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Exploring Structure and Salience of Stereotypes about Russia

Summary: Numerous studies have explored images and representations about Russia. For the most part these studies were done in Western socio-cultural and educational contexts. The present article focuses on images about Russia held by learners of Russian in a big public university in Malaysia. Besides exploring the content of the students’ stereotypical representations about Russia this study distinguishes consensual stereotypes and assesses their salience, which has not been done previously. The findings reveal that the students’ representations aligned with popular images about Russia and that the top salient stereotypes about Russia were a “big country” and a “cold country”. The article offers some suggestions about how knowledge of the students’ stereotypes about the target language country could be employed to teach the cultural component of the language program.

Keywords: consensual stereotypes, salience, Russia, Russian language learning

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1 Introduction

There is a vast body of literature devoted to representations about Russia. The interest in the country and its predecessor political entities dates back several centuries when first travelogues were written by the visitors to Muscovy principality and to Novgorod (see Beller 2007). For the most part, the studies on representations about Russia have been done within Western cultural contexts; very little literature is available on the perceptions of Russia from a different angle (e.g., Sorokin 1967). The present study makes a modest academic attempt to expand research on Russia’s images and representations beyond Western socio-
This empirical study explores stereotypes about Russia held by young Malaysians who learn the Russian language in a big public university.

This article not only examines stereotypical images held by the students but it also explores which of the images form consensual stereotypes about Russia. The term “stereotype” can be perceived as a negative or even a prejudiced perception of other countries, cultures and people. However, it is not necessarily so. In line with research on stereotypes in the field of social psychology, stereotype in this article is defined as a “mental image about the Russia held by the learners of Russian” while a consensual stereotype is defined as an “image about Russia shared by more than ten percent of the language learners”.

The present study not only examines stereotype content but also assesses salience of the stereotypical images about Russia, which has not been done before. It raises the following questions:
1. What consensual stereotypes do Malaysian students have about Russia?
2. What categories do the stereotypical images about Russia form?
3. How salient are these categories of images?

This article focuses on stereotypes about Russia held by young Malaysians who learned the Russian language in a big public university. Exploring young people’s views about other countries, cultures and people is important because, as Turner (2009) pointed out, these representations serve as a foundation for their future perceptions of the world. Besides, foreign language educators agree that learning a new language involves enhancing one’s knowledge and understanding of the target language (TL) country, culture and speaking community. Exploring language learners’ stereotypes can help language educators make empirically-driven decisions about the cultural content of the language program.

This article is organized in the following way. Subsequent to this introductory part, Section Two gives a brief overview of relevant literature while section Three is concerned with the methodology used to conduct this research. The fourth section presents the findings focusing on consensual stereotypes about Russia and salience of the stereotypical representations about the TL country. Chapter five discusses the findings and draws some practical implications for the teaching of the Russian language.
2 Literature Review

2.1 The Concepts of Image and Stereotype

Aristotle pioneered a scholarly discussion and investigation of human imagination (“phantasia”) in his oeuvre “De Anima” where he proposed that a strong link exists between imagination, cognition and memory. Ever since the topics concerning mental imagery have excited the minds of philosophers, scientists and scholars (see van Riel and Destrée 2009). Nowadays mental images are defined as “representations of objects in our mind” and imagery is recognized to be central to the processes of human cognition, memory and information management (Gardini, Cornoldi and De Beni 2006: 41).

Stereotypes are a special case of mental images due to their distinctive qualities. First of all, as etymology of the word indicates (from the Greek words “stereo-s” meaning “solid” and “typos” meaning “a model”), stereotypes are inflexible by nature. Secondly, stereotypes about other cultures and countries are culturally bound. Walter Lippmann (1922/1965: 3), who introduced the concept of stereotypes into the Social Sciences and Humanities and who famously described them as “pictures in our heads”, pointed out that people perceive surrounding reality “in the form stereotyped for us by our culture” (Lippmann 1922/1965: 55).

2.2 Research on Stereotypes in Applied Linguistics

Studies in the field of applied linguistics and foreign language education recognize a fact that language learners bring a variety of images about the TL country, culture and people into the classroom (Byram and Kramsch 2008; Dlaska 2000; Drewelow 2013; Schultz and Haerle 1995; Taylor 1977; Webber 1990). Exploring language learners’ stereotypes can help the language educators to make empirically-driven decisions about the teaching of the cultural component of the language program (Schulz and Haerle 1995; Vande Berg 1990).

