



РУССКИЙ ЯЗЫК В МИРОВОМ ПРОСТРАНСТВЕ

RUSSIAN LANGUAGE IN THE WORLD

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Research article

Educating future Russian language teachers in the United States

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Abstract. The increasing tensions between the Russian Federation and the United States of America have exacerbated the already serious decline in numbers of students seeking to study Russian, as well as the concomitant elimination of many Russian language programs at both the K-12 and university levels. The purpose of the research is to consider the need to improve the preparation and quality of future teachers of Russian in U.S. public schools. This work draws on applied philosophical analysis and policy studies, as well as a review of existing Russian language and literature programs at major U.S. universities. Measures of relevant data are presented, showing a paucity of linguistic competence in Russian produced through current practice in the U.S. Implementation is suggested. A model five-year program is proposed for the preparation of future Russian language teachers in the United States. Based on the typical undergraduate curriculum, this model would involve coursework in three broad areas: general education courses (the liberal arts and sciences), Russian language and related courses, and courses concerned with pedagogy.

Keywords: teaching, teacher preparation, Russian as a foreign language, foreign language education

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Introduction

Teaching Russian in the United States has never been an easy undertaking. Indeed, teaching any foreign language¹ in the U.S. is an extremely challenging undertaking, given the lack of interest in and support for learning languages other

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¹ In the U.S. context, “foreign language” and “foreign language education” have generally been replaced by “world language” and “world language education,” since the languages taught in U.S. schools are not really “foreign,” since they are spoken by significant numbers of students as heritage and native languages. Given the audience of this article, however, I have chosen to use the more traditional terminology.

than English (see: Reagan, 2022a; Reagan, Osborn, 2021). The reality of foreign language education in the U.S. is that only one in five K-12² students study a foreign language (American Councils for International Education, 2017: 7), and most do not begin the study of a second language until middle or high school and study the language for at most four years – a recipe for not succeeding in gaining competence in another language. The fundamental problem with foreign language education in the United States, though, is not merely that not enough students study foreign languages, nor that students do not begin such study sufficiently early, nor even that they do not continue the study of such languages long enough – although all of these are certainly serious problems. The real problem is that such study is not particularly effective for most students. J. Barzun’s observation in the mid-1950s remains largely true:

“Boys and girls “take” French or Spanish or German... for three, four, or five years before entering college, only to discover there that they cannot read, speak or understand it. The word for this type of instruction is not ‘theoretical’ but ‘hypothetical’. Its principle is ‘If it were possible to learn a foreign language in the way I have been taught, I should now know the language’ ” (Barzun, 1954: 119, emphasis added).

This point becomes especially significant when we consider the individuals in U.S. society who *do* speak a language other than English. Approximately 80% of the population are first language users of English³, while 20% are native speakers of another language. At the same time, only 10% of the total population claim to have good language skills in a language other than English. Further,

“As of 2006 (the most recent year for which such data are available), the overwhelming majority of U.S. adults who reported they could speak a non-English language acquired that language at home. Only a small percentage... acquired the language at school, reflecting the challenges faced by Americans of developing language proficiency after childhood” (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2017: 8)

This means that of the nearly 250,000,000 first language users of English in the United States, fewer than 2,000,000 – less than 1% – are able to speak that language well as a result of foreign language study in school (see: Neuman, 2017). Indeed, it is not even the case that English speakers merely find it difficult to learn other languages – as R. Brecht, of the University of Maryland’s Center for Advanced Study of Language, has suggested, “It isn’t that people don’t think language education is important. It’s that they don’t think it’s *possible*” (quoted in: Friedman, 2015, emphasis added).

As for Russian, a good place to begin is by noting that Russian is a difficult language for English speakers to learn – on the *U.S. Defense Language Institute*

² K-12 is the abbreviation used for “kindergarten through grade 12” – that is, all 13 years of public schooling.

³ I am using the phrase “first language users of English” rather than “native speakers of English” because of the growing awareness of the problematic nature of the idea of a “native speaker” or “native language.” There are multiple problems with these terms. First, the word “native” is sometimes taken to be racist, or at the very least to carry racist overtones. Second, there is the problem of the “ideology of nativism” – including the recognition that the “native speaker” is actually a hypothetical (and idealized) construct that confuses linguistic competence and linguistic performance. It is for these reasons that many linguists prefer to simply use L1 rather than any of the alternatives. Finally, there is the modality problem – the use of the word “speaker” can be taken to be audist, inadvertently excluding users of sign languages (see: Bauman, 2004; Eckert, Rowley, 2013).

