

Scottish Parliament European and External Relations Committee inquiry on learning foreign languages in primary schools

Ref: <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/56920.aspx>

Submission from Jennifer Carr on behalf of the Scotland-Russia Forum

1. Overview

Our submission will argue for the inclusion of Russian in the menu of languages offered and will be confined to your two final questions:

- The choice of languages for teaching – which languages should children be learning and why?
- The role of languages in economic development – what languages should children be learning to benefit their future careers, and to help Scotland flourish economically?

Both will be covered in section 4 below.

Russian is currently offered as a curricular subject by only one school in the maintained sector – Peterhead Academy. No independent schools offer Russian, other than to small groups of Russian speaking pupils or similar. By contrast Russian was relatively widely taught in Scotland in the 1960s-80s. The language is still taught in almost all other European countries – for example 9% of English maintained schools (and 24% of independents) offer Russian¹ - particularly those, like Germany, with an active interest in trade with Russia and Eastern Europe.

2. Personal background

I am a qualified language teacher (PGCE), with experience of teaching Russian, German and French in secondary and higher education. I was shocked to discover, on returning to Scotland in 2000, that by then there were almost no schools teaching Russian. My personal commitment to building bridges between our two countries began in 1972, when I spent a year in Leningrad as an undergraduate student of Russian at St Andrews University, and realised the value of personal and cultural contacts with a country that was then politically isolated. The situation has improved since but not out of recognition.

3. The Scotland-Russia Forum and language teaching – background

The Scotland-Russia Forum is a Scottish charity founded in 2003 with the aim of promoting understanding of Russia and her neighbours. We have done this in a wide variety of ways and to a wide variety of audiences – public lectures and exhibitions, business conferences and taster language classes in primary schools to name a small sample of our activities. More information:

www.scotlandrussiaforum.org

We believe it is essential to understand Russia for reasons of Scotland's (and the UK's) political and economic wellbeing but also for a variety of cultural and linguistic reasons.

The SRF supports the teaching of Russian as follows:

- Language courses for adults. Details on www.scotlandrussiaforum.org/languageclasses.html

- Taster classes in Scottish schools. We offer a short taster at all levels of primary and secondary and have visited around 30 schools so far, meeting pupils P2 to S6. Students from the Universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh have assisted with this project.
- Russian clubs. We received a grant in 2012 from Glasgow City Council and set up weekly clubs in Shawlands Academy and Dalmarnock Primary School. Both are flourishing. Shawlands recently participated in a 3 way “tele-bridge” with schools in Russia and China.
- Active participation in COALA, SCILT and SALT events and other multi-lingual initiatives.
- Campaign for the inclusion of Russian in schools and reinstatement of SQA national courses in Russian (due to be withdrawn in 2015):
www.scotlandrussiaforum.org/keepschoolexams.html
- Support for teachers of Russian throughout Scotland

4. Why should Scottish children learn Russian?

Politics: Scotland needs to understand Russia

“... many in Russian civil society and the intelligentsia say it is crucial for the west not to isolate Russia at the very moment its middle-class political consciousness is flowering ... Above all, the west should engage with ordinary Russians. Step up exchanges and opportunities for young Russians to study and experience first-hand the western system...” Neil Buckley, Financial Times 7 March 2012.

- Russia is a large country with a long history of isolation, political and geographical. During the Soviet period it was regarded as a political “superpower” and while those days are gone it still has, and/or seeks, considerable political and economic power. It is essential to understand such a country.
- Russia itself, used to isolation, will not make the first move. Russia contributes far fewer resources to promotion of its language and culture than comparable countries – there are no effective Russian equivalents to the state funded Confucius classrooms, Goethe Institute etc. Russian cultural and linguistic policy is still heavily targeted at maintaining Russian culture and language among its diaspora rather than encouraging uptake by foreigners.
- Russian history and culture has been closely associated with that of the new EU states in Eastern Europe, and its Slavic language also has much in common with many of their languages.
- If Russian language and culture are ignored in schools students and parents get the impression that Russia is an unimportant minor country. Whereas if elements are present – maybe an introduction to the language in P5, maybe cultural aspects taught earlier – they can be built on by students in later life as aspects of Russia become relevant to them.

