


1978

The Cultural Problems Encountered in Teaching Basic English to Russian Jew Refugees as an Initial Step to Entering an English Speaking Society

James Edwin Traver

School for International Training

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/ipp_collection

 Part of the [Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons](#), [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), and the [First and Second Language Acquisition Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Traver, James Edwin, "The Cultural Problems Encountered in Teaching Basic English to Russian Jew Refugees as an Initial Step to Entering an English Speaking Society" (1978). *MA TESOL Collection*. 289.
https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/ipp_collection/289

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Graduate Institute at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in MA TESOL Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact digitalcollections@sit.edu.

THE CULTURAL PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED IN TEACHING
BASIC ENGLISH TO RUSSIAN JEW REFUGEES
AS AN INITIAL STEP TO ENTERING
AN ENGLISH SPEAKING SOCIETY

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Master of Arts in Teaching degree at the
School for International Training, Brattleboro, Vermont.

by
James Edwin Traver
May, 1978



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Mr. C. Bennett, the Director of The Organizzazione Rieducazione Tecnica in Rome, Italy for allowing me to collect data for this report at his school. I would also like to thank the staff at his school for their co-operation and assistance.

James Edwin Traver

This project by James Edwin Traver is accepted in its present form.

Date May 30, 1978 Principal Advisor Mary M. Clark

Project Advisor/Reader:

Raymond C. Clark



ABSTRACT

Eric Descriptors - English, English(Second Language), Immigrants, Jews, Language Instruction, Refugees, Second Language Learning.

The Organizzazione Rieducazione Tecnica in Rome, Italy offers English language instruction to Russian Jew Refugees who for one reason or another wish to obtain visas to an English speaking country. The students are in a transitional phase in their lives; they have left their country of birth and haven't yet been accepted into another country of their choice. This creates special needs in regard to language acquisition. They need survival skills to help them make this transition and they need to gain an appreciation of English speaking cultures.

During the summer of 1977, I taught and observed classes at this school. This paper is an evaluation of the program. I observed there - of how it meets the needs of the students and prepares them for life in an English speaking country. The paper includes descriptions of and comments on both the linguistic and the cultural content of the English language program at ORT.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
INTRODUCTION.....	1
DESIGN OF THE STUDY.....	4
PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA.....	5
The School.....	5
The Students.....	6
The Methodology.....	10
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS.....	19
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	21
REVIEW OF LITERATURE RELATED TO THE SUBJECT MATTER.....	22

INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 1977, I observed and analyzed the methodology used to assist Russian Jew refugees to adapt to an English speaking, primarily American, culture. This study was carried out at the Organizzazione Rieducazione Tecnica in Rome, Italy. Data for the study was collected through direct classroom teaching and observation of regular on-going classes at the school.

The Organizzazione Rieducazione Tecnica is one of several schools established for the purpose of teaching English to Russian Jew refugees. Most of these people have received permission to leave Russia because they have stated a desire to emigrate to Israel. However, once out of Russia many of them change their minds and attempt to acquire visas for an English speaking country. The United States is the most favored destination but many attempt to get visas for Canada and Australia as well.

It is a long and difficult process for most of these people to obtain visas to an English speaking country unless they have relatives already there to assist them. Even then, it is not always easy. During the time that they are waiting for visas, many of them study English at schools such as the Organizzazione Rieducazione Tecnica. These people are of all ages and at different

levels of education. Many are professional people in their middle and even later years. Their life in Russia is considerably different from the life style they will find in an English speaking country such as the United States. It is difficult for them, particularly the older people, to change their concepts of education. They must be prepared to take more responsibility in making decisions about themselves - decisions that were made for them before.

As refugees, these people are, in a sense, without a country during the period in which they are situated in a temporary country such as Italy. They have left the U.S.S.R. and have not obtained visas to enter a country of their choice. They are in Italy on limited time visas but must remain there until they can legally enter another country. Those in younger age groups may adjust more easily to a new culture but are often without skills or training. Those older age groups are often well qualified in skills and education but have great difficulty adjusting to a new environment.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the type of English language training given to these people at the school in Rome. Is it meeting the needs of the different age levels? Is it allowing for differences in education and background? Is the cultural content relevant to the student initial needs upon entering an English speaking country? Are they made aware of the differences in life style between the country they hope to go to and the country they have come from?

