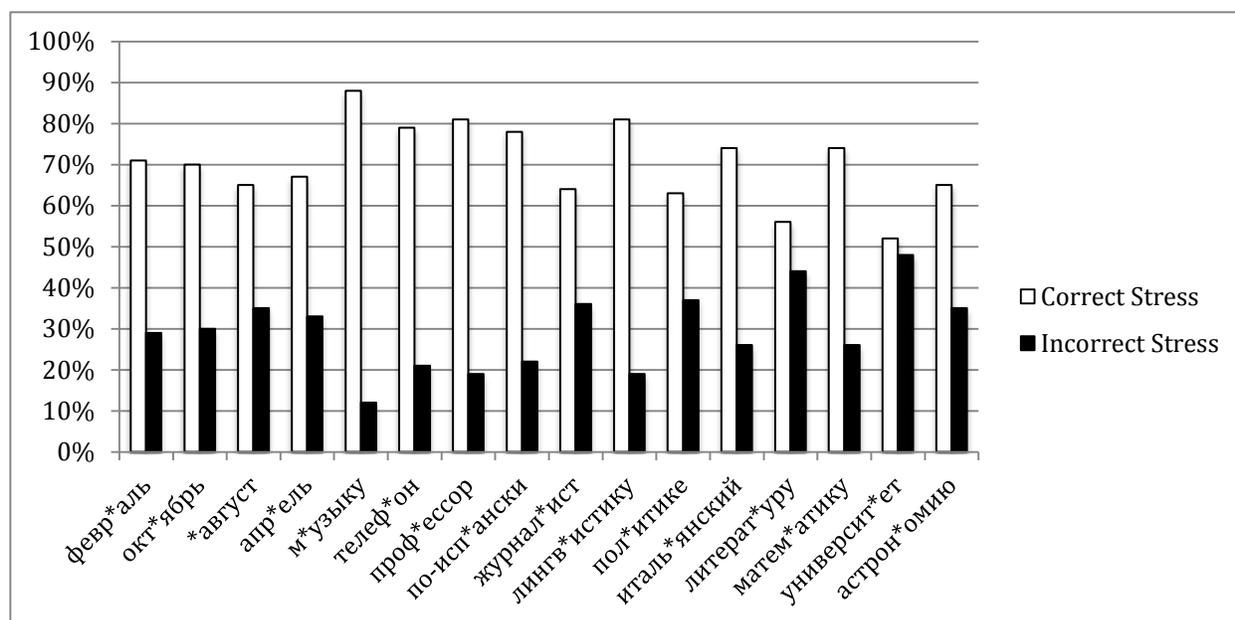


Figure 1. Distribution of Stress Perception for Group B. This shows the percentage of students who either chose correct or incorrect stress for the highlighted word in the questionnaire complete (words given in Cyrillic only). Correct stress is shown by an asterisk placed *before* the stressed vowel of the word.

Many students chose the incorrect stress where, for such easy words, the numbers should be much lower. These results demonstrate that some English-speaking students have difficulty perceiving the correct stress. When students chose the wrong stress, most chose the English style of stress for the word that sounds similar to the word given. For example, the word for “university,” spelt “университет” and pronounced [univɪrsiˈtɛt] with stress on the fifth syllable, had 48% of students choose the incorrect stress; and from that group, 62% of those students chose the English pattern with stress on the third syllable. Other words in the survey with this similar pattern include the word for “astronomy”—“астрономию,” with 60% of the students indicating incorrect stress, choosing the English stress pattern, 46% for “literature”—“литературу,” 57% for “Italian”—“итальянский,” and 60% for “journalist”—“журналист.” These findings help to emphasize the importance for professors to make students aware of certain pronunciation issues, particularly stress in this case.