Culture: a valuable aspect of European culture

The contribution to European culture of writers, composers and the ballet of 19 and early 20 century Russia is well known but there is a wealth of other cultural material, recent as well as historical, which would enrich language study: Russian fairy tales,

its history of space exploration, political jokes, poetry, and folk and pop music are just a few topics which we have used successfully in schools.

Economics: we need to share in this growing market

- Russia is a relatively fast growing BRIC country with a sophisticated and growing consumer market². The Russian-speaking market also includes former Soviet states where the native language is official but there are many Russian speakers: notably Kazakhstan, Ukraine and even the new EU-member states of Lithuania and Latvia. Scotland should have a larger share of that market!
- Business opportunities are not only in Russia itself: Scotland welcomes an increasing number of Russian tourists every year.
- Russians value personal connections so an interest in their culture and language pays dividends. Many Russians do not speak English.
- A recent CBI report highlighted the languages skills gap in the UK. Russian is in the top 10 foreign languages rated as useful to UK organisations³.

Language: “different” enough to be interesting but familiar enough to be accessible

The Russian alphabet seems exotic but the language itself is actually relatively easy to master in the early stages and it is possible for many learners to acquire fluency.

- Russian is NOT “difficult”. The Foreign Office, the US Defense Dept and other organisations used to teaching a wide variety of languages to their employees, all rank it as roughly the same level of difficulty as German in terms of the number of hours’ tuition needed to get to certain levels⁴.
- The alphabet both complicates learning for English-speakers and makes it more straightforward. There are 33 letters, of which relatively few are identical with the Latin alphabet. However, once mastered, pronunciation becomes easy since the language is phonetic and entirely logical.
- Russian is a European language, structurally similar to Western European languages and in many ways easier than most (simple formation of the past tense, no irregular verb “to be” for example).
- Russian seems interesting to boys – they outnumber or equal girls in many classes, which is not true of more commonly taught languages – and so is a valuable tool in encouraging more uptake of languages in general⁵.
- There are around 250m Russian speakers in the world, making it the 6th most widely spoken language⁶.
- A Slavonic language, Russian not only offers students a chance to sample another language group (they are commonly offered Latin and Germanic languages) but one with close links to the Slavonic languages of Eastern Europe, increasingly commonly spoken in British classrooms.

5. Conclusion:

- Russian should be available as one of the selection of languages offered to Scottish pupils for a range of political, cultural, economic and linguistic reasons.

- National courses in Russian should be reinstated to enable those who choose to take a qualification which is offered in other languages
- Russian should be offered as a second language from P5 in the new 1+2 framework, if not earlier.

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¹ 2011 Language Trends survey

² A snapshot: Russia will be the 8th largest world economy by 2014, GDP per capita is highest of the BRICs and average monthly wages were \$805 in 2011 (\$64 in 1999), mainly disposable: 50% of GDP goes on private consumption. Sources: IMF, World Bank, Rosstat/Citi, bne.

³ CBI Education and Skills Survey 2012, pp55-57

⁴ For example: 1 to 1 lessons, hours needed (FCO 2003)

<i>Language (Class)</i>	<i>Beginner to Survival</i>	<i>Beginner to Functional</i>	<i>Beginner to Operational</i>
Chinese, Japanese (Group 1)	250	630	1200
Arabic (Group 2)	180	525	1000
Turkish (Group 2)	160	300	600
Russian (Group 3)	140	300	460
Greek (Group 3)	140	260	460
German (Group 4)	120	240	400
French, Spanish (Group 5)	120	220	360

⁵ Boys' share of exam presentations 2012:

	<i>Int 1</i>	<i>GCSE**</i>	<i>Higher</i>	<i>A level**</i>
	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Boys</i>
Average other MFL*	51%	43%	27%	40%
Russian	58%	52%	38%	49%

Source: JCQ and SQA

*Other MFL: Chinese languages, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Gaelic Learners (SQA), Welsh (JCQ)

** GCSE and A level included because the SQA Russian numbers are arguably too low to be significant.

⁶ Wikipedia. 1-5 are Mandarin, Hindi, English, Spanish and Bengali.