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A Comparative Analysis of American and Russian ESL/EFL Classroom Cultures

■ **The purpose of this ethnographic study was to examine the influence of culture on classroom participation patterns. Methodologically, this study involved participant observations and interviews with the Russian-speaking students and their American ESL instructors in three types of postsecondary institutions in California. The results revealed areas of mismatch between the students' learning behavior and the instructors' methodologies. The cultural differences in the language classrooms were analyzed within the critical theory framework, which takes into account the social and cultural antecedents of the studied situation. Teachers and administrators of language programs will be provided with recommendations on how to improve methods of teaching English as a second or foreign language.**

Introduction

Culture and its influence on language learning has generated contentious debates among scholars and English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) professionals. In the 1980s, anthropologists and sociologists studied differences between American and other non-U.S. cultures (Hofstede, 1998; Spindler & Spindler, 1987; Triandis, 1995; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998). The use of the mainstream American culture as a

“mythical norm” has been criticized in recent studies for its negative stereotyping of the “other” as different from the norm (Yep, 2000). The critics cautioned that too much focus on culture instead of an individual student may lead to “oversensitivity” (Frazier, 2002) or “essentialism” (Gjerde, 2004), an assumption that a group has some defining feature characteristic of all group members. Rather than perpetuating cultural stereotypes or abandoning the concept all together, Atkinson (1999) proposed a “middle-ground” approach to treat culture as a dialectical process between individuals and contexts.

Context has been defined as “the whole set of relationships in which a phenomenon is situated” (Watson-Gegeo, 1992, p. 53). Context can be visualized as “concentric rings of increasingly more macro- and often indirect influences, moving outward from the center in which” learners whose development is studied are living and interacting (Watson-Gegeo, 1992, p. 53). In a study of learner socialization in the Soviet Union and the US, Bronfenbrenner (1970) analyzed the context of teacher-student interactions using analogy with nested Russian dolls. The pieces of analysis included learners’ performance in a lesson that was part of a classroom that was part of a school that was part of a community. Cole criticized this “nested-contexts approach” as being unidirectional because it failed to consider the unequal power relations among participants “at different levels of context” (1996, p. 134). As an activity theorist, Cole emphasized that context creation is “an actively achieved, two-sided process” (1996, p. 134).

The most important cultural difference identified in Bronfenbrenner’s (1970) study of socialization patterns was the collective-centered system of upbringing. With current emphasis on group projects and community service-learning in American educational institutions, researchers’ attempts to use the dichotomy between the “collectivist” Russian culture and “individualist” American culture as an explanatory framework seem artificial. The conceptualization of individualism-collectivism as a single dimension with two clusters

as polar opposites, as measured by surveys, is no longer valid (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2002). Not only is the construct itself fragmented, but also socially desirable or extreme answers on questionnaires influence the scores and the interpretation of findings. Besides, the range of cultures is limited to urban regions of some continents.

Research studies that look in a systematic and rigorous way at characteristics of the Russian classroom culture are scarce. In one study, Alexander (2000) compared the educational systems and learning activities in Russian and American elementary schools. Another study of Russian-speaking adolescents in American high schools by Mirny (2003) examined students' adjustment to a different classroom culture. Smith (2000) surveyed Russian-speaking ESL learners in 2-year colleges and adult schools in California using Buckley's (2000) theoretical framework built on international business and intercultural communication theories. Smith described eight conflict situations experienced by American ESL instructors and provided cultural explanations for the Russian-speaking students' behavior. Cultural differences, though, do not necessarily lead to conflicts. What needed to be examined were the social, political, cultural, ethnic, and gender antecedents of the studied situation in the context where students lived and learned.

The purpose of this study was to shed light on the mismatch between the Russian-speaking students' learning behavior and their American ESL instructors' methodologies in three types of postsecondary institutions in California. The researcher was guided by a grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to collect data and employed qualitative data-analysis techniques as described in Miles and Huberman (1994). The researcher used the critical theory framework (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) to explain cultural differences in the language classroom. Teachers and administrators of language programs will be provided with recommendations on how to improve methods of teaching English as a second or foreign language.

Study Data and Methods

Data Collection

The data were collected using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) through generating theories from the data and enriching the data by grounding them in a theoretical perspective. Three sources of data were employed for data collection and analysis: student and teacher demographic surveys, participant observations, and ethnographic interviews.

Demographic Surveys. The purpose of the student and teacher demographic surveys was to gather information about the participants' background characteristics. In addition to biographical information, the surveys gathered information on native and foreign language proficiency. The student survey was translated into Russian and back-translated for accuracy to eliminate the possibility of tainting the results because of the language barrier. Before filling out the surveys, all participants were informed that their identities would be protected.

Participant Observations. The purpose of participant observations was to collect descriptions of typical ESL classes in various settings. Observations lasted from 1 hour to 2 hours, mornings or afternoons, 5 days a week. From 1 to 3 classes were observed, depending on the comfort level of an individual instructor. Field notes were recorded during each class to document the goals of the lesson, the methods employed to achieve the goals, the types of materials, teaching activities, and teacher-student interactions.

