“A Distant Land of Snow…”: Russian Language Learners’ Representations of Russia

Summary

Extensive research has been done on language learners’ perceptions and representations of the target language country, culture and speaking community. However, first of all, there is a lack of such studies in the context of Russian language teaching and learning. Secondly, no attempt has been made in the previous studies to quantitatively assess the favourability of the country images held by the language learners. The present study addresses these gaps in research literature. It employs an interdisciplinary approach to explore the content of Russian language learners’ stereotypical representations of Russia and to assess favourability of these stereotypes. The findings indicate that the students’ representations of Russia were predominantly positive though their knowledge about the country was limited. The study offers a discussion on pedagogical implications of its findings.

Keywords: country representations, stereotype favourability, Russian language teaching, culture teaching

1 Introduction

Students come to the language classroom with their own ideas and images about the language they learn, the country or countries where this language is spoken and the communities that speak the target language. It has been suggested that the students’ perceptions about the target language country are often based not on a solid knowledge but rather on stereotypical representations which, while not necessarily negative, are usually erroneous and inaccurate (Allen 2004; Ekşi 2009; Schultz and Haerle 1995; Vande Berg 1990; Webber 1990). Some researchers have argued that positive notions about the target language culture, countries and native speakers can enhance the successful outcome of the language learning process while negative perceptions might inhibit it (Castellotti and Moore 2002; Gardner 1985, Gardner and Lambert 1972).

Several studies have been done on foreign language learners’ stereotypical beliefs about the target language country. These studies mainly focused on the learners of the German, Spanish and English languages (Allen 2004; Ekşi 2009; Kim 2010; Peng 2010; Schultz and Haerle 1995; Vande Berg 1990; Webber 1990). There has been a conspicuous lack of studies that specifically focus on the learners of the Russian language. It also came to our attention that in the area of applied linguistics there have been no attempts to quantitatively assess the learners’ country stereotypes. The present study addresses these gaps. It aims to explore the images about Russia held by beginner learners of the Russian language in a big public university in Malaysia and also to assess the favourability of these images. The questions this study raises are:

1. What stereotypical images do the beginner learners of the Russian language have about Russia, its culture, and people?
2. Are the students’ stereotypes about Russia positive or negative?
The findings of this study could enhance our knowledge of the nature of stereotypes that language learners bring into the classroom. This may lead to developing better pedagogical strategies, especially where the teaching of the target language culture is concerned. As language educators and scholars agree, one of the important functions of a foreign language program is to lessen the students’ preconceived and inaccurate perceptions and to broaden their “perspectives regarding humankind and its cultural diversity” (Schultz and Haerle 1995, 29).

2 Literature Review
2.1 The Nature of Stereotypes
Stereotypes have been described as “pictures in our heads” (Lippmann, 1922/1965, 3). They refer to individuals’ preconceived ideas about the world, other people, countries, cultures, religions, gender, ethnic or social groups, and so on. Stereotypical images can be true or false, positive or negative, rigid or flexible. Some researchers consider stereotypes as the antithesis to the critical thinking (Webber 1990). Nevertheless, scholars agree that stereotyping is an integral part of human cognitive processes. People acquire stereotypes over the years and these stereotypes are shaped by the culture and traditions of their society or social group. As Lippmann (1922/1965, 55) has observed:

In the great blooming buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped by our culture.

Early studies on stereotypes have reported that people hold mental images about representatives of other nationalities even if they had never had any personal encounters with them (Katz and Braly 1933). More recent studies assert that people’s perceptions about other nations and ethnic groups are shaped by several factors, which include personal factors (e.g., individual beliefs, values, cognition style, family climate, education background, direct contacts with representative of other ethnic or social groups), socio-political climate and the economic situation (Bal-Tar 1997). The mass media, movies, gossip, and anecdotal evidence also play an important role in stereotype formation (Realo et al. 2009).

2.2 Studies on Stereotypes Held by Language Learners
A number of studies have explored intercultural stereotypes that foreign language learners hold about the target language country, culture and the native speakers. These studies have offered several pedagogical strategies as to how language educators may deal with the preconceived erroneous images that the learners bring into the classroom. The majority of these studies have been done in the context of German (Schultz and Haerle 1995; Webber 1990), Spanish (Vande Berg 1990) and English (Kim 2010; Peng 2010) language pedagogy.

