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A longitudinal study of language learners' images about Russia

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Abstract

Several studies in the field of applied linguistics have explored images held by language learners about a target language country. However, for the most part, these studies focused on learners of modern European languages, such as German, Spanish and French and they were conducted in Western educational contexts. Besides, none of the previous investigations attempted to conduct a systematic classification of the language learners' images. The present longitudinal study addressed these gaps in the research literature. It explored images about Russia held by Malaysian learners of the Russian language in a large university in East Malaysia. This article reports the findings of three questionnaire surveys conducted in 2004, 2007 and 2010. It was found that the images about Russia held by the participants were diverse and clustered around eight country-related aspects. Content of some categories of images was stable and changed little over time. Other categories were more fluid and more prone to change. The paper concludes with a discussion of pedagogical implications that can be derived from the findings.

Keywords: country images, stereotypes, Russian language learning, longitudinal research

Introduction

Educational researchers and applied linguists have noted a fact that students who begin learning a foreign language already possess an array of stable images, stereotypes and cultural beliefs about a target language (TL) country (Allen, 2004; Drewelow, 2013; Houghton, 2010; Nikitina, Zuraidah & Loh, 2014; Schultz & Haerle, 1995). As Steele and Suozzo (1994, cited in Allen, 2004, p. 235) maintained, "Unless students are encountering an absolutely exotic culture, they already reach the classroom with an array of stereotypes". While stereotypes are recognized as an important cognitive device (Lippmann, 1925/1966; McGarty, Yzerbyt & Spears, 2002), a problem with this particular type of mental images is that they are rigid, inflexible and are often inaccurate notions about the surrounding world (Lippmann, 1925/1966; Schultz & Haerle, 1995).

The importance of exploring language learners' stereotypes about a target language country is widely acknowledged (Byram & Kramsch, 2008; Schultz & Haerle, 1995; Storme & Derakhshani, 2002). Moreover, scholars and educators realize that language learners' images and beliefs about a target language country and culture do influence the outcome of the language learning process (Castellotti & Moore, 2002; Gardner & Lambert, 1972). In a recent empirical study, Nikitina (2015) demonstrated that there exists a link between country stereotypes held by language learners and their language learning motivation.

Several studies have explored country images held by language learners in the context of foreign language education. For the most part, these studies were conducted among the students learning German, Spanish and French (Drewelow, 2013; Schultz & Haerle, 1995; Vande Berg, 1990). Some of the studies have made attempts to classify these country images according to their favourability and theme (Schulz & Haerle, 1995; Taylor, 1977). However, no systematic longitudinal analysis of representational structures of country stereotypes held by language learners has been carried out thus far. The current study addresses these gaps; its prime aim is to examine temporal trends and patterns in language learners' perceptions of Russia. To achieve this aim, the study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) What is the internal structure of the language learners' country images about Russia?
- 2) What are the temporal trends in the representational structure of stereotypes about Russia?

In this study, the terms "images", "representations" and "stereotypes" are used interchangeably because of a close link between these three psychological constructs. Thus, "mental images" are "representations of objects in our mind" (Gardini, Cornoldi & De Beni, 2006, 41). Stereotypes can be true or false, positive or negative, individually-held or commonly shared representations of reality. However, as reflected in the etymology of this word (being a combination of the Greek words "*stereo-s*" for "solid" and "*typos*" for "a model"), the main problem is that stereotypes are rigid and inflexible mental representation of reality.

Images and stereotypes that people have about other countries, cultures, ethnic or cultural groups have been widely explored in various academic disciplines ranging from psychology to linguistics, marketing and tourism. Studies in psychology, where the main bulk of research on stereotypes is done, have contributed to the body of knowledge about this psychological phenomenon by deliberating on the definitions and advancing the methodology of stereotype research (Banaji, 2001). While psychologists have been mainly interested in

stereotypes about various groups of people and in the mental processes involved in stereotyping, researchers in tourism and marketing have focused on country stereotypes and have proposed some useful classifications and taxonomies of these stereotypes. For example, Brijs, Bloemer and Kasper (2011) argued that images about a country tend to cluster around nine country-related aspects, which include “cultural identity, political climate, language, history, climate, landscape, economic and technological development, religion and people” (p. 1260). The current study divided the students’ images about Russia into categories based on the taxonomy proposed by Brijs, Bloemer and Kasper (2011). A more detailed description of the research design and analytical approach adopted by this empirical investigation are explained in the following sections.