Ethnographic Interviews. The purpose of informal and formal ethnographic interviews (Spradley, 1979) with Russian-speaking students and their American ESL instructors was to verify hypotheses that emerged from classroom observations. Interview questions were adapted from a similar interview protocol developed by Smith (2000). Questions were administered to graduate students on a pilot basis to help determine whether or not they were understandable and clearly addressed the research questions. All inter-

views were conducted in person at a set time inside or outside classrooms, in a teacher's room or instructor's offices, in a university cafeteria, student residence, or college library. All interviews lasted for about 30 minutes, except two focus-group interviews with 3 to 4 students that lasted 45 minutes each.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed according to a three-part model of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Application of the analysis model involved an inductive, iterative process of data reduction involving coding narrative data, identifying data categories and themes, displaying data in the form of visual networks to illustrate relationships among variables, and drawing conclusions by revising the original data, writing and inviting peer review of preliminary findings, and finalizing the conclusions.

Participants

Following Berry et al. (2002), this ethnographic study employed the theory-guided selection of cultural populations. It was achieved through gathering available information and focusing on an interesting contrast between the Russian and American educational systems and cultures as identified in ethnographic literature. The researcher used a snowballing technique to recruit research participants at three types of postsecondary institutions in California during the 2004-2005 academic year. Slavic Baptist Church leaders and ESL program directors were approached to gain entry to research sites. With the permission of gatekeepers, the researcher contacted instructors via e-mail or phone, the instructors introduced their students during initial visits to arrange time for classroom observations and interviews, and the students introduced their friends or relatives. Pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of the Participants (Students)

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Program</i>	<i>Major</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Years in the US</i>	<i>Country</i>
1	Master's	Social Work	M	24	2 years	Ukraine
2	Master's	Journalism	F	24	4 months	Russia
3	Master's	Business	M	30	3 years	Belarus
4	IELP	ESL	M	27	1 year	Ukraine
5	IELP	ESL	F	18	5 years	Moldova
6	IELP	ESL	F	26	3 months	Ukraine
7	IELP	ESL	M	19	1 year	Russia
8	IELP	ESL	M	21	1 year	Russia
9	Bachelor's	Psychology	F	21	6 years	Georgia
10	Bachelor's	Psychology	F	20	5 years	Ukraine
11	Bachelor's	Liberal Studies	F	22	5 years	Ukraine
12	Bachelor's	Liberal Studies	F	19	8 years	Estonia
13	Adult Education	ESL	F	31	2 years 5 months	Russia
14	Associate	Accounting	M	21	3 years	Ukraine
15	Associate	Computer Tech	M	44	4 years	Ukraine
16	Associate	ESL	M	45	5 years 6 months	Russia

Note: ESL indicates that students were enrolled in ESL classes only.

Table 2
Demographic Characteristics of the Participants (Instructors)

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Institution</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Degree</i>	<i>Major</i>	<i>Teaching experience</i>	<i>Fluency in a second language</i>
1	University	F	MA	Linguistics	Novice	High
2	University	F	MA	Linguistics/TESL	Novice	None
3	University	M	MA	Elementary Education	Novice	Low
4	University	F	Ph.D.	Linguistics	Veteran	Average
5	University	M	MA	Linguistics	Novice	High
6	Adult School	M	MA	Linguistics	Veteran	Average
7	Adult School	F	BA	Linguistics	Veteran	Average
8	College	F	MA	Linguistics	Veteran	Average
9	College	F	MA	Linguistics/TESL	Veteran	High
10	College	M	Ph.D.	Educational Administration	Veteran	High

Study Findings

Of the 23 Russian-speaking students who agreed to participate in this study, 16 case studies were selected for further analysis. Students' ages ranged from 18 to 45 years. Two thirds of them had been in the US less than 5 years. Whereas most of the participants had at least 10 years of education in their native language before arriving in the US, 5 students entered junior high or high schools in the US. The largest number of the participants came from Ukraine (7), then Russia (5), and 1 each from Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, and Moldova. Demographic characteristics of the participants are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