3

In doing this study, I have assumed that the people I have observed fully intend to learn English and want to adjust as quickly and as satisfactorily as possible to their new life. The limitations imposed on me have been the inability to look at more than one school of this type and one particular methodology used. My time was also limited to one summer. However, with the material I have gathered, I hope that I can offer an insight into the plight of a particular group of people and the means by which they are taught to function in an English speaking society.

English has become a world language. It is used in business and technology on an international scale. Language programs have been developed and are being continually developed to meet the needs of people requiring English in these areas abroad. Another area that should not be neglected is language training for people immigrating to an English speaking culture. The United States, for example, accepts large numbers of non-English speaking people every year. They come as potential citizens. Language programs for these people must be constantly evaluated and adapted to changing needs. It is for this reason that I think my study of this particular school will be useful to others in the field of language training, especially those involved in teaching English as a second language.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

For this study, I taught direct English to on-going classes at the Organizzazione Rieducazione Tecnica. I used the books and materials that are used by all of the regular staff members at the school. By doing this, I was able to assess, in my own mind, the validity of the materials and to evaluate them accordingly. I also observed many of the regular staff members while they were teaching. This included observing beginning, intermediate, and advanced groups. Most of the classes had a wide range of age levels. However, the secondary school age students were grouped according to their ability in the language within their own age group.

My sources of data include notes I took during the observations of classes and notes I made in regard to classes that I had directly taught. The text that was used by all of the regular teachers was crucial to my data collecting. It is the foundation upon which the methodology of the school rests. Another invaluable source of information were my discussions with the Director of the school, Mr. Clay Bennett and all of the teachers. It is a small school and I was able to talk about the students and teaching with all of the teachers there. I have also done some supplementary reading to give myself a larger frame of reference.

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

THE SCHOOL

The Organizzazione Rieducazione Tecnica is located in the old Trastevere section of Rome. The physical facilities are adequate but hardly luxurious by any standards. The school has one floor of an office building. It consists of several classrooms, a language laboratory, a teacher's room and an office for the director. The business offices are located in another building in another section of the city. Funding for the school is obtained mainly from an international Jewish relief organization with headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland and with centers located throughout the world.

The size of the staff is usually between ten and fifteen full-time teachers. However, this varies from time to time depending on the number of students that are enrolled. A few teachers have been with the school for a considerable number of years. A few more have been teaching there for three, four and five years, which indicates to me the stability of management and the good rapport I found there among the staff. Most of the teachers are American citizens but several nationalities were represented on the staff when I was there last summer. These include the United Kingdom, South Africa and Australia. I was also told by a good source that no pressure is put on the management of the school to

hire Jewish instructors. This is apparently left up to the descretion of the Director and there didn't appear to me to be any attempt to influence, in one way or another, the racial or nationalistic composition of the teaching staff. The school day is divided into three working segments for the teachers; nine to twelve o'clock, twelve to three and three to six. The students also attend one of these three hour time periods.

THE STUDENTS

The students are people holding exit visas from the Soviet Union. They have obtained these and left the country officially to immigrate to Israel. They have decided, for one reason or another, that they don't want to immigrate to Israel and are allowed to remain in Rome on a temporary basis until they can get visas for another country of their choice. The majority choose to go to the United States while some try to get entry visas for Canada or Australia. Sometimes it takes months, even years for them to obtain these visas. It helps if they have a relative in the country they wish to go to. In any case, it is a difficult and time-consuming process. Even if they might have a relative in the host country, the relative must agree to sponsor this person and to provide basic needs until employment can be found. With goals in mind, it is important for them to avail themselves of the English language classes provided for them.

Not all, but most of the people come from the Ukraine in Soviet Russia and particularly Odessa. Why this is so, I am unable

to answer.¹ Most of them have studied English in school. Some of them have studied English for as long as ten years.

