Russian Bilingual Education across Public, Private and Community Spheres

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Russian speakers make up a diaspora that stretches from Russia to the Baltic Republics across Central Asian nations to Israel, Canada and the United States (US). Although the status of Russian has been heavily influenced by political factors, such as the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, the language has remained prominent on a global scale. Russian speakers living in the US, and in New York City (NYC) in particular, are diverse in their ethnicities, immigration experiences and religions. Nevertheless, within the US the Russian language has the possibility to bring together many groups that are currently separated by borders, beliefs and backgrounds.

Russian bilingual programs in NYC are characterized by their diversity across people and programs models. The participants range from immigrants to US-born students, from those born in Russia to those from former Soviet Republics who no longer have Russian as the official language, from those with familial ties to the Russian language and culture to those who come from different ethnic and linguistic groups and hold an interest in the Russian language and its culture(s). The diversity of the programs, where the focus goes beyond languages and cultures to academic content, demonstrates the combined goals of many Russian bilingual programs: cultural and linguistic development and connectivity alongside deepened content knowledge in areas long associated with Russian traditions, such as mathematics and the arts.

Within this chapter we provide a background of the evolution of the Russian language as well as the immigration history of Russian speakers to the US. Then we review the academic
achievement of Russian-speaking immigrant and US-born students in NYC schools. Finally, we look closely at two different bilingual programs, a private community Saturday school and a public one-way bilingual immersion program, to show the varied opportunities for the inclusion of home (and additional) languages and cultures in the education of students from predominantly Russian-speaking backgrounds. We now turn to the historical and present-day aspects that have impacted the Russian language and its speakers across countries and continents.

The Russian language and the script

The Russian language falls under the umbrella of Indo-European languages and draws on proto-Slavic roots. Many modern-day Russian components emerged from Old Church Slavonic, a language mainly found in sacred biblical texts. Two Greek brothers, St Cyril and St Methodius, were instrumental in developing the first known Slavic alphabet, called Cyrillic, in the late ninth century. Their impetus was to translate the bible in order to preach Christianity to communities in Slavic regions (Hingley, 2003). By the tenth century three streams of Slavic developed: West Slavic, South Slavic and East Slavic. The latter is what we have come to know as Russian. Peter the Great, the Tsar most recognized for his impetus to westernize the Russian empire, initiated its orthography reform in the early 1700s (Millar, 2004). This movement eliminated characters rendered unnecessary for the language’s utility. The result was the Cyrillic alphabet, a system used in Russian and other Slavic and non-Slavic languages such as Bosnian, Macedonian, Moldovan, Tajik and Ukrainian.

Locating Russian and its contact languages

Even prior to the onset of communism, Russia’s leadership russified surrounding nations, imposing the Russian language and culture onto those in the Russian empire. As a result of the creation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1922, the Russian language had
the opportunity to come into contact with other languages spanning across the Baltic republics to the Central Asian republics. The former Soviet republics include present-day Armenia, Azerbaijan, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. People in each former Soviet republic spoke different languages; therefore, Russian was spoken alongside the languages originally associated with the region. With the introduction of Communism in these republics, the Russian language made its way willingly, and often forcefully, into many formal domains of life such as government, education and business.

The Soviet government strongly advocated for Russian to trump the languages of the republics by mandating its usage. These efforts extended to schools. For example, schools in present-day Ukraine were obligated to identify Russian language textbooks as ‘native language’ textbooks whereas those in written in Ukrainian were referred to as ‘Ukrainian language’ textbooks, demonstrating the government’s push to russify its Soviet republics (Bilinsky, 1981). A clear effort was made to distinguish and position the Russian language as official and even indigenous to the region.

Although Russian was considered the official language during the Soviet era, the languages of these republics remained spoken at the personal or informal level. Since the fall of the USSR in 1991, Russian still remains a thriving language in many of the former Soviet republics, as a residual effect of the 69-year Soviet presence. In addition, waves of immigration enabled Russian to interact with Hebrew and Yiddish in Israel, German in Germany, and English in the United States and Canada.

