

# RUSSIAN LANGUAGE NEEDS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA

**Larisa Nikitina, Ma Tin Cho Mar, Fumitaka Furuoka**

University of Malaya, Malaysia

E-mail: larisa@um.edu.my, tinchomar@um.edu.my, fumitaka@um.edu.my

## Abstract

*In the context of higher education foreign language courses are viewed as skills-oriented subjects that aim to enable students to communicate in a foreign language. The main four language skills to be developed are listening, speaking, reading and writing. Until recently, decisions about which of the linguistic skills should be emphasized in a foreign language program have been taken without seeking the opinions of language learners. To address this issue, the present research examined needs for learning the Russian language among students in a Malaysian public university. To achieve this research aim, a survey questionnaire was distributed among prospective learners of Russian. Four different statistical methods were performed to analyse the data, namely, the descriptive statistics, the independent t-test, the exploratory factor analysis and the reliability test. The findings from the descriptive statistics revealed that the respondents considered developing face-to-face interactive skills, such as the speaking and listening skills, as most important. The findings of the t-test suggested that demographic variables might have some influence on the students' perceptions of the skills' importance. For example, the students who spoke Malay at home placed a higher value on developing their ability to speak in a polite manner and to understand non-verbal communicative acts, such as gestures. The results of the exploratory factor analysis revealed that the language skills as perceived by the students formed several dimensions where interactive and non-interactive skills tended to form distinct clusters. This research concludes with a discussion of pedagogical implications to be drawn from the findings.*

**Key words:** language needs, Russian language, higher education, Malaysia.

## Introduction

The four basic language skills that any foreign language program aims to develop are listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Traditionally, the decisions concerning a set of linguistic and non-linguistic skills to be instilled during a foreign language program as well as the planning of a foreign language curriculum have been made at the institutional level. However, more recently, researchers and educators have begun seeking language learners' opinions, needs and even 'wants' regarding curriculum content, the teaching materials and the classroom activities (Bocanegra-Valle, 2015). Currently, a rich body of research literature is available on "needs analysis", which refers to "the process of establishing" language learners' educational needs with the aim to "develop a sensible language curriculum" (Bocanegra-Valle, 2015, p. 68).

Despite the popularity of language needs as a research topic, such analyses suffer from two main methodological weaknesses. Firstly, a notable shortcoming is a lack of a well-accepted definition of the 'language needs'. The definition of language needs is varied in different educational contexts (Otilia, 2015). Richterich (1972) pinpointed a fundamental contradiction between the "known" objective needs and the "unknown" subjective needs in the process of learning a new language. This discrepancy could be also seen as an inconsistency between measurable "perceived" needs and unmeasurable "felt" needs. The "known" objective needs have been described as static by nature and as largely independent from the learning situation. In contrast, the "unknown" subjective needs are perceived as dynamic by nature and as heavily

dependent on a particular teaching and learning context (Brindley, 1989; Brown, 1995; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998).

Secondly, the overwhelming majority of studies on language needs have focused on English language learners (see Bocanegra-Valle, 2015). Only limited empirical research is available on the needs of students learning languages other than English. Importantly, to the best of our knowledge, there is no systematic explorations of the language needs of Russian language learners. In this sense, the current research is one of first empirical studies to examine the language needs in the context of teaching Russian as a foreign language.

### Literature Review

The majority of the available studies on language learning needs have focused on learners of the English language (Bocanegra-Valle, 2015). These studies were conducted in various geographical locations and educational settings. For example, Paci (2013) analysed the language needs of 172 undergraduate science students learning English in Albania. The researcher found out that speaking was the most desirable language skill; it was followed by listening and writing skills. The least sought after were the skills related to the knowledge of grammar, reading and vocabulary acquisition. Bada and Okan (2000) examined English language needs among 230 students and 23 teachers in Turkey. The researchers discovered that the students and teachers preferred individual work rather than paired work in the classroom. Also, the students expressed a strong interest in having opportunities to practice their language skills outside of the classroom; at the same time, they did not want to have any homework assignments. In another study conducted in Turkey, Gözüyeşil (2014) examined English language needs among 133 engineering students and found out that the reading skills were the most desirable. Especially, the students valued the ability to understand the essence and extract specific information from a text. As for the speaking skills, the students regarded the ability to ask their lecturers questions and be able to give responses to the teachers' questions as the most useful skills. Among the listening skills, the ability to understand lectures and instructions given by the lecturers were identified as important.

