

70,000 to Learn English for the Olympics

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The Sochi 2014 Organizing Committee Wednesday hired EF English First to teach the language to an astounding 70,000 people as part of preparations for the 2014 Winter Olympics.

Under the contract, the international firm will educate athletes, Sochi 2014 Organizing Committee staff, service providers — including taxi drivers and hotel maids — judges and volunteers. Most of the training will be carried out online.

"With our help, the Olympians will master modern spoken English," English First vice president Bernard Shearer said at a news conference.

Headquartered in Switzerland, English First beat six other contenders for the contract, whose value wasn't disclosed, organizing committee president Dmitry Chernyshenko said. He didn't name the competitors.

One reason for the choice, Chernyshenko said, was the firm's experience in giving language training for the 2008 Olympics in Beijing and 1988 Olympics in Seoul.

English First will provide training on a much larger scale at the games in the Black Sea resort of Sochi than in Beijing, where, according to Shearer, the company helped improve the English of 6,000 of the organizing staff.

The firm's global operations encompass 500,000 students every year, said its chief learning officer Christopher McCormick.

Online classes with live teachers and access to online educational content will hopefully be available in May 2012 and end with the opening of the games in February 2014, Shearer said.

The Olympics language courses come on the heels of government plans to create a more multilingual federal bureaucracy.

The Economic Development Ministry unveiled a strategy for innovative development in December that calls for 20 percent of federal officials to be fluent in foreign languages by 2020 — a group that would number 140,000 people.

A ministry spokesman was unable to say Wednesday whether the strategy, which was scheduled to be submitted to the Cabinet in February, was actually handed in.

The ministry's plan establishes fluency in English as a requirement for newly hired civil servants starting next year.

President Dmitry Medvedev, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov are able to communicate in the language. The Olympics organizing committee's Chernyshenko is a "good" speaker, Shearer said.

But some top federal ministers, such as Sports and Tourism Minister Vitaly Mutko and Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin, are largely confined to Russian.

Career bureaucrats have the option of enrolling at the presidential Academy for Civil Service for language classes.

Some others have seen their options shrink. Business visa rules introduced at the end of 2007 made life harder for expats working as English teachers, forcing them, or their employers, to apply for work visas and work permits instead — a much more cumbersome process.

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This article initially stated, incorrectly, that the government hired EF English First as part of preparations for the 2014 Winter Olympics. It should have said that the Sochi 2014 Organizing Committee hired EF English First.

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