Many of them, especially the young people, have little if any knowledge of their religious heritage. An attempt is made to rectify that at the Organizzazione Rieducazione Tecnica by having Rabbis come in to give talks and guidance. When I was there last summer, this was usually met with indifference on the part of the younger people. It was necessary to coerce them to attend these sessions. I feel, though, that this is only a natural negative attitude to religious classes that many teenagers and young adults have.

The students come to the school with varied backgrounds. Some are professional people in their middle or later years. Some have technical and clerical skills. The younger people, of course, haven't finished their formal education yet. In the Soviet Union, a person is trained by the state for a particular profession or position and is expected to keep this for the rest of his life. When these people are told that they may not be able to continue in their special field of work when they get to another country, they refuse to believe it. They also refuse to accept the idea that many people in western societies, and especially American, often change their career goals in mid-life and not just once but two or three times. This poses a difficult problem for people immigrating to the United States, as shown in an article I recently

¹The New York Times, Thursday, December 1, 1977.
p.2.

read in THE NEW YORK TIMES which stated:

About 3,000 Soviet Jewish immigrants, convinced that the sole reason they cannot find jobs in the United States is their inability to speak or understand English, are challenging the methods now used to teach the language and integrate them into the American culture.

To change those methods, the immigrants-skilled technicians who are middle-aged or older-have formed The League of Soviet Emigrants for the Study of the English Language.....
Attempts have been made to train many of the immigrants in new careers, but the procedures are said to have ignored the fact that they do not speak English. So several of the highly-trained professionals were enrolled in a variety of publicly-financed courses taught by English-speaking instructors, in which they were paid \$50 to \$75 a week to attend, but learned nothing.²

The excerpts quoted above are focusing on the problem of immigrants without adequate facility in the English language. The people I saw in Rome will, I believe, face the same kinds of difficulty when they arrive in an English speaking country. Having a solid grammatical background in a language and even a good ability to speak it still does not enable them to understand the colloquialisms and half-intelligible mumblings that are accepted communicable forms used by native speakers.

² THE NEW YORK TIMES CO., "Language Hindering Russian Immigrants," The New York Times, Sunday, November 27, 1977.

The Russian Jew refugees have other cultural problems to contend with besides the language. They will have to adjust to an entirely new cultural environment, one that is much less rigid in its outward forms than the one they were used to in Soviet Russia. If they are coming to the United States, and perhaps to a lesser extent, to Canada and Australia, they will be entering a much more dynamic and people/consumer oriented society. This, in itself, calls for a great degree of flexibility on their part. Trying to imagine myself as a middle aged professional entering such a society boggles my mind.

To be more specific, the immigrant must have some very practical knowledge such as:

1. How to go through customs.
2. How to make use of public transportation.
3. How to make a telephone call.
4. How to apply for a job;
 - a. how to fill out the application
 - b. how to conduct himself in an interview
5. How to give and receive information.

If the transition isn't successful, I feel that much has been lost on both sides—one side being the immigrant who must consider this attempt at re-settlement a failure, the other side being the host country which has lost the talent and other attributes that this person could have contributed had he successfully made the transition from one society to another. It's a waste in human resources, a precious commodity.

I don't think it's too much to ask the citizens of English speaking countries to be more sympathetic to the plight or mental condition that the immigrant finds himself in, particularly when he or she has a legal right to be in the host country. Stephen Keller's study of refugees during the India-Pakistan re-settlement period following partition of the sub-continent considers this psychological state that the refugee/immigrant develops thus:

What happens during the actual trauma of becoming a refugee? There is little direct information of this other than such vague statements, made by refugees long after the fact, as, "It was like a nightmare." Two refugees with psychological training in two quite dis-similar books liken it to that ultimate of traumas: being born, an emergence from what was supposed to be a safe, warm, hospitable environment to a cold, hostile one, to a cutting of the umbilical cord tying oneself to a secure past. Other than these scanty descriptions there have been no reports on how the refugee felt during his uprooting, flight, and resettlement.³

This indicates, to me at least, that more research should be done in this area.

