

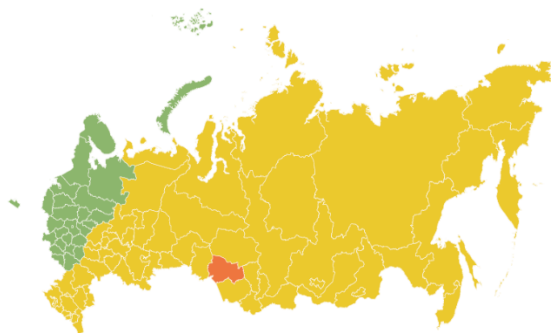
Why you should study languages:

Being a university student abroad

Before coming to university, I was already sure that I wanted to study languages, the choice for me was instead which ones I wanted to learn. Eventually I settled on a combination which included Russian, a decision which I don't regret! Learning Russian has not been without its challenges, but it has meant that, as part of my degree, I've had the unique opportunity to spend a term abroad living and studying in Saint Petersburg. I'd like to first of all talk about some of the reasons why I chose Russian before going into some of the experiences it has offered me.

Russia is well known as the largest country in the world. It covers eleven time zones and two continents spanning from eastern Europe on one side through the Ural Mountains to cover the whole of northern Asia on the other. Russian is the eighth most spoken language in the world¹ with over 150 million native speakers before counting those who speak it as a second language. Learning the language makes it easier to access the long and rich cultural and literary history of the nation, and it equally opens up a large part of the world for travel (including outer space as Russian is required for astronauts wanting to travel to the ISS!). A 2018 ranking of proficiency in English placed Russia as 42nd out of 88 countries and regions² meaning that in order to get around in Russia you can't simply rely on people understanding your English. In addition to this, the British Council placed Russian in its top 10 most important languages for the future yet less than 5% of 18-34 year old Britons said they would be able to hold a basic conversation in Russian³, suggesting Russian skills in the UK are in demand.

Proficiency in English by Region



Central	54.75	██████████
Northwestern	54.34	██████████
Central Black Earth	53.59	██████████
Urals	53.26	██████████
Volga-Vyatka	52.62	██████████
North Caucasus	52.20	██████████
East Siberian	51.93	██████████
Northern	51.70	██████████
West Siberian	51.12	██████████
Far Eastern	50.84	██████████
Volga	49.13	██████████

Reading all of the advantages of learning Russian however is simple, it has been in coming to Saint Petersburg that I've really been inspired. Russian can be complicated, particularly when you focus too hard on the grammar which at first can seem quite daunting to native English speakers, and not all of my experiences here have been easy (trying to negotiate new situations in an unfamiliar language is often a challenge!) and yet, being here has made these struggles worthwhile. I study at the University of Saint Petersburg where I take a course designed for foreigners to learn Russian. In a typical day, I will have three hours of classes which encourage us to develop our speaking, writing and reading skills but they also mean that we have the rest of the day free to explore the city. Although a comparatively young city, founded in 1703 by Peter the Great, Saint Petersburg has earned itself several different nicknames including the 'Venice

¹ <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/rus>

² <https://www.ef.com/ca/epi/>

³ https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/languages_for_the_future_2017.pdf

of the North' for its extensive network of rivers and canals and 'The Cultural Capital of Russia' for its many museums, churches and events, meaning there is always something new to visit. On various days after classes we have been able to visit museums on diverse subjects from art and history to light and space and have discovered many small and relaxed cafés. At weekends we have taken part in such cultural events as Масленица (Maslenitsa) which marks the last week before lent and celebrates the coming of Spring and Victory Day which celebrates and commemorates the end of the Second World War in Russia. The location of Saint Petersburg has also been useful for travelling, it was close enough to the Finnish border for us to travel to Helsinki by bus, and to fly to Moscow takes less than an hour. Russia attracts students from a range of different countries meaning, as a student here, it is possible to make friends with people from all over the world and, in making friends with Russian people, I was able to reinforce one of my motivations for learning the language: breaking down stereotypes and hearing and discussing viewpoints from a perspective difficult to access when you only speak one language.

