

## **Country Images and Stereotypes about Russia Held by Russian Language Learners**

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### **Synopsis**

This article explores country images and stereotypes about Russia held by Russian language learners in a big public university in Malaysia. Several studies in the field of applied linguistics have explored language learners' stereotypes about the target language country. However, there are some gaps in the academic literature on this topic. Firstly, no studies have been done among the learners of the Russian language; secondly, a systematic analysis of cultural stereotypes held by language learners has been lacking. The present study adopts an interdisciplinary approach to address these gaps. It explores the internal structure of the students' images about Russia, examines the stereotypical images about the country and quantitatively assesses favourability of these stereotypes. The findings show that the images about Russia held by the students clustered around several country-related aspects. Several prominent stereotypes about Russia were distinguished and the majority of these stereotypes were positive. The article concludes with a brief discussion on practical implications of these findings.

**Key words:** applied linguistics, Russian language, foreign language education, stereotypes, language learners

## **Introduction**

The concepts of »country image« and »stereotype« have been widely explored in the academic disciplines of psychology, political science, tourism and marketing (BAL-TAR 1997, ECHTNER, RITCHIE 1993, KATZ, BRALY 1933, SPENCER-RODGERS 2001). In the field of applied linguistics the importance of language learners' positive perceptions of the target language country, culture and native speakers has gained a wide recognition since the early 1970s. This awareness was raised by two Canadian psychologists Robert C. Gardner and Wallace E. Lambert (1972) who proposed that language learners' perceptions about the native speakers and culture of the target language play an important role in shaping their motivation to learn this particular language.

A vast body of studies has accumulated on students' attitudes toward the target language country, culture and speaking community. In this multitude of studies several gaps can be detected. First of all, no studies have focused on the learners of the Russian language. Secondly, the previous research has mainly explored the attitudes toward the native speakers of the target language instead of examining the target language country's image in a holistic manner. Thirdly, the available literature on stereotypes held by language learners (e.g., ALLEN 2004, WEBBER 1990) lacks a systematic analysis of the topic. Finally, while researchers recognize the importance of *positive* attitudes toward the target language culture, country and speaking community there is a dearth of studies that quantitatively assess these attitudes; only recently some steps in this direction have been taken (e.g., NIKITINA, FURUOKA in press).

The present study addresses the gaps in research literature. It focuses on the learners of the Russian language in a big public university in Malaysia and aims to (1) explore the internal structure of the language learners' images about the target language country; (2) identify the students' stereotypes about Russia; (3) assess the favourability of these stereotypes. To achieve these aims, this study adopts an interdisciplinary approach. Thus, to explore the country image it uses a framework proposed in the academic discipline of marketing. To examine the students' stereotypes and to measure their favourability this study uses techniques developed in the field of social psychology.

## **Background to the Study**

Malaysia is a multiethnic and multilingual country in Southeast Asia with a population of approximately 28 million people. Among 20 big public universities in the country, the Russian language is currently being offered in four universities. The university where this study was conducted is situated in East Malaysia. The duration of the Russian language program was three semesters with three contact hours per week.

## **Literature Review**

### *Country Image and Stereotypes*

Researchers recognize that individuals create images of various objects and use this imagery to process and retain information in their memory. The same cognitive processes apply to the formation of country images (ECHTNER, RITCHIE 1991). Brijs, Bloemer and Kasper (2011) have proposed a framework that allows exploring country image in a systematic way. They identified several country-related aspects including »cultural identity, political climate, language, history, climate, landscape, economic and technological development, religion and people« (BRIJS, BLOEMER, KASPER 2011: 1260). The present study adopts this taxonomy to explore the images of Russia.

The concept of stereotype has been extensively researched in the field of social psychology. Lippmann (1922/1965: 3) described stereotypes as »pictures in our heads«. Early studies on stereotypes have reported that individuals hold mental images about representatives of other nationalities or cultural groups even if they never had personal encounters with them (KATZ, BRALY 1933). This point is important to consider in the context of foreign language education where the learners often lack direct contacts with the community of the target language speakers.