More specifically, Byram and Kramsch (2008) proposed that there exist three kinds of stereotypes that need to be acknowledged in the context of foreign language education. Firstly, some stereotypes are deeply rooted in the linguistic structures and categories of the target language and for this reason they shape the ways the language is used. These stereotypes are usually not recognizable for the people unfamiliar with the TL culture. However, they are important to know because this knowledge can help develop not only linguistic but also cultural aptitude of the language learners. For example, complexities and nuances of the target culture can be reflected in the usages of the personal
pronouns or a degree of formality expected among the speakers of the target language (Weiss 1971).

The second variety of stereotypes concerns monolithic representations of the whole people. This is the kind of stereotypes that the language learners bring to classroom (e.g., “the Italians are musical”, “the French are romantic”). The third kind of stereotypes represents “collective national memory” and collective consciousness of the native speakers of the target language (Byram and Kramsch 2008: 32). The examples of these stereotypes can be found in proverbs, sayings, popular catchphrases and even in political slogans (Byram and Kramsch 2008). Weiss (1971: 41) noted that these stereotypes define the ways that the whole TL culture perceives itself and he gives such examples as the “American Way of Life” and “Deutsche Tüchtigkeit”.

Byram and Kramsch (2008) proposed that language educators need to address all of these three kinds of stereotypes in the language classroom. The present study focuses on the second variety of stereotypes described by the researchers and it demonstrates how a study of these stereotypes can help address the other two varieties in the Russian language classroom. Thus far, there are only two available studies that explored stereotypical representations about Russia held by beginner and advanced beginner learners of Russian (Nikitina and Furuoka 2013a, b). The researchers found that the largest categories of images concerned Russia’s territorial vastness, its cold climate, the country’s cultural and technological achievements, its military prowess, the past history, especially the communist rule, and the references to the native speakers of the language which included their physical appearances and perceived personality traits. Also, the language learners at both levels of language program tended to view Russia’s history, its military and the political system in a negative light.

2.3 Representations and Stereotypes about Russia and the Russians

Several scholarly works have explored historical, cultural and intellectual backgrounds that contributed to shaping of the image of Russia in Europe (Feklyunina 2012; Lieven 2000/2001; Naarden and Leerssen 2007; Neumann 1999; Tsygankov 2012). An illuminating analysis of European representations of Russia from the 15th to the 20th centuries was done by Neumann (1999) who demonstrated how in the course of centuries constructing Russia as the “other” helped forging a common European identity. Such historical perspectives on the major and ubiquitous images of a country are important because, especially in the case of Russia, the representations of the past “have sweeping contemporary salience” (Neu-
Moreover, the past representations of Russia influence the present-day tone and even determine the contents of the mass media reports about the country’s economic, social and political issues (Feklyunina 2012; Tsygankov 2012). Moreover, the “metaphors of the past” (Neumann 1999: 66) shape contemporary representations of Russia in Western cultural products ranging from Hollywood movies to the video- and computer games.

Over centuries the images of Russia oscillated between positive and menacing. According to Naarden and Leerssen (2007: 226), medieval Kievan Rus’ had “a vague but positive reputation in Western Europe” where it was regarded as “a distant land”. The increasing political assertiveness of the Muscovy rulers in the 15th century followed by the emergence of Russia as a strong political entity in the 16th century coupled with considerable cultural distance from the rest of Europe engendered rather ambiguous attitudes toward Russia. On the positive side, Russia’s geographical and a perceived cultural proximity to various Oriental political entities raised hopes among some European visionaries that the country could become a ‘conduit’ for European enlightenment or, as Leibnitz imagined, “a bridge between Europe and China” (Groh cited in Neumann 1999). Such views promoted the representation of Russia as an apprentice or “a learner in the European state system” and this metaphor is still very much in use in the present discourses on Russia (Neumann 1999: 76).

