

QUESTIONS FROM TEACHERS

1) What do you think are the similarities and differences between the Russians and the British?

(Григору
Елена

К
Владимировна
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Not an easily question, but an interesting one! When I first came to Russia, I though Brits and Russians were completely different and had little in common. I was especially overwhelmed by Russian hospitality and felt indebted to my hosts. In the UK, our materials relationships are far more calculated and mathematically reciprocal than in Russia, where you tend to see more sharing and mutual assistance between friends and family members. This is a topic I have explored in [my blog](#) .

Another Russian trait that was hard to understand was frankness. I find Russians to be quite blunt and direct in communication, whereas Brits are almost the exact opposite! After 10 years in Russia, I have come to appreciate the fact that Russians often speak their minds. That's honest and refreshing, if a little shocking and sometimes offensive from a British standpoint! I prefer to get a straight answer than not know what a person is thinking. As the Hungarian humorist George Mikes said about the English: "An Englishman will never lie to you, but he would never dream of telling you the truth either". The British beat around the bush and seldom say exactly what they mean.

This brings me to another clear difference between us: showing/hiding emotions. In British tradition, we have a concept called "the stuff upper lip", which means one should refrain from showing one's emotions and feelings to others, especially in public. We smile at each other, but mostly because we feel uncomfortable, not because we are overjoyed at seeing a complete stranger! Russians may view this as false or insincere because they tend to wear their hearts on their sleeves and reveal their feelings to others more openly. I have written an article on British vs. Russian smiles, which you can read [here](#) .

I don't think it's fair to say that Brits are cold, conservative robots who never feel anything – we are human like everyone else, but we follow prescribed rules about when and where it is appropriate to share our emotions with others. Brits are truly themselves either when drunk or at

the football!

One further difference is in our attitudes to rules and the law. Brits tend to do everything “by the book” and can’t understand how life can work any other way. Russians are flexible, don’t always follow the rules and are great problem-solvers. If Russia has taught me anything, it has taught me to think outside the box and accept life as it comes. Russia certainly has a strange logic all of its own and people here adapt quickly to their changing circumstances. Put a German in Russia and he might not survive!

So, what unites us?

Alcohol! Brits and Russians love a drink and alcohol performs a similar social function in both cultures. It loosens our tongues, relaxes our bodies and gets rid of our inhibitions – it bonds us together. When Brits drink, they are free from the usual rules governing their behaviour. Perhaps this is also true of Russians to a certain extent. Both countries have serious problems with alcoholism. If you think Russians drink more than Brits, you are mistaken!

I also believe that history unites us. Both countries had large empires, but subsequently lost their colonies and were then reduced to minor superpowers on the world stage. Therefore, we think of ourselves as “great nations”, but in reality we are second to China and America. We share a distain for Americans, whom we perceive as stupid and uncultured (although perhaps we are a little envious). We lack direction and have no new dream to replace that which we have lost from the times of empire. Young people are especially affected by this and are often apathetic about politics and society, and are overly focused on material wealth and money. I think the future holds great things for our nations, but we’re still waiting for people to turn on the light.

2) What is most difficult about teaching English to Russian students? (Раловец Светлана

а
аевна
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Никол

I enjoy my work and don't find it difficult to teach my Russian students. One thing to bear in mind though is that I now mostly teach 1-to-1 classes online. This differs markedly from group teaching to children who may not necessarily want to be in your classroom! I choose my students carefully and don't work with those that are not interested in my subject.

In the past, Russian students have asked me to be stricter with them. Perhaps this is down to a difference in our education systems or mentalities. Russians may expect the teacher to rule with an iron fist and tell them what to do. But, I was raised in a liberal family in which pressure was applied using a moral sense of right and wrong. I was encouraged to take personal responsibility for my own development, to choose subjects to study and hobbies to pursue. Perhaps, for this reason, I don't want to push my students against their will. Instead, I try to make my lessons as interesting as possible and to motivate my students via the language itself. English cannot be boring – it's a way of life. Only people are boring.