Language Learning Difficulty Scale, Russian is a Category III language (only Arabic, Chinese – both Cantonese and Mandarin – Japanese, Korean, and Pashto are Category IV languages) (Coakley, 2016: 190–209), in contrast to the far more commonly taught Category I languages French and Spanish. In addition, Russian – both during Soviet times and more recently – is commonly perceived by many Americans as an “enemy language,” and thus faces resistance both from potential learners and policy-makers (see: Reagan, 2022b)⁴.

To be sure, as many scholars have pointed out over the years, language is never neutral, and is always imbued in power relations (see: Bourdieu, 1982, 2001; Bourdieu, Passeron, 1970; Fairclough, 2015; Mayr, 2008; Wodak, 2012), but this point is particularly powerful when discussing the teaching of a language such as Russian, Arabic, or Chinese (see: Reagan, 2022b, 2023; Yue, 2017; Zhou, 2011)⁵.

The result of the combination of all these factors working against students studying Russian is that of all languages generally offered in most U.S. schools, Russian ranks last in terms of student enrollments – even among the less commonly taught languages (LCTLs) (Table).

Language	Total K-12 enrollment
Spanish	7,363,125
French	1,289,004
German	330,898
Chinese (includes both Cantonese and Mandarin)	227,086
Latin	210,306
ASL	130,411
Japanese	67,909
Arabic	26,045
Russian	14,876
<i>Total</i>	<i>9,659,660</i>

Total enrollment of K-12 students in selected foreign languages, 2014–2015

Source: based on: American Councils for International Education, 2017: 8–9⁶

Aim

The fundamental concern to be addressed in this article is the increasing difficulty faced by Russian language educators and their advocates in the United States in attracting and retaining students in high quality and effective Russian

⁴ This is not, of course, unique to Russian – a similar situation existed in the United States during both World Wars with respect to German (see: Holian, 1998; Kloss, 1998; Koning, 2009).

⁵ Ryding, K. (2006). Teaching Arabic in the United States. In K. Wahba, Z. Taha & L. England (Eds.), *Handbook for Arabic language teaching professionals in the 21st century* (pp. 13–20). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; Ryding, K. (2017). Teaching Arabic in the United States, II. In K. Wahba, L. England & Z. Taha (Eds.), *Handbook for Arabic language teaching professionals in the 21st century* (vol. II, pp. 11–19). New York: Routledge.

⁶ While the focus here is on K-12 foreign language enrollments, a similar situation is found at the university level. In 2016, slightly more than 20,000 students were enrolled in Russian language courses at U.S. universities (a decrease of 7.4% since 2013). This is out of 1,382,371 students enrolled in all foreign language classes, and of a total of 18,521,801 students enrolled in colleges and universities in the U.S. (Looney & Lusin, 2018: 13–15).

language programs (see: Martin, 2020; Kraemer et al., 2020; Leaver, Campbell, 2020). Unlike in the cases of many of the LCTLs, there are excellent textbooks and supporting materials for the teaching of Russian available (see: Dengub, Nazarova, 2021; Kudyma, Kagan, 2019; Rifkin et al., 2017; Smyth, Crosbie, 2002)⁷. The *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages: The Roadmap to Language Competence* (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2023), originally released in 1996 (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996; 2006), are outstanding, and have been integrated into most aspects of the field (see: Phillips, Abbott, 2011). There are significant numbers of heritage language speakers of Russian for whom studying Russian would be a potentially attractive undertaking (see: Kagan, 2010; Laleko, 2013)⁸, as well as a reasonable number of first language users of English who might find studying Russian enticing. At the same time, though, the increasing tensions between the Russian Federation and the United States (and the West more generally) have exacerbated the already serious decline in numbers of students seeking to study Russian, as well as the concomitant elimination of many Russian language programs at both the K-12 and university levels.

In this article, it is not my goal to provide a solution to all of these problems, as much as I wish I could do so. Rather, I want to focus on one particular problem area that has not yet been mentioned: the preparation and quality of first language users of English who seek to become future teachers of Russian in U.S. public schools. Although only one part of the problem facing policy makers concerned with promoting the study of Russian in the United States, this is an essential piece of the puzzle – without well-trained, highly competent teachers of Russian, enrollments are unlikely to increase, and student achievement will almost certainly not improve. Thus, the goal of this article is basically to articulate what an ideal teacher education program for future teachers of Russian in the United States might look like.