Schultz and Haerle (1995) have explored stereotypes about Germany and Germans held by American college students. The students’ images were mostly related to the personal and physical characteristics of the German people and to their love of beer. With a lesser frequency the participants made references to the German language; they also mentioned
some historical events that had occurred in Germany. Schultz and Haerle pointed out that despite the fact that the respondents’ perceptions were overwhelmingly positive they represented simplistic generalizations of a popular kind. Among pedagogical approaches that language teachers could use to confront the students’ erroneous ideas the researchers mentioned creating a culturally rich context in the classroom. Also, they advised allocating some time in the classroom for discussions on how stereotypes are formed because such discussion can promote the development of the students’ critical thinking and enhance their cross-cultural awareness.

An interesting approach to challenging language learners’ stereotypical representations about the target language country was suggested by Vande Berg (1990). She argued that in order to encourage the students to identify and abandon their distorted ideas about other cultures language educators might want to introduce the students to some typical inaccurate stereotypes about their own culture held by people in foreign countries. Similarly to the recommendations given by Schultz and Haerle (1995), Vande Berg suggested holding dialogues with the students about the preconceived notions and erroneous ideas that they had about other countries and people. This would help the students to recognize and analyze their inaccurate perceptions of and stereotypical images about other cultures.

The method described by Vande Berg (1990) aligns with Webber’s (1990) idea of using the language learners’ own cultural and personal identities to “read” the target language culture. Weber has defined this approach as “critical confrontation” wherein a due recognition is given to a fact that the language learners’ responses to the target language culture are based on the implicit stereotypes embedded in their own culture. By using these stereotypes language instructors may want to devise classroom activities that explicitly explore why and how a particular stereotype has come into being and to which extent it is valid. Weber suggested other two approaches toward dealing with the stereotypes held by language learners, namely, “perpetuation” and “suppression”. The former is appropriate when a stereotype reflects the self-image of the people in the target language country. In the case of Germany and the teaching of the German language, this kind of stereotypes can be related to beer drinking. In fact, materials about Oktoberfest are often included in the German language curriculum. By contrast, stereotype “suppression” could be adopted when the teacher wishes to avoid mentioning some pervading but erroneous or unjustified images about the target language country. In this case, the language instructor may want to exclude information that supports such stereotypes from the syllabus and the teaching materials. Also, the “suppression” approach could be practiced when the students’ perceptions of the target language culture are valid but are not culturally appropriate in a particular educational context.

2.3 Stereotypes about Russia and the Russians

It is reasonable to expect that Russia, being the biggest country in the world, a significant ideological “other” during the Cold War, and a major political and cultural presence on the international stage, would be an object of extensive stereotyping among people in various countries, including the learners of the Russian language. As far as research literature in concerned, Russia has been the subject of a number of studies on stereotypes and prejudices. In one of the earlier such studies Davis (1947) argued that a “similar-different” continuum had played an important role in the formation of Russia’s image among the
Westerners. Moreover, the real and perceived differences in political and social structures as well as discrepancies in cultural norms had contributed to the formation of negative perceptions about Russia among the Americans (Davis 1947). The notions about Russia’s “differentness” have a long history and they can be traced several centuries back. Even nowadays, some scholars promote the view of Russia’s cultural incompatibility with Western countries (Huntington 2002).

Research studies that focus on stereotypes about Russia held by young people or university students are scarce but they are especially relevant for the present article. Zevin (2003) has explored stereotypes that American and Norwegian junior high schools students have about several countries, including Russia. As the findings revealed, the students viewed Russia as a country very different from their own. Moreover, Russia was viewed in a negative light. It was described by the participants as untrustworthy, undemocratic, unappealing, less well-educated and more war-like than their own countries. Zevin suggested that teachers play an important role in the formation of a balanced view about other nations among their students.