Also considered in the questionnaire was the perception of prepositions and hushing sounds. There were three prepositions in the dialogue: the word for “in,” spelt “в” and pronounced [v] and another word for “in,” spelt “на” and pronounced [na] which occurred twice in the dialogue. Once again, there was difficulty in hearing prepositions. Although only 13% of students did not hear the preposition [v], a considerable 61% of students did not hear [na] the first time and 43% did not hear it the second time. Generally, for the hushing sounds ([ʃ], [z], [tʃ], and [ʁʁ]), students did poorly in hearing them but did well perceiving the correct

hushing sound they did hear. One word in the dialogue—“скучная,” meaning “boring” and pronounced [ˈskutʂnəjə]—had variants in the hushing sound heard. 46% of students heard the proper “тс,” spelt “ч,” but 29% incorrectly heard “с,” spelt “ш,” while the remaining 25% did not even hear it. These data demonstrate there are some difficulties in hearing prepositions and differentiating between the hushing sounds.

Pronunciation Introduction

For the pronunciation difficulties of both target groups, Group A (Focus Class, where there was focus on pronunciation) and Group B (Regular Class, where there was little focus on pronunciation) were compared to each other for stress, vowel reduction, palatalization, prepositions, and intonation (results given in the “Pronunciation Focus Comparison” section). Group A was then analyzed for the improvements amongst the participants, issues still remaining (results in the “Improvements of the Focus Class” section), and then, finally, the differences between the Upper- and Lower-Levels of Group A (discussed later in the “Is Proper Pronunciation Learned Subconsciously?” section).

Pronunciation Focus Comparison

For this step of the research, the two groups were compared to each other for pronunciation difficulties in Russian. This included stress, reduction of vowels, palatalization, proper pronunciation of prepositions, and intonation.

The recordings completed by both groups included words that were simple and expected to be known by all participants, allowing little chance of improper pronunciation. For Group A (Focus Class), most students showed correct pronunciation for the indicated words (see Figure 2 below).

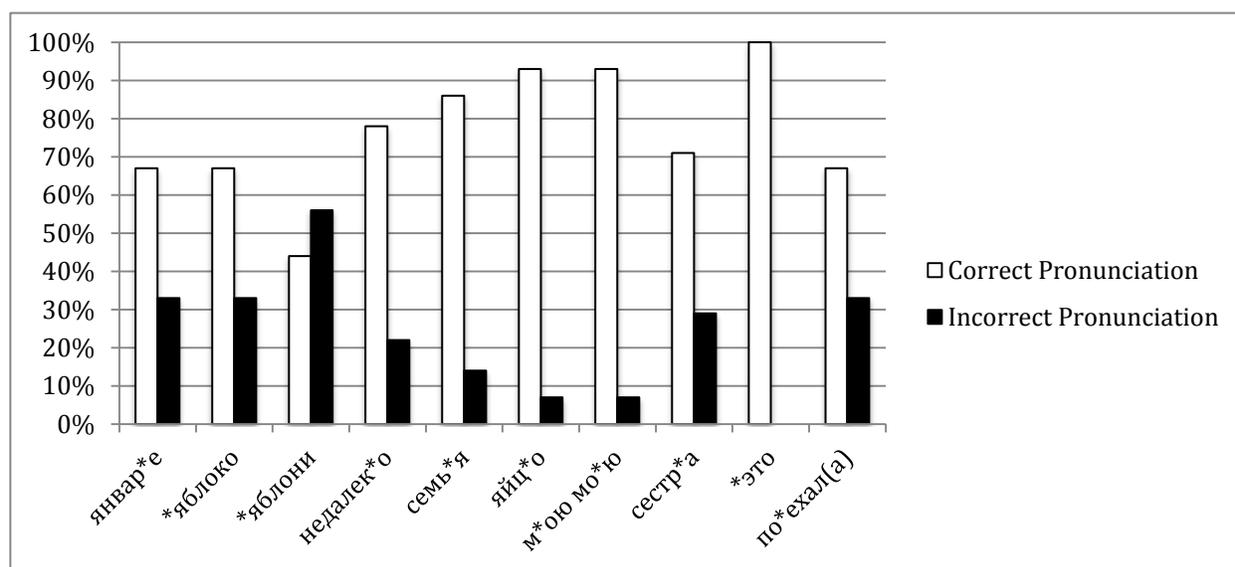


Figure 2. Distribution of Pronunciation for Group A. This shows the percentages of students with correct and incorrect pronunciation (words from voice recordings and given in Cyrillic only). Correct stress is shown by an asterisk placed *before* the stressed vowel of the word.