Longitudinal research in applied linguistics

Generally, longitudinal research concerns itself with development and change and its main aims are either to describe and analyse the patterns of change or to explain causal relationships among variables that are involved in the processes under observation (Menard, 2002). Several researchers have noted that longitudinal studies are comparatively rare in the field of applied linguistics despite the obvious suitability of longitudinal approaches to studying processes involved in learning an additional language (Dörnyei, 2007; Ortega & Iberri-Shea, 2005). Therefore, the current study has potential to contribute to the methodological diversity of the applied linguistics research.

As Dörnyei (2007) pointed out, in order to achieve its purposes, a longitudinal study must focus on an “ongoing examination of people or phenomena over time” as well as fulfil several other criteria (p.78). Thus, the data for the study has to be collected at two or more points in time; the cases or participants must be the same or comparable; the analysis has to include some comparisons of the data collected at different points of time. In their important review of literature on longitudinal research in applied linguistics, Ortega and Iberri-Shea (2005) observed that longitudinal studies in the field had mostly focused on linguistic variables, such as the acquisition of morphological or grammatical structures or the learning rate concerning lexical terms. The most popular research design adopted in such studies is a descriptive-quantitative approach where data are analysed by means of descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages. As Ortega and Iberri-Shea (2005) noted, non-linguistic variables had rarely been included in longitudinal applied linguistics research. Such studies mainly focused on the language learners’ personal experiences (i.e., micro-perspectives) and

employed purely qualitative research designs, including autobiographical or ethnographical methodologies.

The present study's variable of interest—language learners' country images—is non-linguistic and the current investigation is different from earlier studies because it considers the macro perspective or the change in cultural beliefs of a group of people, such as the language learners. This study explores and describes patterns and trends in the structure of images about the target language country—Russia—that had occurred within the population of beginner learners of Russian over a span of seven years.

Method

Research design

Commenting on a variety of possible longitudinal research paradigms, Ortega and Iberri-Shea (2005) encouraged investigators to more fully utilize the potential of mixed-methods research design. The current study was implemented within the mixed-methods research paradigm, which acknowledges the reality that researchers have to make pragmatic choices in their investigative endeavours. The pragmatic choice for the mixed-methods approach in the current study was dictated by two considerations. First of all, the respondents had not been the same individuals, rather, they represented the same population—the learners of Russian in a Malaysian university. This means that the current longitudinal investigation can be identified as a 'trend study'. In trend studies, the population remains the same (i.e., beginner learners of Russian in this particular research study) but the data are collected at different points in time from different (i.e., not the same) samples of respondents (Cresswell, 2012; Dörnyei, 2007; Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2012). Because the longitudinal data presented here were at the aggregate level, it was not viable to employ a micro perspective, an approach associated with purely qualitative research.

Secondly, the current study's variable of interest was non-linguistic: it dealt with Russian language learners' images and cultural representations of Russia. Therefore, unlike the earlier studies that operated with distinctly linguistic variables and adopted the descriptive-quantitative longitudinal design, the present research project was based on the data in the form of language learners' answers to an open-ended question that sought the students' images about Russia. These data were first analysed using a qualitative (QUAL) approach where, based on their thematic unity, the images were separated in the course of thematic analysis into categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following this, the data were quantified to enable the frequency analysis (QUAN). The type of mixed-methods design in this study could be expressed by the formula QUAL→QUAN.

The capital letters in the formula indicate that the qualitative (QUAL) and quantitative (QUAN) strands have equal importance; the direction of the arrow indicates the sequence in the analytical procedures.