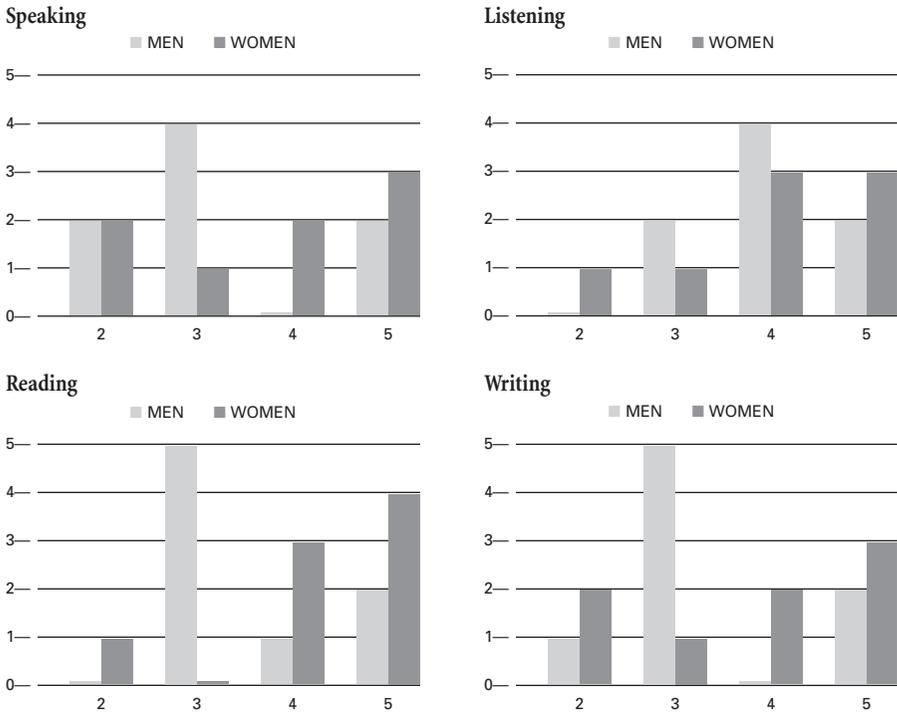
Of the 10 American ESL instructors who participated in this study, 5 were from local universities, 3 from a 2-year college, and 2 from an adult school; 6 were women and 4 were men. Most of the instructors in this sample had a master's degree in Linguistics with an option in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). At the time of the study, 2 instructors were completing their doctoral dissertations; 1 of the instructors had a background in Elementary Education and another in Educational Administration; and 4 instructors had less than 5 years of teaching experi-

ence. The instructors' fluency in a second language ranged from none or low (2 instructors) to average (4 instructors) to high (4 instructors). They were proficient in seven different languages spoken in local communities—French, German, Japanese, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish—and 2 instructors were nonnative English speakers.

Russian-speaking students' goals for studying English varied. Students who had no prior knowledge of English enrolled in the beginning-level classes to learn not only the language but also about American life, society, and institutions to find professional employment. Students with sufficient academic English skills enrolled in graduate-level programs to enhance their professional careers. Most of the students were intermediates, whose goal was to focus on academic English in order to succeed in their major content courses. Their self-rated proficiency in English is illustrated in Figure 1. Whereas women ranked higher in all language skills, men indicated average language proficiency in speaking, reading, and writing, and good in listening.

Classroom observations revealed that ESL programs were organized differently in the three postsecondary institutions where the

Figure 1
Self-Rated English Language Proficiency



	Speaking				Listening				Reading				Writing			
Scale	2	3	4	5	2	3	4	5	2	3	4	5	2	3	4	5
Men	2	4	0	2	0	2	4	2	0	5	1	2	1	5	0	2
Women	2	1	2	3	1	1	3	3	1	0	3	4	2	1	2	3

Note. Self-rated proficiency in English was measured on a 5-point scale: 1 = knowledge of some vocabulary and common phrases; 2 = basic interpersonal communication with difficulty; 3 = everyday communication with ease; 4 = ability to express opinions and feelings; and 5 = successful use for academic or career purposes.

study was conducted. All institutions offer courses at three levels: beginning, intermediate, and advanced. However, they differ in class size and teaching philosophy. In the private university, ESL classes are small, with up to 15 students each. The university Intensive English Language Program (IELP) is content based. It requires 16 hours of classes per week: 2-hour sessions of core language courses in the morning and thematic miniunits in the afternoons. Classes in the 2-year college are capped at 25

students. The 2-year college offers separate classes for reading and vocabulary, writing and grammar, and pronunciation, with 3 hours of lecture plus 1 computer lab hour per week. The adult school maintains an open enrollment, with up to 40 students on any given day. Adult school sessions last 3 hours in the morning and in the afternoon. Each session integrates various language skills.

Despite the differences in program organization, all ESL instructors employed a com-

mon set of activities in their classrooms: individual or pair work, work in small groups, and whole-class instruction. The length of time planned for each activity varied from instructor to instructor. The most common arrangement was the whole-class format in which the teacher provided instructions, explanations, and asked or answered questions. With 75 minutes at most and 15 minutes at least, teachers averaged from half to two thirds of their class time on the whole-class discussion. Depending on the task, small group activities lasted between 15 and 35 minutes, comprising a quarter or a half of the class time, and in one instance as long as three quarters of the time. A similar pattern was observed for pair work. Overall, each lesson included a combination of two or three of the activities. The summary of their distribution is shown in Table 3.

