



The Social Environment and Business Communication in English: A Small-Scale Research on Front-Line Staff Performance in Russia, Spain and France

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ABSTRACT

The performance measuring of the English everyday use of the front-line personnel remains an important topic of theoretical and practical study. Using a method of participant observation, the authors compared the St. Petersburg business environment with two cities in Spain (Madrid, Girona) and one in France (Perpignan). The observers carried out 64 visits in four cities. The sampling method is a convenience sample. The research in Spain and France was carried out in March-April, June-August 2014 and in Russia in June-July 2015. The observers checked how the front-line staff performed business communication in English. The authors draw conclusion that St. Petersburg demonstrates the worst results in the front-line interaction in English.

Keywords: Front-Line Staff Performance, Business Communication in English, Assessment

JEL Classifications: M12, M14, M53

1. INTRODUCTION

English became a foreign language for educational purposes in Russia only in the 1970s (Alpatov, 2000, p. 104). German was the main foreign language before (Comrie, 1981). English became prestigious quickly; as a result, schools with more serious education in English appeared in all regions of the USSR (Grenoble, 2003). Parents estimated these schools as having a higher level. After the Soviet Union collapse, English became an extremely popular subject of study (Alpatov, 2014). Many parents enthusiastically gave their children the opportunity to learn English. Parents paid to this subject much attention, even sending their children to language courses and foreign training. However, state and regional policies in support of this movement were not formulated (Vahtin and Golovko, 2004; Rubtsova, 2007; Rubtsova, 2011; Pavenkov et al., 2015). Contrary to the Russian state, the Spanish government and

the government of autonomies have recently paid more attention to the support of English (Lasagabaster and Zarobe, 2010). So we are going to focus on the comparison between the Russian and the Spanish contexts with a view to the characteristics the English language use in Russian social environment. We will consider the results of sociological research studies and census in Russia and Eurobarometer research studies in Spain.

The Russian sociological organization “Levada Center” published the results of the Survey “Foreign language skills” (Levada Center, 2014). The survey took place between 25 and 28 April 2014 and was conducted throughout all of Russia in both urban and rural settings. The survey was carried out among 1602 people over the age of 18 in 130 localities in 45 of the country’s regions. Table 1 shows that 70% of the respondents did not speak any foreign languages, and 11% could speak fluently (more or less) in English.

In fact, the Levada Center data looks overtly optimistic against the background of official statistics. According to the Official Statistics Census (2010), not more than 5.48% of Russians think they can speak English. In 8 years a very small success was achieved from 4.84% to 5.48% (Table 2).

We will compare these results with those obtained in Spain. We can use data from Eurobarometer, which regularly conducts the study “Europeans and their Languages (2006, 2012).” The Eurobarometer research shows more successful promotion of the English language among the young. The Table 3 and the Figure 1 give information about Eurobarometer respondents’ answers. While only 5.9% of the population aged 55 or older speak English, among younger groups, the percentage of English language speakers reaches 45.9% for groups between 15 and 24 years old.

Despite the fact that we have not got enough information for the exact comparison, we can assume that Spaniards speak English better than Russians almost two times more (if we compare with Levada Center) and 4 times more (if we compare with Russian official statistics). In both countries, parents have made efforts to ensure the future of their children. However, in one case, the Spanish state and the regional governments have made much more effort; for example, they have organized a network of schools with bilingual programmes, while in Russia the state does not do that and tries to protect the Russian language only (Rubtcova, 2015a; 2015b). Perhaps that is why we have such differences.

We would like to consider what effect the prevalence of the English language to the real business communication (Blommaert, 2010). Using a method of participant observation (Garfinkel, 1967; Noel,

1972; Goffman, 1981; Giddens, 2001), we decided to conduct a small-scale research of reactions of the St. Petersburg business staff towards English. This type of research on the social and business environment is popular because it is inexpensive and can be performed without special training of interviewers, who may be commercial service visitors (Usiaeva et al., 2015). We have already written in our papers (Martyanova et al., 2013; Malinina et al., 2015; Rubtcova et al., 2015a; Rubtcova et al., 2015c; Vasilieva et al., 2015), that the communication in Russia may essentially depend on the sustainable models of conduct of the professional communities. It is necessary to consider that the staff as a member of corporate relations in Russia has a low level of satisfaction of its anticipations (Tarando et al., 2015. p. 126). So there may be the staff’s resistance to innovations, such as communication in English (Rubtcova, 2010).