Recently, an increasing number of studies have been done in the Middle East countries. These studies predominantly focused on learners of English. For example, Salehi (2010) conducted a research on language needs among 225 Iranian English language learners. The researcher discovered that reading and speaking were the most important language skills for the respondents. The least sought after language skills were writing and listening. A research by Boroujeni and Fateme (2013) among 90 Iranian undergraduate students reported that reading was the most important language skill for their respondents, which was in line with the findings reported by Salehi (2010). Next in importance was grammar and vocabulary knowledge. The least important skills for the participants in Boroujeni and Fateme's research were listening, speaking and writing. Among the more recent studies, Fadel and Rajab (2017) analysed English language needs among 130 information technology (IT) students in Saudi Arabia. According to the researchers, the most desirable skills for the students were reading and writing.

It is interesting to note that the findings reported by the studies conducted in the Middle Eastern countries were quite consistent (Boroujeni & Fateme, 2013; Fadel & Rajab, 2017; Salehi, 2010). All of these studies found out that the language learners had expressed preferences for developing writing and reading skills, which are essentially non-interactive (i.e., not for face-to-face communication) skills. A tentative conclusion drawn from these findings could be that the perception of the importance and hierarchy of linguistic abilities as perceived by language learners could be culturally rooted. In Bangladesh, Hossain (2013) explored English language needs among 120 engineering students. He found that the students placed a greater importance on acquiring writing skills rather than speaking skills. Interestingly, the students needed good writing skills for conducting business correspondence, however, they did not con-

sider augmenting their speaking skill for the face-to-face communication as equally important. In the context of Indonesia, Poedjiastutie and Oliver (2017) examined English language needs of 284 university students. The researchers discovered that the students placed priority on developing their speaking skills; these were followed by writing and reading skills. The listening skills were considered as the least important linguistic ability.

In Malaysia, studies on language learning needs also tend to be implemented among learners of English (e.g., David, Thang, & Azman, 2015; Ismail, Hussin, & Darus, 2012; Rahman, 2012; Sahrir & Alias, 2011). Only one article by Faiz (2008) included the Russian language and 14 other foreign and local languages in its exploration of Malaysian university students' foreign language needs, interests and preferences. Faiz conducted his research among 51 undergraduate students at a major public university in Malaysia. As the findings revealed, Japanese, Mandarin and French were the preferred foreign language choices while Russian was the least desirable foreign language to learn. The researcher also found out that, at the aggregate level, 90.2% of the respondents prioritized developing their speaking skills, followed by listening skills; reading and writing abilities were considered as less important. However, Faiz (2008) did not specifically focus on the language needs and 'wants' of the Malaysian students learning Russian.

### *Problem of Research and Research Focus*

Recognizing a dualistic nature of the language needs, the current research focuses on both the objective language needs, such as grammar, speaking, reading, writing and listening, and subjective language needs that might be felt by the students, such as politeness of speech. It also addresses the problem of a scarcity of studies on language learning needs in the context of teaching Russian as a foreign language.

The aim of this research was two-fold: firstly, to examine the Russian language needs among undergraduate university students in Malaysia; secondly, to gain insights for developing a Russian language curriculum that is relevant to the needs of Russian language learners in Malaysia. Stemming from this aim the question raised in this research was: Which Russian language skills do students consider as the most and the least important?

