

# English Teaching in the Russian Far East

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Over the last fifteen years, English teachers in the Russian Far East have felt the impact of social, cultural and historical changes from outside their profession which have had a profound effect on the way they work and teach. The presenter will describe the state of ELT in the region, focusing on the role of the Far Eastern English Language Teachers' Association which was founded in 1995 to work for English language teachers' professional development.

この15年の間、ロシアの極東に住む英語教師達は、自分の専門外である社会的、文化的、そして歴史的な移り変わりに影響されて、教師としての仕事の内容や教え方を大きく変化させていきました。発表者はその地域のELTの状況を、英語教師達の専門的な向上をうながす為1995年に設立されたFar Eastern English Language Teachers' Association（極東英語教師協会）の役割に重点を置きながら発表します。

The Russian Far East is a vast region. It comprises 9 administrative regions, some of them as large as France. It is also a very long way from European Russia: seven or eight time zones away from Moscow and St. Petersburg. It takes 7 days and nights for a passenger train on the Trans-Siberian railroad to cover the distance from Vladivostok (the most important

city in the region) to Moscow. Even the plane takes nine hours. By contrast, the capitals of East Asia, Bangkok, Beijing, Seoul, Tokyo are much closer, most of them within two hours' flying time of Vladivostok.

The settlements in the region are relatively young, with a history of only about 140 years. Most were founded as military posts and many of them cities were closed during the 70 years of the Soviet period to all foreigners. Even Soviet citizens needed to apply for a special visa to visit them. For most of their history, the cities and towns of the Russian Far East have been at the end of a very long railroad: connected to the center and at the same time very, very distant from it.

Despite this, an educational policy was followed on the national level for several decades which meant that a student in the Russian Far East received exactly the same education as a student in European Russia. This was implemented through the uniform secondary school curriculum. Thanks to this uniformity, there are hardly any regional accents in Russian, making it very difficult to say what part of Russia someone comes from.

As for foreign languages, they have always been core subjects in secondary and tertiary education in Russia. The goals of teaching foreign languages have changed over the course of time, depending on the social, economic, and political situation in the country, from overall personal development of students and their proper ideological up-bringing to developing reading

skills in order to read the best literary works in English, to teaching students to communicate effectively. But even in the darkest periods of 20th

Century Russian history, such as the Stalin years, foreign languages were never eliminated from the curriculum as everybody was aware of their great educational value.

Usually children start learning a foreign language at the age of 10 when they are in the fifth grade in middle school. It is a compulsory subject at high school. Upon entering a university (at 17) every student has to take at least a two-year foreign language course. Thus, the study of a foreign language has always had a mass character. One of the advantages of a foreign language class is its relatively small number of students, usually 10 -15 students per class, half the size of classes for other subjects, throughout secondary and tertiary education.

Which foreign language is studied? At different times different European languages have been popular: in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, French; in the 20<sup>th</sup>, English.

In general, teaching English in Russia over the last century might be looked upon as a unique experience, as it was taught only by non-native speaking teachers who had neither been to an English speaking country, nor ever set their eyes on a native speaker. It was taught mainly with the help of chalk and blackboard, with no authentic materials available, the only recourse being a textbook written by Russian authors. But the results

were surprisingly good. After five years of study, children were able to converse with a native speaker without much difficulty and to read Agatha Christie in the original form.

Until recently, we teachers of English in this part of Russia were never aware of the peculiarities of teaching English in the Russian Far East; or to be more exact, there hardly were any. The textbooks were uniform for each level of English all over Russia, as it was the Ministry of Education that chose the textbook to be used in the classroom. There was no such question as what variant of English to teach. There was a long tradition of teaching British English, which made sense in the European part of Russia. Students all over Russia learnt the dialogue “How to get to Trafalgar Square” by heart. The freedom of the teacher was limited to a choice of techniques that were very often within the parameters of the *Grammar Translation Method*.