Participants, data collection and research instrument

A total of 143 students learning Russian in *Universiti Malaysia Sabah* (UMS) participated in this study between the years 2004 and 2010. All the participants were learning Russian *ab initio*, and none of them had travelled to Russia before. The data were collected by repeated questionnaire surveys administered among different groups of respondents in the years 2004 (69 students), 2007 (32 students) and 2010 (42 students).

It is important to note that the data were collected in the very first language class that the respondents attended. This was done in order to obtain endogenous images about Russia held by the students before these perceptions could be changed or modified in the course of the language program. The students were asked to write all images that the words "Russia" or "Russian" bring to their mind. They could provide any number of words, short phrases or sentences written either in English or Malay. In order to elicit sincere responses from the participants the researcher decided to ensure maximum anonymity, therefore, the respondents were not asked to provide any demographic information about themselves.

Data analysis

Prior to data analysis, all responses were typed *ad verbatim* and the data were cleansed. For example, double-loaded answers, such as "Russia is a big country with its own culture", were separated into two images, namely, "Russia is a big country" and "(it) has its own culture". After this, the data were analysed by thematic analysis, which is a qualitative analytic method for "identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). First of all, images that were mentioned more than once were grouped into subcategories. Idiosyncratic images or the images mentioned only once and those that could not form a logical unit with the other representations (e.g., "my friend Mugu"), were removed. Then, considering the type of images they contained, the smaller subcategories were joined into larger categories based on the taxonomy adopted from Brijs, Bloemer and Kasper (2011). This step in the analysis enabled the researcher to examine the internal structure of the students' images about Russia.

Some minor modifications to the original taxonomy by Brijs et al. (2011) were done in order to reflect the content of images collected during the three

questionnaire surveys. These changes did not alter the essence of the relevant country-related aspects and representative structure of country images in the taxonomy proposed by Brijs and his colleagues. To be more specific, the category "Landscape" in the original taxonomy by Brijs et al. was renamed in this study as "Country size and sites". Also, since very few references had been made by the respondents to economic condition in Russia and, instead, many images referred to technology and education, the category "Technology and education" was introduced in lieu of the thematic label "Economic and technological development" proposed in Brijs et al.'s study.

Results

Findings of Study 1: 2004

The students provided 222 images about Russia. Of them, 168 were retained for further analysis. Table 1 demonstrates the study's findings. As can be seen from the table, the images about Russia corresponded to eight out of nine thematic categories; none of the images related to the label "Religion". The biggest category of images was "Language", which is not surprising considering that the study had been carried out among learners of Russian during their language class. It contained references to various aspects of the target language. The majority of the images related to the difficulty of Russian (e.g., "very difficult language to learn"). Some students commented on the novelty and uniqueness of the target language (e.g., "Russian has unique spelling that looks like Greek"). Several respondents considered Russian as a language that is "popular in the world" and "spread in Asia" while some students wrote that Russian is "not a popular language".

The second in the size category was "History". Typical images here were "former USSR" and "communist country". Several images in this cluster referred to the "cold war". One student indicated a deeper knowledge of history by providing the image "Russo-Japanese war". The third largest group of images concerned Russia's territorial vastness (e.g., "Russia is a big country") and included some geographical areas and cities ("Siberia", "the capital Moscow"). It was named accordingly "Country size and sites". Two images in this group identified Russia's location as "a country next to China"; there were some erroneous beliefs as well (e.g., "Romania").

An important position in the representational structure occupied the images concerning Russia's advanced status in the areas of technology and education. Many students mentioned Russia as a popular destination to study medicine (e.g., "Russia has many medical schools"). Several references were made to the military and aerospace technology (e.g., "military jets *MIG* and *Sukhoi*"),

“aerospace technology”). Following in size was the category “Political situation”. There were several outdated images in this group which described Russia as a “communist” and a “Marxist” country. Other representations were “strong country”, “republic” and “veto holder in the United Nations”.

