

for Dean

# Assessment of Undergraduate Major in Russian Language and Literature

Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures  
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Prepared and Submitted by

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**Abstract:** In accordance with the plan for the assessment of the undergraduate major in Russian language and literature submitted to and approved by the College of Letters and Sciences of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the language program coordinator collected data on a number of different instruments in order to assess learner outcomes in the Russian-language program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The assessment of language performance by students at the second-, fourth-, sixth-, and eighth-semester levels in a variety of ways (lexicon, grammar, speech, writing, self-report in surveys) and by a random sampling of students in fourth-semester Russian indicates that the Slavic Department's Russian language program is functioning very well, providing students with the opportunity to excel in Russian language studies. Independent verification of our success comes from the comparative performance of our students against the performance of students from other post-secondary institutions in the selection process for the study abroad program sponsored by the American Council of Teachers of Russia, the National Post-Secondary Russian Essay Contest, by the success of our students in the National Security Education Program Scholarship competition, and by national rankings in the Gourman Report on undergraduate education.

## I. Communicative Competence: Oral Proficiency Interviews

The language program coordinator is certified by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) to conduct oral proficiency interviews, a standardized means of assessing an individual's command of a spoken language recognized throughout North America as a valid assessment instrument. The language program coordinator and a graduate student who is also an ACTFL-certified OPI tester conducted oral proficiency interviews with students currently taking first-, second-, third-, and fourth-year Russian (Slavic 102 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Semester Russian, Slavic 204 – 4<sup>th</sup> Semester Russian, Slavic 276 – 6<sup>th</sup> Semester Russian, and Slavic 322 – 8<sup>th</sup> Semester Russian, respectively). These interviews were not double rated by a second certified interviewer and are thus not official ACTFL oral proficiency interviews, but may, nonetheless, be used as an indicator of the level of oral proficiency attained by students in Russian-language courses at these levels. Students with whom the language program coordinator

conducted these interviews volunteered; the only incentive they were provided was the possibility of practice using their Russian.

Table 1 Results of Oral Proficiency Interviews

	2 <sup>nd</sup> Semester	4 <sup>th</sup> Semester	6 <sup>th</sup> Semester	8 <sup>th</sup> Semester
Student One	Intermediate Low	Intermediate Mid	Intermediate Mid	Intermediate Mid
Student Two	Intermediate Low	Intermediate Mid	Intermediate Mid	Intermediate Mid

Comments:

We are very pleased that at least two of our students achieved intermediate low oral proficiency by the end of first-year Russian. This is significantly better than the data reported in previous years and in other studies. The other results of this year's oral proficiency testing are comparable with previous assessment reports from our department and with published research on oral proficiency attained by students in various stages of language instruction in foreign languages in general (for instance, Carroll, 1967 and Magnan, 1986) and in Russian (Thompson, 1996). Most studies show that students completing only two years of Russian-language study achieve only intermediate-low or novice-high level oral proficiency in Russian.

While the Slavic Department would like to see higher levels of oral proficiency attained by undergraduates studying Russian who complete the entire four year sequence, it is unlikely that higher levels of oral proficiency can be attained by students who take the regular sequence of courses in Russian without studying abroad, as suggested by Brecht, Davidson and Ginsberg (1993). The Slavic Department encourages all students to participate in study abroad programs, especially during the junior year; the University of Wisconsin-Madison has entered an agreement with the American Council of Teachers of Russian (ACTR) regarding study abroad programs sponsored by ACTR in Moscow and St. Petersburg that would be available for UW-Madison students for residency credit. For more information about the study abroad programs, see the web page of ACTR at [www.actr.org](http://www.actr.org) or the web page of the UW-Madison Office of International Studies and Programs (OISP) at [www.wisc.edu/studyabroad](http://www.wisc.edu/studyabroad).

## II. Grammatical Competence

As part of the undergraduate language assessment for Russian, the language program coordinator worked with instructors in second-, third- and fourth-year Russian (Slavic 204, Slavic 276, and Slavic 322) to administer a test of Russian grammar to all students in all sections of these three courses. These computer-mediated tests were administered in mid-April 2001; the same test was used in each class. This test consists of an extended cloze text in Russian, adapted from a contemporary Russian murder mystery novel, with English cues for 100 blanks. Students are instructed to fill in each blank based on the

context and the English cue provided. Each student's test was scored as the sum of correct responses (out of a possible 100 correct responses.) The language program coordinator uses this test as a placement tool for undergraduates with previous Russian-language instruction at the Middlebury Russian School (a summer program). For these purposes, a score of 10 or higher results in placement in the first semester of second-year (Slavic 203), 20 or higher – placement in the first semester of third-year (Slavic 275), and 30 or higher – placement in the first semester of fourth-year (Slavic 321). This same test is used to assess the grammatical competency of graduate students in Russian literature; graduate students must attain a score of 90 or higher in order to pass their grammar exam for the Ph.D.

