Evolving and adapting to global changes regarding English: English language teaching in the Siberian city of Irkutsk

VALERIE SARTOR AND SVETLANA BOGDANOVA

Contemporary English language teaching in a remote Siberian university

Introduction

The Russian Federation, established after the break-up of the USSR in the early 1990s, is the largest country in the world (Blinnikov, 2011). Russians have long considered their capital, Moscow, and the adjoining city of St Petersburg, to be the centres of culture and commerce, as well of the arts and educational facilities. Due to the large size of their country, Russians designate areas west of the Ural Mountains informally as "European Russia." The Russian territories known as Siberia and the Russian Far East extend east of the Urals to the Pacific Ocean, and cover approximately 10% of the world's land mass (Yudin, 2006). In May 2000, President Putin designated nine federal subjects (provinces and republics) of Siberia as the Siberian Federal District (http://russiatrek.org/siberia-district). The capital of Irkutsk, located in Irkutsk Province, is situated in the southeastern part of the Siberian Federal District.

During the Soviet Era (1917–1990), cities in the western provinces, such as Kiev and Riga, were also held in high regard for education, often in the form of specialized universities dedicated to making contributions to science and technology, as well as the arts and sciences (Graham, 1993). Very little, however, has been written recently about English language teaching in universities in the more remote areas of Siberia, especially those in Eastern Siberia. This article aims to address this gap.

Under Soviet rule, throughout the USSR, many universities and institutes contained faculties of foreign languages, where English, German, and other foreign languages were taught. Especially

SVETLANA YUREVNA BOGDANOVA, Doctor of Philology, currently heads the Department of English Philology at ELI. She graduated from the Irkutsk State Pedagogical Institute of Foreign Languages in 1987. She has taught English for 26 years at this university in Irkutsk. As a researcher, she specializes in cognitive linguistics, following the work of George Lakoff and Ronald Langacker.

VALERIE SARTOR, PhD, LLSS, University of New Mexico, is serving as an English instructor and teacher trainer at ELI in Irkutsk for the academic year 2014–2015, as a Fulbright scholar/teacher. Her sociolinguistic research focuses upon language and identity regarding multilingual children, and upon teaching ESL writing strategies.

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after World War II, Soviet academics recognized the need for broad-based language studies. However, when the Russian Federation was established in 1993, only four institutes in four Russian cities remained as prestigious academic institutions specializing in linguistics and pedagogy. These four institutes are located in Moscow, Pyatigorsk, Nizhniy Novgorod, and Irkutsk. The Eurasian Linguistic Institute in Irkutsk therefore serves as a key foreign language university for all of Siberia east of the Urals and south to Mongolia, and also this institute serves the Russian Far East. Moreover, the Eurasian Language Institute's rector, deans, and many faculty members are renowned linguists. For this reason the Eurasian Language Institute attracts English and other language major students from throughout Siberia and the Far East.

Today, Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) exemplifies some of the major changes that have taken place in post-Soviet educational policies more generally, such as marketization, privatization, and testing reforms (Silova & Eklof, 2012). Throughout contemporary Russia, the teaching of English has become a business commodity. Moreover, acquiring English fluency is now considered a valuable and prestigious skill, as opportunities for international business and travel continue to increase for Russians (Ter-Minasova, 2005). Government policies for teaching English at university are evolving to accommodate post-Soviet student needs. This article describes changes regarding English language teaching within the Eurasian Linguistic Institute (ELI), a new affiliate branch of the Moscow State Linguistic University (MGLU), located in the city of Irkutsk, Irkutsk Province. Formerly known as the Irkutsk State Pedagogical Institute of Foreign Languages, this facility was founded in 1948, later the Irkutsk State Linguistic University (1997) (Khakhalova, 2008). The Department of English Philology is one of sixteen departments in the Eurasian Linguistic Institute. Historically, these departments have prepared Russian citizens to primarily serve as foreign language teachers (Khakhalova, 2008). Currently, English remains the most popular language chosen by students who attend this institute, either as language majors or otherwise.