Table 1: Students’ images about Russia (2004)

<i>Country aspects</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Culture (n=3)*	Historical culture; unique culture
Political situation (n=22)	Communist country; republic; strong country; veto holder in the UN; war; ethnic problem
Language (n=37)	Difficult language; unique language; interesting language; beautiful language; new language; good language to learn; popular in the world / not popular in the world; sounds strange / sounds cool
History (n=28)	Former USSR; former communist country; Cold war; Russo-Japanese War; Karl Marx; Anastasia; Peter the Great; Tsar Nicholas; Lenin; Stalin
Climate (n=10)	Cold weather; winter
Country size and sites (n=27)	Large territory; country next to China; Moscow; Saint Petersburg; Ural; Siberia; Crimea; Ukraine; Romania
Technology and education (n=23)	Medical schools; high tech; military technology; great inventions; Sputnik; K-19 submarine; aerospace technology
Religion (n=0)	----
People (n=18)	Good-looking people; people with white skin; people with yellow hair; warm-hearted people; hard working people; people not wealthy; Vladimir Putin; Alexander Popov; Marat Safin

* Note: *n* indicates number of images in a category

Images in the category “People” contained references to physical appearance (e.g., “people with white skin and yellow hair”), to the perceived behaviour (“people are hardworking”) and the character (“they are nice and warm hearted”) of Russian people as well as their economic status (“people are not wealthy”). Several images mentioned contemporary political figures (e.g., “Vladimir Putin”) and sportsmen (“Marat Safin” and “Alexander Popov”). One student wrote that “Putin is a cool guy”. There were considerably fewer images in the categories “Climate” (e.g., “cold climate”) and “Culture” (e.g., “unique

culture”). None of the respondents provided any image that could be placed under the heading “Religion”.

Findings of Study 2: 2007

The data collected during the second survey contained 176 images about Russia. After the data were cleaned, 138 images were retained for further analysis. Table 2 demonstrates the findings from this survey. As the table shows, the greatest number of images were placed in the “Country size and sites” category. These images pertained to Russia’s territorial vastness (“very big country”), to cities and geographical areas and to the country’s geographical position. There were some interesting discrepancies in the students’ perceptions. Thus, several respondents wrote that Russia was “located in Asia” or “situated near China” while others provided the image “Europe”.

Table 2: Students’ images about Russia (2007)

<i>Country aspects</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Culture (n=16)*	Different culture from Malaysia; T.A.T.U. (pop singers); European culture; Russian dance
Political situation (n=11)	Military power; USSR; communist country
Language (n=12)	Different language; difficult language; funny language
History (n=10)	Former USSR; Russian royal family; World War I; Cold war; revolution in the 1990s
Climate (n=19)	Cold country; four seasons
Country size and sites (n=30)	Big country; the biggest country in the world; Moscow; Saint Petersburg; Kursk; country in Asia / country in Europe; located near China; beautiful country; Ukraine
Technology and education (n=24)	medical courses; nuclear technology; aerospace technology
Religion (n=0)	---
People (n=16)	Good looking people; people with golden hair; friendly people; Vladimir Putin; Maria Sharapova; Yuri, the first man in space

* Note: *n* indicates number of images in a category

The second in the size group of images was labelled “Technology and education”. The majority of answers in this category mentioned medical programs in Russia (“studies in medicine”). Some students wrote “aerospace technology” or “nuclear technology. The following category “Climate” contained

the answers “cold country” and “four seasons”. The representations in the cluster labelled “Culture” included references to the once-famous duet T.A.T.U.; some students commented on the dissimilar nature of Malaysian and Russian cultures. As in the earlier survey, the category “People” contained references to the appearance and perceived character of Russian people (e.g., “good looking people”, “friendly people”). The category “Language” mostly consisted of the images describing Russian as “different” from languages familiar to the respondents, such as Malay and English. Some students commented that Russian was a “difficult” or “funny” language. The smallest categories of images were “Political situation” and “History”. It should be noted that some of the images in the cluster “Political situation” were outdated (“USSR”, “communist country”). As in the previous study, there were no images that could be placed in the category “Religion”.

Findings of Study 3: 2010

Out of 136 images collected from the respondents during this survey, 115 were retained for further analysis. Table 3 demonstrates the findings. The largest category “Country size and sites” contained references to Russia’s geographical vastness (“a very big country”), “beautiful landscape” and the country’s considerable distance from Malaysia (“a distant country”). Among cities, only “Moscow” and “Saint Petersburg” were mentioned.