**History of Russian speaking immigrants to the US**
The volatile relationship between Russia and the United States during the era of the Russia Empire, and the period leading up to and including the Cold War, drove different waves of immigration to the ‘land of gold,’ as many Russian speakers refer to the US. Several waves of immigration to the US occurred, starting in the late nineteenth century. The first major influx of immigrants, totaling over three million, arrived on US soil seeking religious tolerance and better economic opportunities. This wave was prompted by increased Jewish persecution in Russia in the form of systemized pogroms, which gained momentum after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881. The Jews were used as a scapegoat for the death of this popular and progressive Tsar. Other restrictions imposed on Jews in Russia included quotas limiting Jewish entry to high schools and universities and limited mobility to the outskirts of the Russian Empire, known as the Pale of Settlement. There was general looting perpetrated by ethnic Russians, and a government apathetic to these discriminatory policies (Hingley, 2003).

Once the tsarist regime was fully ousted by the Bolsheviks in 1917, the new Soviet government implemented several restrictions on emigration, making it nearly impossible to leave the Former Soviet Union (FSU). Tensions between the Soviet and US governments brought immigration to an all time low, marking the second wave, with 6,000 persons emigrating from the FSU between 1920 and 1969 (US Department of Homeland Security, 2009). The passage of the Refugee Relief Act in 1953 once again opened US borders for ‘escapees from communist domination’ (FAIR, 2009). However, it was not until the early 1970s that the United States saw a spike in immigration from the FSU. Demonstrations by Jewish protesters demanding visas to leave for Israel and the United States and international pressure on the Soviet government, resulted in increased immigration. This marked the third wave of immigration, from 1970 to
1990, which brought 61,000 Soviet citizens to the US, a number that quadrupled the prior immigration numbers from the FSU between 1920 and 1969.

As evidenced by the rapid surge in immigration during the 1990s, the political situation in the FSU eroded and Communism collapsed in 1991. The former Soviet republics reclaimed their sovereignty and the doors of immigration reopened. The fourth wave, post dissolution of the Soviet Union, saw numbers that continued to rise each ten-year period: 433,000 immigrants between 1990 and 2000 and 562,000 immigrants between 2000 and 2009 (US Department of Homeland Security, 2009). More recently, with improved US-Russian relations, higher numbers of Russian speakers have begun to migrate to the US for economic purposes, marking the second highest percentage change in immigration rates noted for this timeframe, and second only to Vietnam (US Census Bureau, 2010a).

**US demographics and present settlements**

Russian-speakers make up 881,723 of residents across the US (US Census Bureau, 2009). They tend to reside in large urban cities, as urban living is also the norm for many Russian-speaking immigrants who come from big cities such as Kiev, Tashkent and Moscow. The four cosmopolitan areas with the highest numbers of Russian-speakers in 2007 were New York City (30%), Los Angeles (6.3%), Chicago (4.6%) and San Francisco (3.7%) (US Census Bureau, 2010a).

Russian-speaking immigrants comprise a religiously, ethnically and racially diverse group, emigrating from over fourteen countries. As such, cultures and traditions vary widely across this immigrant group, with some countries holding Eastern European values and others resembling a blend of Eastern European, Asian and Middle Eastern traditions. Their proficiency and connectivity to the Russian language also varies due to the status of the language in their
home country, its presence or absence in schools and the nation’s political position in relation to
Russia. Nevertheless, the Russian language serves as a bridge that connects people throughout
their nations of origin and in the US. And when it comes to their English development, 50% of
Russian-speakers in the US and 63% residing in NY feel they “speak English less than very
well” (US Census Bureau, 2009). Clearly, Russian-speakers in the US are at different places in
their bilingualism.