In the city of Irkutsk, another local university (Irkutsk State University) recently offered English language training, and other academically oriented institutes teach classes in foreign languages such as English. As elsewhere in Russia in the early 1990s (Ustinova, 2005), small, private English language schools have appeared around the city as well. Past and present, however, the Eurasian Linguistic Institute has long been known throughout Siberia for its specialty regarding the teaching of foreign languages (Khakhalova, 2008). Although we will discuss changes in curriculum and other aspects of English language education that have caused the university to be renamed the Eurasian Linguistic Institute, the majority of current students still attend in order to become English language teachers or interpreters.

This article will address the following areas: the contemporary Russian student population in Irkutsk and their options for their course of study; textbooks and English language proficiency; and finally, the Russian teachers of English, their teaching philosophies and methodologies. Throughout the article we will draw on interviews conducted with staff at the ELI.

Student population

In the 2014–15 academic year, 176 students have currently enrolled as English majors, ranging from their first to fifth year. "The majority of our students are females," said Tatiana Nikolevna, a teacher who has been with the institute for 36 years. "The reason is our Russian culture: We have unwritten norms that men should go to military school or get involved in industry or in business enterprises and IT. But women – women should be teachers and translators, and we have the notion that women learn languages easily, that they listen well, that they make better teachers for our children, as they also become mothers." Thus, Russian culture has gender norms and expectations that translate into educational norms (Richmond, 2003). Among this year's English majors in the student population, fewer than fifteen students are male. Moreover, all twenty teachers in the Department of English Philology are female.

Since Soviet times, the Russian student population studying English has always been predominantly female (Ashwin, 2000). Many young female students are married, with some women also having a child. "Our parents take care of our children while we study," said Alyona, a young Buriat girl, aged 21. Regarding Indigenous students, Buriats and other minorities (Tatar, Ukrainian) are represented at the institute. Yet of the six young Indigenous women we interviewed for this article, none spoke their Indigenous language.[1] Additionally, these young English majors, male and female, ranged in age from 17 to 24 years of age.

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Requirements for graduation have changed this year (2014), as the institute merged with Moscow State Linguistic University this summer. This centralization of academic institutions is part of a government initiative to improve educational quality while reducing overall costs (http://www.rg.ru). This current year is the final year students must study for five years as specialists; from next year students will only study for four years to achieve their baccalaureates (http://edu.ru). Today, as in the past, English language classes are small, with no more than ten to fifteen students per group. English majors choose a second language as their minor, with Mandarin Chinese now being the most popular, followed by German.

Testing has also changed. From 2006, to enter the institute, students have had to take a qualifying exam called the United National Exam (EGE).[2] This test somewhat resembles the SAT exams in the USA. In Russia, the maths and Russian EGE exams are compulsory; there are also several, optional EGEs, such as physics, chemistry, and foreign languages (Lenskaya, 2013). To qualify as English majors, students graduating from secondary school sit for the English language EGE, which has 100 points and consists of listening comprehension, reading, writing, and grammatical/lexical components. In 2015, a 15 minute spoken component will be added to the English exam (http://fipi.ru).

In 2014, the minimum score for secondary school students to receive an EGE English Certificate was 20 (http://fipi.ru). Upon graduation they are given their certificate in English as a foreign language (EGE – English). In 2015, however, students must score 22 to receive this certificate (personal communication, October 2014). At the ELI, as among other institutes, every area of studies has the right to determine the minimum entrance score. To qualify at ELI as an English major, in the past the minimum score was 21; in the future, the minimum score is expected to be approximately 40 (personal communication, October 2014). Inside Russian universities, those with high scores may receive a government stipend for tuition. Students with lower scores may choose a major other than English, while electing to pursue English fluency through practical conversation courses also offered by the university.

Most ELI students (as well as other students attending universities in Irkutsk) hail from Irkutsk City and outlying regions, such as Angarsk and the neighbouring provinces of Buryatia and Zabaikalskaya. Yelena Alexandrovna, an associate professor of English, explains: "Students take a series of exams after graduating from high school, and with their marks they are eligible to apply for institutes and universities around Russia. Usually, however, they prefer to stay near their homes, because they want to be close to their families and because it costs less to live nearby than to move elsewhere, where there are no relatives to help you, or give you a place to sleep." Thus, economics is often a major factor determining educational choices (Ashwin, 2000).