To gain insight into the students' perception of the effectiveness of the learning activities and their explanation of learning behavior in response to a particular teaching approach, the researcher asked students to reflect on the most difficult thing for them to get used to in an American classroom. The students' and instructors' responses are quoted verbatim in the Appendix. The Russian-speaking students and their American ESL

instructors differed in their interpretations of learning behavior in the following areas:

Asking Questions

In an American classroom, asking questions is considered part of the learning process. Whereas American instructors expected students to speak up, ask questions, and demonstrate knowledge, Russian-speaking students had difficulties asking questions because they believed questions showed one's silliness or distracted the teacher from explaining the material. An obvious difficulty some students had was the lack of appropriate stock phrases to raise a question. On the other hand, some instructors admitted that the Russian-speaking students asked challenging questions. If the teacher's content knowledge is weak, such questions may be perceived as personal. If, however, students come out as too direct or assertive, they need to be taught how modal, subjunctive, and negative forms are used in the American classroom discourse to formulate a question in a face-saving way.

Volunteering Comments

In an American classroom, comments are encouraged and considered active reflection. Many Russian-speaking students considered

Table 3
The Distribution of Class Time for the Three Types of Lesson Activities

#	Level	Lesson	Pair work		Group work		Whole class	
			Min.	%	Min.	%	Min.	%
1	Intermediate	Grammar	20	22%	20	22%	50	56%
2	Advanced	Thematic miniunit	0	0%	35	39%	55	61%
3	Intermediate	Thematic miniunit	0	0%	25	25%	75	75%
4	Advanced	Writing	10	11%	20	22%	60	67%
5	Advanced	Reading	0	0%	20	33%	40	67%
6	Advanced	Reading	30	40%	0	0%	45	60%
7	Advanced	Grammar	10	11%	15	17%	65	72%
8	Beginning	Speaking	10	16%	20	34%	30	50%
9	Beginning	Speaking	35	47%	0	0%	40	53%
10	Advanced	Writing	0	0%	35	70%	15	30%
11	Beginning	Pronunciation	25	50%	0	0%	25	50%

comments a “show off” or a poor waste of time, particularly if comments were inappropriate. The students had a hard time adapting to this requirement to earn a good grade. Eventually, they had to break through silence to “raise their stakes.” From the students’ perspective, their own experiences or knowledge might be limited or not good enough to bring up as an example because they came to class to learn higher-order reasoning and thinking skills they wouldn’t be able to acquire without the teacher’s guidance. When the students relate the knowledge they acquire to their personal experiences, it becomes meaningful and relevant. Experienced teachers allocate time equitably so that no one dominates the discussion and everybody keeps comments short and to the point.

Working in Small Groups

There are several perspectives on the usefulness of small group work in an American language classroom. A psycholinguistic rationale for classroom group work is derived from the theory that negotiating meaning provides necessary and sufficient conditions for second language acquisition (Long & Porter, 1985). However, the negotiation for meaning can be face threatening, limited in nature, and ambiguous, thus leading to inaccurate conclusions about its value to language learners (Foster & Ohta, 2005). Another theory of social learning based on the works of Vygotsky emphasized that interaction contributes to language development (Donato, 1994; Lantolf & Appel, 1994). A third approach proposed by Skehan (2003) maintains that a small group activity should be task-based and cognitively demanding.

The three theories, however, are inadequate to explain why the Russian-speaking students resist working in groups in class. Interviews with the students and their instructors revealed that working in a group is challenging for students with beginning levels of proficiency in English. Students fall back on their native language to shortcut searching for meanings in a dictionary or to

help each other catch up quickly if there are several Russian speakers in one group. By doing this they socially excluded teachers and students from other language groups. This behavior, however, is characteristic of all ESL learners, not just Russian speakers. Russian-speaking students with adequate levels of proficiency in English liked the activity if all students did their homework and were prepared to talk. They considered that time was wasted when the discussion went far off topic. Only 1 graduate student admitted that working in groups is a uniquely American classroom activity that helps learners to exchange opinions, show their own worth, and think ideas through in a nonthreatening way.

When instructors plan group activities, it is important to remember that the group composition determines the quality of the interaction. Groups in American classrooms are formed on an ad-hoc basis (Hofstede, 1998). These “loosely knit groups” are different from “collective groups” (Donato, 1994). The latter consist of students who work together on a variety of projects and know each other well, thus providing peer scaffolding beyond the mere negotiation of input level. A study participant, an American instructor who used to live and teach in Russia, confirmed what students were saying in the interviews—that there is little interaction among students in a Russian classroom. One reason is classroom furniture. Desks are designed for two and stand in rows (Alexander, 2000; Gerhart, 2000). Only a few experimental schools can afford to order individually designed desks. Thus, arranging desks into a circle or workstations as often practiced in American classrooms never occurred. Another reason is that students were involved in completing tasks rather than getting to know each other. Socialization among students occurred after class. A piece of advice from the experienced ESL instructors is to use small group work sparingly. Besides, students need to be taught how to cooperate with others on a short-term task.