## **Methodology of Research**

### *General Background*

Malaysia is a multicultural and multilingual country in Southeast Asia. The main ethnic groups are Malay, Chinese and Indian; each group has its own distinct and well-preserved culture and traditions. *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language) is the national language. Each of the ethnic communities, however, has speakers of several dialects (e.g., Teochew, Foochow, Hakka are spoken among the Malaysian Chinese). English is widely spoken throughout the country and it is a compulsory subject in all national schools. As a result, many people in Malaysia are plurilingual and the majority of the university students are fluent speakers of at least two languages (e.g., *Bahasa Melayu*, English and/or their mother tongue). A good proficiency in and knowledge of several languages may influence the students' perceptions about the need to learn an additional foreign language. Therefore, the current research aimed to explore the perceived needs for the Russian language among students in the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya.

The Russian language is one of the oldest foreign language programs at University of Malaya and it has been taught since the 1970s. Currently, the language is offered as an elective course and only to students studying at the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics. The students typically learn Russian for one semester and only at the beginner level. The semester lasts 14 weeks, during which the language learners' academic performance is evaluated by several for-

mal assessment procedures (i.e., assignments, tests, one oral examination); these make up 50 percent of the overall course assessment. At the end of the semester students must take a written examination which adds the remaining 50 percent to the course evaluation.

### *Research Type and Scope*

This exploratory research employed quantitative approaches to collecting and analysing the data. The data were collected through a questionnaire survey, which was a part of the research project “Learning Needs of UM Students Enrolled in Burmese, Russian and Thai Language Courses: Implications for Teaching and Curriculum Development”. The project was implemented in the University of Malaya. The current research reports only the findings concerning the language needs of prospective students of Russian.

### *Instrument and Procedures*

The questionnaire used in this research was based on several existing instruments (Alalou, 2001; Sung & Tsai, 2013). The respondents were first asked to rate each of the skills, such as Listening, Writing, Reading, Understanding Russian culture, Speaking skills, Grammar skills, and Good pronunciation, on 5-point Likert-type scales with the answers ranging from “1=least important” to “5=most important”.

Following this, the perceived needs for developing four main language skills were assessed by 23 questionnaire items. To be more specific, seven items assessed the needs for acquiring the writing skills (e.g., “Using the correct letters or script”, “Writing in formal and informal styles”); five items focused on the reading skills (e.g., “Reading short messages, sms, tweets”, “Reading Russian internet sites”), five items assessed the need for the listening skills (e.g., “Understanding real-life conversations in the Russian language”, “Understanding lectures in Russian”) and six items pertained to the speaking skills (e.g., “Speaking with good pronunciation and intonation”, “Using an appropriate level of politeness”) (the questionnaire is available in Appendix).

Five-point Likert-type scales were attached to each of these questionnaire items; the scales ranged from “1=least important” to “5=most important”. The final section of the questionnaire sought the demographic information, such as age, gender and the mother tongue. Reflecting the multi-ethnic composition of Malaysia’s population, the students’ ethnic background (or mother tongue) was deemed as a potentially important factor for the analysis of the data.

The questionnaires were distributed during language classes and lectures in the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics; prior permissions were obtained from the lecturers who taught the classes. The participants were verbally informed about the purposes of this research and advised that participation in the survey was voluntary and that returning the filled-in questionnaire implied their consent to participate. These clauses were also stated in the questionnaire forms (see Appendix).

### *Sample of Research*

A purposive sampling procedure was adopted and the questionnaire was distributed only among potential learners of Russian. This means that the survey was limited to one research site, namely, the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics (FLL) at the University of Malaya.

A total of 34 students ( $N=34$ ) participated in the survey. This sample represented about 8 percent of the student number in the faculty and was considerably larger than the number of students (15 persons on average) who take the Russian language course each semester. The age of the participants ranged between 20 and 24 years old and there were considerably more female ( $n=31$  or 91.2%) than male respondents. Nineteen respondents ( $n=19$  or 55.9%) listed Malay as their mother tongue.

*Data Analysis*

To analyse the data, four different statistical analyses were performed which included the descriptive statistics, the independent *t*-test, the factor analysis and the reliability test. The descriptive statistics provided the findings on the main features of Russian language needs. The independent *t*-test examined the differences in the students' preferences for developing speaking skill. For the *t*-test, the participants were divided into two groups according to their ethnic background/mother tongue: (1) native speakers of the Malay language (or the respondents who indicated Malay as the language they speak at home) and (2) native speakers of other than Malay languages (or those who spoke a variety of local languages and dialects or the English language at home). Finally, the exploratory factor analysis and reliability test assessed the dimensionality of the Russian language needs.