However, Group B (Regular Class) showed a considerable number of participants incorrectly pronouncing the same words, in some cases over 50% of students improperly pronouncing the word (see Figure 3 below).

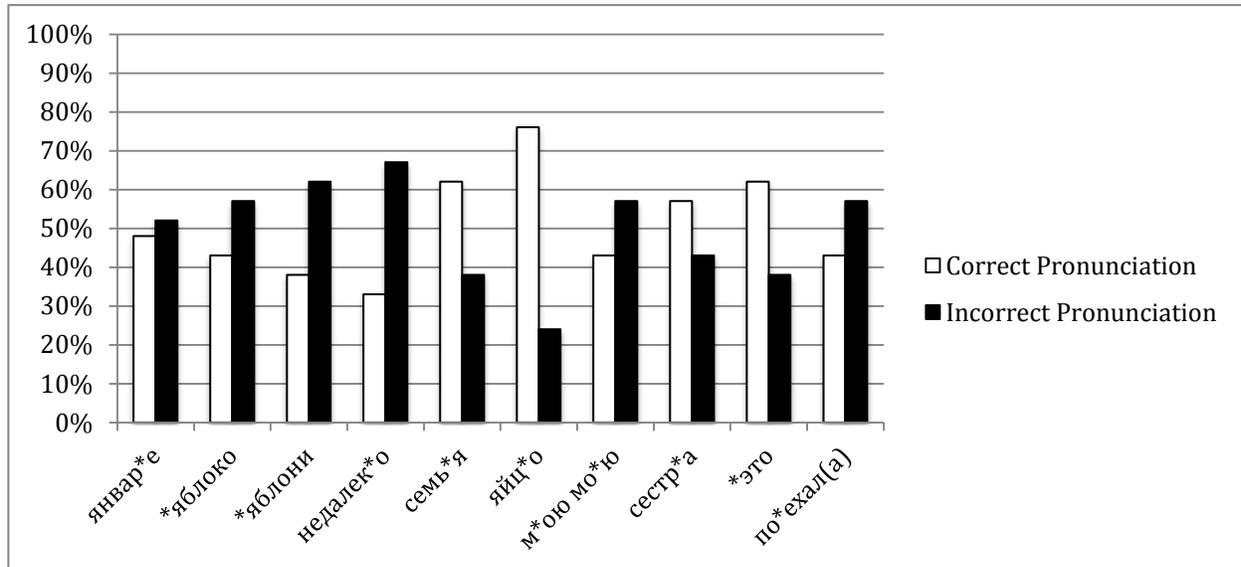


Figure 3. Distribution for Pronunciation for Group B. This shows the percentages of students with correct and incorrect pronunciation (words from voice recordings and given in Cyrillic only). Correct stress is shown by an asterisk placed *before* the stressed vowel of the word.

When students incorrectly pronounced the word, the problems would include putting the stress on the wrong syllable, not reducing the vowels, or not palatalizing, especially for the vowel “e” where preceding consonants become palatalized. In the cases where there was improper pronunciation, there were far fewer participants in Group A than in Group B (refer to Figure 4 below).