THE METHODOLOGY

All of the English classes at the school are standardized. This is achieved by the use of a basic text. Each teacher has a copy of this and uses it for all classes. It is flexible enough

³Keller, Stephen L., Uprooting and Social Change, (Delhi: Manchar Book Service, 1975.) p. 40.

for the individual teacher to incorporate some original ideas. Teachers are also allowed to deviate occasionally from the text with supplementary materials such as pictures or special readings.

The standardized text is called Basic English. It is a transformationally based text. Transformational grammar⁴ is a relatively new approach to the teaching of languages and is still in a developing process.

Almost all of the lessons in the Basic English text were written by the teachers at the Organizzazione Rieducazione Tecnica over the past few years. They were compiled and edited by Lyn R. Hale of the University of Rochester into a standardized textbook. The underlying format of the text is based on syntax and semantics which holds the chapters together to form a cohesive, self-contained unit.

4...The goal of transformational grammarians is to develop a grammar rich enough not only to generate all the sentences of a language and only the sentences, but also to capture the significant relationships between sentences and between elements of a sentence and to "explain" how speakers are able to produce and understand sentences...

Fromkin V. and Rodman R., An Introduction to Language.
(New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1974.)
p. 346.

The text emphasizes the 'regularities' in language; the 'regularities' being the ways in which the speaker of a language puts the words together to convey meaning. The student at ORT⁵ is introduced to basic sentence formations such as statements, negatives, yes-no questions and wh-word questions. These structures are used to teach basic survival skills which the student will need upon entering an English speaking society.

Each lesson in the Basic English text is organized around what is called a Cyclec - a set of exercises that teaches a particular structure such as the present tense verb endings or the possessive pronouns. The format of the Cyclec is as follows:

1. A conversation - this contains the structure to be taught.
2. Repetition - this contains the target structure and new vocabulary.
3. Substitution - the student provides the missing word/s in a drill.
4. Question/answer exercises - first teacher to student and later student to student.

⁵hereafter when referring to the Organizzazione Rieducazione Tecnica, I will use the initials ORT.

Variations in the above format include the use of transformation drills⁶ and role playing. Outside materials are drawn on frequently and include teacher-assigned written materials that the students are expected to do at home. The tapes used in the language laboratory have native American voices on them with different regional accents being used. Films are occasionally used.

The underlying assumption of the course is to view the English language as a means of communication. This is emphasized above all else. Grammar rules may or may not be explicitly taught. This is for the individual teacher and class to decide. In any event, the grammar rules are built in the materials for the student to discover for himself. I would like to offer a personal opinion here; I feel that many if not most people want to understand the grammar of a second language. By comparing the grammar of a second language with one's native language we can better understand the second language and be better able to construct meaningful sentences in that language.

It is stated that pronunciation is not a main concern of this course. However, intonation is very important. This seems to be compatible with the primary emphasis of the course which is to treat the language as a means to communication. Knowledge of intonation patterns can be very helpful to a person even if he doesn't know the precise meaning of an utterance.

⁶ example: teacher: I am here.
student: I was here.

The text for the ORT course states that in teaching it is most important to use a Cyclec in the context of the students. By this is meant that structures and vocabulary that will be most beneficial to the student on arriving in an English speaking country should be used.

The text is organized into thematic units, including the following:

1. introduction
2. transportation
3. shopping for clothes
4. shopping for food
5. school
6. employment
7. housing
8. the Post Office and banking

While the program is thematically organized, there is also careful grammatical sequencing. For example, when a student finishes the transportation module he should know how to tell time, make yes/no questions with the verb TO BE and how to make statements. He should know the personal pronouns in the subject forms and the possessive forms, A and THE, the demonstratives THIS and THAT, the present tense forms of the verb TO BE and how to make the present tense of other verbs.

During the time that I was at the school, I observed several teachers and also taught some classes myself. One particular class that I had direct teaching contact with was an intermediate level

class of fifteen students. The ages of the students varied from young men and women in their early twenties to middle aged couples. Most of them demonstrated a lively interest in learning the language and practicing skills they had already acquired. Many of the students also showed an interest in knowing the underlying grammatical principles of new structures.⁷ This was especially true of more mature students who wanted to compare it with the Russian language.