In academic literature, social psychologists recognize the existence of a cultural stereotype when a certain share of the respondents has referred to a particular image, descriptor or its synonyms. While there is no established minimum percentage of the total responses to distinguish a stereotype a frequency in the range between 6 percent and 20 percent has been indicative of the stereotype presence (MARIN 1984, SPENCER-RODGERS 2001, ECHTNER, RITCHIE 1993). The

current study will set a benchmark at 10 percent to distinguish the stereotypical images about Russia among the variety of country images held by the respondents.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

Forty-two (n=42) students in their second semester of Russian language program participated in this study. All the participants were Malaysian citizens of various ethnic groups and none of them had studied the Russian language before, formally or informally. The age of the students was between 20 and 23 years old. There were slightly more female (n=23) than male (n=19) participants. The students majored in various academic disciplines (e.g., the sciences, engineering, education, economics and psychology).

### *Instrument*

This study adopted a free-response approach to collecting data on the language learners' country images. This is because such approaches permit reporting and capturing the characteristics, features and traits that are the most salient and most strongly associated by the respondents with an object under study (SPENCER-RODGERS 2001).

The instrument in this study had one open-ended question that asked »What images do the words *Russia* or *Russian* conjure in your mind?«. The students were free to provide any number of words or short phrases to answer this question. They were also asked to assign favourability ratings to the images they had written. The rating scale ranged from -3 (»extremely negative«) to +3 (»extremely positive«).

### *Data Organization and Analysis*

Content analysis was carried out in this study. All the responses provided by the students were listed *ad verbatim*. The images mentioned more than once were grouped together and assigned their own codes thus forming smaller subcategories of images. These smaller subcategories were then grouped into nine larger categories according to the taxonomy proposed by Brijs et al. (2011), which allowed exploring the internal structure of the students' images about Russia.

Then we proceeded to identify the stereotypical images about Russia. An image was considered stereotypical if it had been mentioned by four ( $n=4$ , or 10%) or more participants. Finally, favourability of the stereotypes was assessed by calculating the mean valence of each stereotypical image using the ratings assigned by the students. The formula employed for the calculation was adapted from Spencer-Rogers (2001):

$$S = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^N V_i}{N}$$

where  $S$  is the mean valence of the category;  $V_i$  is the valence rating given to the image  $i$ , and  $N$  is the total number of images in the category.

## **Findings**

The participants provided 235 answers to the open-ended question. Among them 11 responses were idiosyncratic (eg., »rainbow«); they could not be grouped with the other items and had to be removed. After the data cleaning, 224 answers were retained for the analysis.

The majority of the images ( $n=203$ ) could be placed into one of the nine country-related aspects identified by Brijs et al. (2011). Table 1 reports these findings. It should be noted that two labels in the original taxonomy had to be modified in the current study. These minor modifications did not affect the essence of the relevant country-related aspects. Thus, the original label »Landscape« proposed by Brijs et al. was changed to »Country size and sites« in the present study while the »Economic and technological development« label in Brijs et al. was changed to »Technology and education«.

As Table 1 shows, the majority of the responses made references to Russian culture, the country's size and geography, education and technology, climate, language and people. On the other hand, »History« and »Religion« were the least notable among the country-related aspects.

Table 1: Country-related aspects and their subcategories

Country aspects	Subcategories
1. Culture (n=41)*	Architecture Foods Unique / different / interesting culture <i>Matryoshka</i> dolls Diverse culture
2. Political situation (n=18)	Politically strong country Communism The Soviet Union Domestic chaos War, terrorism
3. Language (n=23)	Difficult language Unique language
4. History (n=8)	Historical personae Historical places
5. Climate (n=27)	Cold/snow/winter Four seasons
6. Country size and sites (n=32)	Big country Geographical location Beautiful scenery Cities, regions
7. Technology and education (n=28)	Medical schools and education Space technology Advanced technology Advanced country
8. Religion (n=3)	Multiconfessional
9. People (n=23)	Physical appearance Character Behaviour Real and fictional persons (eg., <i>Maria Sharapova</i> , <i>the character »Sasha« from the movie »2012«</i> )

\* indicates number of answers

The next steps of the analysis identified the students' stereotypes about Russia and assessed favourability of these stereotypes (see Table 2). There were 16 stereotypical images about Russia which clustered around seven country-related aspects. Interestingly, while »Culture« was the

most prominent country-related image in the previous step of the analysis it did not contain the most prominent stereotypes. The most frequent stereotypical images referred to Russia's country size, climate and education and technology.