The method of participant observation allows us to find out how the employees in the commercial sector use English. It is a good way to know how employees actually relate to the English language and whether they can solve their everyday work tasks with the help of English. It should be noted that the language of business communication imposes other requirements (Rubtcova et al., 2015b). For example, it is very important to understand the many accents and dialects (Luckmann, 2009.). So small-scale research “The social environment and business communication in English in St. Petersburg” addressed the following question:

- How does front-line staff perform business communication in English?

2. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The data collection method was participant observation. Our observers carried out 64 visits with 16 visits in each of the following four cities: St. Petersburg (Russia), Madrid (Spain), Girona (Spain), Perpignan (France). There were eight visits to a bank and eight to mobile shopping (from 16). Four observations were made in tourist areas and four observations in the outskirts of the city (from 8). One visit was made to each shop. Cities in Spain and France were chosen for comparison with the situation in St. Petersburg

The observed operations were: Operations of bank accounts; assistance with ATM; problems with the account; question about banking services; purchase of SIM cards; change of mobile phone tariff; replacement of SIM card for iPad; buying Mobile Phone.

Table 1: Do you speak more or less free in any foreign languages, and if so, on what: Age distribution (multiple answers are possible), Levada Center, Russia (2014)

Languages	Total	Age (years)			
		18-24	25-39	40-54	55 - older
English	11	22	17	9	3
German	2	2	3	3	2
Spanish	2	2	1	1	2
French	<1	1	<1	<1	<1
Chinese	<1	<1	1	<1	<1
Other	2	1	1	2	2
Speak some foreign language, but with big difficulty	13	21	18	10	7
Generally, I do not speak foreign languages	70	49	61	74	83

Table 2: “I can speak...” The results of the two official censuses in Russia (2002, 2010), Federal State Statistics Service (2015)

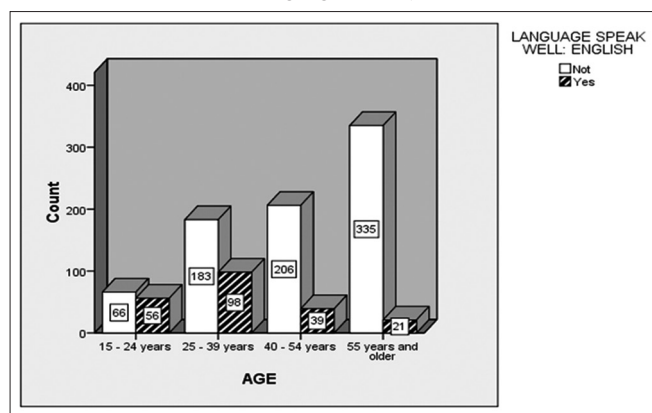
Number of spread	Language	I can speak...	Group % 2002	Total %	I can speak...	Group % 2010	Total %	Growth from 2002 to 2010, %	Growth from 2002 to 2010, people
		Total, people 2002			total, people 2010				
1	Russian	142573285	99.18	98.21	137494893	99.41	96.25	-3.56	-5078392
2	English	6955315	4.84	4.79	7574303	5.48	5.30	8.90	618988
4	German	2895147	2.01	1.99	2069949	1.50	1.45	-28.50	-825198
11	French	705217	0.49	0.49	616394	0.45	0.43	-12.60	-88823
31	Spanish	111900	0.08	0.08	152147	0.11	0.11	35.97	40247

Table 3: Question D48b: “And which other language, if any, do you speak well enough in order to be able to have a conversation”: Distribution of responses by age, Spain

Age (years)	Language speak well: English (total)		Total
	Yes (%)	Not	
	15-24		
Frequency	56 (45.9)	66	122
Expected frequency	26	96.0	122.0
25-39			
Frequency	98 (34.9)	183	281
Expected frequency	59.9	221.1	281.0
40-54			
Frequency	39 (15.9)	206	245
Expected frequency	52.2	192.8	245.0
55 and older			
Frequency	21 (5.9)	335	356
Expected frequency	75.9	280.1	356.0
Total			
Frequency	214	790	1004

Europeans and their languages, 2012

Figure 1: Question D48b: “And which other language, if any, do you speak well enough in order to be able to have a conversation”: Distribution of Responses by Age, Spain (Europeans and Their Languages, 2012)



The research in Spain and France was carried out in March-April, June-August 2014. The observers were four Russian tourists who do not speak Spanish and French. Their English level was basic, with a strong Russian accent. The sampling method is a convenience sample.