Parallel to the serene and unthreatening “apprentice” image of Russia there has existed a more menacing image of the country as “the barbarian at the gate” (Neumann 1999: 77). The ideas of Russia’s inherent expansionist nature can be traced back to the 16th century. Thus, in a letter written by a Hubertus Langeutus in 1558, Muscovy was singled out among all the European political entities as the principality most likely to grow and expand (Groh cited in Neumann 1999). These perceptions grew even stronger during the Northern War between Russia and Sweden (1700–1721) and the representations of Russia in contemporary literary sources grew even more menacing (Neumann 1999). In the 19th century, Britain became one of the major geopolitical rivals of the Russian Empire. The result of these past hostilities between the two nations has been enduring. As Lieven (2000/2001: 26) argued, “intellectual basis for, and even the specific phraseology, of Russophobia was put forward in Britain in the nineteenth century”.

Putting centuries-old political and ideological rivalries between Russia and its Western and Northern neighbours aside, one of the most enduring images about Russia over many centuries has been quite neutral. It concerns the country’s “large and spacious” territory. An “immense continent” and a “vast Empire” were among the earliest descriptions in the accounts written by various travelers and visitors (Naarden and Leerssen 2007; Neumann 1999). Whether this spacious
empire is to be viewed as belonging in Asia or Europe is a point of contestation till the present day.

As this brief review of literature reveals, the perceptions of Russia among its European neighbours have been quite ambiguous. The following sections focus on perceptions of Russia held by young people in Malaysia, a country geographically and culturally distant from Russia.

3 Method

3.1 Participants and Research Instrument

Two groups comprising 28 students learning the Russian language in University of Malaya participated in this study. The students were asked to answer in writing the question “What images come to your mind when you hear the words ‘Russia’ and ‘Russian’?” They could write any number of words or short phrases, in English or in Malay, that they thought would be sufficient to describe the TL country. Then the students were instructed to give marks to their images on the scale from −2 (for “a very negative image”) to +2 (for a “very positive image”).

3.2 Data Organization and Analysis

The images generated by the students were typed ad verbatim. Then the data were cleaned. This included correcting and unifying spelling. Also, the words or phrases written in German or Malay were translated into English. This step was necessary to enable a computer-assisted analysis of the data. To answers research questions (1) and (3) the data were transformed into the Microsoft Notepad format and analyzed using the computer software ANTHROPAC 4.0 (Borgatti 1992).

In the next step of the analysis, which aimed to answer research question (2) and to identify the categories of images about Russia, content analysis was performed. Content analysis refers to “the intellectual process of categorizing qualitative textual data into clusters of similar entities, or conceptual categories, to identify consistent patterns and relationship between variables or themes” (Julien 2008: 120). Open-coding approach inherent to content analysis helps to separate the data into categories or clusters or images. This means that the data rather than theory or a priory decisions on the part of the researcher determine the codes and the resultant categories (Mackey and Gass 2005; Ryan and Bernard 2003).

When we separated the images into the categories we aimed to achieve logically consistent and coherent clusters of representations about Russia. In some
instances an image could not form a category with the rest of the answers due to its idiosyncratic nature. These images were placed in the category “Others”.

3.3 Assessing Salience of the Categories of Images about Russia

Weller and Romney (1988) described salience in terms of familiarity or importance. As they pointed out, more salient images in the free-lists provided by the participants in a study occupy higher positions in the lists. In other words, they come to the minds of the respondents more readily compared to the less salient images. Several approaches or indices have been devised to measure salience (e.g., Smith 1993; Smith and Borgatti 1997; Smith, Furbee, Maynard, Quick and Ross 1995; Sutrop 2001).

Salience of the images about Russia is measured in this study by the frequency the images are mentioned and also by the position an image occupies in the student’s list. To be more specific, we employed the Modified free-list salience (MFLS) index developed by Smith et al. (1995). Smith et al. (1995) offered only a verbal explanation of the MFLS index, which Sutrop (2001) transformed into the following mathematical terms:

\[
\text{MFLS}_c = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{F_c} (L_i - R_{ji})}{N}
\]

where MFLS\(_c\) is the modified free-list salience index of the category of stereotypical images \(c\); \(L_i\) is the number of images mentioned by student \(i\), and \(R_{ji}\) is the rank of image \(j\) in the individual list of images. It should be noted that in the MFLS index, the rank of the first image (\(R_{j1}\)) in the list is codified as 1, the second image is codified as 2 and so on.