A study by Stephan et al. (1993) has compared stereotypes about the Russians and the Americans held by second- and third-year university students in America and Russia, respectively. The researchers found out that the students’ stereotypes of both nationalities had been predominantly favourable. Although the participants believed that the two nations were different in many respects they attributed only few negative traits to the other group. Among the most enduring stereotypes that the American students held about the Russians were “disciplined”, “hardworking”, “strong”, “serious”, and “proud”. To reflect the perceived “differentness” of the Russian people, the American participants ascribed to the Russians such traits as “obedient”, “orderly”, “conservative”, and “restrained”.

A study by Realo et al. (2009) has examined perception of a “typical” Russian among college students in six neighbouring countries of Russia, namely, Belarus, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. Despite a fact that these countries are geographically close to Russia and share some common historical heritage as former parts of the Russian Empire and, later, the USSR they have considerable cultural differences with Russia, except perhaps in the case of Belarus. The findings indicated that among the positive characteristics the respondents had ascribed such traits to a “typical” Russian as “assertive”, “outgoing” and “open to new experiences”. From a negative perspective, a “typical” Russian was described as a less agreeable and less conscientious person compared to the respondents’ compatriots.

Our search of literature has revealed that the majority of the studies on stereotypical images about Russia and the Russians have been done in Western socio-cultural and educational contexts where Russia is perceived as “different”. However, despite all the real and perceived differences Russia is a part of Western civilization. It is interesting to note that the previous studies recognize a fact that cultural stereotypes held by people in neighbouring cultures often have a “mirror image” or compensatory nature. In other words, people tend to think that one is what the “other” is not and they tend to view the “other” in a more negative light (Realo et al. 2009). A review of literature done in this section supports this viewpoint. Therefore, exploring stereotypes about Russia held by people from geographically and culturally distant countries may enrich our knowledge and understanding of cultural stereotypes.
3 Method
3.1 Participants and Research Instrument

The study was conducted in the year 2011 among 29 beginner learners of the Russian language in a big public university in East Malaysia. The whole class, which consisted of 23 female and 6 male students, participated in this research. The age of the respondents was between 19 and 23 years old. They majored in various academic disciplines, such as the sciences (n=8), economics and business (n=8), food science and nutrition (n=6), engineering (n=3), forestry (n=3) and education (n=1).

Each respondent was given a photocopied form with an instruction to write images that the words “Russia” or “Russian” conjured in their mind. They were free to write any amount of single words or short phrases as the answers.

3.2 Valence Rating

In order to measure favourability of the students’ stereotypical images about Russia, the participants were asked to rate each image that they had written on a scale ranging from –3 (“extremely negative” image) to +3 (“extremely positive” image). This approach was adopted from a study by Spencer-Rodgers (2001). In this way, the students assigned evaluative or valence ratings to their images of Russia which enabled the researchers to assess whether the students’ perceptions about the target language country, culture and people were positive or negative.

3.3 Data Organization and Analysis

First of all, a content analysis of the data was conducted. For this, all the responses given by the students were listed ad verbatim. Then they were analyzed and classified according to the references they had made. Some of the students’ responses had to be removed in this initial stage of organizing the data. This was done because, firstly, five responses were idiosyncratic (e.g., “curious”, “jewelry”) and they could not be placed with a good degree of confidence in any of the subcategories. Secondly, six responses were not assigned the valence ratings by the respondents; these images had to be removed in order to ensure the accuracy of the quantitative data analysis.

An open-coding procedure was used for the qualitative part of the data analysis (Ryan and Bernard 2003). The students’ answers were coded and divided into smaller subcategories. These subcategories were then grouped into larger categories. For example, many students had made references to the cold climate in Russia (e.g., a “cold country”, “chilly weather”, “snowing”). These responses were coded and grouped together in the “Cold country” subcategory. Also, several answers had given the descriptions of Russia as a “very large country”, a “big country” or a “very big country”. These items were grouped together in the “Big country” subcategory. Then the smaller subcategories that contained allusions to Russia as a country were combined together into the larger category labeled “Country”. This step in the data analysis established the contents of the students’ stereotypes about Russia.
3.4 Valence Calculation for the Categories

The next step was to measure favourability of the students’ images about Russia. For this purpose, the mean valence of the stereotypes in each category was calculated using the following formula adapted from Spencer-Rogers’ (2001) study:

\[
S = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{N} V_i}{N}
\]

where \( S \) is the mean valence of the category; \( V_i \) is the valence rating given to the image \( i \), and \( N \) is the total number of images in the category. For example, the students had provided 50 images that could be placed in the category “Country”. Each image had its own valence ratings assigned by the students on the scale ranging from –3 to +3. Using the above formula, the mean valence of the images in the category “Country” was calculated at 1.1 (valence=1.1).

