

Spring 2002 Assessment of Undergraduate Major in Russian

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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. This year, due to the events of September 11 we decided not to run the lexical assessment in the fall. We will resume the fall lexical assessment in fall 2002. This year we began to alternate the assessments of listening and reading; in spring 2002, we assessed listening. We will assess reading skills in spring 2003 and continue alternating the tests in order to reduce the assessment burden on teachers and students. Language assessments, enrollment patterns, national prizes and surveys indicate 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, awards won in the context of a national Russian language program at Middlebury College, 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. Enrollment Patterns / Number of Majors

This year we introduce a new section to our assessment report, focusing on enrollment patterns and the number of majors. In January 2001 the Slavic Department opened up a new track within the Russian major. The "old" Russian major was renamed "Russian Language and Literature," and the new major track was named "Russian Language and Civilization." In January 2001, before the creation of the new major track, we had 18 students majoring in Russian. As this report goes to press, we have 46 students majoring in Russian as follows: 25 in Language & Civilization, 17 in Language and Literature,

and 4 in the Native Speaker Track. Although we have 10 students graduating in May or December 2002, we have 9 students who have declared the Russian major as early as their second semester of enrollment in the Russian program (Slavic 102) already this year. Typically students declare their major in the sophomore year, so we expect more students in the cohort currently completing 1st year to declare a Russian major some time while taking 2nd year Russian in the coming academic year. This suggests that the number of majors (currently at 43, a record since the decline of the early 1990s) will remain at least stable, if not increase slightly in the years to come. The new major track has proven to be very popular, attracting even more students than the old major in Russian Language and Literature. Moreover, the new major track in Russian Language and Civilization requires four years of Russian-language study (as opposed to the old major in Russian & East European Studies administered by International Relations, but now defunct); the new language requirement for students in "Russian Studies" (Russian Language and Civilization) has helped to improve enrollments in upper-level Russian-language courses (Slavic 275/276 and 321/322) and has improved the quality of the Russian spoken by our students (who now take four years of instruction, rather than merely two years, in the case of those students pursuing a non-literary major.)

II. 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 – 2nd Semester Russian, Slavic 204 – 4th Semester Russian, Slavic 276 – 6th Semester Russian, and Slavic 322 – 8th 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 nd Semester	4 th Semester	6 th Semester	8 th Semester
Student One	Intermediate Low	Intermediate Low	Intermediate Mid	Advanced Mid
Student Two	Intermediate Low	Intermediate Mid	Intermediate Mid	Intermediate Mid

Once again we did not select for interviews any students in the second-year course who had spent considerable time in Russia or any students at any level who were heritage

speakers of Russian. We are very pleased that at least two of our students achieved intermediate low oral proficiency by the end of first-year Russian and that one student even achieved intermediate mid oral proficiency in second-year. We are proudest of the achievement of one of our students in fourth year who demonstrated advanced mid oral skills. (This student spent a year in Irkutsk during his 3rd year of Russian and came back to enter into the honors program; he is exceptionally talented and has achieved other recognition of his academic work, including being named an alternate Fulbright recipient.) 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) In general these data confirm for us once again that all our students should go on the study abroad program in Russia for at least a semester if not a year.

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 or the web page of the UW-Madison Office of International Studies and Programs (OISP) at www.wisc.edu/studyabroad.

Studies show that students who complete only two years of foreign language study at the college level typically achieve only intermediate low oral proficiency and this is consistent with our findings.

It is important to remember when interpreting these results that the difficulty of moving from novice level proficiency to intermediate level proficiency is not comparable with the difficulty of moving from intermediate level proficiency to advanced level proficiency, and so forth. The "distance" between each major level on the proficiency scale (novice, intermediate, advanced, superior) is not equal; the effort and time required to move from one major level to the next increases geometrically at each higher level. In other words, the scale is *not* linear, but rather *geometric* in nature.

III. Grammatical Competence: UPDATE

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 nd -Year Section 1	2 nd -Year Section 2	3 rd -Year	4 th -Year
Mean Score '02	25		37.3	47.54
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

We continue to assess scores in 2nd year only on a course-wide basis, rather than per sections. This year saw a slight increase in the scores of students in the second year, but slight declines in the scores of third- and fourth-year students. The fourth-year students' scores remain higher than they were since 1999, but still have not reached the peak they set in 1998. Scores might have been higher in the 4th year course had more of the students in the course taken their grammar assessments. (The response rate in this course was only about 60%). The score in the 2nd year course is encouraging because this was the first year in which we used the new textbook, *Russian Stage Two: Welcome Back!* We have discovered some "gaps" in this textbook in the process of using it and will work to "cover" them in the coming academic year. This may lead to even better learning outcomes in grammar for students enrolled in 2nd year in the coming academic year. We will continue to use Wade's *Comprehensive Russian Grammar* and the accompanying workbook as a grammar supplement in the 4th year course.