Methods and materials

This article is situated within the framework of improvement science. Improvement science utilizes a systematic approach to change in education, among other fields and focuses first on defining problems or opportunities to improve

⁷ Dolgova, I.A., & Martin, C. (2010). *Welcome back! Russian Stage 2. Textbook* (3rd ed.). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, American Council of Teachers of Russian; Lekić, M., Davidson, D., & Gor, K. (2008). *Live from Russia! Russian Stage One. Volume 1: Textbook* (2nd ed.). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, American Council of Teachers of Russian; Lekić, M., Davidson, D., & Gor, K. (2009). *Live from Russia! Russian Stage 2. Volume 2: Textbook* (2nd ed.). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, American Council of Teachers of Russian; Robin, R., Evans-Romaine, K., & Shatalina, G. (2022). *Голоца: A basic course in Russian. Book 1* (6th ed.). New York: Routledge; Robin, R., Evans-Romaine, K., & Shatalina, G. (2023). *Голоца: A basic course in Russian. Book 2* (6th ed.). New York: Routledge.

⁸ Heritage language education is an increasingly important subfield in world language education in the United States. Although often thought of with respect to speakers of Spanish, it is also an area of concern for the teaching of Chinese, Korean, and Russian, among others (see: Wiley, T., Peyton, J., Christian, D., Moore, S., & Na Liu. (Eds.). (2014). *Handbook of heritage, community, and Native American Languages in the United States*. New York: Routledge, Center for Applied Linguistics; Beaudrie & Fairclough, 2012; Brinton et al., 2008).

practice. As a tertiary instructor of foreign language education, I draw on theory that is applied philosophical analysis and policy-oriented in nature, as well as a review of existing Russian language and literature programs at major U.S. universities⁹. Measures of relevant data have been offered as part of the literature review, showing a paucity of linguistic competence in Russian produced through current practice in U.S. Education and provide the data for analysis. Root causes have also been identified both through the researcher's experience and spaces in which improvement is possible. Finally, implementation is suggested. The process of improvement science is iterative, to be sure. Therefore, the reader should engage this work as a catalyst for change, implementing the recommended and additional efforts of improvement. Thereafter, identifying additional positive interventions should lead to broader implementation and assessment of change.

Results

A model five-year program is proposed for the preparation of future Russian language teachers in the United States. Based on the typical undergraduate curriculum, this model would involve coursework in three broad areas: general education courses (the liberal arts and sciences), the Russian language and related courses, and courses concerned with pedagogy.

General education courses seek to ensure that students have a *breadth* of knowledge across a variety of disciplines (including English, mathematics, the sciences, the humanities, fine arts, etc.), while their major (in this case, Russian language) ensures that the student will also have a *depth* of knowledge. For the future Russian language teacher, it is the development of Russian language skills and the related knowledge base that is the core of their preparation. By the end of the program, the goal should be an ACTFL proficiency level of high superior (CEFR C1), or at least a TORFL-II/B2 level of competence on the *Test on Russian as a foreign language (Тест по русскому языку как иностранному)*. Finally, the pedagogical component of the program, which would be based on the framework suggested by L. Shulman, would include all the major elements of the knowledge base for the classroom teacher.

Discussion

The teacher education curriculum has been a controversial topic for decades, although there are general norms – supported by state departments of education (which are responsible for the licensure of teachers), accreditation organizations, and professional organizations for different subject matter areas (in the case of foreign language, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages and language-specific groups such as the American Council of Teachers of Russian). The result is that teacher education programs are in many ways remarkably similar from university to university and from state to state.

⁹ In preparation for this article, a survey of the ten most highly ranked Russian language programs at public universities in the United States was undertaken. It showed that the major described here for the undergraduate degree is not significantly different from the norm. It is the fifth year of the program that is the characteristic that most distinguishes the proposal offered here from what is already common practice. The same is true when the best programs at elite private institutions are considered.

The educational psychologist L. Shulman identified seven broad categories of knowledge that constitute the major components of the knowledge base for the classroom teacher:

- the appropriate content knowledge;
- general pedagogical knowledge, with special reference to those broad principles and strategies of classroom management and organization that appear to transcend subject matter;
- curriculum knowledge, with particular grasp of the materials and programs that serve as “tools of the trade” for teachers;
- pedagogical content knowledge, that special amalgam of content and pedagogy that is uniquely the province of teachers, their own special form of professional understanding;
- knowledge of learners and their characteristics;
- knowledge of educational contexts, ranging from the workings of the group or classroom, the governance and financing of school districts, to the character of communities and cultures;
- knowledge of educational ends, purposes, and values, and their philosophical and historical grounds” (Shulman, 1987: 54).

Shulman’s categories have remained largely unchallenged since he first proposed them, and they continue to be widely utilized in the teacher education literature (see: Herold, 2019; Johnston, Goettsch, 2000; Kansanen, 2009).