Of the classes that I observed, I want to show the step by step procedure of one. This was the second day of a beginning class of eleven students:

1. While taking attendance, the teacher reviewed the word "absent." This was done by means of a visual demonstration. The teacher impressed upon the students the necessity of knowing how to spell their names for immigration officials. The students spelled their names while the teacher wrote them on the blackboard.
2. The teacher reviewed the alphabet by grouping the letters according to sounds. Then a quick review of 'Good Morning' was done.
3. The teacher drew two stick figures on the blackboard and modeled a dialogue pointing at the figures:

I'm Dick Smith.

Who are you?

I'm L.B.

How are You?

I'm fine, thank you.

And you?

I'm fine, thank you.

⁷see footnotel on p. 10.

The dialogue was repeated several times with teacher to student and student to student responses. The teacher was physically very active throughout the lesson and correct pronunciation was stressed.⁸

4. The teacher put the dialogue on the blackboard and the students copied it in their notebooks. Then, it was reviewed both chorally and individually.

During the second hour of class, the teacher reviewed the differences between WHO and HOW by using the following dialogue;

Who are you?

I'm _____.

How are you?

I'm fine, thank you.

Later in the hour, time was given for a written exercise.

As I've stated before, the students are planning to enter an English speaking culture. Although some will go to Canada or Australia, most will be going to the United States. Therefore, American culture is emphasized in the program. Survival skills needed upon initial entry into the new culture are built into the basic text used in the classroom. These include how to make use of public transportation, how to shop for clothes and food, how to find a place to live, how to use the post office and banks.

⁸although pronunciation was clearly regarded as not important in the text, I found most of the teachers quite insistent that it be stressed in their classes.

Also included are skills needed to get a job, i.e., how to make out a job application form and what to say during an interview and the procedure for enrolling in a school.

The teachers also use supplementary materials to introduce the students to their new society. American documents such as the Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address and readings from American literature are read and discussed in class. Geographical information about particular cities or regions is available. Sometimes the students know in advance where they are going or where to expect to go. If this is the case, then information about that particular area is very useful to them.

These students come from a very rigid, fixed society. When they are trained for a particular job or profession, they expect to continue in that capacity for the rest of their lives. It is difficult for them to understand how people in a country like the United States can change their professions or jobs more than once throughout their working lives. Attempts are made by the school to illustrate this difference between cultures. However, it is less than successful. Not until the student is actually faced with the problem of finding a position in the new society, is he willing to accept what he has been told at the school.

It might be helpful if the course included some additional skills which are not presently taught. These could include reading schedules for buses, trains and other means of public transport; using street maps and being able to understand abbreviated dates and times. After finding a job, the student must hold onto it. Skills needed to help a person with their first job in the new country might be useful. Such skills could include dialogues built around being on time to work, calling in sick, keeping busy on the job and getting along with others. These job skills could be adapted to meet the needs of older people who have been working for many years and young people who have never held a job before. Learning how to read signs would be helpful. These could include road signs, hospital signs and signs in restaurants and other public places. Skill in buying a used car might be very useful for someone coming to the United States, a society of people on wheels.

Considering the wide range of ages and educational levels of the students, it is impossible to accomodate all of their individual needs. However, I feel that most of the skills included in the syllabus can help all of the students regardless of age or educational background.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The ORT school in Rome offers English language instruction to Russian Jew refugees who are waiting for visas to English speaking countries. The school has developed a program of instruction which it feels meets the basic and immediate needs of immigrants upon arriving in a foreign, English speaking country.

During the summer of 1977 I taught and observed classes at the ORT School as a means to evaluate the program offered there. Although the basic text developed and used at the school is called a transformation-generative approach, it appears to me to be a rather traditional audio-lingual text with situational re-enforcement dialogues. The classes I observed were definitely teacher centered and audio-lingual oriented. I don't mean to suggest that this is bad. It is, though, somewhat of a mis-representation of what I understand to be transformational grammar. The lessons are designed to give the student some linguistic knowledge that will be immediately useful upon arriving in a new country such as the United States. Perhaps a less teacher-centered class would encourage more 'real' generation of the language by the students. I think the school does the best that it can under the circumstances. I certainly saw some excellent teaching, teacher-centered though it be.