IV. 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 st -Year Russian Section 1	1 st -Year Russian Section 2	1 st -Year Russian Section 3	2 nd -Year Russian Section 1	2 nd -Year Russian Section 2	3 rd -Year Russian	4 th -Year Russian
Mean '02	42.4			59.41		71.65	77.88
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. Listening and Reading Skills

In the spring 2002 assessment we focused only on listening skills, beginning an alternative of listening and reading assessments. We will assess reading skills in spring

2003, and return to the assessment of listening skills in 2004 and so on. This will reduce the assessment burden on students and teachers.

This year we implemented a more realistic (more accurate) listening proficiency assessment and learned that our previous years' assessments were inflated due to a simpler (less challenging) listening test that was not sufficiently carefully correlated with the proficiency guidelines. Our results indicate that students in the second semester class typically achieve novice mid listening comprehension, but the average level of listening comprehension does not increase much from year to year, with the average listening comprehension result at the 4th year level only at intermediate low. However, the range of listening comprehension results at each level is indicative of growth, since the high scores at each level of instruction are successively higher:

Course	Listening Mean / Rating 2002	Listening Mean / Rating 2001	Listening High Score 2002
Slavic 102	0.52 / NM	0.9/NH	1.0
Slavic 204	0.77 / NM - NH	1.0/IL	1.0*
Slavic 276	0.85 / NM - NH	N/A	1.5
Slavic 322	1.0 / IL	1.9/IH	1.5

*excluding higher scores earned by native speakers of Russian in this class.

With the more refined listening test, we can see that our students are not achieving the excellent results in listening that we thought they were, especially at the fourth-year level. The difference in ratings between 1st and 2nd year courses in 2001 and 2002 are not very significant. At the third-year level we have no comparison because the class was too small in the 2000-2001 academic year to determine an average result. The difference in results in the fourth-year course, however, was quite significant, from Intermediate High (1.9) in 2001 to Intermediate Low (1.0) in 2002. This suggests that we need to do more work on listening comprehension in the curriculum at every level and the lessons developed for the T⁴ listening project should help in this regard.

V. 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 2002 semester, adding to the portfolio collected in 1998-2001. This portfolio includes short papers 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.

VI. Survey of Graduating Seniors: UPDATE

As part of the Slavic Department's assessment of the undergraduate Russian major, students completing the major in Spring 2002 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 2002 was slightly different from that used in 2001. A summary of responses to each question in last year's survey is provided in brackets. 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: Four students are confident that they can get their message across., some more confident of their speech, others more confident of their writing. Three students responded they didn't feel very confident (two of whom did not study abroad). [2001: Students report feeling confident, if somewhat nervous in certain speaking situations and on more formal topics.]

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

Responses to Question 2: Five students reported great confidence, one confidence within limited (familiar) topics, and one reported little confidence; these last two students did not participate in a study abroad program.. [2001: Students 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.]

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

Responses to Question 3: Four students reported feeling very confident, two students reported feeling confident in a limited way (e.g., as long as the texts are not "slang or really old"), and one reported feeling not as confident about his/her reading skills as about his/her listening and speaking skills. (The two students with weaker language skills did not study abroad.) [2001: Students responded that they feel more confident about their reading comprehension after having completed fourth-year Russian.]

Question 4 [Question 5 in 2001] 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 very enthusiastic here – only one reported that the study of Russian had not had a significant impact on their understanding of the structure of English or on listening or reading skills in English. [2001: 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.]

Question 5: Did the literature and culture courses listed above improve your understanding of Russia and its culture?

Five students responded very positively to this question. One student reported not having taken these courses (due to the creation of a new major track – we will have to come up with a different survey for next year to accommodate students majoring in Russian Language & Civilization). One student criticized the culture courses as too basic, arguing that most majors take these courses as juniors and seniors, by which time they've already been introduced to most cultural concepts in a basic way in the language curriculum. (Note: Department records show that most of our majors take these introductory culture courses as sophomores, some as freshmen, some as juniors and seniors.) [This question was not asked in 2001.]