**Results of Research***Findings from the Descriptive Statistics*

First of all, the descriptive statistics analysis aided in examining the students' needs for five main language skills and the findings are summarized in Table 1. As can be seen in the Table, speaking was considered as the most desirable of the skills to develop ( $Mean=4.59$ ,  $SD=0.55$ ). Among the 34 respondents, 12 students (or 35.3%) viewed the speaking skill as "important" and 21 respondents (or 61.8%) identified this skill as the "most important". In sum, almost all of the students (or 97.1%) aimed to develop their speaking skills during the language program; the standard deviation (*SD*) of 0.55 indicated a narrow dispersion in the students' opinions about the importance of speaking skills.

The second in importance was the listening skill ( $Mean=4.53$ ,  $SD=0.66$ ). Thirteen respondents (38.2%) marked it as "important" and 20 participants (58.8%) considered this skill as the "most important". The *SD* of 0.66 indicates a relatively narrow dispersion in the students' opinions regarding the need to attain this skill.

**Table 1. Students' needs for main language skills.**

| Skills    | Minimum value | Maximum value | Mean value | Standard deviation ( <i>SD</i> ) |
|-----------|---------------|---------------|------------|----------------------------------|
| Listening | 2             | 5             | 4.53       | 0.66                             |
| Writing   | 2             | 5             | 3.88       | 0.91                             |
| Reading   | 2             | 5             | 4.03       | 0.83                             |
| Culture   | 1             | 5             | 4.12       | 0.91                             |
| Speaking  | 3             | 5             | 4.59       | 0.55                             |
| Grammar   | 2             | 5             | 4.26       | 0.66                             |

Grammar was considered as the third most important skill ( $Mean=4.26$ ,  $SD=0.66$ ). Among the 34 respondents, 20 (58.8%) viewed grammar as "important" and additional 12 respondents (35.3%) considered it the "most important" linguistic skill. The *SD* of 0.66 attests that the students tended to have similar opinions regarding this skill and the dispersion in their opinions was narrow. The next in importance was a non-linguistic skill, namely, "culture" ( $Mean=4.12$ ,  $SD=0.91$ ). Thus, 14 respondents (41.2%) viewed developing cultural aptitude and knowledge as "important" and 13 respondents (38.2%) considered it as the "most important" skill. However, the *SD* of 0.91 indicates a wider dispersion in the students' opinions regarding the importance of this skill.

The reading skills ( $Mean=4.03$ ,  $SD=0.83$ ) were next in prominence. Seventeen of the 34 respondents (50.0%) considered acquiring reading skills “important” and another 10 respondents (29.4%) described these skills as the “most important”. The  $SD$  of 0.83 indicates a somewhat wider dispersion in the students’ opinions. Finally, the writing skills were found to be considered as the least important ( $Mean=3.88$ ,  $SD=0.91$ ). Out of the 34 respondents, 12 (35.3%) marked these skills as “important” and 10 (29.4%) indicated that reading skills are the “most important”. The  $SD$  of 0.91 attests to a higher level of dispersion in the opinions.

In brief, among the language skills, the speaking or face-to-face communication skills were considered as the most important. These interpersonal face-to-face communication skills contained the following components: (1) speak with good pronunciation and intonation, (2) use correct grammar, (3) say some simple sentences, (4) have long conversations with native speakers of the Russian language, (5) use an appropriate level of politeness (e.g., formal and informal speech) and (6) understand non-verbal communication, such as gestures. Interestingly, the respondents’ demographic background may have had some influence on the perception of the skills importance.