This brings us to a discussion of the specific content that should be studied by the future K-12 Russian language teacher in the United States. To begin with content knowledge, such an individual needs to be competent in all four basic language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) at a high level, must understand the linguistic and sociolinguistic issues related to the Russian language, should be familiar with the history of Russian language literature, and be able to demonstrate a thorough understanding of the history of Russia and the nature of Russian society. In short, the future teacher must demonstrate both linguistic and cultural competence relevant to Russian.

To achieve this goal, even for a student with a solid background in the Russian language from secondary school study¹⁰, is an extremely difficult undertaking. Although some undergraduate programs are based on the assumption that the student might enter the program with no background in Russian, most presuppose that the student is ready for at least the second-year curriculum, and typically no credit in first year Russian language courses can be included in the major. In fact, although most undergraduate university programs in the United States are four-year programs, it is arguably more appropriate to conceptualize such a program as at least a five-year one, depending on the student’s background, which would result in the student receiving both an undergraduate and a graduate degree. Although not common, combined undergraduate/graduate programs of this type are also by no means particularly unusual (see: Schwab et al., 2004; Truxaw et al., 2011)¹¹.

¹⁰ And, as has already been noted, there are relatively few students with strong high school backgrounds studying Russian.

¹¹ In fact, there are a number of precedents for five-year teacher education programs. In Europe, many countries require secondary teachers to complete an undergraduate program in the content

Turning to an outline of an ideal teaching preparation program for future Russian language teachers in the United States, such a program can be divided into three parts paralleling those of the common U.S. undergraduate curriculum: general education, Russian language and related areas, and pedagogy. Each of these areas will now be discussed.

General education refers to the multidisciplinary grouping of courses (some required, some selected from a group of related courses) that students typically complete during their first two years of university study. General education constitutes about half of the coursework that a student completes, regardless of their major. The basic idea underlying general education is to ensure that all students have a broad foundation in the liberal arts and sciences regardless of their subject area major. In other words, general education seeks to guarantee that the student will have an appropriate *breadth* of knowledge, while their major ensures that the student will also have a *depth* of knowledge in a particular field of study (Mulcahy, 2008; Kirk-Kuwaye, San-Franchini, 2015). General education requirements have varied over time, as well as from one institution to another, but they most commonly include:

- English/English composition;
- mathematics or quantitative reasoning;
- the natural sciences;
- the social sciences;
- the humanities;
- the fine arts;
- foreign languages¹².

In recent years, many universities have added requirements related to diversity, equity and inclusion, social justice, and sustainability as part of their general education requirements¹³.

It is common in teacher education programs to reduce the overall number of credit hours that students are required to complete by allowing them to “double dip” courses in general education, allowing them to take courses that complement their major field of study as part of general education. In the case of the future Russian language teacher, this can be accomplished with courses in Russian literature in translation, history, political science, sociology, anthropology, East European, Russian, and Soviet Studies, and so on.

For the future Russian language teacher in the United States, it is the development of Russian language skills and the related knowledge base – which would be entailed in the content area major – that is the core of their preparation. Assuming a limited exposure and competence in Russian prior to their admission to

area followed by a year of pedagogical training (see: Caena, 2014: 8). In the US, the norm is a four-year undergraduate degree followed by a required master’s degree (or equivalent) which must be completed in the first few years of teaching practice.

¹² Although historically the study of a foreign language was an extremely common – in fact, virtually universal – part of general education, that is no longer the case. Today, foreign languages are only rarely included in contemporary general education requirements.

¹³ While quite common, such initiatives are increasingly controversial, and have come under attack from conservative politicians and policy makers as an example of “woke” indoctrination in higher education.

the university, during the first two years of their program the student would concentrate on intensive introductory and intermediate Russian language courses, as well as a course in Russian phonology (see: Shutova, Orekhova, 2018). By the end of the second year at the university, the student should have reached an ACTFL proficiency level between high intermediate and low advanced (between a CEFR level B1 and B2). This should be ensured with an institutional oral and written proficiency examination before being allowed to continue in the program.

