

Episode 36: Learning Russian

Summary

Nick's English friend Helen is a Russian-English interpreter. In this conversation she talks about learning Russian and her experiences in Russian-speaking countries.

Transcript

Nick: Today I'm talking to my friend Helen and, Helen, you're English but you are an interpreter¹ and so you speak and French and Russian, right?

Helen: That is correct, yes.

Nick: OK, so let's talk about Russian. Umm, when did you start learning Russian?

Helen: Well, I started when I was 12 years old, uhh, at secondary school. I had done a year of French before that and I was offered the option of either Latin, German or Russian, so, uhh, I decided to choose Russian.

Nick: And so this would have been probably in the early 90s?

Helen: That's right, yes, it was. Ohh, goodness!², giving my age away. It was 1992.

Nick: OK, so it's interesting that I guess this was probably right at the time when, essentially, Russian was about to decline as a language with the fall of the Soviet Union, but now you work as an interpreter for international organisations, which can be a bit slow in, uhh, in developing with their bureaucracies, so Russian is still super important.

Helen: Oh certainly, yes, yes. There's still plenty of Russian spoken in the international organisations. It's offered at most of the meetings, umm, and, yeah, there's quite a bit of Russian spoken by not only Russian Federation of course, but for example, Belarus, you have the Central Asian Republics - Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and the others, and a lot of them will use Russian in the meetings.

¹ interpreter: someone who translates, orally, from one language to another. A translator does the same thing but with written documents.

² goodness! (interjection): a polite expression of alarm (in this case) or surprise.

Nick: OK, and so obviously language teaching in high school, especially in anglophone countries, is not very good, usually...

Helen: Yes.

Nick: ...so you must have done a lot more beyond just your high school Russian.

Helen: Well, when I started Russian it was as any other subject, really, You do your set number of hours and then you think, 'Phew³, now I can do and do something else - maths or, I don't know, physics.' Umm, but as I went on, I got more and more interested in languages in general and Russian in particular and I was lucky enough to be part of a school exchange. We went to Belarus in 1995. That was quite an experience, and that really peaked my interest. And I think from then on, I was much more willing to do a lot more than just the basics to get through an exam.

Nick: That must have been really amazing, 'cause even today, and this is more than 20 years later, Belarus is still kind of the most closed of the European former Soviet countries, right?

Helen: Yes, that's right, that's right. Umm, I haven't been to Belarus, I have to admit, since about 1997, so I couldn't say what it's like now on a daily basis. Obviously you hear certain things in the media, you get to know a certain bit about ... a certain amount about the politics and, umm, and high levels of what's going on. But, umm, I couldn't say I know a lot about it now but in '95 and '97 it was a completely different world. I'd never been abroad...

Nick: Oh wow.

Helen: ...and the first country I visited was Belarus.

Nick: OK, and so what was it like?

Helen: Umm, well we stayed with families who were amazing - really, really hospitable⁴, fantastically generous. We were taken around to various places in Borisov, which is the city we were staying in. We went to the theatre, umm, we went to museums, and we went to ... also went to Minsk as part of our trip. And, uhh, I really had nothing to compare it with 'cause I hadn't been abroad. It was a completely different world - totally, totally different from anything I had seen or heard of before. So it was utterly⁵ fascinating for me.

³ phew (interjection): an expression of relief

⁴ hospitable: someone who treats guests well and warmly

⁵ utterly: completely, absolutely

Nick: And did you already have a decent enough level in Russian at that time to survive?

Helen: No! Definitely not, no. Umm, I think you only really realise your level of the language, of any language, when you go to the country and you try and use it, or you're surrounded by people who are speaking it, uhh, in the street or on the bus or whatever. Umm, I realised that my level was very, very, very basic. Uhh, I was lucky enough to be staying with a family, umm, with an exchange student who had very good English. They had amazing teachers out there as well and they seemed to be progressing a lot quicker with their English than we were with our Russian. Umm, but it was a fascinating, uhh, cultural experience and it really made me want to learn more of the language and understand more, even purely because of the frustration of not actually being able to say anything at that time, so...

Nick: And is the attraction for you then the sound of the language or the structure of the language or the culture of the people who speak it?

Helen: It's cultural and I think the sounds. And it's a challenge as well. Russian is a huge challenge. The structure is so different, uhh, to French or Spanish or even German. Umm, it was the challenge that got me interested and the challenge that kept me going. I thought, 'Well if I can hold a basic conversation, then that's huge brownie points⁶ for me,' sort of thing. And then if I could go and deal with⁷ a certain amount of bureaucracy when I was living in Russia later on, umm, I felt a huge achievement doing that as well. So it was the challenge and also the cultural aspects as well that were really interesting for me.

Nick: OK, so how long did you live in Russia?