Table 2 Results of Grammar Tests

	2 <sup>nd</sup> -Year Section 1	2 <sup>nd</sup> -Year Section 2	3 <sup>rd</sup> -Year	4 <sup>th</sup> -Year
Mean Score '01	20		40.5	49.25
Mean Score '00	22.58	20.5	38.75	30.17
Mean Score '99	27.83	25.5	34.27	35.13
Mean Score '98	25.6	27.73	43.71	52.67

Because the grammar test was computer mediated this year, we do not have breakdowns per section for 2<sup>nd</sup> year Russian. However, the scores for all levels are comparable, with a nice up-tic for grammar in the fourth-year course. It is important to note, however, that one of the students in the fourth-year course was a heritage speaker with a very high grammar score. If her score were removed from the calculations, the mean for the fourth-year course would be only 42.3. The faculty have discussed a grammar component for fourth-year Russian; this will be addressed later in this report.

### III. Lexical Competence

In addition to the tests described above, the language program administered a vocabulary test to measure the lexical competence of students in the first three years of Russian language instruction. The vocabulary test was created on the basis of Patrick Waddington's *A Russian Vocabulary* (Bristol Books), which includes a list of 850 of the most commonly used words in Russian. Every tenth word from this list was selected for the vocabulary test; students were asked to provide the English equivalent of the given 85 Russian words. The purpose of this test is to measure the degree to which students will be able to read for meaning in Russian without having to resort frequently to a dictionary. Mean scores reported in the table below reflect a maximum possible score of 84 (equivalent to 100% correct) due to the exclusion of one item with a typographical error rendering it ambiguous.

Table 3 Results of Vocabulary Test

	1 <sup>st</sup> -Year Russian Section 1	1 <sup>st</sup> -Year Russian Section 2	1 <sup>st</sup> -Year Russian Section 3	2 <sup>nd</sup> -Year Russian Section 1	2 <sup>nd</sup> -Year Russian Section 2	3 <sup>rd</sup> -Year Russian	4 <sup>th</sup> -Year Russian
Mean '01	63.25	53.36	33	54.08	50.43	73.6	81.75
Mean Fall '00	n/a	n/a	n/a	40.125		66.67	81
Mean '00	32.86	34.73	30.64	50.92	52.90	76.00	78.38
Mean Fall '99	n/a	n/a	n/a	40.50	37.77	52.60	71.10
Mean '99	45.00	46.53	no section	57.00	59.11	71.55	75.22
Mean '98	45.06	48.7	no section	50.33	56.46	69.90	not given

Beginning in the fall of 1998, students in first- through third-year Russian began working with Waddington dictionary and it was explained to all students in the program that the 850-word vocabulary in that dictionary is the assumed vocabulary for all Russian-language reading texts assigned in Slavic 204-Slavic 322. In the spring of 1998, students in first- through third-year Russian were tested on a random sampling of this vocabulary, asked to provide English definitions for the Russian words on the instrument. In the spring of 1999, the vocabulary assessment was expanded to include the fourth-year course. In the fall of 1999, students in second-, third- and fourth-year Russian took a vocabulary assessment so we could measure vocabulary loss over the summer months. We are pleased that means on the vocabulary assessment in first-year Russian were higher than they have been since we began keeping these records. The scores of students in second- through fourth-year courses were similar to those observed previously, suggesting that these scores are typical or benchmark levels for lexical competence at these levels. The comparison of fall 1999 results to spring 2000 results suggests that there is negligible lexical loss for students entering fourth-year Russian (perhaps because they are good enough readers to read over the summer), small loss for students entering third-year Russian, and greater loss for students entering second-year Russian.

#### IV. Pilot Tests of Listening and Reading Skills

We expanded the pilot testing of listening and reading skills to all four levels of Russian-language courses this year. However, the tests, which are computer-mediated, were not administered in class. Accordingly, compliance (the response rate) was not as high as we would have liked. For that reason, the data collected this year are still considered preliminary. Next year we will plan to take classes intact to the computer lab to take the tests during class time.