**Demographics and NY communities**

New York State is home to over one-quarter of all Russian-speakers in the US, which
makes it the largest Russian-speaking population across the fifty states. In 2009 the state was
home to 202,225 speakers of Russian (US Census Bureau, 2009). New York City’s five
boroughs account for 90% of the Russian-speaking population in the state.

In 2008, the Russian language was the third most commonly spoken language other than
English in the NYC region, following Spanish and Chinese. The largest concentration of
Russian speakers in the United States is found in Brooklyn, New York. A total of 63% of the
City’s Russian speakers reside in Brooklyn, 20% are in Queens and the remaining 17% are
scattered among the remaining three boroughs of Manhattan, Bronx and Staten Island,
respectively (US Census Bureau, 2008). According to the Jewish Community Study of New
York there are 202,000 Russian-speaking Jews living within the City’s five boroughs (Ukeles &
Miller, 2004).

**Educational achievement in schools**

The literature on Russian-speaking students in US schools and their academic
achievement is rather sparse. Possible reasons for the invisibility of this group may be that
Russian-speaking students have traditionally fared well in schools, and as a result, have not
garnered specific attention in the research. Many Russian-speaking immigrants arrive to the US with strong formal schooling backgrounds, especially in the areas of math and science, and some exposure to the English language. Second, most are White and middle-class. Finally, because of the group’s diversity, it is difficult to study Russian speakers. Nevertheless, within the NYC school system there has been some attention of this student population.

In 2009/2010, Russian speakers made up 1.9% of students labeled ‘English Language Learners’ (ELL) in NYC schools. They are the seventh largest ethnolinguistic emergent bilingual group in the City (Infante, 2010). This is a decrease from ten years prior, when Russian-speaking emergent bilinguals were 12.5% of the whole emergent bilingual population, and the fourth largest ethnolinguistic group in NYC schools (Stiefel et al., 2003). The reasons for this decrease are twofold. First, the more recent multilingual immigrants from former Soviet republics may not identify Russian as their primary language due to the reclaiming and repositioning of other languages in their home countries. Second, the US, and NYC included, have seen a rise in immigration from other regions of the world, specifically Latin American and Southeast Asia (Camarota, 2007).

In 2008, 34% of Russian-speaking emergent bilinguals at the fourth grade level met the NY State ELA exam (English Language Arts) standards, compared to 61.5% of English proficient students who took the test. Russian-speaking emergent bilingual fourth graders placed eighth, after those who spoke Polish, Korean, Chinese, French, Punjabi and Bengali. At the eighth grade level, 13% of Russian-speaking emergent bilinguals met the NYS ELA standard, outsored only by Korean and Polish emergent bilinguals. In 2008 77% of Russian-speaking fourth graders and 59% of eighth graders met the state math exam standards. These results place
Russian emergent bilinguals in the top half of standardized achievement for NYC students labeled ‘English Language Learner’ (NYC DOE, 2009).

When we consider the achievement of Russian-speaking bilingual students who are deemed ‘English Proficient’ by the NYC schools (and are not labeled ‘ELL’), they also do well on standardized tests. Overall, these bilingual students score .675 standard deviations above English (only) speakers on English reading assessments and .856 standard deviations above English speakers on standardized assessments in Math (Stiefel et al., 2003). Therefore, Russian-speaking bilingual students tend to do well academically when compared to others. The reasons may stem from high levels of formal education of parents. Furthermore, students may also be attending the enrichment programs we describe in the next section that provide them with support not only in home language practices, but that deepen their academic content learning. Finally, students who are immigrants or children of immigrants who willingly came to the country may do better in schools due to a heightened awareness of the educational and economic opportunities available to them in the US that would not otherwise be possible in their family’s country of origin (Ogbu & Simon, 1998).

**NYC Russian Bilingual Programs**

While many children of Russian-speaking families acclimate to US schools where the primary language of instruction is English, there are alternatives to maintain and develop their children’s bilingualism. New York City Russian bilingual programs exist in both the public and private sectors.