Helping Each Other Inside and Outside Class

In an American classroom, copying a homework assignment or helping a fellow student on a test is considered cheating and results in earning an “F” on the test or homework. What American instructors consider cheating is considered in the Russian culture as an altruistic desire to help a friend. Outside class, more advanced students helped less proficient students with preparation of homework assignments. This was part of their upbringing aimed at nurturing responsibility for each other’s learning. Russian-speaking students’ attitude toward cheating is less negative because refusal to allow another student to copy from their papers can be perceived as a selfish, unfriendly action, and in extreme cases may lead to ostracism by the peers. Armed with this knowledge, American instructors can socialize their Russian-speaking students into the American academic culture without passing value judgements on them.

Making and Correcting Mistakes

“You don’t improve without making mistakes” is a mantra repeated by many American instructors. The Russian-speaking students felt embarrassed when they made mistakes. Some students admitted they had inhibitions about asking for a teacher’s help or making a mistake because of the fear of losing face in front of other adults. The two most common types of mistakes were pronunciation and grammatical errors. Although students were afraid to make a mistake, they expected their instructors to correct all mistakes. The American instructors, however, were less likely to do so for various reasons. One reason is that language learning is stressful; thus, it is important to lower anxiety, not “correct a student into silence.” Another reason is that some mistakes are developmental, meaning that students have to go through several stages to acquire the correct form; therefore, correcting early in the process might be more harmful than helpful.

Unlike their American counterparts, Russian teachers correct mistakes, often comparing students’ work and chiding those who do less than a perfect job in front of their classmates. Analyzing mistakes was also part of the review after a test or a homework exercise. American ESL instructors use editorial remarks and let students correct mistakes by themselves or in cooperation with their peers, an activity known as peer editing. This is a technique used by professional writers. It is frequently used in ESL classrooms. Its benefit to learners with different levels of proficiency is less well understood. If a student struggles, tutors are available in a learning resource center. They, too, will guide the student through the text and discuss the problem areas without making corrections. The students have to discover the rules by themselves. This approach is liberating because American instructors emphasize ideas over errors, yet inability to use the appropriate grammatical form holds ESL learners back.

Relating to Teachers

The American ESL instructors interviewed for this study noted that there was something different about the Russian-speaking students in how they relate to teachers. The students expected the instructor to be a parent figure, the one who can spank, scold, or give a pat on the student’s shoulder. The students believe that the teacher who not only knows the subject matter but also sets boundaries is a strong teacher. The students noted that the teacher in a Russian classroom had the responsibility to make sure students learn the material, whereas in an American classroom, there is “no skin off the teacher’s back” if students don’t do it. Students have more rights in an American classroom, and with the rights come duties, the main one being the responsibility for one’s own learning. American instructors are required to keep open communication with the students either through office visits, phone, or e-mail. Although instructors in Russia do not have individual offices and office hours for stu-

dents, this does not mean they do not know their students well, but the relationship is much more distant and formal than in an American classroom. In a Russian university, students progress through classes in cohorts and elect group leaders who deal with the administration on their behalf. In contrast, students in an American university register for classes of their choice each semester and may never meet the same classmates again. For this reason, a faculty adviser is appointed to guide students through their academic careers. Because the students maintain distance among themselves, their instructor sometimes becomes their “surrogate” friend to whom they confess their problems.

Whether American or Russian, a good instructor is expected to engage in a dialogue with the student, to know the student’s needs, and to modify the instruction to meet these needs. The content of instruction can be fun and entertaining but it loses its attractiveness to students if it is weak. The instructor who commands the subject matter and delivers it well earns the students’ respect. The students need structure as well as freedom in the classroom to master the material.

The list above covers the gist of the answers given by the students and their instructors during the interviews. The following discussion will attempt to explain the findings within their cultural context.

Discussion

When comparing American and Russian classroom cultures, scholars typically note that American students are more individualistic because they grew up in a competitive culture and the Russian students are more socially oriented because they grew up in a collectivist culture. What is commonly overlooked is that both are competitive and cooperative, but for different reasons. The American students maintain social distance with each other outside class, are expected to complete home assignments on their own without anybody’s help, and then come to

class to discuss the answers with their peers and demonstrate their knowledge to the teacher. Students are responsible for their own learning. The scenario is completely opposite in a Russian classroom. The Russian students maintain close relations with their classmates outside class, do their homework together to help each other to complete the assignment to pass the course, and then come to class and independently work on exercises after the teacher’s explanation of the new material. In the case of the American classroom, the social aspect of learning moves into the sphere of didactics when one student teaches the other while the teacher facilitates the process. In the case of the Russian classroom, “the learning is more individual than collective, with little time allocated for student interaction” (S. Gettys, personal communication, December 11, 2004). The teacher provides the scaffolding and makes sure everybody learns the material.

In the American classroom the teacher is viewed as “a facilitator who helps the students to reach their own potential and learn.” Instructors described their approaches in terms of “winning students over on a personal level” and “creating an environment of vulnerability” in which learners are free to make mistakes. They encouraged interaction between students focusing on mutual cooperation in completing tasks. They talked about the differences between Russian and American teaching approaches in terms of “teacher-centered” versus “learner-centered,” “information provider” versus “facilitator,” “boss” versus “coach.” Their answers echoed Dewey, who wrote, “When education is based upon experience and educative experience is seen to be a social process, the situation changes radically. The teacher loses the position of external boss or dictator but takes on that of leader of group activities” (1938/1963, p. 59).