#### *Findings from the t-test*

The participants in this research were divided into two groups according to their ethnic background/mother tongue: (1) native speakers of the Malay language and (2) native speakers of other than Malay languages. The independent  $t$ -test examined the differences in the opinions between the first and the second groups of the respondents regarding the needs for acquiring the speaking skills. The findings of the analysis are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Difference in the students’ preferences for the speaking skills.**

| Language skills          | Malay speakers<br>(mean value) | Non-Malay<br>speakers<br>(mean value) | t-statistic | p values |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------|----------|
| Good pronunciation       | 4.42                           | 4.47                                  | -0.232      | .818     |
| Correct grammar          | 4.42                           | 4.40                                  | 0.091       | .928     |
| Simple sentences         | 4.55                           | 4.53                                  | 0.197       | .845     |
| Long conversation        | 3.79                           | 4.13                                  | -1.129      | .267     |
| Politeness               | 4.32                           | 3.87                                  | 1.848*      | .074     |
| Non-verbal communication | 4.53                           | 4.07                                  | 1.902*      | .066     |

*Note:* \* indicates statistical significance at the 10 percent level

As can be seen from the table, the non-Malay language speakers placed a greater value on acquiring good pronunciation and on developing the ability to have long conversations in the target language. In contrast, the respondents for whom Malay was the mother tongue considered the abilities to produce grammatical speech and to utter simple sentences in Russian as well as the need for developing non-verbal communication skills as important outcomes of the language program. It should be noted that not all of these differences in perceptions were statistically significant: only the group differences concerning “politeness” and “non-verbal communication” had a statistical significance.

*Findings from the Exploratory Factor Analysis*

As a next step, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) examined dimensionality of the students' language needs. The findings are shown in Table 3. As stated earlier in this article, 23 items in the questionnaire measured the following skills: writing, reading, listening and speaking. However, in the course of the EFA, double-loadings were found on the items "Summarizing texts" (Reading #3), "Understanding non-verbal communication, such as gestures" (Speaking #6), "Translation skills" (Writing #7), "Reading newspapers and magazines" (Reading #2), and "Writing business letters" (Writing #5). The double-loadings pose considerable difficulties in the interpretation of the results (Nikitina, Zuraidah, & Loh, 2016). In order to improve the precision and clarity of the interpretation, these five items were removed and the EFA was performed on the cleaned data set. This time, the EFA yielded five dimensions in the students' language needs which accounted for almost 70 percent (67.9 percent) of total variance in the factor model (see Table 3). All of the items, except for "Using an appropriate vocabulary" (Writing #3) and "Reading Russian novels" (Reading #4), had communalities above 0.5. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.469 and the Bartlett's test of sphericity was 283.6 and significant at the 1 percent level. These results indicated that the EFA was a suitable method to analyse the data.

The five dimensions in the students' language needs detected by the EFA were labelled as: Factor 1 "Listening Needs", Factor 2 "Writing Needs", Factor 3 "Reading needs", Factor 4 "Speaking Needs", and Factor 5 "Communication needs". First of all, Factor 1 "Listening Needs" consisted of 3 items measuring the listening needs and 1 item relating to the speaking need. This dimension was the most prominent and it explained almost 29.5 percent of total variance in the factor model. Moreover, it had a very high internal consistency as reflected in its Cronbach's  $\alpha=.840$ . Factor 2 "Writing Needs", where all of the loaded items measured this particular language need, explained approximately 13 percent of variance. Also, it had a relatively high internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha=.750$ ). Next, Factor 3 "Reading needs" contained 3 items pertaining to the reading skills and 1 item relating to the speaking skills. This dimension accounted for 10.4 percent of variance and its internal consistency was relatively high (Cronbach's  $\alpha=.749$ ).