Evolving curriculum

During the Soviet era, education was free (Holmes, Read & Voskresenskaya, 1995). Now, in post-Soviet times, at the ELI, students without a stipend must pay 60,000 rubles per academic year (http://www.islu.ru). According to one teacher, "Some of our students get state stipends; this covers only the cost of their studies. Basic needs: a dorm room, for example, is 400 rubles a month, and food costs vary from 2500 to 5500 rubles a month. Stipends are awarded to according to their academic marks". Different courses of study have different tuition charges. Another teacher remarked that the Management Department of ELI has a different kind of student body. "They also study English, for practical purposes, and some go abroad to do internships, in China or New Zealand or elsewhere," said Irina Ivanovna, a teacher, "These students desire English but don't want to learn linguistic theories; they think that it simply doesn't pay enough these days to be an English teacher."

With the breakup of the USSR in the early 1990s, educational institutions were forced to restructure and transform themselves (Polyzoi & Dneprov, 2011). New majors appeared in the institute during the 1990s (Khakhalova, 2008). "We added management, PR, and guide/interpreter to our curriculum choices," said Svetlana Yurevana, the head of the Department of English Philology, adding, "Professional English teachers now receive a higher salary than in the past." English majors must take intensives from both theoretical as well as practical perspectives. Their degree requirements include learning the history of the English language, as well as grammatical and lexical theory. They also learn hands-on communicative teaching methods from their teachers and from doing internships in local primary and secondary schools.

In addition to new majors, the ELI was encouraged, as were other academic facilities around Russia, to seek new ways to make money (Jones,

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1994). Natalia Vladimirovna, a coordinator inside the International Relations Office, said: "We have created a youth language school, as well as an adult night school that offers several foreign languages. English is our most popular choice, but we also offer Chinese, French, Spanish, Italian and German." When I asked the English teachers about the popularity of other foreign languages, they told me that some of their students actually preferred Chinese to English. "It's because we are such close neighbours with China," said Natalia Nikolaevna, an associate professor, "Our students travel there and think they can find a better job, or have a better life, than here. When they do their internships in China, they may forget about studying English."

Textbooks

For Russian students, English language studies are still evolving. Firstly, since the breakup of the USSR, many things have changed regarding English language teaching and the curriculum (Hudgins, 2004). "In the Soviet period we had the same textbooks for years and years, they were written by our experts," said Svetlana Yurevna. She explained that in 1997 her department started making use of *Headway* and other foreign ESL textbooks. "When the British Council had an office in Irkutsk, we had the opportunity to attend workshops and get some teaching materials. Our English teachers also utilized excerpts from English books they obtained from abroad," said Varvara Faridovna. "Eventually, in 2008, we created our own textbook. This book incorporates reading, speaking, and writing activities; we don't have a listening component because we are not native speakers. Since 2006, we started getting literary books from the Oxford–Russia Fund; they cater exclusively toward university students and teachers. Every year I go to a conference and come back with fifty new top quality books – modern British literature – for free," said Svetlana Yurevna.

English Language Proficiency

"There is no doubt that contemporary students are becoming fluent more easily than those who studied during Soviet times," said Svetlana Yurevna. She spoke of three significant factors: technology, mobility, and interactions. "Clearly, young people today have access to the Internet; they can hear, see, watch, and mimic English freely. They can chat with English speakers using computers; this is something previous generations lacked," she said. Her words reflect similar trends worldwide (Warschauer, 1998).

Additionally, Ekaterina Valerievna, a young teacher in the department, also pointed out the opportunities that Russian students had to participate in work exchanges; "If someone is motivated, and not just a wealthy student, he or she can go to an English-speaking country and do a work exchange. These things are possible. Today's young people are highly mobile; many of my students have been to Canada or to Australia." Finally, I asked Varvara Faridovna, at age 28 the youngest senior teacher, how she gained her astounding fluency. She said: "I have been abroad a few times, but mainly I have volunteered for many international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for several years, and helped foreign guests who came as artists, scholars, and scientists. This ongoing contact, as well as some trips to international conferences affiliated with my activities, has made me very comfortable using English."