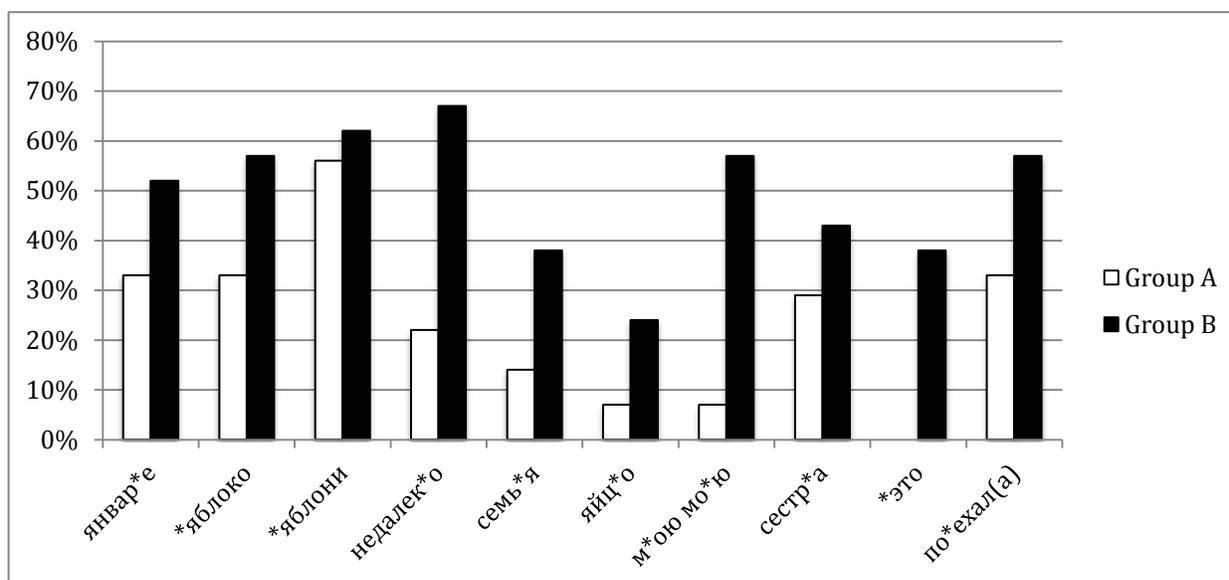


Figure 4. Distribution of Improper Pronunciation for Group A and B. This demonstrates the difference of the large percentage of Group B participants who improperly pronounce the given words compared to Group A participants (words from voice recordings and given in Cyrillic only). Correct stress is shown by an asterisk placed *before* the stressed vowel of the word.

Most notably for the word “это,” pronounced [’ɛta], 0% of participants in Group A pronounced it incorrectly while 38% of participants in Group B did. Group B, not aware of proper pronunciation rules, 49% of the time would say the incorrect pronunciation while Group A would only do this 20% of the time. The research shows that, as in Group A, more emphasis and awareness by professors at the University of Victoria needs to be put on pronunciation concerning stress, rules for reduction of vowels, and palatalization for learners of Russian to have proper pronunciation.

Concerning proper pronunciation of prepositions, where the preposition is pronounced together with the following word, the two considered to be one phonetic word, Group A performed considerably better than Group B. Where a preposition was of one phonetic sound, such as “в,” pronounced [v] or [f] depending on its position, less than 25% of participants of Group A would incorrectly pronounce them while over 50% of participants in Group B would. There was an issue for both groups, however, in the case where the preposition was longer than one phonetic sound. In this study, this problem arose for the word “от” which in unstressed position is pronounced [at]. 56% of Group A and 57% of Group B pronounced it incorrectly (refer to Figure 5 below).