At the private level, NYC is home to cultural centers that offer Russian language classes in addition to programs in the arts for children and adults; private schools that offer after-school and Saturday school Russian language and cultural enrichment programs; and bilingual summer
camps that allow children to use the Russian language through activities that integrate the arts and academic content. These programs, started by families and organizations, create opportunities for children to have consistent exposure to the Russian language and culture, aspects that are often absent in their formal schooling. The programs sustain themselves through tuition funds that allow them to secure space, hire educators and advertise their programs to the larger Russian-speaking community. Private and community-based programs are more difficult to quantify, as no database exists to track the wide range of programs available in NYC. An Internet search reveals that these programs are mostly found in the boroughs of Brooklyn and Manhattan, with less than five programs geared toward students at the Pre-K-12 age group.

Within the public schools there are only two Russian language programs at the elementary level, one that is designed for students who are deemed gifted and talented, and another for Russian-speaking and non-Russian speaking students to learn together in a two-way bilingual immersion program. Most Russian-speaking emergent bilingual students are placed in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESL) programs.

The sections that follow provide a descriptive overview of two Russian bilingual programs in NYC. The first is a privately run Saturday program that offers instruction in the Russian language, but goes beyond just language to incorporate academics and the arts. The second case is that of a public school two-way bilingual immersion program that became the focal point of a heated debate around its existence in a multicultural and multilingual neighborhood. While the programs differ in many ways, they share an ethnolinguistic group’s desire to make Russian language education a central aspect of their children’s education.

_Saturdays of learning Russian language, culture and academic enrichment_
SchoolPlus is located in Manhattan, a borough that does not have a large percentage of Russian speakers and in a neighborhood that is not densely populated by Russians. Nevertheless, the school creates its own language and learning community with its students and their families who predominantly come from Russian-speaking backgrounds. They come together on Saturdays during the academic year to take part in a range of courses in Russian, as well as in different content areas and the arts. The school, which has been in existence for seven years, rents classroom space from a private university. It is part of a larger organization of similar educational sites that began in order to allow families to provide their children with the opportunity to develop their Russian language and cultural connections, while also supporting academic enrichment.

The diversity of the student body is reflective of the school’s Russian focus, as well as the multiculturalism prevalent in NYC. Some students are immigrants or children of Russian-speaking immigrants, while others are products of inter-ethnic marriages and have one parent who speaks Russian. Approximately one quarter of these families are of Jewish descent, which is reflective of the larger Russian Jewish population in NYC and the US who fled from former Soviet republics as political refugees. The majority of students, who range from 3 to 12 years of age, come from families with Russian-speaking backgrounds. Some students grow up bilingually while others have been exposed to Russian in their homes, but over time have grown to speak only English. The latter group may approach the Saturday classes with resistance and even resentment towards their parents for ‘forcing’ them to spend their time learning Russian, while others have already moved through the defiance and/or shame of speaking a language other than English and have come to embrace their home language and are willing and even happy to have the chance to become bilingual.
Students of non-Russian speaking backgrounds come to the school for a variety for reasons. One Japanese-American student had a Russian-speaking nanny as a young child and was in the program to continue his language learning. Another African-American student played the violin and as a result of the musical heritage associated with the Russian culture, wanted to take this a step further and study the language. The school positions the Russian language as a resource for students from all backgrounds (Ruiz, 1988).

The Saturday program is set up to provide a wide range of courses as possibilities for its students to take. The school offers leveled Russian classes to those who are native speakers, as well as students learning it as an additional language. Beyond the Russian classes, students may also take classes in English, math, physics, chess, theater and art. Some of these classes are offered in Russian, but others are taught through English. The rationale behind offering such courses is to expose students to areas for which the culture associated with Russian has traditionally been known. As such, the foundation of numeracy and in-depth mathematical knowledge and love of the discipline take center stage at the school, side-by-side with the Russian language.