The research in Russia was carried out in June-July 2015. The observers were two international students who do not speak Russian. Their English level was native-speaker (American observer) and basic (Chinese observer). The sampling method is a convenience sample.

All studies were conducted according to the Professional Ethical Code of Sociologists by the Russian Society of Sociologists. It means that according to requirements of anonymity, the signed Participant Consent Agreement cannot be asked for.

All participants were asked to participate in the study and informed about the objectives of the research. Participant

consent to participate was gained. They were assured of the anonymity of their responses through the use of pseudonyms to report the results and were guaranteed the confidentiality of collecting data. They allowed to use the data for research purposes.

3. RESULTS

In order to compare business communication in English in St. Petersburg with other cities, our observers made 16 visits in St. Petersburg and 48 visits in Madrid (Spain), Girona (Spain) and Perpignan (France). Other cities were selected by convenience sampling, because the study did not have funding. From these 16 visits in each city, there are eight visits to a bank and eight to mobile shopping. Four observations were made in tourist areas and four observations in the outskirts of the city (from 8). The observed operations were:

- Operations of bank accounts; assistance with ATM; problems with the account; question about banking services;
- Purchase of SIM cards; change of mobile phone tariff; replacement of SIM card for iPad; buying a mobile phone.

The research in Spain and France was carried out in March-April, June-August 2014. Observers are Russian tourists (4 persons) who do not speak Spanish or French. The English level is Basic with a strong Russian accent. The research in Russia was carried out in June-July 2015. The observers were future international students (2 persons) who do not speak Russian. The English level was: Native (1 person), Basic (1 person). Our observers checked how the front-line staff performed business communication in English.

In this section we discuss the results of these observations, which are presented in Table 4. Each case contains eight observations. If observation confirm feature it marked by a sign (+), if not, it marked by a sign (-). For example, the characteristic “The first employee, whom we asked, speaks English (1)” in column 2 means that only once observers met a first employee answered in English (+1) and seven times (-7) a first employee did not speak English.

4. DISCUSSION

Spaniards showed the loyal relation and readiness to help. Even if the staff does not speak English, they often understand it. If they listen to a question in English, they can give a relevant answer in Spanish. Spaniards can have colleagues (compañeros) who speak English and ask them for help. Usually, the younger staff speaks English. In Girona the older generation in banks speaks English, however, it is usually one special person in the bank who speaks English very well. Observers do not see this practice in Madrid. Our observers noted that “in Girona bank employees speak English better than in Madrid.” This is a small difference because the main part of the observers’ problems was solved in both cities. Also Girona is a bilingual community (Spanish and Catalan) and that might explain the difference.

Table 4: The English everyday use of the front-line personnel in St. Petersburg (Russia), Madrid, Girona (Spain) and Perpignan (France)