Mean Results (according to ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for Listening and Reading)

Course	Listening	Reading
102 (2 <sup>nd</sup> -Semester Russian)	Novice High	Novice High
204 (4 <sup>th</sup> Semester Russian)	Intermediate Low	Intermediate Mid
276 (6 <sup>th</sup> Semester Russian)	Sample too small to calculate mean	
322 (8 <sup>th</sup> Semester Russian)	Intermediate High	Advanced Low

#### IV. Portfolio of Samples of Work for Fourth-Year Russian

The Slavic Department has collected a portfolio of samples of work done by students in fourth-year Russian (Slavic 322) in the Spring 2001 semester, adding to the portfolio collected in 1998-2000. This portfolio includes short papers in Russian as well as longer papers on literary analysis in English with citations in Russian. The papers collected both years include strong and weak work, indicating that some of our students are able to write quite well and with great creativity in Russian (probably at the intermediate high or advanced level according to the ACTFL proficiency guidelines for writing), but that not all our students achieve such writing proficiency.

#### V. Survey of Graduating Seniors

As part of the Slavic Department's assessment of the undergraduate Russian major, students completing the major in Spring 2000 who are enrolled in Slavic 322 were asked to complete a survey focusing on their experiences as Russian majors. The survey instrument used in Spring 1999 was revised from the previous year in order to include questions about literature and culture courses in our program. The discussion of those questions will be presented in the document addressing the assessment of literature and culture instruction. The questions concerning language study were mostly retained from last year's survey; information in brackets below indicates the number of the question in last year's survey and a summary of responses to this question in last year's survey. The total number of respondents to this year's survey is 7.

*Question 1: How confident do you feel about your ability to communicate with Russians in Russian in speech and writing?*

Responses to Question 1: Students report feeling confident, if somewhat nervous in certain speaking situations and on more formal topics. [This is analogous with previous years' responses.]

*Question 2: How confident do you feel about your ability to understand spoken Russian?*

Responses to Question 2: Students again this year report being more confident in listening comprehension, than in speaking, especially in areas of general interest, with less confidence in more specialized topics, e.g. politics. [This is analogous to responses in previous years.] One student who has not yet been on a study abroad program noted that this skill is his weakest.

*Question 3: How confident do you feel about your ability to understand written Russian?*

Responses to Question 3: Students responded that they feel more confident about their reading comprehension after having completed fourth-year Russian. [This is analogous to responses in previous years.]

*Question 4: Has your study of Russian significantly affected your appreciation for the diversity of world cultures? If so, how? [Question 8 in 2000]:*

Responses to Question 4: Student response was very enthusiastic here that the Russian major helped them to become more appreciative of the diversity of world cultures. Some cited study abroad or international travel as part of their learning experience in this respect. [This is analogous to responses in previous years.]

*Question 5 [Question 4 in 2000] Has your study of Russian had an impact on your understanding of the structure of English or on your listening or reading skills in your native language?*

Students were not generally very enthusiastic about the idea that their study of Russian had helped them improve their English. Some said it had a little bit, some said it hadn't. [This is analogous to responses in previous years.]

*Question 6 [Question 9 in 2000]: What are your goals beyond the BA? How do you expect to find your Russian major has helped you achieve your goals after you graduate?*

Responses to Question 9: Three of the six plan to go onto graduate school, one in history, one in Russian Studies, one in Russian literature. One student plans to work for the National Park Service for a few years. Another student wants to work in international business (with Russia) after participating in a volunteer experience in Antarctica. Another student is certain that graduate school is in his future, but not sure in which field. [Response in 2000: While some students still didn't know what they would be doing, others cited graduate work in Russian language and literature, international relations or global studies and volunteering for the Peace Corps. Response in 1999: Some students reported they were planning on pursuing graduate study, work for non-profit organizations, government work, and teacher certification (in English), while others reported they were not certain what they would be doing after graduation.]

## **VI. Plans for Subsequent Assessment**

The Slavic Department has collected graduating seniors' permanent addresses in order to conduct a survey of graduates' opinions of their Russian-language education three years after graduation (i.e., in 2003 for those students graduating in 2000.) This summer we will contact seniors who graduated in May 1998 to conduct our first post-graduation survey. In Spring 2001 we will expand our pilot testing of reading and listening skills.

## VII. Ongoing Curricular Improvements

The textbook used in first-year Russian, *Russian Stage One: Live from Moscow*, continues to enjoy popularity among the students and instructors of that course. The textbook used in second-year Russian is less universally admired, but the new edition, with a design analogous to the successful first-year textbook, has been released: *Russian Stage Two: Welcome Back!* The new edition will be used in second-year Russian as of the fall 2001 semester. In addition, the faculty have agreed to use Terence Wade's *Comprehensive Russian Grammar and Workbook* as supplementary grammar texts for the fourth-year Russian course.