The Russian drama classes allow students participate in staged performances of modern Russian writers and poets as well as world known authors whose works are translated into Russian. During the winter of 2010, the drama class put on a well attended and received performance of ‘Кошкин дом’ [The Cat’s House], a tale by Pavel Shumil. Chess is a sport that has been dominated by Russian players and has become intricately connected with its culture. The school boasts a champion Russian chess player who teaches beginner and advanced classes. The FSU is also known for its strong background in the areas of math and physics. This can be evidenced by the many FSU educated immigrant engineers and scientists in the US. Both of
these classes are instructed in English with teachers who have Russian-speaking backgrounds and most of whom hail from the FSU. They may use a different method of instruction and thereby go beyond the Russian language to bridge its cultural strengths and pedagogical traditions.

SchoolPlus is a hub for Russian language learning, cultural connectivity and academic development. The vision of the school, as elaborated by the director, is for students to love learning, especially when it comes to their bilingual abilities and academic areas such as math and science. The school fills a gap in terms of language offerings, pedagogy and cultural ties that are missing from the education of many Russian-speaking children and those who want to learn more about Russian language and culture. As evidenced by the program’s name, the educational center both enhances and enriches the education children receive in their formal K-8 schools.

**A community’s fight for a public school’s Russian bilingual education program**

Aside from the community Russian programs available across the boroughs of NYC, a small number of public schools also offer Russian bilingual education programs to their students. A two-way or dual language bilingual education program was started in a heavily populated Russian speaking community with family backing, regional and central office support and an interest by the school’s then-principal and staff (personal communication, Fraga, J., June 16, 2010). This two-way bilingual program was the first Russian program of its kind in the region. It began as a side-by-side model with an English and Russian component teacher at the kindergarten level, and has since grown by one grade level each year. Although the program was intended for both Russian and English speaking students (as well as those from other language groups), almost all the students came from Russian-speaking families. As such, the program
began to resemble a one-way bilingual immersion program. Year by year the program began to gain momentum as the only such program in the City. Russian-speaking families began to move into the surrounding neighborhood to be able to offer their children a bilingual education through their home language, as well as English.

Following three years of implementation and the retirement of the program’s founding principal, the school’s new administration announced plans to shut down the program because of low student achievement and insufficient interest and enrollment. Ironically, this announcement came only two years after the US government rolled out its National Security Language Initiative (NSLI). Russian was listed among the ‘critical languages’ under this plan ‘to expand US foreign language education beginning in kindergarten and continuing throughout formal schooling and into the workforce with new programs and resources’ (US Department of Education, n.d., p.1).

This announcement launched a battle, pitting the school’s newly hired administration and parents of different ethnolinguistic groups against Russian-speaking families, Russian activist groups and larger immigration advocacy organizations, such as the NY Immigration Coalition, Advocates for Children and the NY State Association of Bilingual Education (NYSABE). Although the school had a large Russian-speaking student body, it was also diverse, with students of Chinese, Spanish, and Arabic speaking populations, among others. The parents of some of those groups, whose home languages were not offered in the school’s programming, began to feel resentment around the perceived catering toward the White Russian-speaking students and their families. In addition to linguistic and racial differences, some of the students in the Russian program were also Jewish. Anti-Semitism might also have been a factor in the attempt to close down the Russian bilingual program. Taken together, the negative sentiments that were developing toward the Russian-speaking families, coupled with the administration’s
stance, stirred tensions along racial and ethnolinguistic lines and subsequently threatened to shut down the Russian bilingual program, the only one of its kind in all of NYC.

In an effort to save the program, the Russian-speaking parents took it upon themselves to investigate both the achievement of students in the program, as well as parental interest and enrollment, both areas of concern raised by the administration. They uncovered that students were scoring well on standardized measures and the numbers of applications for the program was sufficient for it to continue and receive funding (personal communication, Kalenkevitch, M., January 2, 2011). As the conflict waged on, petitions were circulated on both sides of the issue. Letters about the heavily racialized and linguicized issues circulated among NYC media outlets.