4 Findings

One hundred and twenty-five (n=125) images were retained for the analysis out of the total 136 responses given by the students. The longest individual list of the images about Russia contained 18 items while the shortest list had only 1 item. The majority of the respondents had given between 2 to 4 images. The students’ images about Russia formed seven large categories, namely, (1) “Country”, (2) “Culture and Art”, (3) “Language”, (4) “People”, (5) “Education and Technology”, (6) “The Political System and Military”, and (7) “Sports”. Table 1 reports these categories (and the smaller subcategories) together with the number of images they contained. The Table also indicates the mean valence ratings of the images in each of the 7 categories.

The biggest category of the images about Russia – “Country” – contained 50 answers. Many students perceived Russia as a “cold”, “big” or “distant” land. Several respondents stated that Russia was an “interesting” or “mysterious country” with “beautiful scenery”. Also, Russia was described as a “great place to explore”, a “powerful/strong” or a “very strict” country. Despite some negative opinions (e.g., the responses “closed country”, “radioactive” were given the lowest valence ratings of –3), the students’ perceptions of Russia were overwhelmingly positive. The category’s mean valence rating was 1.1 (valence=1.1).

The second biggest category of the images referred to “Culture and Art” and had total 19 images. All items in this category had received positive valence ratings; moreover, the majority of the responses in this category had been assigned the highest valence rating of +3 by the students. Eight images in this category made allusions to Russian architecture (e.g., “old churches”, “beautiful churches”, “famous architecture”) and the famous buildings (e.g., the “Saint Basil’s Cathedral”). Several answers concerned the arts (e.g., “violin players”, “famous ballet dancers”). There were statements about the uniqueness of Russian culture (e.g., “unique culture”, “different from Western culture”). The category “Culture and Art” had the highest mean valence rating of 2.74 (valence=2.74).
The references to the Russian language contained 16 images and they formed the third biggest category labeled “Language”. Eight responses described Russian as a “difficult language” and all of these images had negative valence ratings of either –1 or –2. Five statements described Russian as an “interesting” language with “beautiful pronunciation”, while three responses noted the language’s “differentness” (e.g., “different alphabet”, “unfamiliar language”). These ratings ranged between –2 at the lowest point (e.g., “different language”) to +2 at the highest point (e.g., “interesting language”). Overall, the “Language” category’s mean valence rating was positive but low at 0.13 (valence=0.13).

Twelve statements made references to the Russian people. The participants gave their opinions about personal characteristics of the Russians (e.g., “clever”, “hardworking”, “(they) think similarly to the Chinese”, “(they are) not friendly”); they also provided the descriptions of physical attributes of the Russian people (e.g., “tall people”, “people with blond hair”). The majority of the items in this category were positively rated at +2 or +3. Only one item – “not friendly” – received the lowest valence rating of –3. There were three responses with the neutral valence rating of zero (e.g., “foreign people”, “white people”). The mean valence rating of this category of images was positive at 1.5 (valence=1.5).

The references to Russia’s political system and the military (n=12) formed the category “The Political System and Military”. The majority of the images in this category were given the negative valence ratings of –3, –2 or –1. The lowest valence rating (–3) was assigned to the statements “Russian army (WWII)” and “war”. The images “communism”,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories and number of images they contain (n)</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
<th>Mean valence values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Country (n=50)</td>
<td>Cold country/snow</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Big country</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Distant country</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nature/geography</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interesting/special/beautiful country</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Culture and art (n=19)</td>
<td>Architecture/buildings</td>
<td>2.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Music, art and culture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Language (n=16)</td>
<td>Difficult language</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interesting/beautiful language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unfamiliar language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. People (n=12)</td>
<td>Physical attributes</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal characteristics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The Political System and Military (n=12)</td>
<td>Military</td>
<td>–1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Political system</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>History</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Education and technology (n=11)</td>
<td>Higher education</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Developed technology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Sport (n=5)</td>
<td>Sports and sportsmen</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sport achievements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* number of images in this particular subcategory
“communist country”, “involved in war” received low ratings of –2, while the “military weapons” image was rated at –1. Only two items in this category received positive ratings, namely, “full of history” (+2) and “the former President Putin” (+1). The mean valence rating of the images in this category was negative and the lowest (valence= –1.16).