### First Year

*Russian Stage One: Live from Moscow* (textbook with video program and CD-ROM), Davidson, Gor and Lekic (1996)

*START: An Introduction to the Sound and Writing Systems of Russian* (CD-ROM), Rifkin (1998)

### Second Year

*Russian Stage Two: Welcome Back!* (textbook with video program), Martin and Zaitsev (2000)

*Russian's World*, Gerhart (2001)

### Third Year

*Grammatika v kontekste* (textbook and workbook), Rifkin (1996) and readings selected by the instructor

### Fourth Year

*A Comprehensive Russian Grammar and Workbook*, Wade (2000), and readings selected by the instructor

Our Russian-language curriculum is working well. Indeed, UW-Madison students applying for admission to the ACTR study abroad program in Russia were all admitted for the fall 2000 semester. Students from UW-Madison applying for study at Middlebury College's Russian School were also all admitted and placed into the next level of study (something that does not happen for students from many other institutions). This year, again, UW-Madison students participated in the National Post-Secondary Russian Essay Contest. UW-Madison students won prizes in all three levels of competition for non-heritage speakers, including two gold prizes. One UW-Madison Russian student won the extremely competitive National Security Education Program for a fellowship to study in Russia and two others were named alternates. The Gourman Report ranks UW-Madison's Russian program as the tenth best in the country, although it seems clear to the author of this report that several of the institutions listed above UW-Madison in the rankings do not have as strong a Russian program as ours at UW-Madison (based on the author's interactions with students from those institutions at the Middlebury Russian School year after year). Instructors in our study abroad programs, sponsored by the American

Council of Teachers of Russian, report that UW-Madison students are among the best prepared students in their programs which draw students from institutions all over the United States. Students enrolled at other institutions, both in Wisconsin and beyond its borders, choose UW-Madison as the school they want to transfer to in order to major in Russian. Among the schools from which we have drawn transfer students in the recent past are: UW-La Crosse, UW-Eau Claire, UW-Milwaukee, and the University of Oklahoma. Students interested in studying Russian as one of their majors are electing to enroll in UW-Madison from the following states (among others): California, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, Minnesota, and Missouri. These students have contacted the author of this report with questions about the Russian program at UW-Madison, in some cases visiting UW-Madison and visiting our department while on campus. They enrolled in UW-Madison from out of state, declining offers of admission to schools in their own states (where they would be paying resident tuition) in order to study in one of the best Russian programs in the US.

We have also made a major change to our major in Russian, by expanding to create a new track in the Russian major, the track in Russian language and civilization, as approved by the Letters and Science Curriculum Committee in December 2000. A copy of the revised Russian major is appended to this report. The new major track was opened up to undergraduate students in January 2001 and the response has been tremendous. We have more than doubled the number of students majoring in Russian in the last few months; the increase is almost exclusively among students declaring a major in Russian language and civilization. This new major track fits an important curricular need in the College of Letters and Science in light of the elimination of the concentration in Russian and East European Studies in the International Relations major.

### **VIII. Plans for Future Curricular Improvements**

The results of our on-going assessment program are evidence that our language program is working well. While not all of our students achieve great success in their Russian-language study, many students do achieve great success when their skills are measured against the ACTFL proficiency guidelines or when their performance is compared to those of students at other institutions applying to the American Council of Teachers of Russian (ACTR) for study abroad. Given published research data on feasible learning outcomes in a four-year language curriculum (e.g., Brecht, Davidson and Ginsberg, 1993; Thompson, 1996), our successful learners' Russian-language skills, upon graduation, are in the highest performance ranges. We are proud of this achievement and look forward to continuing to lead students toward this success. In our efforts to expand the range of students who achieve this success, we are looking toward incorporating more computer-mediated exercises, such as web-based activities and CD-ROM based exercises, since some of our students respond very well to work in these new media. We will continue to monitor the success of our new second-year textbook, as some students and instructors have expressed dissatisfaction with the book. It is possible that in a year or two we will consider adopting a different textbook for this level. The textbooks in first- and third-year are working quite well and we will continue to use them. Clearly, however, the best indicator of language gain is participation in a study abroad program and we will



continue to recommend study abroad with great enthusiasm to all our students. The study abroad programs in Moscow and St. Petersburg run by our organizational partner, ACTR, are excellent programs offering both language and area studies courses at a reasonable price, with home stay residential options. We will continue to bring information about the ACTR programs to our undergraduate language classes as early as first-semester to encourage students to think about study abroad and to plan for it. It is, in fact, the single best predictor of language study success for our students.