Nowadays, with changing times, we Far Easterners have become increasingly aware that our teaching concerns are different in our Asian context from those of the European part of Russia. To mention just a few of them: the demand for American English (primarily due to our proximity to the U.S. West Coast, but also influenced by the preference for American English in most East Asian countries), the need to focus on East Asian accents and varieties of English (for trading relations with Asian nations),, the need to focus on

East Asian accents and varieties of English (for trading relations with Asian nations), and the emphasis on multiculturalism. Students' motivation to study English as a means of communication and cultural understanding is immense in the Russian Far East as it strives to take its place as an active member of the Pacific Rim community.

The availability of teaching resources is also very different from European Russia. Moscow and St. Petersburg have always been the main educational centers in Russia, with the richest libraries, best research centers and best universities. Political changes, the immense distances and economic difficulties have now made it impossible for us Far Eastern teachers of English to go to Moscow to attend professional development in-service courses or work in the national libraries.

All these reasons have motivated us to unite in a professional association – another novelty in the life of English language teachers in this country. Thus, in 1995 the Far Eastern English Language Teachers' Association was founded on the initiative of a group of university teachers. We hope that being united in the association will help us to strengthen the teaching and learning of English in the Russian Far East, support networking with colleagues all over the world and give our members access to the latest language teaching resources.

The first FEELTA conference, in 1996, brought us many pleasant discoveries of the benefits of being

associated. We experienced many things for the first time: first contact with colleagues from overseas, meeting colleagues from remote and far away parts of the Far East who traveled up to 15 hours to the conference site, our first publishers' book exhibition. The two conferences which followed, in 1998 and 2000, have helped teachers to develop a taste for networking. It turned out that most overseas colleagues came from East Asian countries. It was at that time that we fully realized that we were part of the East Asian region; we found that we had many things in common and what differences there were enriched us. We learnt many things about the organisation of a conference: never before had we heard about workshops, swap shops, panel discussions, or poster sessions. Until then a presentation was just a presentation for us. Definitely, by attending the conferences teachers of English in the Russian Far East have accumulated valuable experience of different presentation forms which help them to share and discuss the challenges of today's classroom.

As the geography of the Russian Far East is so extensive, to coordinate our work efficiently we have founded affiliates throughout the Far East. Today FEELTA has 6 affiliates: in Primorye, the Khabarovsk region, the Sakhalin region, the Amur region, the Jewish Autonomous region and the Kamchatka region, with the headquarters in Vladivostok.

To promote FEELTA membership around the region

we have established a tradition for each affiliate to host the biannual international conference, which usually attracts up to 500 participants. This is a rather good number taking into account the density of population in the Russian Far East, i.e. about 8 million people spread around the region. Published conference proceedings give teachers insight into the art of ELT and serve as a bank of new ideas for the classroom.

In between conferences the role of the quarterly FEELTA newsletter in providing a forum for teachers is hard to overestimate. As there is only one national periodical for foreign language teachers in Russia ("Foreign Languages at School"), the FEELTA newsletter is an indispensable source of information for teachers in the region. For many of them living in remote places the newsletter is the only way to learn about what is going on in the field of English language teaching in the Russian Far East, so we are fully aware of our responsibility.

Among other FEELTA activities are the *Winter School* (a number of workshops and seminars on new trends in language and culture teaching), publishers' workshops, and exhibitions to inform teachers about the latest textbooks and other teaching resources. Today, with the Russian textbook market being open to overseas publishers, there is a flood of books coming into the country and it is extremely important for us to be aware of what is being offered and to be able to choose

the “right” textbook. To improve students’ motivation to master English and to discover the joy of learning a foreign language, we have introduced an annual English Language Contest, called the “Talent Show,” for secondary school students. Every year we are impressed with teachers’ enthusiasm and involvement in extra-curricular activities to help students to prepare for the Contest.

We clearly see that being associated opens new vistas to us. We have stopped feeling isolated. Bilateral agreements with East Asian professional associations KOTESOL, JALT, ETA-ROC and ThaiTESOL give us new ideas for collaborative research and networking, for sharing our experiences and ideas, for learning from each other.