Too much control on the part of the teacher can be oppressive, but relinquishing control of the learning process to students can be disorienting. In fact, a recent study revealed that 40% of students in American

universities fail to navigate the educational system and need guidance (Hildreth, 2006). Students, whether American or Russian, look for an authority figure, not an authoritarian, a teacher who cares and who does not only proclaim the value of caring and sharing. The teacher in a Russian classroom may have more power to discipline students, whereas the power of the teacher in an American classroom is downplayed. In both cases, it must enhance, not interfere with, the students' learning.

The differences in the social organization of American and Russian classrooms reflect deep historical, educational, and cultural traditions. Although Dewey and Vygotsky, two influential theorists of 20th-century educational thought, held similar ideas on society, they differed in their interpretations of the role of inquiry in educational practice (Glassman, 2001; Karpov, 2003; O'Brien, 2002; Prawat, 2002). The comparison of their

views is presented in Table 4. Both theorists agreed that individuals were born social. Dewey emphasized "expression and cultivation of individuality," free from external imposition or control (1938/1963, p. 19). In Vygotsky's theory, the social agent provided the learner with the tools she or he needed (1934/1996, 1978).

Many Russian students pointed out in their interviews that the nature of the relationship between the American instructors and students is egalitarian, that the instructors meet students where they are, and they capitalize on their knowledge. This reflects Dewey's (1959) idea that informality and external freedom enable teachers to become acquainted with their students as they really are because formalization is hostile to mental activity. He recognized the need to respect the learner's initiative and self-direction as the stimulus for learning. At the same time, Dewey believed that individual

Table 4
Comparison of Dewey's and Vygotsky's Ideas on Society, Inquiry, and Educational Practice

<i>John Dewey (1902, 1938/1963, 1959)</i>	<i>L. S. Vygotsky (1934/1996, 1978)</i>
Views of society	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "cultivation of the individual" • equip individuals to hold their own against society 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • individual is shaped by the society
Social organization of the classroom	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • project approach, cooperative work in groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • problem-solving under teacher's guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers
The nature of inquiry	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • discovery learning (logic plus imagination) • learning through personal experience (half guidance) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the social agent provides the student with tools she or he will need (concept formation)
Student's role	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • action as adaptation: the student has a desire to complete a task, but lacks strategic direction; this sets the stage for the "teachable moment" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • self-regulation: action had to be taught; action is part of a recognized set of actions (mnemonic techniques)
Teacher's role	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a mentor, friend, trusted counselor, guide, tutor, facilitator, coach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • didactic, scaffolding

character is formed in cooperation with others, hence his emphasis on cooperative activities of a group.

Whereas Dewey (1902) was a proponent of discovery learning, viewing learners as independent agents of acquisition, Vygotsky (1934/1996, 1978) emphasized the necessity of leading the learner to a higher level of conceptualization. He believed that the acquisition of scientific concepts (theoretical understanding) does not happen spontaneously; it needs to be systematically formed (Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev, & Miller, 2003). Vygotsky defined the contradiction between a learner's current capabilities as manifested in the actually developed psychological functions and the possibilities of the development "in cooperation, under the guidance, with assistance" as a *zone of proximal development* (Chaiklin, 2003). In Vygotsky's theory, there are two agents—the human and the symbolic—that can assist in the formation of new functions or the enrichment of existing functions. The role of the human mediator referred to the notion that each psychological function appeared twice in development: first in the form of actual interaction between the teacher and the student, and the second time internalized as the student's own functions. The symbolic mediators were signs, codes, writing, graphic organizers, or other devices that serve to organize cognitive functions.

American scholars of the sociocultural approach to language learning elaborated Vygotsky's idea that second language acquisition is mediated in the zone of proximal development through peer interaction, private speech, expert-novice scaffolding, artifacts, and technology. Vygotsky's theory has been transformed and adapted to the American context. Reviewing the original eight texts in which Vygotsky discussed the concept, Chaiklin (2003) compiled a list of interventions that could be used in problem solving. A problem can be given to learners, and they can be shown how to solve it and encouraged to do it by imitating the demonstration. Another way to help them learn could be by starting to solve the problem and

then asking the learners to finish. A third way to encourage the learner's development could be by proposing to solve the problem in cooperation with another, more capable, peer. Finally, the principle of solving the problem could be explained by asking leading questions or analyzing the problem for learners.

It is evident from Chaiklin's (2003) observation that problem solving by cooperating with a more developed peer was one of the several techniques proposed by Vygotsky to be used by a person who was assessing a learner's zone of proximal development. Another important idea that had direct bearing on second language acquisition was the theory of interdependence of the foreign and native languages, known as the language skills transfer theory. The lesser-known part of it deals with conscious comparison of the native and foreign languages. The comparison of the two grammars is unlikely to succeed in an American language classroom because students are from diverse ethnic backgrounds and speak many different languages.