**Table 3. Dimensionality in language needs.**

| Questionnaire items*   | Factor 1 | Factor 2 | Factor 3 | Factor 4 | Factor 5 |
|--|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Understanding movies in Russian (Listening #2)                                       | .852     |          |          |          |          |
| Using an appropriate level of politeness (Speaking #5)                               | .807     |          |          |          |          |
| Understanding TV programs in the Russian (Listening #5)                              | .711     |          |          |          |          |
| Understanding Russian songs (Listening #3)   | .546     |          |          |          |          |
| Using the correct letters or script (Writing #1)                                     |          | .795     |          |          |          |
| Developing academic writing skills (e.g., essay) (Writing #6)                        |          | .748     |          |          |          |
| Using the correct grammar (Writing #2)   |          | .712     |          |          |          |
| Using an appropriate vocabulary (Writing #3)   |          | .611     |          |          |          |
| Writing in formal and informal styles (Writing #4)                                   |          | .534     |          |          |          |
| Reading short messages, sms, tweets (Reading #1)                                     |          |          | .886     |          |          |
| Summarizing texts (e.g., finding main ideas and important facts) (Reading #5)        |          |          | .730     |          |          |
| Saying some simple sentences (Speaking #3)   |          |          | .643     |          |          |
| Understanding real-life conversations in the Russian language (Listening #1)         |          |          | .629     |          |          |
| Writing business letters (Writing #5)  |          |          |          | .827     |          |
| Speak with good pronunciation and intonation (Speaking #1)                           |          |          |          | .760     |          |
| Having long conversations with native speakers of the Russian language (Speaking #4) |          |          |          | .676     |          |
| Using the correct grammar (Speaking #2)  |          |          |          |          | .819     |
| Understanding lectures in Russian (Listening #4)                                     |          |          |          |          | .766     |
| Eigenvalue   | 5.321    | 2.329    | 1.878    | 1.684    | 1.050    |
| Variance explained   | 29.5%    | 12.9%    | 10.4%    | 9.3%     | 5.8%     |
| Cronbach's $\alpha$  | .840     | .750     | .749     | .668     | .780     |

\*Note: The type of skill and the item sequence in the questionnaire are indicated in brackets.

Among the least distinctive dimensions, Factor 4 “Speaking needs” contained 2 items relating to the speaking items and 1 item on the writing skills. This dimension explained around 9 percent of variance and had an acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach’s  $\alpha=.668$ ). Finally, Factor 5 “Communication needs” consisted of 1 item focusing on the speaking skills and 1 item that originally measured the listening skills. Only 6 percent of variance could be explained by this dimension. The internal consistency of the items within this dimension was relatively high (Cronbach’s  $\alpha=.780$ ).

## Discussion

The findings of the present research agree with the results reported by Faiz (2008) who included Russian language learners in his analysis of language learning needs of Malaysian undergraduate students. Thus, both Faiz’ and the present research discovered that Malaysian undergraduate students placed a higher premium on developing their speaking skills, which were followed by listening skills. At the same time, the students considered reading and writing abilities as less important. In other words, Malaysian undergraduate students valued the development of interactive skills that enable a successful face-to-face communication in a foreign language. A pedagogical implication to be drawn from this finding is that the language instructor could consider allocating more time to the classroom activities that facilitate the development of these skills. These activities may include listening to audio recordings (e.g., oral exercises, real-life conversations, songs, etc.) or watching video clips as a means to provide the linguistic input in the form valued by the language learners. To encourage the target language production, audio and video sessions should be followed by activities where the students construct their own conversations or short narratives on a given topic in the target language. At the same time, exercises and activities that do not develop face-to-face interactive skills (i.e., reading and writing) could be given in the form of home assignments.

Furthermore, the findings are generally in line with the outcome of the language needs analysis conducted in Malaysia’s neighbouring country, Indonesia (Poedjiastutie & Oliver, 2017). Thus, the respondents in the two studies highly valued the interactive linguistic abilities; a minor discrepancy in the students’ opinions concerned the development of another important face-to-face communication skill, which was the listening skill. The Malaysian respondents identified the listening skill as the second most important linguistic ability while the Indonesian students did not confer this skill the same value. Among the studies conducted in other than Malaysian and Indonesian educational contexts, similar results were reported by Paci (2013) who discovered that the Albanian learners of English as a foreign language placed a higher premium on acquiring language skills that are necessary for a direct interaction, namely, speaking and listening skills. In sum, the Malaysian students preferred to acquire interactive language skills, such as speaking and listening skills in the course of a foreign language program (Faiz, 2008). However, foreign (mainly English) language learners in other regions expressed their preference for non-interactive linguistic skills, such as writing and reading skills.