One of the key advocates of the school, a member of the Metropolitan Russian-American Parent Association, wrote the following in a letter that was disseminated across educational and immigration-related listserves:

Regardless of the orientation outcome, we all Russians, Asians, Latinos and others live in the same neighborhood and our children go into the same school. The hate that is growing right now is going to stay in our neighborhood and in our school. This is dangerous. This has to be stopped before it turns into something tragic. (Email communication, June 12, 2009)

The New York Immigration Coalition, a prominent advocacy group for immigrant rights in the City, also took to the Internet via listserves to take a stance in favor of continuing the school’s bilingual program from the perspective of supporting the rights of all immigrant groups:

Despite the cultural and linguistic differences that may exist between different communities, immigrant parents, regardless of their countries of origin, share a lot in common…Russian immigrant parents fought to establish this program, because they
determined that it would help their children learn English, while maintaining their native language.

We as members of other immigrant communities stand with them in support of this program. Our communities have absolutely nothing to gain from closing the only Russian dual language program, a program that is designed to help immigrant students learn English and succeed in school. We hope that members of all of the school’s vibrant and diverse communities will also stand with the Russian parents and their allies as they fight to keep this important program open. (Email communication, June 15, 2009)

Following many contentious meetings, letters and media attention, the program was ultimately allowed to continue. It was deemed that there would be enough students entering at the kindergarten level to keep it running and growing one grade level per year (the program’s most recent kindergarten class was selected by lottery due to a record number of applications). This outcome demonstrates the importance of the community and its role as advocates in public education, as it highlights the need to provide many and varied ways for students to become bilingual in different educational settings.

The accept-reject spectrum of Russian bilingual education in private-public spheres

The diaspora of Russian speakers across the globe is vast. NYC brings together this diverse group and provides a range of spaces for emergent bilingual students to use and develop their Russian language in both private and public educational settings. And while the core of Russian bilingual education programs across public and private spheres intersect in terms of their values and goals, rooted in their desire to make the language a relevant part of children’s education, they also diverge in their degree of acceptance. In private schools, such as the one discussed here, the programs tend to be embraced by a diverse group of students and their
families who have all chosen the school and as a result have laid a strong foundation of support for the program to exist and thrive. Within public education settings, there can be more of a competitive nature for language programming, especially in areas with significant racial, ethnic and linguistic diversity. Therefore, the creation of public programs requires intra- and inter-group conversations to develop language programming that is equitable and considers larger issues of demographics, systemic availability and inclusion of different stakeholders.

The importance of a combination private and public Russian bilingual education offerings is essential to meeting the logistical, geographical, economic, linguistic and academic needs and desires of the diverse students and families these programs serve. The cases described here offer lessons for the educational planning for emergent bilingual across ethnolinguistic groups. First, while it is important to develop students’ bilingual practices, it is also important to make positive connections to cultural aspects associated with the related language(s). Educators can seek out pedagogical approaches that have been successful in other countries and languages. Therefore, looking at bilingual programs through the languages of instruction alone is a rather narrow lens that can overlook the richness of an ethnolinguistic community.

The number of Russian-speaking children in NYC far exceeds the number of students who have opportunities to use the language in schools. As a result, Russian-speaking (emergent) bilinguals may find their home language and culture absent from formal schooling. For students to have access to a culturally and linguistically relevant education we must rely on the combination and partnership of public schools, private programs and community support, be it geographically founded or created by common beliefs, to come together to ensure emergent bilingual students are not only bilingual in their homes, but also in their schools and communities.
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Within this chapter we use the term Russian speakers, as opposed to Russians, because it more accurately reflects the diversity of a population that originates from and inhabits the nations across the Former Soviet Union, as well as other regions of the world.

There are discrepancies in the reporting of the number of Russian-speakers in New York, particularly among Jewish households, as evidenced in the statistics from American Community Survey (2009) and the Jewish Community Study of New York (2002).