Table 2: Stereotypes about Russia, their frequency and favourability

Country-related aspects	Stereotypes and their mean valence
1. Culture	Architecture (n=9)*; MV** = 2.22 Unique /different /interesting culture (n=8); MV= 2
2. Political situation	Politically strong country (n=5); MV = 1.2 Communism (n=4); MV = -1
3. Language	Difficult language (n=12); MV = -0.08 unique language (n=6); MV= 0.66
4. Climate	Cold weather (n=16); MV = -0.62 Winter (n=5); MV = 0.8
5. Country size and sites	Big country (n=16); MV = 1.45 Moscow (n=6); MV = 0.46 St.Petersbourg (n=5); MV = 2.2
6. Education and technology	Medical schools and education (n=15); MV = 2.13 Space technology (n=4); MV = 2.5 Advanced technology (n=4); MV = 2
7. People	White people (n=4); MV = 1.25 Maria Sharapova (n=4); MV = 1

\* "n" denotes number of answers; \*\*"MV" is abbreviation for "mean valence"

As the findings show, the stereotypes about Russia were predominantly positive. Only three out of the sixteen stereotypical images had negative mean valences, i.e., »communism«, »difficult language« and »cold weather«. The most positive stereotypes related to Russia's advanced technology, education and culture, which all had mean valences above 2 points.

Finally, we analyzed the remaining 11 images that did not fit Brijs et al.'s (2011) taxonomy because they conveyed the respondents' affective reaction toward Russia by the means of

adjectives (eg., »beautiful«, »patriotic«, »complex«) or short phrases (eg., »the source of inspiration«). None of such responses was given more than once and therefore could not form a stereotypical image. The mean valence of all the affective images combined was positive at 1.41.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The present study sought to, firstly, explore the internal structure of Russian language learners' images about Russia; secondly, to identify the stereotypical images; and thirdly, to assess favourability of these stereotypes. This study offered the first systematic analysis of the internal structure of the country images and country stereotypes held by language learners. To achieve this, it adapted and blended frameworks and approaches from the academic fields of social psychology and marketing.

Regarding the first aim, the internal structure of the students' images of Russia fitted the framework outlined by Brijs et al. (2011). This indicates that language learners' perceptions about the target language country are multifaceted and that they are not limited to the opinions about the native speakers and the target culture only. As to the second and the third aims of the present study, the findings showed that the students' stereotypes about Russia were diverse and, for the most part, positive. Only three of the sixteen stereotypical images had negative mean valences. The most prominent stereotypes referred to Russia's size, education system, technology and climate.

Some practical implications could be drawn from the present study's analysis and findings, especially regarding research methods on foreign language learners' images of and attitudes toward the target language country. This study has demonstrated how research on this topic could benefit from adapting approaches and techniques employed in other academic disciplines.

To conclude, since the seminal study by Gardner and Lambert (1972) researchers and language educators recognize a fact that language learners' positive attitudes toward the target language country, culture and native speakers is an important aspect in the motivation to learn the foreign language. Russian language educators could enhance the students' motivation by promoting



positive images and developing a deeper knowledge about Russia. The learners at more advanced levels could benefit from seeking information about the country on the Russian-language internet sites. Such recourses have a good potential to promote people's knowledge about Russia (HYE-HYUN 2012). Exploring the relationship between the language learners' cultural knowledge, target language country images and attitudes could be an interesting topic for future research.

#### SUMMARY

This article explored country images and stereotypes about Russia held by 42 Russian language learners in a big public university in Malaysia. It adopted an interdisciplinary approach for this purpose. Research literature in the academic field of marketing has provided a framework for exploring the internal structure of the country image; literature in the field of social psychology has informed this study of approaches and techniques used to distinguish and quantitatively evaluate cultural stereotypes.

The findings indicated that the internal structure of the students' images about Russia fitted the framework outlined by Brijs, Bloemer and Kasper (2011) and clustered around all the nine country-related aspects identified by the researchers. The most prominent of the country images were related to Russian culture, the country's geographical characteristics (eg., the size and climate) as well as technology and education. The findings also showed that the students' stereotypes about Russia were diverse and clustered around seven country-related aspects from Brijs et al.'s (2011) taxonomy. The most prominent stereotypical images referred to Russia's big size, cold climate, advanced technology and education system. Encouragingly, the majority of the students' stereotypes about Russia were positive. The method adopted in this study demonstrated how images about the target language country held by language learners could be explored in a systematic manner and quantitatively assessed.

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