References to Russia’s education and technology were made 11 times. The majority of these responses mentioned medical courses and tertiary education in Russia. For example, some students’ images about Russia were “a place popular for medical studies”, “a place where my friends went to learn medicine”. These answers were not unexpected because many young Malaysians go to study medicine in Russia due to a lower tuition cost. Five images alluded to Russia’s achievements in technology (e.g., “advanced technology” and “(Russia) got space station”). The majority of the items in this category received the positive valence ratings of +1, +2, or +3. There was one neutral response (“a lot of universities”) and one images negative rating of –2 (“famous with their weapon technology”). The mean valence rating of the images in this category was positive (valence=1.5).

Finally, there were five images related to Russia’s achievements in sports. Three of the responses were that Russia was “famous in gymnastics” and “always a champion in the Olympics” while other two students wrote “Maria Sharapova”. All the items in this category were rated positively at +2 or +3. The category’s mean valence rating was positive and rather high (valence=2.6).

5 Discussion and Pedagogical Implications

One of the purposes of this study was to explore the images of Russia and the Russians held by beginner learners of the Russian language. As the findings show, the participants held various and diverse images of the target language country. They included general representations of Russia as a country (e.g., the climate, geography), references to Russian culture and art as well as the images evoking various aspects of Russian life and reality (e.g., the educational system, technology, political system, people, etc.). Despite this diversity the images about Russia supplied by the students were for the most part stereotypical. This finding agrees with the results reported in the previous studies on the language learners’ images about the target language country (Abrams 2002; Allen 2004; Schultz and Haerle 1995; Vande Berg 1990). For example, many respondents in the present study mentioned that Russia was a “cold country” or a “big country”. These images are true but at the same time rather shallow as the students did not provide specific references to the geographical borders, the climate zone or the time zones. The students’ answers testify that they had rather vague ideas about Russia, as it was reflected in the statements “an interesting country”, “a far away country”. Moreover, some of the answers (e.g., “leafless trees”, “warm coffee shops”) could be applied to any country with a colder climate, not only to Russia. These findings indicate a lack of knowledge about Russia on the part of the learners, which some of them had frankly admitted (e.g., “(I) seldom hear about this country”).

The second aim of this study was to assess whether the students’ stereotypical images about Russia were positive or negative. The findings show that they were predominantly positive as only one out of the seven categories of images had a negative mean valence rating. The participants held especially high opinions about Russian culture and art as well as the country’s sports achievements. The “Culture and Art” and the “Sport” categories
had the highest mean valence ratings of 2.74 and 2.6, respectively. In addition, the students had positive perceptions about Russian people (mean valence=1.5) as well as the level education and technology in Russia (mean valence=1.5). Furthermore, Russia as a country was, overall, positively perceived by the students (mean valence=1.1).

More ambiguous attitudes were detected in the students’ attitudes towards the Russian language. The “Language” category contained the statements that described Russian as an “interesting”, “romantic” and even “sexy” language; these images had positive favourability ratings. However, the mean valence of the “Language” category was just above zero (0.13) because the positive images of the language were outnumbered by the negative perceptions that Russian was “hard to learn”, “different”, “unfamiliar” and even required that the learners “twist the tongue when we speak”.