There is available an alternative approach to the manual calculation of the MFLS index. The computations can be performed with the aid of the ANTHROPAC 4.0 software (Borgatti 1992) as it was done in the present study.

3.4 Assessing Favourability of the Categories of Images

In order to have more insights into the overall representational structure of the students’ stereotypes about Russia, we calculated favourability of the categories of images besides assessing their salience. To compute favourability or mean
valence (MV) of the categories of images we used the marks or ratings given by
the students to each image in their lists. The following formula was employed for
this purpose:

\[
MV_c = \frac{\sum F_j V_{ji}}{F_j}
\]

(2)

where \( MV_c \) is mean valence of the category of images (c) about Russia, \( V_{ji} \) is the
valence rating assigned by student \( i \) to image \( j \), \( F_j \) is the number of images in the
category.

Depending on the MV value, the categories of images about Russia could be
described as highly positive (1.500 ≤ MV ≤ 2.000), positive (0.500 ≤ MV < 1.500),
mildly positive (0 < MV < 0.500), neutral (MV = 0), mildly negative (-0.500 < MV < 0),
negative (-1.500 < MV ≤ -0.500) and highly negative (-2.000 ≤ MV ≤ -1.500).

4 Findings

4.1 Consensual Stereotypes about Russia: Their Frequency and
Salience

The students provided a total of 209 images about the target language country. The longest individual list contained thirteen (n=13) images while three shortest lists had 2 (n=2) images each.

Among these 209 images 12 were distinguished as consensual stereotypes about Russia. This means that these images had been mentioned by more than 10% of the respondents or more than 3 Russian language learners. Table 1 shows the consensual stereotypes about Russia. It also reports these images’ frequencies in number (n) and percentage (%). The last two columns of the table inform about salience (MFLS) of each consensual stereotype and its rank according to salience (SR).

As the findings show, “big country” (MFLS=0.351) and “cold country” (MFLS=0.303) were the top salient consensual stereotypes about Russia. They were also the most frequently mentioned representations about the country. Each of these images was recalled by almost half of the respondents, or 46% and 43%, respectively. The following in salience consensual stereotype was “Matryoshka” (MFLS=0.209), which refers to Russian nested wooden dolls. It was mentioned by almost one-third (or 32%) of the respondents. The images “Russian alphabet”
“difficult language” (MFLS=0.108) and “astronaut” (MFLS=0.096) came to the minds of one-fifth (21%) of the language learners.

Table 1: Consensual stereotypes about Russia, their frequencies and salience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
<th>MFLS Index</th>
<th>Salience Rank (SR)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Big country</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>0.351</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cold country</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>0.303</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matryoshka</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0.209</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian alphabet</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0.169</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult language</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0.108</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Astronaut</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0.096</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moscow</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0.154</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Victor (the language teacher)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0.129</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beautiful architecture</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.095</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Petersburg</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.088</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.087</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitas (a pop-singer)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.066</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The rest of the consensual stereotypes were mentioned by 18% and 14% of the respondents. The former images included the capital of Russia “Moscow” (MFLS=0.154) and “Dr. Victor” who is the language instructor for the Russian language course (MFLS=0.129). The latter images were “beautiful architecture” (MFLS=0.095), “St Petersburg” (MFLS=0.088), “winter” (MFLS=0.087) and “Vitas” who is a Russian pop-singer (MFLS=0.066).

As the results demonstrated in Table 1 indicate, for the most part, salience and frequency of the consensual stereotypes about Russia were aligned. This means that the images that came to the minds of the respondents most readily were also the images mentioned most frequently and *vice versa*.
4.2 Categories of Stereotypical Images about Russia: Their Content, Salience, Favourability and Size

In the course of the content analysis, the 209 stereotypical images about Russia were separated into 11 categories, not including the category “Others” which contained 8 idiosyncratic images. The findings concerning these 11 categories of images are shown in Table 2. These include: (1) salience of each category (MFLS), (2) category’s rank according to its salience (SR); (3) category’s favourability or mean valence (MV); (4) category’s rank according to favourability (MVR); and (5) the number of images in each category (n). Due to a highly heterogeneous nature of the images in the category “Others” we did not compute this category’s salience, favourability and the corresponding ranks for these two parameters.

