

Spring 2003 Assessment of Undergraduate Major in Russian

**Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures
University of Wisconsin-Madison**

Prepared and Submitted by

Benjamin Rifkin

Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures
Associate Chair of the Slavic Department
Coordinator of Russian-Language Instruction and Advisor for the Russian Major

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. Last year we began to alternate the assessments of listening and reading; in spring 2002, we assessed listening; this year we assessed reading skills (and will revisit listening in spring 2004). We will 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

Last year we introduced a new section to our assessment report, focusing on enrollment patterns and the number of majors

Table 1. Russian Majors

	Total Russian Majors	Russian Lang & Lit Majors	Russian Lang & Civ Majors	Russian Native Speaker Majors
May 2002	46	17	25	4
Graduating May and Dec 2002	8	6	0	2
May 2003	61	21	34	6
Graduating May and Dec 2003	16	4	11	1

As this report goes to press, enrollments in Russian-language classes for the fall 2003 semester are strong:

2nd semester Russian – Spring 2003 enrollment: 61 (Slavic 102)

Fall 2003 enrollment in 3rd semester Russian: 39 (Slavic 203)

Note: 3 students are planning to take 2nd year during the summer.

Including students taking Russian in the summer, this is a 69% retention rate.

4th semester Russian – Spring 2003 enrollment: 30 (Slavic 204)

Fall 2003 enrollment in 5th semester Russian: 24 (Slavic 275)

Note: 2 students are planning on taking 3rd year during the summer and 4 are planning to take 3rd year next year during study abroad on the UW-Madison / ACTR program.

Including students taking Russian in the summer or going on study abroad, this is a 100% retention rate.

6th semester Russian – Spring 2003 enrollment: 16 (Slavic 276)

Fall 2003 enrollment in 7th semester Russian: 11 (Slavic 322)

Note: 3 students are planning on taking the first semester of 4th year Russian on study abroad on the UW-Madison / ACTR program

Including students going on study abroad, this is an 88% retention rate.

Table 2. Enrollment Chart as of 5 May

	Slavic 101	Slavic 203	Slavic 275	Slavic 321
2002	48	34	12	17
2003	65	39	24	11
% change (+/-)	+35%	+15%	+50%	-35%

Numbers above do not reflect enrollments in study abroad (students planning on summer study have enrolled in the next higher course level for the fall 2003 semester and those enrollments are reflected in the chart above.) Note that the fourth-year class (Slavic 321) represents the "small cohort" that began first-year Russian in the fall of 2000; the

decrease in the number of students in fourth-year Russian from the 2002-2003 academic year to the 2003-2004 academic year is consistent with the pattern we have seen all along since this group began first-year Russian in the fall of 2000. Moreover, the enrollment in the fourth-year course should be seen in light of the retention of students from third-year Russian. Given 16 students in 3rd year Russian in the spring 2003 semester, of whom 3 are going on study abroad in the fall 2003 semester, we have kept a very high retention rate (of 88% including students going on study abroad as continuing their study of Russian.)

In addition to the numbers above, we are pleased to report that there are 66 students enrolled in first-semester Russian (Slavic 101) for the fall 2003 semester as of this writing. This represents a significant increase over the enrollment in this course at the same time in the spring 2002 registration period. The enrollments reported here do not reflect SOAR enrollments.

The quality of our program continues to attract students from near and far. The author of this report has been in e-mail correspondence with three high school students (all from out of state) who have chosen to come to UW-Madison because of the quality and reputation of its Russian program. These students will place into second- or third-year Russian, much as some of our incoming freshman <NAMES DELETED> did in the fall of 2002.