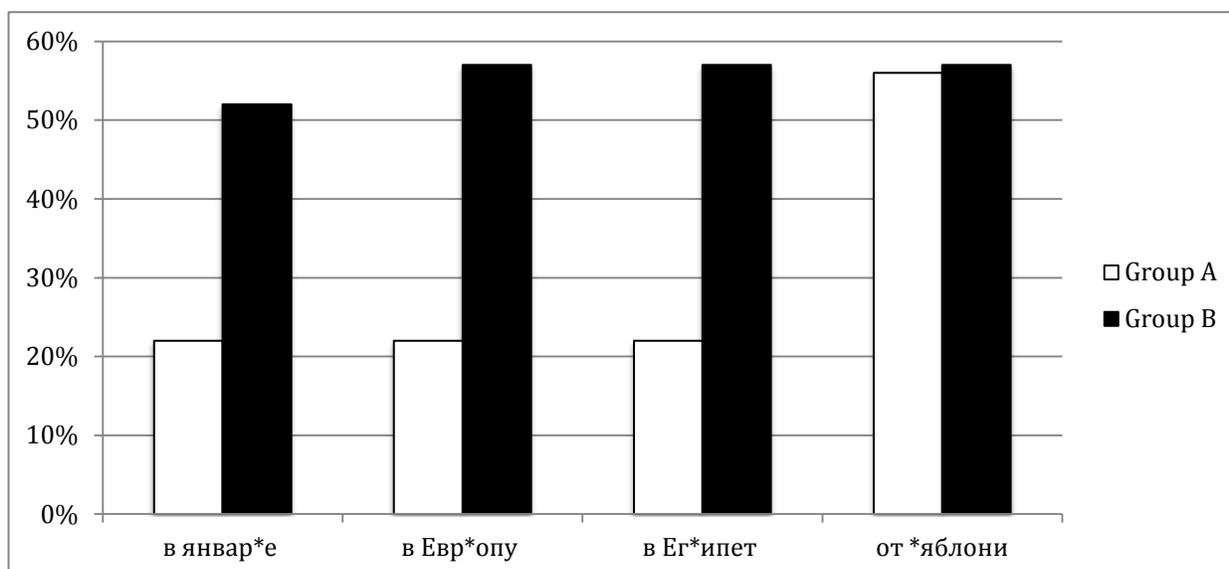


Figure 5. Distribution of Incorrect Pronunciation of Prepositions for Group A and B. The prepositions are given with the preceding word (the phrase considered the complete phonetic word). A greater percentage of Group B incorrectly pronounced prepositions compared to Group A except in the case for the preposition longer than one phonetic sound. Correct stress is shown by an asterisk placed *before* the stressed vowel of the word.

For Russian, seven intonation contours (ICs) were previously introduced. For the research, only the basic ones (IC-1, IC-2, and, IC-3), presumably familiar to both groups, were considered: IC-1 used for statements and IC-2 and IC-3 for questions. Consideration of only these intonation contours was done as Group B (Regular Class) was only introduced to the first three ICs. Group A (Focus Class), who were introduced to and spent a considerable amount of time working on proper Russian intonation, performed much better than Group B. For all the sentences, only 14% by Group A were pronounced with incorrect intonation while a considerable difference of 76% of sentences were pronounced incorrectly by Group B (see Figure 6 below).