In the category “Language”, which was second in the size group of images, the majority of images referred to Russian as a “difficult language to learn”, a “beautiful language” or a “language which is different from English”. In the cluster labelled “Culture”, the prevalent images included Russian architecture (“unique architecture”, “Saint Basil’s cathedral”); some students mentioned “music”, “interesting fairy tales” and “unique costumes”.

Similar to the findings from the two earlier surveys, images in the category “People” contained references to physical appearance (“white people”) and perceived character (“friendly people”, “people are not friendly”) of Russians. Some students mentioned a famous tennis player, Maria Sharapova. The next in size cluster was “Technology and education”. Analogous to the images gathered in the surveys conducted in 2004 and 2007, many answers in this category mentioned medical studies in Russia (“a place popular for medical studies”). Also, there were references to technological advancements (“a country famous for military technology”) and one student mentioned “Moscow State University”.

Table 3. Students' images about Russia (2010)

<i>Country aspects</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Culture (n=18)*	Old churches; famous architecture; Saint Basil's cathedral; music; unique culture; arts; fairy tales; different from Western culture
Political situation (n=12)	Communist country; war; republic; military country; strong country
Language (n=18)	Difficult language; different language; beautiful language
History (n=6)	Involved in wars; communist country; rich history
Climate (n=11)	Cold country
Country size and sites (n=22)	A very large country; distant country; beautiful country; Moscow; Saint Petersburg; Ukraine
Technology and education (n=13)	Medical colleges; advanced technology; aerospace technology; military technology; Moscow State University
Religion (n=0)	---
People (n=15)	Good looking people; white people; hard working people; people are friendly / not friendly; Maria Sharapova; different ethnic groups

* Note: *n* indicates number of images in a category

The category "Political situation" contained descriptions of Russia as a "communist country" and, rather inconsistently, as a "republic". As in the surveys conducted in 2004 and 2007, there were representations of Russia as a "strong country" and a military power; several students provided the answers "war" or "wars". Images in the cluster "Climate" referred solely to Russia being a "cold country" and a "place where it snows every time". Finally, the category "History" contained the references "Russian army" and "World War II". Several respondents were aware that Russia "was a communist country before" while some students described Russia as a country "full of history". As in the previous surveys, there were no images that could be placed in the "Religion" category.

Trend analysis of images about Russia

Regarding the first research question, which entailed exploration of the internal structure of language learners' images about Russia, the findings allowed for the conclusion that the structure of students' mental imagery about Russia was rich and multidimensional. Also, the mappings of images had, overall, concurred with the model proposed by Brijs et al. (2011). To be more specific, in

the course of three surveys conducted at three-year intervals (in 2004, 2007 and 2010) the students' representations about Russia consistently clustered around eight out of the nine country-related aspects identified by Brijs et al. (2011). The missing images about Russia in all three surveys related to the "Religion" aspect in this structure.

As to the second research question, which nudged the researcher to examine temporal trends and changes in the structural patterns of the students' images about Russia that occurred between the surveys, the findings provided several interesting insights. As Table 4 shows, the most stable categories of mental images about Russia were "Technology and education", "Country size and sites" and "People". Image content in these categories underwent minimal changes over the years, especially in the cluster "Technology and education". The findings also indicated that "Country size and sites" was the top category according to the number of images it contained in the surveys conducted in 2007 and 2010, and occupied the third position in size in the survey conducted in 2004. This finding indicates that some of the most prominent and enduring images about Russia held by the students were rooted in factual reality.