Helen: I lived in Russia for a year, uhh, after I graduated from secondary school. And then a year after I graduated from university as well. Umm, so there was sort of four years between the two but I did feel like I was building, building, building - obviously studying at university. Umm, and actually after I graduated from university and I'd lived in Russia for a year, I had - I *had* - a pretty good level of Russian and I could converse⁸ in most situations, so that was great.

Nick: And now that you're kind of out of that environment, do you feel like you're losing it a little bit?

⁶ brownie points: made-up credits for doing something good in life (i.e. nobody actually gives you any 'points')

⁷ deal with (phrasal verb): manage, handle

⁸ converse: hold or have a conversation

Helen: Yeah, yeah, you always do if you're not totally immersed in the environment. I try to have Skype conversation classes, umm, when I'm at home in London. Or when I'm in Geneva, I try and meet up with Russian-speaking friends and speak Russian with them as well. So there are ways of keeping it going - and obviously listening to podcasts, listening to the radio, possibly watching TV when I can in Russian. There are ways of keeping it going but it's no substitute for⁹ actually being in the country and actually speaking on a daily basis.

Nick: Right. And when you do you're interpreting work, uhh, with the international organisations, I imagine a lot of the things that you have to interpret are incredibly difficult in terms of vocabulary. And it's not just your normal conversations.

Helen: Yes, yeah, yeah. It's, it's, yeah, it's definitely not your normal conversations! You get all sorts of, umm, technical meetings, you have quite high level meetings, some things can get very political. Other things are not political but they're difficult because they're so technical. You have to learn different vocabulary for each meeting, pretty much, and you're in and out of the meeting - you could be in and out of a meeting in a day, and then onto something else the next day. So you have to be quite quick with your reflexes and also have a good system of glossaries. You have to keep going.

Nick: OK, and you have two daughters.

Helen: I do.

Nick: One is four and the other one is less than one.

Helen: That's right.

Nick: And are you starting them down a, kind of, Russian learning path?

Helen: Oh, well, I'd like to say yes. Umm, I'd like to, I would really like them to learn Russian. I'm starting with French purely because I think it's a little bit easier and they may well get a bit more practice. Umm, eventually I'd love them to speak Russian or at least understand little bits and pieces¹⁰ of Russian. But I'm hoping that they will inherit my interest for languages, but we will wait and see, wait and see.

Nick: Yeah, 'cause they might inherit your husband's lack of interest for languages, mightn't they?

⁹ it's no substitute for (fixed expression): it's not as good as, it can't replace

¹⁰ bits and pieces: small amounts

Helen: Ohhh! Maybe, no, he is interested but, you know, he has other things that he has to do on a daily basis.

Nick: OK, and do you have any plans to go back to a Russian-speaking area?

Helen: Umm, well, I'd like to visit Moscow. I've got some friends who live in Moscow and they also have small children, uhh, so I've taken my eldest daughter out there once, when she was less than one. Umm, so I'd like to visit and I'd like them to, sort of, feel that they can go to different places and visit different, uhh, different cultures and I hope - I *hope* - that they will get an interest for the world outside of the UK, basically.

Nick: Alright, well thank you very much for talking to us about Russian.

Helen: Thank you!

Comprehension Questions

1. Where was Helen's first experience in a Russian-speaking environment?
2. What are the two things that Helen likes most about Russian?
3. According to Helen, what's the most difficult thing about interpreting in Russian for international organisations?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. If he cleans the house while his wife is at work, he'll get a lot of _____. She will be impressed with him.
2. _____! Watch out, you almost got hit by that car!
3. If you're an _____ and you're working simultaneously in a meeting, you have to listen to one language and speak another at virtually the same time.
4. She has a basic level of Japanese. She can understand some things but can't really _____ in the language.
5. Watching sport on TV is OK but _____ watching it in person.
6. He only understands _____ of Portuguese so you have to speak very slowly and be very patient with him.
7. _____, I've finally finished the work project that I've been working on for three weeks.
8. He has taken the same beginner English course three times and can barely say a word. He's _____ hopeless!
9. In many countries, there's a lot of bureaucracy to _____. You have to go to a lot of different offices and fill out a lot of forms.
10. My host family was very _____. They cooked me a lot of great food, took me on trips and overall were very kind to me.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. If you're not a Russian speaker, are you interested in learning Russian? Why or why not?
2. What do you know about Belarus? Do you think it would be an interesting country to visit?
3. How do you think parents can try to get their children interested in languages?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. In Belarus, where she went as a teenager in 1995.
2. She likes the challenge of the language and the culture of Russian-speaking people.
3. The vocabulary, because she says a lot of the meetings are very technical.

Exercises

1. brownie points
2. Goodness
3. interpreter
4. converse
5. it's no substitute for
6. bits and pieces
7. Phew
8. utterly
9. deal with
10. hospitable