The other thing to remember is that I'm a native speaker of English, so students react to me differently. They are automatically more engaged and interested regardless of whether my lessons are good or bad. I've seen many native speakers in Russian classrooms who are more like "chatters" than teachers. Just because English is your mother tongue doesn't mean you can teach it.

3) Do you think that the communicative approach is really so effective in the process of foreign language teaching. Are there any good alternatives?□

(
Дубаков
Артем
Викторович
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I'd never actually heard of the "communicative approach" before coming to Russian in 2002. In my experience, it basically means – go in there and chat with them! A fancy term for a simple idea. To be honest, I think there needs to be a balance across the 4 skills. It's like building a house with a foundation (grammar), 4 walls (skills) and a roof (practice). If you don't study grammar, then the house is going to come down around your ears sooner or later.

My students mostly need me for conversation-related practice and error correction. I give

grammar, reading, listening, writing, etc. as homework. These tasks can often be completed outside the classroom and don't require the teacher to be present. Speaking, on the other hand, cannot be done alone. Therefore, I understand the idea of teaching language via verbal communication, but would argue that you can be speaking English all (or most) of the time while exploring the other skills. I sometimes chat with my students about aspects of grammar. Two birds with one stone – speaking and grammar.

I imagine it's difficult for Russian teachers of English to spend hours and hours chatting with students in a foreign language. Some teachers may be concerned about making mistakes with their own English. However, I do think that getting students to speak must be a top priority for any teacher (native or Russian) and we must lead by example.

I studied Russian for 3 years before I actually worked up the courage to speak it! I knew the theory, but lacked the practice. I should've started speaking from day 1. Theory without practice is useless.

4) What do you think of the "mysterious Russian soul": is it a myth or reality nowadays?

(Шес

топалова

Вера

Евгеньевна

)

I find it interesting that the Russian language is full of references to the soul, where English is far more interested in the heart, e.g. душа в душу (a heart to heart talk). I'm currently researching this fascinating topic. I find Russians to be a more spiritual people than the British. You are concerned with questions of morality and conscience. It's interesting that Russians often use phrases that appeal to the person's moral judgement and sense of what is right. In English, we're more interested in what is “

[fair](#)

”.

A student of mine was playing with my naughty cat one day and said this: “Ой! Ты бессовестный мальчик
!

Как тебе не стыдно

?” I found this hard to translate into modern English because we no longer say things like “shame on you!” – it’s old-fashioned. Another interesting expression used by older Russians is “по

-

человечески

”, which roughly translates as “in a humane fashion” but in reality is closer to “in the right or proper way”. To me, all of this reflects the Russian interest in being a moral human being.

In answer to your question, I’m not sure how deep the Russian soul goes! You definitely have a soul, where we Brits have a heart. We are also less religious and superstitious than you, which ties in with Russians being more spiritual as a people. However, I don’t like it when some Russians claim to be different, unique and special just by virtue of the fact they were born in Russia. I can find you thousands of Brits with a “deep soul” and equally as many Russians with a “shallow heart”. We shouldn’t hide behind a mask when we are all fundamentally just human.

5) Are you a Russian Englishman or an English Russian after your 10 years in Russia?

(Кошелева Тамара Геннадьевна)

This question made me smile because I don’t know the answer anymore. My girlfriend told me that I sometimes talk in my sleep. When I asked in which language, she said I used both. She doesn’t speak English so couldn’t understand my English sleep-talk, but she said that in Russian I mumbled slang like: “Чё! Вообще! Типа того!” in a random order. Very strange!

It’s interesting to be on the edge of two languages – sandwiched in between like a piece of Russian колбаса. I was a latecomer to Russian at 18, so I don’t think I’ll ever get rid of my accent. But near-native is close enough for me. I think to fully understand a people, you have to understand the language. My interest in Russian has always been driven by my desire to know its speakers.