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 3 Results of Oral Proficiency Interviews

	2 nd Semester	4 th Semester	6 th Semester	8 th Semester
Student One	Intermediate Low	Intermediate High	Intermediate Mid	Advanced Mid
Student Two	Novice High	Novice High	Intermediate Mid	Advanced Low

Students selected for interviews represent the best learning outcomes in our program. In the case of the second-year student who achieved intermediate high oral proficiency, we are simply astonished. This is an extraordinarily unusual result and reflects this particular student's high motivation and language aptitude. The students in fourth-year all had had a summer intensive immersion experience before a year-long study abroad program, our preferred curricular sequence. These high results are typical of what we have seen in the past for students who go on study abroad for an entire year. The results for first-year are typical of what we have seen in the past, as are the results for third-year.

We are very proud of the achievements of our students in the fourth-year course, as we believe that this demonstrates the quality of our preparation for study abroad and the importance of study abroad in the foreign language curriculum. We are grateful to our partners in the Study Abroad Office and at the American Council of Teachers of Russian, who help administer our study abroad programs in St. Petersburg and Moscow.

The 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; this year's unusual outcome of intermediate high at the

second-year level is anomalous. While we are proud of this student's achievement, we don't believe that this is a typical outcome at all.

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

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 4 Results of Grammar Tests

	2 nd -Year Section 1	2 nd -Year Section 2	3 rd -Year	4 th -Year
Mean Score '03	29.5		N/a	44.5
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

(Unfortunately, due to a computer failure, we were unable to capture the scores for third-year Russian in the spring 2003 assessment process.)

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.

We are proud to report that in second-year Russian we had one student score 52; in fourth-year Russian we had four students score higher than 60 and one who scored 81. These are very strong results: our own graduate students are required to show a score of 90 as part of their doctoral program.

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 5a Lexical Competence Results 2002 – Present

	1 st Year	2 nd Year	3 rd Year	4 th Year
Spring '03	43.1	55.1	77.15	74.8
Fall '02	N/a	31.0	58.7	71.1
Spring '02	42.4	59.41	71.65	77.88

Table 5b Lexical Competence Results 1998 – 2001

	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 '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 the 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. This fall assessment has been administered annually since 1999, with the exception of the fall of 2001. The fall lexical assessment shows that our students typically lose lexical competence over the course of the summer; this helps us plan and teach accordingly.

As of the spring of 2002 we stopped recording results per section for first- and second-year Russian due to the variation in the number of sections offered. Instead, we report those results here as a cumulative average of all students in all sections at the given level.

Scores of students at all levels in the spring 2003 assessment program were close to what they have been in the past.

IV. Listening and Reading Skills

In the spring 2002 assessment we focused only on listening skills, beginning an alternation of listening and reading assessments. In the spring of 2003, we assessed reading skills. (We will alternate back to listening skills for the spring 2004 assessment.)

Last year we implemented a more realistic (and 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. We have taken the same approach for the assessment of reading this year. 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:

Table 6 Reading Proficiency

Course	Reading Mean / Rating 2003	Reading Mean / Rating 2001	Reading High Score 2002
Slavic 102	0.93 / NH	0.9 / NH	1.9
Slavic 204	1.02 / IL	1.5 / IM	1.5
Slavic 276	1.30 / IL-IM	N/A	1.9
Slavic 322	1.4 / IM	2.0 / AL	2.0

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

With the more refined reading 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 2003 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 Advanced Low (2.0) in 2001 to Intermediate Mid (1.4) in 2003. This suggests that we need to do more work on the reading of non-fiction texts in the curriculum at every level. We are heartened, however, by the high scores attained by one or more individual at each level of instruction; these high scores prove the success of the curriculum for those motivated and talented students ready to apply themselves to the study of Russian.

