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English Improving but Teachers Scarce

By Lena Smirnova

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Russian Railways has been investing in its employees' language skills. **Andrei Makhonin**

Visitors will still need to pack their phrasebooks for some time to come as Russia ranked last among European countries in terms of English-language skills, according to the English Proficiency Index that EF Education First released Thursday.

Globally, Russia placed 29th out of 54 countries where inhabitants were tested on their ability to read and write in English and understand spoken text.

Russia has moved up the ranking — it was 32nd out of 44 countries two years ago — but experts agree that there is still a long way to go. Bernard Shearer, vice president of EF English First, credited the positive trend to a demographic shift as well as progressive parenting attitudes.

"The older generations that didn't have the same opportunities to learn English are determined not to repeat those mistakes by investing a substantial part of their household budget into their child's English education," Shearer said.

The second edition of the English Proficiency Index, which was created in 2011, was compiled by testing 1.7 million adults in 54 countries for their knowledge of English. Respondents answered free online tests that measured their proficiency and this data was used to compile the index.

Scandinavian countries dominate the top spots in the ranking while the worst results are seen in Central and South America. Moscow, St. Petersburg and Novosibirsk showed the best index scores among Russian cities with Muscovite participants exceeding Hungarians and Germans in English proficiency.

Experts are optimistic that Russia will continue to rise in the ranking because younger generations are more determined to study languages. Young Russians, ages 18 to 22, are the most proficient group, whereas in other European countries this title goes to professionals who are 30 to 40 years old.

"If we can see these children getting older, maintaining their English abilities and their younger brothers and sisters also having these strong abilities, then there is hope for Russia to start catching up with the rest of Europe in terms of their English skills," said Rachel Baker, the study's director.

Russian companies have also started to look more into giving their employees language skills as part of their wider effort to become more international. Workers in Russia's technology and pharmaceutical sectors have the strongest English skills, but the language skills rating for the banking sector— where Russia ranks behind Mexico and Brazil—are less than half of the overall average.

EF English First offers courses for corporate clients. Their biggest customers include Russian Railways and AvtoVAZ.

Russian Railways launched the initiative to train over 1,000 employees, including managers and Sapsan train conductors, two years ago. This initiative aligns with the company's rules that none of its managers can be promoted without knowing the language, said Eduard Baldakov, English First's corporate training manager for Russia and CIS.

Russia needs to improve the language education offered in public schools in order to improve its ranking, experts said. The Education Ministry is considering making foreign language study a mandatory part of the school program and requiring students to take a national exam.

Private companies are happy to fill the void where the public sector falters, but recruiting good teachers can be tricky.

AAA English Language Courses center, which operates two schools in Moscow, employs 11 tutors and needs to hire eight more native English speakers to open a third location, said the center's general director Michael Lang. He posted three online advertisements for tutor positions last year and another three this year, but received 100 fewer applications in 2012.

Interest in working as a tutor in Russia may have declined because of the "constant negativity in the British press about Russia," Lang said.

"Russia also seems to be so far away," he said, adding that last week's announcement that

Easy Jet would start operating low cost flights between Moscow and London could inspire more language tutors to make the move.

The lineup of international sporting events here is expected to help raise English proficiency in the country. There is a language training project underway in Sochi that aims to give volunteers minimal English skills and medium-level proficiency for people in more responsible roles.

The Education Ministry of Tatarstan has also commissioned EF English First to improve the quality of the republic's English teachers. This is part of the broader efforts to make Tatarstan more attractive internationally ahead of the 2013 Universiade students sporting competition.

When EF English First started working on this project, it became clear that 80 percent of the teachers couldn't pass state language exams, Baldakov said. Additional training helped to move them to the highest levels of English proficiency.

Prospects for improvement look bleaker beyond the regions where sporting events will take place. Lang said that he has no plans to open schools in the regions. The demand is there, but it is small, he said.

"If you live in a region, you're going to come to Moscow anyway to study English," Lang said. "All roads lead to Moscow."

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