A good follow-up research on the success of this school's teaching would be to talk to the people who have since left the school and entered an English speaking country. The students are, of course, learning the language out of context in as much as Rome does not provide an English speaking environment.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Fromkin, V. and Rodman, R. An Introduction To Language. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1974.
2. Gefen, Aba, Unholy Alliance. New York: Express Printing, 1973.
3. Keller, Stephen L., Uprooting and Social Change. Delhi: Manohar Book Service, 1975.
4. The New York Times. November 27, 1977.
5. The New York Times. December 1, 1977.
6. Schroeter, Leonard, The Last Exodus. New York: Universe Books, 1974.
7. Time, Inc. "The New Immigrants: Still the Promised Land," July 5, 1977.
8. Time Inc. "Soviet Jews: Israel Wants Them All." November 22, 1976.
9. UNESCO. Cultural Rights as Human Rights. Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. 1970.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE RELATED TO
THE SUBJECT MATTER

1. Gefen, Aba, Unholy Alliance.
(New York: Express Printing, 1973).

This book traces the recent history of the Jewish people from World War Two to the present time. One of its main concerns is anti-Semitism - what it has led to in the past and its implications in the contemporary world. It emphasizes the need for the State of Israel to maintain a militant posture in an unfriendly world.

2. Keller, Stephen L., Uprooting and Social Change.
(Delhi: Manohar Book Service, 1975).

Although this book is concerned with the refugee problem in India and Pakistan at the time of partition and the two decades following it, the conclusions that the author draws from studying these refugees and their problems in dealing with social and psychological change can be applied to many refugee situations anywhere. Particularly interesting is the analysis of personality change within individuals who must radically alter their lives. An idea that emerges is that the refugee has to, in a manner of speaking, go through re-birth. He must leave a secure place in a society with fairly predictable outcomes and start life anew in a different and sometimes hostile one.

3. Schroeter, Leonard, The Last Exodus.
(New York: Universe Books, 1974).

This book relates the struggle of Soviet Jews to gain permission to leave the Soviet Union. It deals specifically with an underground movement dedicated to this cause. The author is an American Jew who has recently taken up residence in Israel and is now committed to the plight of Jews in the Soviet Union who wish to leave.

4. TIME, Inc. "Soviet Jews; Israel Wants Them All."
Time, Nov. 22, 1976.

The article states that recently 59% of Soviet Jews who have gained permission to leave the Soviet Union have expressed an interest in immigrating to the United States rather than to Israel. The refugees feel they have the right of free choice in this matter. Many expressed a fear of Arab/Israeli clashes. Israeli officials, particularly the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, are annoyed at this situation. The HIAS has been helping refugees since the 1880's.

5. TIME, Inc., "The New Immigrants: Still the Promised Land."
Time, July 5, 1976.

Many refugees think of the United States as a land of freedom - The Promised Land, the land of opportunity. Millions of immigrants came in the nineteenth century, including Russian Jews who were fleeing the pogroms there. Russian refugees, Jewish and non-Jewish, have enriched American society. Rostropovich, presently conductor of the National Symphony in Washington, D.C. and Mikhail Baryshnikov, a ballet dancer, are both Russian refugees.



3 3356 00035 1905

6. THE NEW YORK TIMES CO., "Language Hindering Russian Immigrants."
The New York Times, Sunday, Nov. 27, 1977.

This article discusses the problems of many Soviet Jewish immigrants to this country in finding employment. The reasons, many refugees feel, is the inadequate English language training they receive, especially as it concerns the older immigrant.

7. UNESCO, Cultural Rights as Human Rights.
(Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1970.)

This report is a compilation of papers presented at a session of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization by experts in the field related to the study of cultural policies. The presentation of various opinions were followed by discussions of cultural policies throughout the world.