

Taking Your English From Good to Great

By [Luc Jones](#)

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Native speakers of English are regularly lambasted for their unwillingness or point-blank refusal to learn a foreign language. The most common excuse is that even if you do try, everyone will just reply in English anyway.

Perhaps I was fortunate to have been born to a British father and a French-Canadian mother who wanted their family to be bilingual in English and French —albeit the heavily accented Quebec variety of French. But the reality was that when I grew up in a small British town with only summers in Quebec and the occasional vacation in France, my French suffered, since there were almost no "outsiders" with whom to converse. As for Russian, I still can't figure out how foreigners can live and work in Russia for years and get by with only a handful of phrases.

Of course, the task is a little easier for non-native speakers of English, since English is very much the business language of the world. It's the one demanded by major employers in Russia, even if the overwhelming majority of the communication is conducted in Russian.

I am often asked by Russians: "Which foreign language should I learn next?" While this is a simple enough question, it's tricky to answer since it depends very much on what you hope to get from it.

If you begin taking Italian classes because you vacation there, enjoy Italian food, culture, music, architecture or football or perhaps even have an Italian spouse or lover, then fantastic. But despite the presence of hundreds of Italian companies in the Russian market, even a reasonably strong grasp of the language is rarely going to seal a deal during an interview process when you're competing against candidates whose work experience is more relevant than yours.

The Italian general manager wouldn't have been posted to Moscow if he didn't speak English, and he might even converse effectively in Russian. In any case, the general manager is looking for different skill sets connected to the job itself. And don't forget that the office might easily be run by a Russian manager these days. The same goes for "other" languages, such as Chinese, Japanese, Korean, German, French and Spanish.

Only a decade ago, German and French companies setting up and expanding into Russia explained to us that prospective Russian candidates should speak either German or French, preferably in addition to English. Despite our insistence that this was unrealistic, many persisted and then struggled to find the perfect candidates. Nowadays, they rarely even list another language as a "nice to have." Good English will generally suffice.

For Russian job candidates, your best bet from a purely career-progression point of view, would be to improve your level of English — particularly verbal skills — from good to very good. Foreigners are always impressed by a fluent English speaker, and visiting hiring managers regularly will prefer an average candidate with strong English skills over a candidate who better fits the job description but struggled to make themselves understood in an interview. Yet experience shows that this "English-first" approach to hiring often backfires.

Please don't get me wrong. I am not trying to discourage people from learning a second foreign language. In fact, quite the opposite: Every new language opens doors and, with it, tons of new experiences and possibilities, especially in terms of "soft skills."

But in the same way that you wouldn't expect being a good tennis, chess or piano player to increase your net worth during a job interview, don't expect your good Spanish to guarantee you a 20 percent pay raise during your next job search.

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