I’ve now been back in the UK for 2 weeks now and, I have to admit, it feels a little strange. On the one hand, I’m home – surrounded by friends and family, traditional food from my childhood, footy and pints down the local pub with a bag of pork scratchings. On the other hand, a little Russian voice in the back of my mind is saying: “2 taps instead of 1 – that’s inconvenient! Why are the houses here so cold?! Why don’t they squeeze the teabag?!”

QUESTIONS FROM PUPILS

1) My teacher at school says that English people eat porridge, bacon, eggs and toast for breakfast. What do you have for breakfast in Russia?

(
Скрипин
Александр
Сергеевич
)

This is a stereotype of the British. We do have what is called the “traditional English breakfast”, which consists of the ingredients mentioned above, but we don’t eat it every morning. I’d have a traditional breakfast about once a month. Another stereotype is that the English eat porridge all the time. That isn’t true either (for my generation at least). Russians probably eat more porridge and cereals than we do!

My typical breakfast consists of a cup of tea with milk and a bowl of honey-nut cornflakes! I’m still eating a kid’s breakfast at 32, but my generation were raised on breakfast cereal so it’s hardly surprising. In Russia, I bought Nesquik chocolate cereal and my girlfriend made me collect all the free toys for our cat to play with! He loved the plastic racing cars and chased them round the kitchen.

2) When you first visited Russia, were the stereotypes and rumours you’d heard about the place confirmed or not ? (Арабаджи Кристина Дмитриевна)

I’m not sure I had many stereotypes about Russia before I arrived. I’d visited Ukraine twice on family holidays to Donetsk and Crimea before going to Russia for the first time in 1999. Prior to that, I’d had absolutely no interest in Russia and knew nothing about the place.

Most Westerners think of Russia and Eastern Europe as if it’s one big country. Everyone from there has a similar accent in English and their cultures seem quite close to each other. It’s strange when Russians say that Brits or Americans hate them. That’s not true at all. For the majority of people in the West, Russia is far away and they don’t think about it.

I'd say our stereotypes of Russia can be broken down like this:

Yes: Drink a lot, very direct (or rude) in conversation, a bit crazy, beautiful girls, tough

No: Cossack dancing in nightclubs, mafia, Communism rules, everyone's poor, always cold

3) In Russia, as in Great Britain, there are many subcultures. What subculture would you like to belong to and why? (Филатова Ксения Александровна)

I'm too old to join a subculture! When I was at school, I had a dyed blonde fringe and wore Smashing Pumpkins and Radiohead t-shirts. My favourite colour was black and I loved guitar music. I suppose I was somewhere between an indie kid and a hippy. I mixed in different circles and hung out with many interesting types of people. It was good fun and we had a lot of adventures!

It's hard to compare that situation with what we have today in England. As far as I can see, there are no strict divisions between subcultures now. Everyone just tries to be "individual". Teenagers form groups, but not so much based on their taste in music or clothes. I think this is a product of corporate marketing, which has taught people to construct their sense of self and freedom through buying iphones and Nike trainers. It's a very hollow illusion. Perhaps Russia has kept its subculture groups longer than we have.

4) Would you like to have been born in Russia? If so, in which particular place? (Лукьянчева Полина Андреевна)

I think if I'd been born in Russia, I'd have wanted to leave and explore another country. I've

always been bored by familiarity and routine, so I'm glad that I was born in England and discovered Russia as my second home. I think that until you live outside your country, you can never truly say what makes it special or whether your home lies elsewhere. There are 3 places I call home: Sheffield, Petersburg and Omsk.

5) Do they show Russian TV programmes in the UK? What is your favourite? (Дубинин
Глеб
Дмитриевич
)

You can get satellite or cable TV, which shows most Russian channels. I have Russian friends in England who have Russian TV here. I don't actually watch TV myself because I don't have time. I'm too busy teaching and working on my [website](#) . When I was in Omsk, I sometimes watched *Projector Paris Hilton* with my girlfriend – that was quite good!