	St. Petersburg (Russia)			Madrid (Spain)			Girona (Spain)			Perpignan (France)		
	Bank	Phone	Bank	Phone	Bank	Phone	Bank	Phone	Bank	Phone	Bank	Phone
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9				
The first employee, whom we asked, speaks English (1)	+(1)	+(3)	+(2)	+(3)	+(2)	+(5)	+(0)	+(2)				
The first employee, whom we asked, speaks English: Approximate age (2)	-(7)	-(5)	-(6)	-(5)	-(6)	-(2)	-(8)	-(6)				
The first employee, whom we asked, speaks English: Approximate age (2)	25-35 years (1)	25-35 years (3)	25-35 years (2)	25-35 years (2)	25-35 years (1)	25-35 years (3)	-	25-35 years (2)				
The first employee, whom we asked, speaks English: Approximate age (2)	25-35 years (1)	25-35 years (3)	25-35 years (1)	25-35 years (1)	25-35 years (1)	25-35 years (1)	-	25-35 years (1)				
The first employee, whom we asked, speaks English: Approximate age (2)	Russian	Russian	Spanish	Spanish	Spanish	Spanish	-	French				
Approximate nationality (a titular/ titular family or migrant/migrant family: in compliance with the Russian classification. The European Union does not use this approach) (3)	Approximate Migrant (Russian)	Approximate Migrant (Chinese)	Approximate Migrant (Chinese)	Approximate Migrant (Chinese)	Spanish	Approximate Migrant (Chinese)	Approximate Migrant (Chinese)	Approximate Migrant (Arabian)				
The first employee, whom we asked, speaks English: The approximate level of English (Observers were not English teachers, a subjective opinion) (4)	25-35 years (1)	25-35 years (3)	25-35 years (1)	25-35 years (1)	25-35 years (1)	25-35 years (1)	-	25-35 years (1)				
• Age	Russian, basic	Russian, basic	Spanish, basic	Spanish, basic	Spanish, basic	Spanish, basic, beginner	-	French, basic				
• Nation	25-35 years (1)	25-35 years (1)	35-45 years (1)	25-35 years (1)	45-55 years (1)	25-35 years (1)	-	25-35 years (1)				
• Approximate level of English	Russian, Beginner	Russian, Beginner	Approximate Migrant (Russian)	Approximate migrant (Chinese), Beginner	Spanish, upper intermediate	Approximate Migrant (Chinese), beginner	Approximate Migrant (Chinese), beginner	Approximate migrant (Arabian), basic				
Staff (somebody) speaks English in the office (5)	+(2)	+(3)	+(4)	+(6)	+(7)	+(7)	+(1)	+(3)				
Staff does not speak in English, but understands it. We can have a relevant answer in Spanish (Spain), French (France) or Russian (Russia)	-(6)	-(5)	-(4)	-(2)	-(1)	-(1)	-(7)	-(5)				
It was used when there were no English speaking staff (6)	-	+(1)	+(1)	+(1)	-	+(1)	+(1)	+(1)				
Nobody from staff understands English, but we can negotiate with the help of gestures, drawings, etc., Other clients can help us (7)	+(5)	+(1)	-	-	-	-	+(5)	+(2)				
The hostile/impolite reaction to the English, the rejection of communications (8)	+(2)	+(4)	+(6)	+(8)	+(8)	+(8)	+(2)	+(6)				
The problem was decided (9)	-(6)	-(4)	-(2)	-(0)	-(0)	-(0)	-(6)	-(2)				
Approximate effectiveness of communication (10) (%)	25	50	75	100	100	100	25	75				

In Perpignan (France) it is possible to see the hostile/impolite relation to English. It can be expressed in the full unwillingness to understand English and to answer questions. As a result, only two of eight visits to the banks were successful. In Perpignan one of the office-workers escaped from the shop after hearing the English speech, while we certainly cannot prove that this was the reason. The shop remained without any supervision. It is interesting that it was in the tourist center of Perpignan.

In St. Petersburg distinctions between the tourist center and residential areas of the city were very clear. In the residential areas, it was not possible to solve any problem, including the purchase of SIM cards. Nobody spoke English and wished to help. Moreover, our observers said that the seller in one of the mobile phone shops behaved aggressively and answered: "Yankee go home." After that, he started shouting something loudly and they were compelled to leave this shop quickly. In the tourist center the relation was loyal, however, two banks could not find English-speaking personnel, and the problem was not solved. All operations with mobile phones were performed successfully, and the personnel spoke English well and was friendly.

In our study we compared the St. Petersburg social and business environment with two cities in Spain (Madrid, Girona) and one in France (Perpignan) and draw conclusion that St. Petersburg demonstrates the worst results in the interaction in English.

St. Petersburg front-line personnel could show some disloyalty to people speaking English, especially in distance from the tourist center. Although we have fixed one intolerant case in 16 visits, it causes our concern because other similar cases of xenophobia toward Americans have been described (Herrera, 2013). Therefore, this situation has to be a subject of the special care.

4.1. Limitation of the Study

Although the small-scale research has been justified as an appropriate approach for addressing our research questions, a number of limitations of this strategy need to be acknowledged. The choice of small-scale research means that the results should be restricted to the opinions of the participants/observers and cannot be assumed to be representative. Therefore, the small sample size and its under representative character do not allow us to extend the conclusions to all cases.

The obtained data are of limited use. However, these preliminary findings will help us to correct hypotheses in future studies. In addition, this research study can inform stakeholders and prepare future research and decision-making process.

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