The top salient category of images about Russia was “Cold weather” (MFLS=0.390). It contained such images as “cold”, “cold country”, “very cold country”, “cold weather”, “long winter”, “lots of snow”, “winter” and “very cold in winter”. The majority of these images were rated negatively and the most frequent rating given by the students to their answers was −1, which accounted for the category’s negative mean valence (MV=−0.368). However, not all images in this category were rated as negative: three images were marked as neutral (i.e., were given the mark 0) while six representations in this group were rated positively (+1).

Second in salience was the category “Big and powerful country” (MFLS=0.375). It included the images concerning Russia’s vast territory (e.g., “a very big country”, “big”, “big country”, “huge country”, “large area” and “the largest country in the world”). These images received either positive or neutral ratings. Also placed in this cluster were the answers referring to Russia as a “powerful country” or “strong country”. The images in this category received mixed evaluations from the respondents as reflected in their neutral (“strong country” 0), positive (“powerful country” +2) and negative (“strong country” −1) ratings. Overall, this category of images was positive (MV=0.813).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>MFLS Index</th>
<th>Salience rank (SR)</th>
<th>Category mean valence (MV)</th>
<th>MV Rank (MVR)</th>
<th>Category size (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cold weather</td>
<td>0.390</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-0.368</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big and powerful country</td>
<td>0.375</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.813</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architecture, arts and culture</td>
<td>0.350</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.676</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>MFLS Index</td>
<td>Salience rank (SR)</td>
<td>Category mean valence (MV)</td>
<td>MV Rank (MVR)</td>
<td>Category size (n)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People and population</td>
<td>0.337</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian language and alphabet</td>
<td>0.327</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.476</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cities, places and sites</td>
<td>0.303</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.478</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matryoshka and things Russian</td>
<td>0.221</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.667</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military and war</td>
<td>0.151</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>-0.800</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology, aerospace industry and education</td>
<td>0.147</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.733</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soviet Union and communism</td>
<td>0.058</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-1.000</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mafia</td>
<td>0.019</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>-1.500</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The category labelled “Architecture, arts and culture” was the third in salience (MFLS=0.350). This category contained the images concerning Russian architecture (e.g., “beautiful old architecture”, “beautiful buildings”, “colourful buildings” and “special buildings”), music (“music”, “beautiful songs”, “beautiful folksongs” “the song ‘Kalinka’”), literature (“famous literature”, “[the novel] ‘Anna Karenina’”, “[Russia] has many female poets”), arts (“ballet”) and culture (“culture”, “unique culture”, “interesting culture”). Some students mentioned the Soviet-era pop song “Eto zdorovo!” (“That’s Great!”), which they had listened during the class. Concerning the marks, only one student gave the neutral rating 0 to the image “folk song ‘Kalinka’”. The rest of the answers were rated positively. As a result, this category of images was highly positive (MV= 1.676).

“People and population” was the fourth most salient category of images about Russia (MFLS=0.337). Also, it was the most voluminous group of images as it contained 41 representations of Russia. In this category were included several general responses referring to “Russian people” or simply “people”. Some images concerned the physical attributes and appearance of the Russians (e.g., “blue eyes”, “tall nose”, “gold hair”, “pretty girls”). Some students had described the perceived typical behaviour or traits of the Russian people (e.g., “Russian people drink vodka”, “people wear fur and leather in winter”, “[they have] strong accent”). The category also contained several evaluative remarks about the Russians (e.g., “nice people”) and the images referring to the qualities that the students attached to the Russian people (e.g., “people rich in culture”). Several
students provided the names of Russian people, which included their Russian
language teacher, “Dr. Victor”, pop singer Vitas, tennis players Anna Kournikova
and Maria Sharapova, Russian Tsar Nicolas II, Princess Anastasia, President
Vladimir Putin and painter Ilya Repin (1844–1930). Also included in the category
“People and population” were the images “big population” and “huge Muslim
population”. This category of images was positive as reflected in its mean valence
value (MV = 1.000). Among the images that were given the positive ratings by the
students were “(they have) different eye colour”, “Russian athletes”, “pretty girls”
and “people are nice”. The neutral rating 0 was given to the answers “Anastasia”,
“Nicolas II”, “Anna Kournikova”, “Maria Sharapova”, “people”, “Repin”, “strong
accent” and “Vitas”. Some of the negative marks were given to the images
concerning the physical appearance of the Russians (e.g., “Russians have blond
hair and are tall” [−1] and “tall nose” [−1]); in addition, two students assigned the
negative ratings to the images “Maria Sharapova” (−1) and “Vladimir Putin” (−2).

