

Elena Vasyanina,
PhD, associate professor of Moscow State Linguistic University
russian-teacher@nm.ru

Tensions in the motivation of Russian Heritage Learners: Observation during language teaching in Moscow

It has been observed many times that Russian Heritage Learners (RHL) manifest a strong integrative motivation. In 2005-2006 I worked as an instructor teaching RHL from U of Pittsburgh Summer Language Institute (www.pitt.edu/~slavic) in Moscow State University (www.cie.ru), Russia, and I'd like to add some remarks on this matter, arguing that integrative motivation of RHL is quite different from that of Non-Heritage Learners (NHL).

I have observed that NHL, coming to Russia after some years of studying Russian are usually attracted by the experience of being in Russia which overweighs the inconveniences of Russian life. They are motivated by the aesthetics of knowing a difficult language, by gaining an idea of the 'mysterious Russian soul,' or by very pragmatic and career-related reasons. They claim and perform both instrumental and integrative motivation: they accumulate Russian friends, apply for jobs, take the trans-Siberian railway, etc.

The experience of RHL is different and more ambiguous. Family stories taught them about the reasons for emigration. Consciously or not, they seek to prove or justify these claims about how hard it is to live in Russia or the FSU. Yet, when they do in fact experience the local problems, they remain disoriented. Many of them claim they are half-Russian. Yet, RHL remain only partly integrated – "I would always be transient – between countries, cultures, and identities." They are often uncertain about their motivation, whether and why they want this 'half' to grow and develop.

They point to different reasons for wanting to improve their language skills: "to communicate with relatives", "not to feel embarrassed to write", "not to lose the advantage of knowing a difficult language", "to read Russian literature", "to help Russian immigrants in the U.S." etc. When I saw the traces of integrative motivation, it seemed to be oriented towards circle of relatives or to the immigrant community abroad and *not* towards Russia. When I asked whether someone would like to work in Moscow, at first no one volunteered. Later some students concede they could try to work in Russia in a Western company with expat staff.

IM comes from positive attitudes toward the target language group. For RHL, their attitude towards the language group is ambiguous. In Russia, RHL may meet unfriendly people, and experience rudeness, which usually they take much more personally than NHL. RHL are also often harassed by language purists who approach them: "you sound like a countrymen." Indeed, RHL often inherit vernacular forms such as ихний [ihni] instead of их [ih], ложить [lozhit] instead of класть [klas't'] from their parents. RHL however are very much embarrassed and insulted by these reproaches of speaking ungrammatically, for having poor orthography and for their lack of cultural background knowledge. Even if this is sometimes true, the problem is also that the Russians they met have never met RHL before and have different expectations about what RHL *should* know. In contrast with these encounters, I observed RHL engaged in research projects that enable them to meet with educated and worldly Russian people. It was obvious to me during the lessons how much these contacts stimulate their interest in the language and culture and affect the learning process.

In conclusion, in my experience, interest in Russian literature and culture and acquaintance with well-educated and open-minded Russian speakers seems to be one of the most important impulses for RHL. Regardless of where, when and how they encounter Russian culture, the desire to continue this acquaintance is usually a good indicator and maybe even prerequisite of the future personal progress in heritage language learning.