Significantly, when I polled the teachers regarding the fluency of their students, reactions were mixed. Many told me that their students were talented and fluent, especially those who had travelled and/or worked abroad on exchanges. "The trouble is that they no longer read," said Natalia Nikolaevna. "During Soviet times, we read voraciously; reading is crucial to understanding and learning anything, especially a foreign language. But today's students don't read much. They lack a long attention span." Her complaint, also voiced by other teachers, is reflected worldwide (Barnes, Marateo, & Ferris, 2007). Digital technology, mobile phones and the Internet have opened immense opportunities for social interactions, but they seem to have come at a price. Young Russian students at ELI are less likely to sit and read, than they are to scan webpages, or watch videos, whether it be in English or Russian.

"Another issue is motivation," said Yelena Alexandrevna, an associate professor of English. "Some of these kids are not as hard working, they put out less effort, because their lives are very different from those of us who grew up during Soviet times. It's a different mindset, I can't blame them …" Post-Soviet culture has cultivated this trend (Markowitz, 2000). This led us to query the twenty women about their own visions as teachers.

Teachers, teaching philosophy, and methodology

"As an English teacher, my life has not changed much in terms of salary; I mean I am still paid

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poorly, it's just inflation has changed the value of the ruble," said one teacher over 50 when I asked her about her teaching career. Another, younger teacher said: "Well, we must run about to different places to teach. Our salaries here are small, so I teach at three or four different places. The thing is, I like having the choice. If I want more money, I run about and work. I think it's good. I teach at the nearby Waldorf School and it is exciting for me to experience a different system, as well as to get extra money." Many post-Soviet teachers feel the same way (Roshchina & Fillopova, 2014).

Russian universities such as this one have a hierarchy for teaching (Holmes, Read, & Voskresenskaya, 1995). Respect for other colleagues can be determined by academic ranking. In the Department of English Philology at ELI there are three doctors of philology, seven assistant professors, and ten senior teachers. In Russia, a doctor of philology (*doktor*) rates higher than an American PhD, because it implies that this scholar has published extensively and her doctoral dissertation has added something original to the body of knowledge. An assistant professor (*kandidat nauk*) has defended her (*kandidat*) dissertation; finally a senior teacher is a person who has studied for five years and received a diploma (*specialist*) and who is working toward a higher degree; she also has several years experience teaching English. As throughout Russia, those who work in the Department of English Philology are eligible to retire at age 55; they may go on full pension and decide to return to teach at full salary (Eklof, Holmes, & Kaplan, 2004). Some of the professors in the Department of English Philology have done this, either because they do not want to give up their profession, or they wish to supplement their income, or both.

All the Russian teachers of English, young and old, said that they were under the same pressure as in Soviet times. They were expected to better themselves academically, to write articles, or to conduct extra-curricular activities – involving creation of textbooks or curriculum (Khakhalova, 2008). The English teachers at ELI had to carry out tedious administrative functions, attend meetings, and to teach many classes.

Conclusion

Education in the Russian Federation has changed significantly in recent decades. With the breakup of the USSR, former Soviet educational systems had to seek ways to survive and thrive, as economic turmoil challenged and changed the Russian way of life (Eklof, Holmes, & Kaplan, 2004). In addition to economic changes in Russia, many post-Soviet educators have supported attempts toward creating a more European-style system of education in the mid-1990s (Lenskaya, 2013). "Part of this reasoning is due to the fact that we want Europe and the West to acknowledge and accept our diplomas," said one retired professor in Irkutsk. "Another is simply the need to evolve and to keep up with the changing times." This restructuring has taught the teachers at ELI to be flexible regarding the names of their workplaces, and open to changes in structure, salary, and teaching load. They all work very hard to offer high-quality English language instruction.

English is still considered the premier global language among the Russian student population in Irkutsk. Fortunately, access to English language materials has not decreased as political tensions have increased, and the English teachers at the Eurasian Linguistic Institute remain hopeful. As Ludmilla Valentinovna, an associate professor, puts it: "Our lives are in flux; our students study English and Chinese, and other languages, and we are grateful for the increased mobility and advanced technologies that bring these languages to our corner of the world. Let us hope that by supporting multilingual education among our youth, we are also promoting cultural understanding – which is the true path towards keeping our world peaceful." ■

Notes

1 More research is needed on the urban student Indigenous populations in Siberia.

2 Единый государственный экзамен

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