### Works Cited

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## **New Track Approved for the Russian Major: Russian Language and Civilization**

The College of Letters and Science has approved a new option for the Russian major. All students who have already declared a major in Russian will be automatically considered to be majoring in the track called "Russian Language and Literature" which has the same requirements as the old Russian major, to wit:

*Current Russian Major: "Russian Language and Literature"*

1a) Language: 20 credits in Slavic 275/276, Slavic 315/316, Slavic 321/322\*

1b) Literature: 12 credits in LT 203/204 and a 400-level course\*

1c) Culture: 4 credits in LT 233 or LT 234

**Total: 36 credits**

\*Note that the 400-level course and at least one of Slavic 321/322 must be taken on the Madison campus with Slavic Department Faculty

In addition to the track in Russian Language and Literature, outlined above, students now have the option to declare the Russian major with the track called "Russian Language and Civilization" as follows:

*New Option for the Russian Major: "Russian Language and Civilization"*

2a) Language: 20 credits in Slavic 275/276, Slavic 315/316, Slavic 321/322\*

2b) Culture: 4 credits in LT 233 or LT 234

2c) Civilization: 3 credits in Slavic 253 (offered only every other spring semester, is offered in Spring 2001) and 9 more credits in *approved* area studies courses in which students write a paper for which they read sources in Russian and cite them, in Russian, in their papers.

**Total: 36 credits**

\*Note that at least one of Slavic 321/322 must be taken on the Madison campus with Slavic Department faculty.

Courses already approved that fulfill the 9-credit requirement spelled out in 2c above include:

Anthropology 441 .....Peoples and Cultures of the European Parts of the Ex-Soviet Union  
Communication Arts 456....Russian and Soviet Film  
Economics 365.....Comparative Economic Systems  
Economics 366.....Soviet Economics  
Economics 390.....Contemporary Economic Issues  
Slavic 444.....Slavic and East European Folklore  
Slavic 455.....Russian Folk Literature  
Geography 353.....Russia and the NIS: Topical Analysis  
History 417.....History of Russia before 1800  
History 418.....History of Russia 1800-1917  
History 419.....History of Soviet Russia  
History 420.....Russian Social and Intellectual History  
History 421.....The Russian Revolutions, 1905-1921  
History 422.....History of Russian and Soviet Foreign Policies to 1945

History 423.....Soviet Cultural and Intellectual History  
 Jewish Studies 371.....Topics in Jewish Civilization\*  
 Lit. Transl. 233.....Russian Culture before 1917\*\*  
 Lit. Transl. 234.....Russian Culture since 1917\*\*  
 Political Science 336.....Soviet and Post Soviet-Foreign Policies  
 Political Science 401.....Selected topics in Political Science\*  
 Political Science 612.....Transitions to the Market  
 Political Science 633.....Russian Politics  
 Political Science 634.....Nationalities & Ethnonationalism in Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics  
 Political Science 695.....Contemporary Russian Politics  
 Theatre and Drama 532.....History of Russian Theatre

\*When the topic is relevant to Russia.

\*\* When the course is *not* used by students to fulfill requirement 2b.

Additional courses may be approved by the advisor for the Russian major. Additionally, students studying abroad on the ACTR programs through the UW-Madison study abroad office (OISP in 261 Bascom Hall) for at least a semester may fulfill the 9-credit requirement in 2c with courses taken abroad at Hertzen University in St. Petersburg, Linguistics or International University in Moscow with approval from the advisor for the Russian major.

Students who have already declared the Russian major will be automatically registered for the major track in language and literature unless they see the advisor for the Russian major to declare a major in Russian language and civilization. Students wishing to declare the major in Russian language and civilization may do so in January 2001 (when classes start), but may already sign up for classes to fulfill the requirements for this new option in the Russian major.

The faculty of the Slavic Department call your attention to the fact that one of the required courses for the new track in the Russian major, Slavic 253: An Interdisciplinary Survey of Russia, is offered only every other year in the spring semester. It is offered in the spring 2001 semester, so students interested in the major in Russian language and civilization should take this course in the spring 2001 semester.

For any questions related to the Russian major, please see the advisor for the Russian major, Professor Benjamin Rifkin. His office hours in the Fall 2000 semester are: Tuesdays 3-4 pm, Thursdays 10:30-11:30 pm through the end of classes. In addition, he is available by appointment: call 262-1623 or e-mail him at [brifkin@facstaff.wisc.edu](mailto:brifkin@facstaff.wisc.edu) to make an appointment. Professor Rifkin's office hours for the Spring 2001 semester have not yet been determined, but he will *not* be on campus during Welcome Week in January 2001.