The students’ opinions were predominantly negative in one category only, namely, “The Political System and Military” (valence=−1.16). Eight out of total twelve images in this category were ranked negatively. Besides, there was little variety in the students’ images in this category. For the most part, the participants made references to Russia’s communist past, the wars, military weapons and the Russian army. There was no mention of important historical events or figures, with the exception of “the former president Putin”. What came to our attention is that the students did not appear to be able to differentiate between the positive and negative aspects in Russian history. For example, while the statements “involved in war” and “wars” were, quite naturally, negatively rated, the answers “World War II” and “Russian Army (WWII)” also received negative ratings. This indicates that the respondents had a shallow knowledge about Russian history and were not aware of the crucial role that Russian army played during World War II to ensure the victory over fascism.

Research literature on cultural stereotypes reveals that the stereotypical images are shaped by a variety of factors, including personal factors, the socio-political climate, the recent events – and the interpretations of those events in the mass media – and also popular culture, gossip and anecdotal evidence (Bal-Tar 1997; Kim 2010; Realo et al. 2009; Willnat, He, and Hao 1997). It has been argued that the key factor in stereotype formation is individual’s tendency to oversimplification and that education has a great potential to promote a more holistic and balanced outlook of the world around us. Foreign language educators realize that among the key objectives of any foreign language program is not only developing the learners’ linguistic aptitude but also instilling into them multiple literacies that would enable the foreign language speakers to perform effectively in various professional, social and cultural contexts (Goldoni 2008). Foreign language curricula and the classroom teaching practice must aim to expand the students’ cultural knowledge, to enhance their awareness of the humanity’s rich cultural diversity, to help them acquire a more sophisticated world view and to diminish their stereotypical perceptions of other cultures (Coenders and Scheepers 2003; Schultz and Haerle 1995).

Considering a fact that Russia has been traditionally viewed as a cultural and ideological “other” by its Western neighbours, and that such views have been perpetuated in other parts of the world through the mass media and popular culture, it is important for Russian language educators to know what kind of images and representations of Russia their students bring to the language classroom. For this purpose the instructor may want to ask them to write down the images that the words “Russia” and “Russian” bring to their mind.
as it had been done in the present study. Evidently, this approach is not limited to the context of Russian language teaching and it can be adopted with learners of various foreign languages. It would be good to conduct this activity in the very first class before the formal teaching begins. This way the obtained data is more “pure” as it reflects the original impressions about the target language country held by the students before they had a chance to modify or change their opinions during the language program.

A number of studies have described various approaches that language educators may want to adopt to address especially prominent and erroneous country stereotypes held by their students (Schultz and Haerle 1995; Vande Berg 1990; Webber 1990). Encouraging the students to explore culture of the target language country in a more systematic and profound manner has been among the most widely employed pedagogical strategies (Abrams 2002; Choi and Yi 2012; Jourdain 1998). Based on the findings of the present study, the language instructor decided to use the students’ interest in Russian culture as a platform for expanding their knowledge of other aspects of Russian past and present reality, history and society. To do this, a documentary film on Stravinsky’s ballet *The Rite of Spring* was shown in the classroom in the beginning of semester. Upon finishing watching the documentary a discussion and a short Questions and Answers session were conducted in the classroom. They were aimed at gauging the students’ understanding of the materials presented in the documentary and their interest in the topic.

The documentary was sufficiently informative and intellectually stimulating to encourage and support a classroom discussion of the themes that it had raised. Among them had been the historical epoch, the socio-political and cultural environments in the early 20th century Russia, the role of Russian folk music in Stravinsky’s art, the innovations in *The Rite of Spring*’s choreography and music. After the discussion session had ended, the language instructor suggested that the students conduct research in small groups on any one of the themes presented in the documentary. This approach allowed the class to have a common platform in their exploration of Russian culture, society and history. The students were also free to suggest their own research topics as long as those were closely related to the main topics in the documentary. For example, one group of students decided to explore the management style in the Ballets Russes company. In the end of the semester the students presented the results of their group work in the form of reports delivered in the classroom.

Pedagogical implications concerning the teaching of foreign languages that could be drawn from the findings of the present study is that language educators need to have a good idea about their students’ knowledge and perceptions about the target language country. This can be done through exploring the country images, representations or stereotypes held by the language learners. This knowledge can then be used for devising pedagogical strategies aimed at providing the students with balanced and more holistic information about the target language. Exploring the target language culture as a group activity could be a good starting point in this endeavor.
References


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