Table 4: Trend analysis of images about Russia (2004, 2007 and 2010)

Year	2004			2007			2010		
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>rank</i>	<i>n</i>	%	<i>rank</i>	<i>n</i>	%	<i>rank</i>
Culture	3	1.7%	8	16	11.5%	4	18	15.6%	2
Political situation	22	13.0%	5	11	7.9%	7	12	10.4%	6
Language	37	22.0%	1	12	8.6%	6	18	15.6%	2
History	28	16.6%	2	10	7.2%	8	6	5.2%	8
Climate	10	5.9%	7	19	13.7%	3	11	9.5%	7
Country size and sites	27	16.0%	3	30	21.7%	1	22	19.1%	1
Technology and education	23	13.6%	4	24	17.3%	2	13	11.3%	5
Religion	0	0%	9	0	0%	9	0	0%	9
People	18	10.7%	6	16	11.5%	4	15	13.0%	4
Total	168	100%	-	138	100%	-	115	100%	-

To attest to the universality and ubiquity of relating the image of Russia to the concept of spatial vastness, Google's "Ngram viewer" shows that among the common words to follow the string of words "Russia is a" are the adjectives "vast" (the third in rank) and "large" (ranked sixth). Moreover, the string of words "Russia is a vast country" has been continuously and uninterruptedly used in the corpus of millions of English language books since the year 1900.

The least stable categories in the students' representation structure of Russia were "Culture" and "History". These groups of images underwent noticeable changes in their prominence: the former category became more salient while the latter declined in importance over the years. The findings also revealed that the categories' rankings according to their salience (as reflected in their share of total images) were closely aligned in the two later surveys (i.e., 2007 and 2010).

Conclusions and pedagogical implications

Despite the sufficiently large numbers of images about Russia collected during each survey and notwithstanding the multidimensional structure of the language learners' mental imagery about the target language country, findings from the surveys indicated that the students' perceptions about Russia reflected the most ubiquitous and popular stereotypes. This fact concurs with conclusions reached in other investigations of language learners' representations of a TL country (Allen, 2004; Nikitina, Zuraidah & Loh, 2014; Schultz & Haerle, 1995; Vande Berg, 1990). A stereotypical nature of the students' imagery about Russia was revealed in the finding that almost the same images about Russia had been provided by the respondents in all three surveys. The fact that the images referring to Russia's history and political system tended to be outdated and highly erroneous (e.g., "communist country") indicated that some of these stereotypical representations have become greatly 'ossified'.

It has been recognized in research literature that an important role of foreign language education is to diminish language learners' stereotypical perceptions about a TL country, its culture and people, to develop the learners' cultural awareness and aptitude and to enhance their critical thinking (Houghton, 2010; Schulz & Haerle, 1995). Viable pedagogical approaches to achieving these objectives would be based on constructivist assumptions concerning learning and teaching and some studies have offered detailed descriptions and discussions of innovative pedagogical initiatives that utilize language learners' stereotypes in concrete educational settings (Allen, 2004; Drewelow, 2013; Houghton, 2010; Vande Berg, 1990).

The images about Russia collected from the students had informed the language instructor about the gaps in the students' cultural knowledge and

provided some ideas as to how the cultural component of the language program could be tailored according to the students' educational needs. Thus, a part of the course curriculum had been introduced where the students were required to search materials and prepare short reports about any aspect of Russian culture that interested them. Topics chosen by the students usually included biographies of famous Russian composers, writers, artists and scientists; other popular themes concerned Russian cities, geographical areas, historical events and personae as well as folk customs and national cuisine. While preparing their reports, the students normally worked in small groups and each group presented their findings to classmates at the end of the semester; a short question and answer session followed each presentation. Due to their limited knowledge of Russian, the reports were written and presented either in Malay or English. These classroom presentations provided a platform for holding discussions about various aspects of Russian culture and everyday reality.

As the duration of the Russian language program at the University was three semesters, the approaches to implementing the group projects varied. In the earlier stages of the language program, the students themselves chose a topic for their semester-long project. At more advanced levels, the topics had to be related to some central theme proposed by the language teacher. These themes usually concerned major historical or important cultural epochs in Russia. To help the students generate ideas, a video on the proposed theme was shown and discussed with them in the classroom in the beginning of the semester (see Nikitina & Furuoka, 2013). To conclude, pedagogical approaches that employ language learners' images and stereotypes about a TL country as a shared platform from where further explorations of the TL culture can be initiated is a promising direction for the teaching of culture in the foreign language classroom.

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