The fifth top salient category of images was named “Russian language and
alphabet” (MFLS=0.327). It included the remarks concerning the difficulty of the
Russian language (e.g., “hard language”, “difficult language”, “Russian is very
difficult”). These answers were mostly marked negatively (−1 or −2). Due to this,
the category was only mildly positive (MV=0.476). However, more than half
(n=11) of the images in the category “Russian language and alphabet” were
rated positively by the respondents. Among them were the references to the
Russian alphabet (e.g., “alphabet”, “different writing-complicated but pretty”
and “Russian alphabet is interesting”). These images were marked positively.
Among other positive images were the descriptions “unique language” (+2),
“new language” (+2) and “interesting language” (+1).

Following in salience was the category “Cities, places and sites” (MFLS=0.303).
In this cluster were included the images referring to particular cities and areas in
Russia (i.e., “Moscow”, “St Petersburg”, “Siberia”). Several images evoked famous
tourist landmarks (e.g., “Kremlin”, “metro” (subway), “Red Square” and “the
Hermitage Museum”). Also placed in this cluster were less specific remarks regard-
ing “tourist attractions”, “towns”, “historical places” and the comments about
Russian panorama and landscape (“a lot of churches”, “beautiful sea cost”). The
majority of images in this category were marked +2. As a consequence, this category
was positive (MV=1.478).

The category “Matryoshka and things Russian” was sixth in salience
(MFLS=0.221). However, despite somewhat lower salience this group of images
was highly positive (MV=1.667). Included here were representations of various
paraphernalia traditionally associated with Russia, such as “matryoshka”, “Rus-
sian dolls” or “babushka dolls”, “gold Easter eggs”, “blini” (Russian pancakes)
and “samovar” (a self-heating vessel to boil water which was traditionally
placed on the table during tea-drinking). In this category, only one image (“blini”) received the neutral rating 0, while the remaining images were rated positively and mostly received the mark +2.

Following in salience was the category “Military and war” (MFLS=0.151). It contained such responses as “military”, “nuclear weapons”, “war”, “war with Japan”. The majority of the images were rated negatively and only two responses were given positive ratings, namely, “military” (+1) and, somewhat unexpectedly, “nuclear weapon” (+1). This category of images was negative (MV= −0.800).

Next in salience was the group of images relating to “Technology, aerospace industry, education” (MFLS=0.147). This category of images was high positive (MV=1.733). It included some general remarks about “technology”, the references to Russia as a country “famous in science” or as a “country with high technology”. Also placed in this category were the answers “airspace technology”, “rocket technology”, “education”, “astronaut”. All the images in this group were rated positively and the majority received the highest rating +2.

The lowest salience had the categories labelled “Soviet Union and communism” (MFLS=0.058) and “Mafia” (MFLS=0.019). It should be noted that these groups of images were also the smallest as they contained five (n=5) and two (n=2) images, respectively. In the category “Soviet Union” one image only was assigned a positive mark by the respondent, namely, “Soviet Union” (+1). The rest of the answers (e.g., “Soviet Union”, “a communist country”, “governed by the communist rule”) were marked negatively. This category of images was negative (MV= −1.000). The two images in the category “Mafia” were “Russian mafia in US drama” rated −1 and “Russian mafia” rated −2. This category was highly negative (MV= −1.500).

5 Discussion and Pedagogical Implications

The students provided a voluminous list of representations about Russia totalling 209 images. The 11 consensual stereotypes about Russia concerned such varied country-related aspects as geography, climate, technology, culture, art, language, cities and people. The findings indicated that the students most readily associated the TL country with a vast space and cold climate as it was evidenced in high salience and frequency of the relevant consensual stereotypes about Russia. It should be noted that the representations of Russia as a ‘vast empire’ and ‘a land of snow’ have been among the most enduring and ubiquitous images of the country for centuries.