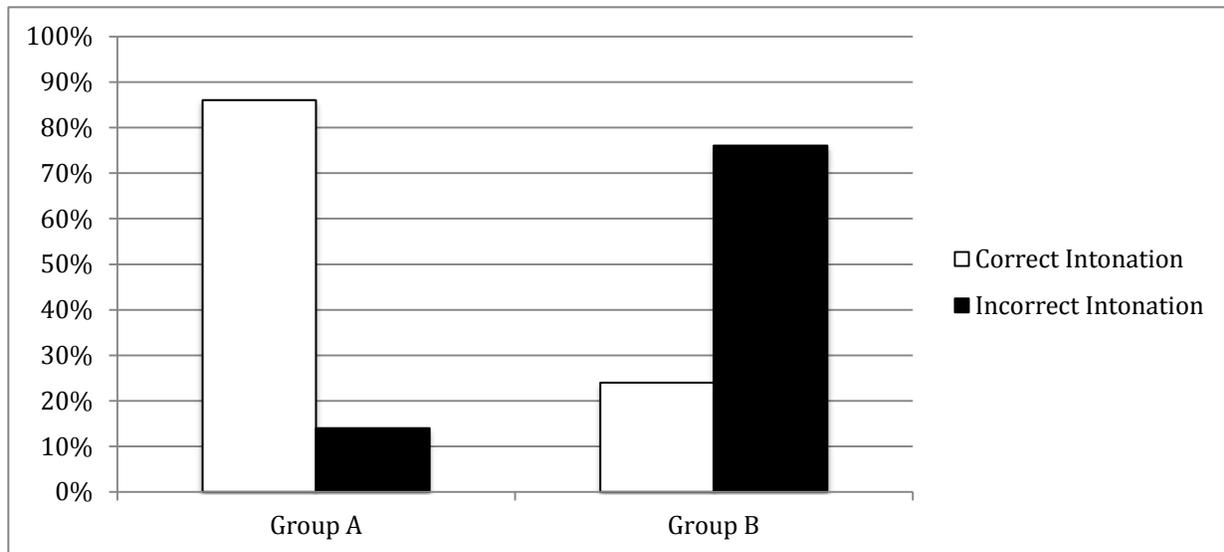


Figure 6. Distribution of Intonation Pronunciation for Group A and Group B. Group A shows a greater percentage of participants who use correct intonation than Group B.

Both groups consistently pronounced statements using IC-1 correctly but had difficulties with question contours. For IC-2 and IC-3, Group B would consistently use English intonation regardless of the type of question rather than the Russian intonation contours they were introduced to. Group A, who worked on Russian intonation, would at least try to use proper intonation for questions, but when mistakes occurred, participants would either not know the center of the intonation contour and put stress on the wrong word or, on the rare occasion, use English intonation. Without knowing and working on intonation concepts, participants showed they would mostly use the improper English intonation when speaking Russian. For the other intonation contours, IC-4, 5, 6, and 7, used to show more emotion in a person's speech, only Group A was considered. In general, the participants performed well. IC-5, 6, and 7 were all conducted with proper intonation or a very close attempt with only a few mistakes as to the center of the contour. There was some difficulty with IC-4, where participants would do a combination of IC-3 and 4 or a combination of IC-4 and English intonation. There was an attempt by all students in Group A to conduct Russian ICs on their phrases rather than simply using English intonation as in Group B. The important finding in these data is that our native language, English in this case, greatly influences the intonation we use in other languages, like Russian. The study discovered that, since English and Russian differ greatly in how intonation contours are used, it is important for students to learn and focus extensively on the intonation differences to achieve proficiency in Russian.

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.

<u>Problem at the Beginning</u>	<u>Improvement made After</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants consistently put the stress on the wrong part of the word • Not remembering to reduce all vowels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speech is halting with large pauses between words and the words themselves were pronounced in a forced manner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speech sounds more natural, less forced with a flow to their words and almost all participants not putting pauses between words
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issues with palatalizing where participants forget and pronounce without palatalization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Majority of participants all remembering to palatalize consonants preceding certain vowels
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepositions consistently pronounced as a separate phonetic word 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All one phonetic sound prepositions consistently pronounced with preceding word
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Always using English intonation during Russian speech 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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.

Is Proper Pronunciation Learned Subconsciously?

For the final step of the research, the recordings for the upper and lower levels of Group A (Focus Class) were compared to each other to see if Upper-Level participants, being in a 300 or higher level and having practiced and learned more Russian, had subconsciously acquired

proper pronunciation or if they made the same mistakes at the beginning of the research as did the Lower-Level participants, only at a 100 and 200 level of Russian. If Upper-Level participants do start at the same pronunciation level, do they advance faster and master proper pronunciation more easily than the Lower-Level participants? When comparing the first recordings of the Upper and Lower Levels, we found that all participants have the same pronunciation issues regardless of level. Consistently, the average number of Upper-Level participants having issues with palatalization, prepositions, proper stress, and vowel reduction was very similar to the average number of Lower-Level participants having similar issues: 60% of Upper-Level participants and 75% of Lower-Level participants had issues with stress; 40% Upper-Level and 50% Lower-Level had issues with prepositions; and 80% Upper Level and 100% Lower Level had issues with vowel reduction. These data show that without focusing on pronunciation issues, participants will continue to make errors throughout their Russian learning experience into more advanced levels. In the research, both groups then progressed at about the same level, neither the Upper- nor Lower-Level doing better in acquiring proficient pronunciation skills than the other. They improved together, and similar problems persisted for both levels. Findings of the research show that proper pronunciation is not something that comes naturally for an English speaker learning Russian, and it is apparent that focusing on the issues helps speakers to learn and adhere to the unfamiliar Russian pronunciation concepts.