The Russian-speaking students brought with them to the American classrooms a history of classroom practices from a different educational environment to which they were exposed in their earlier educational careers. A teaching context where students are seen as partners or apprentices who have more control over their learning environment is new to them. Discovery learning and problem solving are activities that engage students and contribute to their learning, but they leave some of them paralyzed by the choices they are required to make. One student admitted that she learned many ways to solve the problem, but that she was not sure which one was right. It became apparent in the process of the analysis of the interviews that the higher the students advanced in their educational careers, the more tolerant they were of the relative nature of knowledge. They became aware that knowledge is not certain or fixed, that teachers don't know all the answers, and that there are no right or wrong answers.

Conclusion

The study of culture in ESL classrooms is extremely important. The differences between the students' and instructors' expectations are rooted in the theories of teaching and learning in the country of origin and the society of settlement. On the microlevel, Russian-speaking students' experiences in American classrooms are reflective of their English language proficiency and educational level. On the macrolevel of society, experiences of the Russian-speaking students are reflective of their "linguistic and cultural-historical repertoires" of practice that they bring to American classrooms (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003, p. 22). Russian-speaking students who were exposed to a traditional or even behaviorist curriculum can be challenged to learn in new ways. The process of learning is both individual and sociocultural; therefore, it is important to understand not only individual but also social and cultural dimensions of the learning situation.

American ESL instructors interviewed for this study characterized their Russian-speaking students as "some of the top-performing students, very motivated, very literate, very hard working, very diligent." They emphasized that their Russian-speaking students were better equipped for the study of grammar than students from other cultural backgrounds. The instructors can capitalize on the Russian-speaking students' strengths in literary text analysis and grammar. At the same time, the development of discourse and emotional and sociocultural competence should not be neglected (Leaver & Shekhtman, 2002).

Overall, Russian-speaking students interviewed for this study admitted that their instructors were professional, kind, accessible, and treated students with respect. Two factors figured prominently in teachers' attitudes toward their Russian-speaking students. One was years of teaching experience, while the other was proficiency in foreign languages. Less experienced teachers reported having difficulties with the Russian-speaking students in their classrooms,

whereas seasoned veteran teachers learned "to pick battles." Proficiency in a second language made ESL teachers more sensitive to psychological and linguistic struggles their students were going through while learning English. What created tensions between instructors and students was the fact that students who attended the Slavic Baptist Church did not use English outside the classroom as often as they should. The three-generation law will soon override this tendency, and as in other immigrant groups in the US, children of Russian-speaking immigrants will become either bilinguals dominant in English or monolingual English speakers.

Despite rigorous selection of the research techniques, the design of the study has several limitations. The sample is small; therefore, the findings should be viewed with caution. Participants in this study were Russian-speaking students from three postsecondary institutions in California; thus, the findings cannot be generalized to other Russian-speaking learners or other language groups in other geographical areas. A larger comparative follow-up study could be conducted to see if the aspects of learning behavior reported by the participants hold true for students from other cultural backgrounds. Another limitation of the study is the reliance on self-assessment of students' first and second language proficiency. If direct measures of performance assessment of students' first and second language proficiency had been obtained, the validity of the findings would be strengthened. A new finding that the author did not explore in this study included the relationship between music, artistic abilities, and learning a foreign language.

Perhaps the most important limitation is the danger of "essentialism," an assumption that a group has some features characteristic of all group members. The term "Russian-speaking" used in this study refers to students from Russia as well as to students from other former Soviet republics who were socialized to a set of common classroom practices and who spoke Russian as their first or second language in school and home settings.

Although these students speak Russian, this does not make them Russian in culture and identity. In fact, students from Estonia, Georgia, Moldova, and some students from Ukraine interviewed for this study attend the Slavic Baptist Church and use Russian for communication because it is the language of the chief pastor. Yet there is a possibility that in a focus group interview, the presence of Russian speakers could influence their responses. As 1 participant observed, in the presence of other Russian speakers they are less likely to admit that they are more American than they wanted to believe. Despite individual differences, all students in this study, whether sojourner international or Baptist refugees, reached a point of no return. Learning English is more important to their futures than is Russian, the pattern typical of other immigrant groups. They left the country where they “marched in columns, sat in rows” in the past. Democracy is their future.