Overall, the findings of the present study align with the results reported in the available research literature on Russian language learners’ images about the target
language country (Nikitina and Furuoka 2013a,b). However, the focus on salience of the stereotypical representations adopted in this study allowed some important additional insights into the representational structure of the language learners’ images. To be more specific, in support of the previous studies’ findings the top five most salient categories of images about Russia were “Cold weather”, “Big and powerful country”, “Architecture, arts and culture”, “People and population” and “Russian language and alphabet”. With the exception of the category “Big and powerful country” the top salient groups of images were also the largest ones.

Similar to the results obtained in the earlier studies, the students’ images were coherent enough to form the categories “Soviet Union and communism” and “Military and war”; and in all the three studies these categories of images were negative. However, the findings of the present study revealed that though these categories did contribute to the underlying representational structure of the images about Russia their salience was very low. This means that despite the fact that the images concerning these aspects were recalled by the students they tended to come to the respondents’ minds as an afterthought and not as the most readily available images about the country.

In addition, the findings revealed that – with the exception of the category “Cold weather” – the negative groups of the images about the target language country were also the smallest ones. Regarding the category “Cold weather”, its negative mean valence does not necessarily mean that the students had negative attitudes toward the country. Rather, this could be interpreted as their dislike or a lack of appreciation for the cold weather.

Among interesting insights of this study is the finding that some of the students’ images about Russia were directly influenced by the classroom reality and by external cultural products. Thus, many of the respondents associated the words “Russia” and “Russian” with their language teacher, Dr. Victor Pogadaev. This image received the highest possible favourability rating, which contributed to the overall favourability of the category “People and population”. Also, the students mentioned the songs “Kalinka” and “Eto zдорово!” that they had listened and learned in their Russian classes. Regarding other sources of information, one image – “Russian mafia in US drama” – clearly attested to the fact that depictions of the country in external cultural products, such as Hollywood movies, do influence the language learners’ perceptions.

Some pedagogical implications can be drawn from the findings of this study especially concerning the teaching of the cultural component of the language program. The teaching of culture in the beginner level of a language program remains for the most part limited to introducing various aspects of daily life realities and some factual information about the target language country. However, it does not need be so. As Byram and Kramsch (2008) pointed out, linguistic
structures are saturated with important cultural concepts and categories. These insights can – and should be – shared with the language learners even at the beginner level. In addition, the researchers reminded us that various proverbs, sayings, political slogans and catch phrases coming from the target language culture have a good potential to expand the students’ linguistic and cultural aptitude. For example, when introducing Russian alphabet the first author of this article used to tell the students the Russian saying «Я последняя буква в алфавите» (“Я’ is the last letter in the alphabet”). In Russian, я is both the letter and the the first-person singular pronoun equivalent to English “I”. Parents in Russia often cite this saying to their children to point out that people should not be selfish.

Also, the students may be interested to know that the original Cyrillic alphabet was called “азбука” and that this word comes from the names of two first letters in Cyrillic script, just like it is the case with its English word “alphabet” which comes from the Greek letters “alpha” and “beta”. In modern Russian the word “азбука” is used in such expressions as “азбука Морсе” (the Morse code) and “азбука Брейля” (the Braille code). As additional cultural information, the students might be told that the first textbook used in primary schools in Russia is called “Азбука”. Furthermore, when teaching greetings in Russian, the language instructor may want to explain the Russian word “Здравствуйте” and a less formal variant “Здравствуй” have the meaning “I wish you good health”. These greetings could be then compared with the greetings in the language learners’ mothers tongue.

Knowing that Malaysian students tend to strongly associate Russia with snow and cold – and that they usually view these representations as negative – the first author of this article used to tell the students that while the most part of the country’s territory has cold climate, some areas in Southern Russia around the Black Sea have subtropical climate. At the same time, the students can be introduced to such fairy tales as “Morozko” (“Jack Frost”) or “Snegurochka” (“The Snow Maiden”) to show some examples of how the target culture sees itself. Also, when teaching names of seasons in Russian the students were given the proverb “Сколько лет, сколько зим” (lit. “So many summers, so many winters”), which is equivalent to the English saying “Long time no see”.

To conclude, linguistic structures and categories contain a wealth of material that could be employed for teaching the target culture while giving priority to teaching the target language. Language educators need to be aware of this vast hidden potential. In addition, they may benefit from knowing the content and the underlying representational structure of the stereotypes that their students bring to the language classroom.
References