With regard to pronunciation, it was found that Group A, in which the participants focused directly on pronunciation, showed a considerably better pronunciation compared to Group B, who were only introduced to pronunciation concepts. Group A also showed considerable improvement over the three months of the research. The biggest problem both groups had was using correct stress consistently. Other problems included vowel reduction, palatalization, and prepositions. Within Group A, the upper and lower levels were found to start at the same pronunciation level and certain problems persisted into more advanced levels when participants were not made aware of them earlier on. The two levels then progressed at the same pace, showing patterns of improvement and persisting issues.

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 at the University of Victoria is word stress.

As mentioned, stress is crucial to proper Russian pronunciation. It influences the meaning of the word as well as the vowels within a word (vowel reduction). The participants of

this study had particular problems putting the correct stress on a word, often reverting to standard English stress, with emphasis either on the base syllable or somewhere else. If a word sounded similar in both English and Russian, English speakers would be influenced by their native language and put the stress pattern of the English word onto the Russian word. This creates an enormous problem not just for proper Russian pronunciation but also proper meaning and understanding. Even when there is more emphasis put on proper stress patterning, students still have issues following correct stress every time. This may be because English speakers have difficulty perceiving stress, as demonstrated by the participants in this study when they had to indicate stress. A vast number had difficulty even knowing where the stress was on very simple words. For English speakers, professors at the University of Victoria need to put even more emphasis on perceiving and pronouncing stress when learning Russian to ensure stress issues do not continue into the more advanced levels.

The problem with stress also influences how the vowels within the word are pronounced. Another issue that many students had was remembering to reduce vowels that are not stressed. English speakers become so influenced by the orthography that they tend to want to read every single vowel as it is written, giving improper pronunciation. This aspect improved immensely when participants were taught and focused on proper vowel reduction, but it still proved to be an issue where students occasionally stressed the reduced vowels. Only with knowledge of this process and practice will this problem subside. The conclusion of this research brings a new awareness and understanding for the professors of the University of Victoria teaching Russian.

The other issues examined, including proper pronunciation of prepositions, palatalization, and intonation, greatly improved when participants focused primarily on them. These pronunciation problems will persist into more advanced levels of Russian learning if there is not a considerable amount of time spent focusing on these issues alone. Students with only a brief introduction to the concepts will make mistakes, and if these mistakes are not corrected and focused on, problems for students will persist into more advanced levels. Proper pronunciation and intonation are not concepts that are learned subconsciously, slowly integrated into a learner of Russian's speech. There are, however, considerable improvements in students when pronunciation problems are focused on, and, in some cases, these problems disappear completely. Focusing on the issues then allows learners of Russian to improve their pronunciation and become more proficient in the language. Minor issues that still persisted even after there was focus on proper pronunciation were proper stress and reduction of vowels, as previously mentioned, as well as knowing the center of an intonation contour and properly pronouncing prepositions that are longer than one phonetic sound. However, these are all issues that can be resolved over time with focused instruction and practice.

This study found that it is important for learners of Russian to have time to learn and practice proper pronunciation techniques. It is only when these issues are focused on that

students will learn and improve their Russian speech. Proper pronunciation is not subconsciously learned, and if it is not targeted, problems of pronunciation will continue into more advanced levels of Russian learning. The most important issues found for the students at the University of Victoria learning Russian were the stress and vowel reduction rules, two issues that merit much more time and work. Other issues improved considerably only when focused on, including proper pronunciation of prepositions, consonant devoicing, voicing assimilation, palatalization, and intonation. The discoveries in this study will allow the professors at the University of Victoria to have a better understanding of the more important problems students have when learning Russian. By focusing on the issues laid out here, students of Russian will be able to enrich the understanding of the language and get closer to the goal of proficiency in Russian.

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