Question 6: Did the culture course (Literature in Translation 233 or 234) improve your understanding of Russian culture and American culture in the context of global culture?

Four students responded positively about the course's contribution to their understanding of Russian culture, but two of these said that the links to American culture were weak. One student didn't answer the question and two said that the culture course improved their understanding a little bit. [Question not asked in 2001.]

Question 7: Did these courses improve your ability to analyze literary texts and write analytical papers?

Four students responded positively. One said that s/he had already learned how to do this before taking these courses. One student didn't answer and one answered negatively. [Question not asked in 2001; the question needs to be revised to accommodate students majoring in Russian language and civilization for spring 2003.]

Question 8: Did you study abroad. If so, on what program? Were you satisfied with your experience in the study abroad program? Did your studies in the Slavic Department at UW-Madison prepare you well for your study abroad experience? Did your study abroad experience prepare you well to continue your studies at UW-Madison?

Two students reported not having studied abroad. **Importantly, these were the two students who reported the least confidence in their language skills in questions 1-3.** Three students reported studying abroad the UW-Madison programs sponsored by ACTR in either Moscow or St. Petersburg and they were satisfied with the experience and how Madison had prepared them for study abroad, but one reported disappointment with the way that Madison has helped them maintain skills s/he picked up while abroad. [Not asked in 2001.]

Question 9: Has your study in the Russian major significantly affected your appreciation for the diversity of world cultures? If so, how?

Five students responded very enthusiastically in the positive, citing, among other things, their study abroad experience as a critical moment in their international education. Two students responded negatively, saying "not really" and "No – I have always been a citizen of the world." These two students did not participate in the study abroad program.

Question 10: What are your goals for beyond the BA? How do you expect to find your Russian major has helped you achieve your goals after you graduate?

One student plans to get an MA at Middlebury in Russian and then go on to another graduate degree related to Russian. Two plan to go to law school and hope that their Russian language training will help them study law. One plans to go into the Peace Corps and then perhaps the Foreign Service or another NGO in Russia. One plans to continue reading Russian literature, but isn't sure what s/he will do next. One is unclear as to his/her future, but hopes Russian will present more and/or different career opportunities.

Review of Survey Data

The survey data reveal that study abroad is a significant component of the UW-Madison Russian education. Accordingly, we should continue to try to impress upon our students the importance of study abroad as part of their undergraduate education. On the whole, students who participated in the study abroad program were more satisfied with their education at UW-Madison, and the skills they acquired in our program, than the students who did not participate in the study abroad program. The fact that five out of seven graduating seniors did participate in the study abroad program in one way or another speaks to our success in recruiting students to go abroad. Lastly, this year's survey results show us that we need to modify our survey to make sure that we accommodate questions for students majoring in Russian Language and Civilization.

VII. Plans for Subsequent Assessment

We are currently mailing out surveys to students who graduated with a Russian major in 1998 and 1999 and will include a discussion of these results in the next annual assessment report (assuming that we have some responses!)

VIII. 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 new textbook used in 2nd year Russian this year, *Russian Stage Two: Welcome Back!*, was found to be very good. We will supplement it next year with additional materials now that we know the textbook better, having used it for a year. We have agreed to use Terence Wade's *Comprehensive Russian Grammar* and *Workbook* as supplementary grammar texts for the fourth-year Russian course and this was our first year using that book in the 4th year 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, four UW-Madison students applying for admission to the ACTR study abroad program in Russia were all admitted for the fall 2002 semester or 2002-2003 academic year. 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 first place in level 3 and third place in level 1 this year. UW-Madison students of Russian were ranked first- and second- in the campus wide NSEP review. Another UW-Madison Russian student was named an alternate for the Fulbright and is likely going to get the Fulbright (he is 2nd alternate and in previous years enough of the winners declined to go past the 2nd alternate in the list.). Last year's Gourman Report ranked 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 that 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-Stevens Point, 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.

IX. 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 a high performance range. 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. The development of listening comprehension activities for Russian in the context of the T⁴ Foreign Languages Project will help us improve instruction in listening comprehension in the future. We will explore the option of a service learning course (at the third-year level) in which students could work with Russian-speaking émigrés living in the Madison area. This course would fulfill requirements for both the Language and Literature major and the Language and Civilization major.

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