Stemming from these findings, a tentative proposition was made earlier in this article that language learners’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds could be one of the factors that shape their perceptions regarding language learning needs. The independent *t*-test was able to detect two statistically significant differences and these differences pertained to the hierarchy of the speaking skills. Thus, the students who spoke the Malay language at home tended to assign a higher importance to developing the skills that would enable them to speak politely in the target language and to understand non-verbal communication such as gestures. This is a notable finding as it has offered some empirical support to a tentative proposal that language learners’ cultural backgrounds might have an impact on their subjective perceptions of the language skills importance. This finding has some implications for the teaching practice. Thus, language instructors might want to be aware of a role that the language learners’ cultural background may play in shaping their language learning needs. At the same time, Russian language instructors

may want to convey to all their students the importance of using an appropriate level of politeness, such as the *вы* and *ты* forms of address, when communicating with speakers of Russian. Also, it could be advisable to keep highlighting throughout the language course how formal and informal patterns of speech are realized through the usage of Russian grammar (e.g., conjugation) and lexis (e.g., greetings).

The exploratory factor analysis identified five main dimensions in the students' language learning needs. A closer look at the composition of these dimensions revealed that the skills tended to form distinct clusters that comprised either the *interactive skills* (i.e., the skills required for a successful face-to-face communication, such as Factor 1 "Listening Needs", Factor 4 "Speaking Needs", and Factor 5 "Communication needs") or *non-interactive skills* that did not relate to a verbal communication (i.e., Factor 2 "Writing Needs"). Overall, the findings supported the observation by Richterich (1972) that there exist contradictions between the 'known' and identifiable language needs and 'unknown' subjective needs of language learners. The participants in this research valued the development of interactive language skills which would enable them to have successful face-to-face communications with speakers of Russian. It also might be worth noting that Malaysia is a multicultural and multi-lingual country where the majority of people are plurilingual. In such a setting these findings are not entirely unexpected.

The present research endeavor has brought to light a discord between the prospective students' 'felt' language learning needs and the 'perceived' needs included in the foreign language curriculum. The prevailing assessment system in the foreign language courses endorses the importance, if not primacy, of the written examinations. This places a greater emphasis on developing non-interactive foreign language skills, such as reading and writing, which are crucial for passing written tests. Undoubtedly, these two language skills are important. However, they are not the most basic 'survival' skills, such as speaking and listening that might be prioritized by language learners, especially in the initial stage of a foreign language program.

## Conclusions

This research explored language learning needs among prospective learners of Russian at the University of Malaya. The findings revealed that the students expressed a strong preference and need for developing *interactive* language skills. Specifically, they regarded developing the speaking and listening skills as an important outcome of the language program. In the light of these findings, it could be proposed that, firstly, a continuous assessment be practiced for elective foreign language courses at the university; secondly, the emphasis should be placed on communicative skills and abilities of the students when measuring their academic achievement in elective foreign language courses. This assessment approach would align the foreign language curriculum at the university with the students' language needs and educational expectations. Also, such continuous assessment would enable focusing on developing the skills that are most important at the earlier stages of language learning, especially when the learners may not plan to proceed to the next level of language proficiency.

Language learners' linguistic and communicative needs and requirements differ from one country to another and from one learning situation to another. Therefore, future research on language learning needs might want to explore language learners' perceived hierarchy of components within each of the main language skills (i.e., grammar, speaking, listening, reading and writing) as well as the learners' needs for acquiring non-linguistic aptitudes (i.e., non-verbal communication skills). In future studies, researchers would need to give special considerations to the cultural, institutional and educational settings in which the teaching and learning of a foreign language takes place. Outcomes of such studies will help to identify and perhaps even rectify potential clashes between the students' needs for learning an additional foreign language and the learning outcomes as stipulated and promoted in the institutional foreign language curricula. More importantly, some desirable changes in the foreign language education and more enlightened foreign language teaching practices may eventuate from these research endeavours.