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 2003 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

As part of the Slavic Department's assessment of the undergraduate Russian major, students completing the major in Spring 2003 who are enrolled in Slavic 322 were asked

to complete a survey focusing on their experiences as Russian majors. The survey data reveal again that study abroad is a significant component of the UW-Madison Russian education. We have worked hard to convey this information to our students and are very pleased that we have a large group of students going on study abroad in the fall 2003 semester for either the semester or the entire academic year (eight students, compared with only three last year). 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 survey data also show us that we need to increase the time in our fourth-year curriculum (Slavic 321-322) devoted to the study of non-literary texts, as our students majoring in Russian language and civilization did not feel satisfied with the readings in fourth-year Russian. Our students' future plans include graduate work (Russian studies, anthropology, business administration were specifically mentioned) and work opportunities in Russia.

VII. Plans for Subsequent Assessment

We are currently mailing out surveys to students who graduated with a Russian major in 2000 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 Letic (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

IX. Awards and Citations

Our Russian-language curriculum is working well. Indeed, nine UW-Madison students applying for admission to the ACTR study abroad program in Russia were all admitted for the fall 2003 semester or 2003-2004 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 tied for third-place in level 2. Two UW-Madison students were inducted into Phi Beta Kappa this year; one of our students won a campus-wide student leadership award. UW-Madison students of Russian were ranked among the best applicants in the campus-wide NSEP scholarship review. One UW-Madison Russian student (Laura Brandt) was awarded the NSEP scholarship and three more were named as alternates. Last year one UW-Madison Russian student won a Fulbright (too late for inclusion in the 2002 assessment report). Students of Russian from UW-Madison won awards at the nationally competitive summer language program at Middlebury as follows:

Nathan Rasmussen – Level 3 – Best Grammar Score
Karen Anderson – Level 4 - Best Writing Skills
Julia Hon – Level 5 – Best Overall Performance
Mike Baumann – Level 6 – Best Listening Score
Chrissy Klemens – Level 4 – Most Active in Cultural Program

Together with awards won by UW-Madison graduate students enrolled in the Middlebury Russian School graduate program, UW-Madison students won more awards at Middlebury in the summer 2002 session than students at any other institution (with the closest competitor being Columbia University). The Middlebury Russian School is a nationally competitive program: our students' success in that program is indicative of the competitiveness of our Russian-language program more generally.

The Gourman Report ranked UW-Madison's Russian program as the tenth best in the country in 2001, 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, Illinois, 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.

The Russian program at Madison is also thriving as a community as evidenced by the success of our fall picnic, our spring majors party, our new and successful film festival, the Russian table and other extra-curricular events such as lectures and concerts.

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 continue to look 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. In the spring 2004 semester the author of this report will develop and propose 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.

Works Cited

- ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for Russian. (1988). *Foreign Language Annals* 21, pp. 177-197.
- Brecht, R., Davidson, D., and Ginsberg, R. (1993) *Predictors of Foreign Language Gain During Study Abroad*. Washington, DC: National Foreign Language Center.

- Carroll, J. B. (1967). "Foreign Language Proficiency Levels Attained by Language Majors Near Graduation from College." *Foreign Language Annals* 1: 131-151.
- Davidson, D.; Gor, K.; and Lekic, M. (1996). *Russian Stage One: Live from Moscow*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt/ACTR.
- Gerhart, G. (2001). *The Russian's World: Life and Language*. Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers (3rd edition).
- Magnan, S. (1986). "Assessing Speaking Proficiency in the Undergraduate Curriculum: Data from French." *Foreign Language Annals* 19: 429-437.
- Martin, C.; and Zaitsev, A. (2001). *Russian Stage Two: Welcome Back!*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt/ACTR.
- Rifkin, B. (1996). *Grammatika v kontekste: Russian Grammar in Literary Contexts*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Rifkin, B. (1998). *START: An Introduction to the Sound and Writing Systems of Russian*. (CD-ROM) Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing Group.
- Thompson, I. (1996). "Assessing Foreign Language Skills: Data from Russian." *Modern Language Journal* 80: 47-65.
- Waddington, P. (1992) *A First Russian Vocabulary*. Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing Group.
- Wade, T. (2000). *A Comprehensive Russian Grammar*. Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press.