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Appendix

Verbatim Quotes of the American ESL Instructors' Expectations and the Russian-Speaking Students' Explanations of Their Learning Behavior

<i>Learning behavior</i>	<i>American ESL instructors</i>	<i>Russian-speaking students</i>
Asking questions	<p>Asking questions is part of the learning process.</p> <p>They don't know how to ask the question because they don't know what they don't know.</p> <p>It's a cultural thing that you don't question the teacher.</p> <p>One thing, in general, I think Russian students would need to be careful that when they question, they don't come across as too assertive or too challenging.</p>	<p>Only silly students ask questions, not those who want to know; I understand that this is not right, but I cannot help it.</p> <p>Russian students are more critical, they ask more challenging questions, and thoughtful in content. American students are less inhibited, they can ask all kinds of nonsense, anything, anytime. Russian students wouldn't dare to ask such things simply out of consideration for their reputation.</p>
Volunteering comments	<p>All my students have to understand that they come in with a certain amount of knowledge, and I want that knowledge to be shared with the others.</p> <p>When students comment on the topic, they are actively engaged in reflection.</p>	<p>When students volunteer comments, it's often to show off.</p> <p>Sometimes, comments are inappropriate but professors would never say that it would be better to think before making such a comment.</p>
Working in small groups	<p>When students are not interacting with each other, they are not learning.</p> <p>Allows students to negotiate some of the meaning themselves.</p> <p>Working in a group can help with judging where they are at and how much they are or are not understanding the homework assignment.</p> <p>I would imagine that sometimes they feel that the group work is a waste of time.</p> <p>They could probably work faster by themselves. And I am sure that when they are in groups with students that don't speak English very well, it's probably very frustrating for them.</p> <p>I think Russian students would prefer to have a lot more information, which was learned intensely, and much less energy put on group interaction.</p> <p>Students have to be helped to understand that when they are talking with other nonnatives they are not learning their bad habits but actually hypothesizing and developing their own ability.</p>	<p>It's a waste of time when the teacher gives us an assignment but we cannot put two words together.</p> <p>The teacher should not emphasize free exchange of opinions so much but rather approach a task individually to let everyone participate.</p> <p>I think group work is least useful at the beginning level. If you are at a level of proficiency when you can communicate freely and understand other students, it's challenging, but at the beginning level it's unnecessary.</p> <p>I like group work. It depends. If everyone is prepared, it's interesting.</p> <p>Work in groups is one of the most useful, which I consider to be a distinctly American approach to learning. First, you get to know other's ideas. Second, close contact with other students creates more opportunities to show one's worth, more time to think your answer or idea over. And it helps to improve communication.</p>

Helping each other inside and outside class	<p>Cheating is a big problem because for many of them in the culture they come from, what we consider cheating here is not cheating to them.</p> <p>Helping someone on a test, passing answers back and forth, answering questions that someone has because they don't understand the question in the middle of the test is all considered cheating here and grounds for having the test taken away and giving an "F". One of the reasons for this is they are very anxious to do well, they want to get a high score, nothing less than an "A" is good enough. So, if I have to do something to get that "A," I'm gonna do it.</p>	<p>Russian students are more socially oriented. For them, classmates and collective are important. It is their first priority to get to know their neighbors to secure support. They are more oriented toward informal socializing after formal classes.</p> <p>It is in our heads that if I have an assignment, I have to complete at any cost; that's why cheating is common among the Russian students because it was encouraged back home.</p>
Making mistakes	<p>I believe that the most important thing in a classroom is that you are not afraid to make a mistake.</p> <p>It's OK to make a mistake, a mistake is part of the process.</p> <p>They are afraid of making mistakes. But the whole thing about improving is making mistakes. You don't improve without making mistakes.</p>	<p>If I don't understand something, it's bad. It will affect your image. I hesitate to come and ask for the teacher's help out of fear that I didn't understand what she was saying in class.</p> <p>It was probably in our mentality this fear of making a mistake, approaching a teacher, or asking a silly question.</p>
Correcting mistakes	<p>I try not to correct everything. First, I'm gonna waste time if they don't do anything about correction. And second, I want to encourage them it's OK to express their opinion and not worry about mistakes. We try not to correct all of the mistakes because there would be so many that it would be very discouraging.</p> <p>I won't correct too much because I don't want to intimidate them.</p> <p>I think you have to be very careful because you can correct the student into silence.</p>	<p>The teacher must correct all mistakes. When we write essays, the teacher wants to know my opinion. It's not important to me whether or not the teacher liked my opinion, I want to learn grammar. One big deficiency is that our teachers never correct our pronunciation. When I notice my mistakes, I think. When I learn what was wrong, I understand. But if the mistake was not corrected, I'm not sure whether I was right or wrong.</p>
Relating to teachers	<p>They want me to be in the position of more authority than I am willing to take. I find sometimes there is an expectation that I am going to be more of a parent figure, and I am not gonna do it.</p> <p>A teacher is more of a coach as opposed to a boss.</p> <p>The teacher is usually a facilitator who helps the students to reach their own potential and learn.</p>	<p>A Russian student needs a teacher who can set boundaries.</p> <p>In some classes, teachers don't teach. Perhaps, it's just the classes that I had. I had an impression that the teacher relinquishes authority to the students so that they learn everything by themselves. Yes, the teacher gives us an opportunity to show one's worth, and we can teach each other, but you come to learn, instead just sit and invent something.</p>