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## Appendix

### Students' language learning needs (Russian language)

*We aim to improve the teaching of foreign languages in UM. For this, we gather information about students' learning needs and preferences. Your sincere answers will give us this valuable information. Participation in this study is **voluntary**. Returning this form with your answers implies that you agree to take part in this study.*

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Developing which Russian language skills could be most important for you? Please rate each skill from 1 to 5 (1= the least important skill, 5= the most important skill).

|                               | Least important |   |   | Most important |   |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|---|---|----------------|---|
| Listening                     | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |
| Writing                       | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |
| Reading                       | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |
| Understanding Russian culture | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |
| Speaking                      | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |
| Grammar skills                | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |
| Good pronunciation            | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |

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Among the **writing skills**, which would be the most and least important for you?

|   | Least important |   |   | Most important |   |
|---|-----------------|---|---|----------------|---|
| 1. Using the correct letters or script              | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |
| 2. Using the correct grammar                        | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |
| 3. Using an appropriate vocabulary                  | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |
| 4. Writing in formal and informal styles            | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |
| 5. Writing business letters                         | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |
| 6. Developing academic writing skills (e.g., essay) | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |
| 7. Translation skills                               | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |

Among the **reading skills**, which could be the most and least important for you?

|   | Least important |   |   | Most important |   |
|---|-----------------|---|---|----------------|---|
| 1. Reading short messages, sms, tweets                              | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |
| 2. Reading newspapers and magazines                                 | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |
| 3. Reading Russian internet sites                                   | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |
| 4. Reading Russian novels   | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |
| 5. Summarizing texts (e.g., finding main ideas and important facts) | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |

Among the **listening skills**, which would be the most and least important for you?

|   | Least important |   |   | Most important |   |
|---|-----------------|---|---|----------------|---|
| 1. Understanding real-life conversations in the Russian language  | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |
| 2. Understanding movies in Russian                                | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |
| 3. Understanding Russian songs                                    | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |
| 4. Understanding lectures in Russian                              | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |
| 5. Understanding TV programs in the Russian language (e.g., news) | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |

Among **speaking and communication skills** which would be the most and least important for you?

|   | Least important |   |   | Most important |   |
|---|-----------------|---|---|----------------|---|
| 1. Speaking with good pronunciation and intonation                          | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |
| 2. Using the correct grammar  | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |
| 3. Saying some simple sentences   | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |
| 4. Having long conversations with native speakers of the Russian language   | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |
| 5. Using appropriate level of politeness (e.g., formal and informal speech) | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |
| 6. Understanding non-verbal communication, such as gestures                 | 1               | 2 | 3 | 4              | 5 |

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Please answer these questions about yourself:

- Age: \_\_\_\_\_ years old
- Gender: \_\_\_male \_\_\_female
- Language(s) you speak at home \_\_\_\_\_

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|-------------------------|--|
| <b>Larisa Nikitina</b>  | PhD, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, WP, Malaysia.<br>E-mail: <a href="mailto:larisa@um.edu.my">larisa@um.edu.my</a><br>Website: <a href="https://umexpert.um.edu.my/larisa">https://umexpert.um.edu.my/larisa</a>  |
| <b>Ma Tin Cho Mar</b>   | PhD, Senior Lecturer, Department of Southeast Asian Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, WP, Malaysia.<br>E-mail: <a href="mailto:tinchomar@um.edu.my">tinchomar@um.edu.my</a><br>Website: <a href="https://umexpert.um.edu.my/tinchomar">https://umexpert.um.edu.my/tinchomar</a>    |
| <b>Fumitaka Furuoka</b> | PhD, Visiting Senior Research Fellow, Asia–Europe Institute, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, WP, Malaysia.<br>E-mail: <a href="mailto:fumitaka@um.edu.my">fumitaka@um.edu.my</a><br>Website: <a href="https://aei.um.edu.my/about-us/academics/fumitaka-furuoka">https://aei.um.edu.my/about-us/academics/fumitaka-furuoka</a> |