Beginning in the third year of the program, the student would take a two-term Advanced Russian course, as well as two year-long courses focused on further developing skills in both conversation and composition. In the third and fourth years, students would also take both required overview Russian literature courses (one for the 19th century and one for the 20th century), as well as additional elective Russian literature courses. These courses should be taught in Russian, although they would most probably be supplemented with general education courses on Russian literature courses taught in English. In the fourth year of the program, students should also complete advanced coursework in Russian language, as well as the linguistics and the history of the Russian language. The use of additional, innovation types of resources in courses focusing on the teaching of the Russian language is also essential in these contexts (see: Bakiyevna, 2021: 129–130; Ndyay et al., 2020). Although there are widely recognized challenges associated with study abroad programs (see: Douglas, Jones-Ridders, 2001; McLeod, Wainwright, 2009), there is really no viable substitute for students living and studying in places where the target language is the daily spoken language, and to the extent possible every student should have at least a one-term (and preferably a one-year) study abroad experience in a Russian-speaking setting (see: Davidson, 2007, 2010; Kinginger, 2011)¹⁴.

In the fifth and master's year of the program, students should have opportunities to continue to develop and improve their oral, reading, and written skills in Russian. In addition to a mandatory, small-group research seminar, students would normally be expected to complete a capstone project in the master's year that would be the equivalent of a master's degree thesis. This project, which would be in Russian, could be presented to the faculty in written form, and might also be presented formally in a public setting. With respect to coursework, in the master's year students could take additional literature courses and seminars, linguistics courses, study another Slavic language (perhaps Old Church Slavonic), and so on. By the end of the master's year, the goal should be an ACTFL proficiency level of high superior (CEFR C1). It would be ideal for students to take the *Test on Russian as a foreign language* (*Тест по русскому языку как иностранному*) as well, with at least a TORFL-II/B-2 level of competence.

An essential component of any teacher education program is the coursework that is concerned explicitly with pedagogy. In the context of the United States, the pedagogical component of teacher education programs – across disciplines and levels, and regardless of state – is largely restricted by external constraints. Virtually every teacher education program is likely to include courses taken by all

¹⁴ At present, study abroad in the Russian Federation itself is unfortunately not possible for U.S. students. While one hopes that this is only a temporary situation, in the meantime there are other options (such as Kazakhstan) available to students.

students in child and adolescent development, learning theories, teaching methods, classroom management, special education, multicultural education and diversity, the use of technology in the classroom, and so on. In addition, teacher certification programs include field experiences, almost always culminating in a full-time (or nearly full-time) student teaching experience. As a consequence, there is relatively little flexibility in the structure of the pedagogical component of programs designed to prepare future foreign language educators. There are, though, certain topics and issues in preparing future foreign language teachers that *do* differ from those in other certification areas that are extremely important. First, of course, “while there are certain elements of generic teaching methodologies that are either similar or identical to other disciplines (for example, lesson and unit planning)”, there are others that, in the case of foreign language education, are unique. The teaching methodologies coursework for future foreign language educators will necessarily be different from that found in other certification areas (see: Curtain, Dahlberg, 2016; Larsen-Freeman, Anderson, 2011; Omaggio Hadley, 2001; Richard-Amato, 2010)¹⁵ – and will most often focus on eclectic approaches to language teaching and communicative teaching strategies (see: Lee, Van Patten, 2003; Nasiba, 2022)¹⁶. Another area that is unique in the context of foreign language teaching is second language acquisition (see: Cook, 2013; Gass et al., 2020). In addition, foreign language teachers are increasingly faced with the challenges and opportunities presented by heritage language learners, and require specialized preparation here as well (in the case of Russian, see, for example: Isurin, Ivanova-Sullivan, 2008; Kagan, 2005, 2010, 2014; Kagan, Dillon, 2001; Laleko, 2013; Laleko, Miroshnychenko, 2022; Laleko, Polinsky, 2017; Minkov et al., 2019). Finally, in the U.S. context it used to be said that “Every teacher is an English teacher” – the idea being that whatever one taught, it was important that the teacher model correct and proper English language use¹⁷. Today, this might be better conceptualized as focusing on the literacy needs of learners, and we are increasingly concerned with the concept of “literacy across the curriculum” (May, Wright, 2007; Wingate, 2018) – again, an especially significant issue for foreign language educators.

Conclusion

Becoming an educator entails far more than simply the completion of coursework and field experiences. Underlying the formal preparation outlined here are a related series of philosophical commitments. The preparation of future teachers should:

¹⁵ Schrum, J., & Glisan, E. (2005). *Teacher’s handbook: Contextualized language instruction* (3rd ed.). Boston: Thomson Heinle.

¹⁶ Savignon, S. (2005). Communicative language teaching: Strategies and goals. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning* (pp. 635–651). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum; Spada, N. (2007). Communicative language teaching: Current status and future prospects. In J. Cummins & C. Davison (Eds.), *International Handbook of English Language Teaching* (pp. 271–288). New York: Springer.

¹⁷ The idea of “correct and proper English language use” is a prescriptivist approach to language and language study that would be rejected by virtually all linguists (see, for example: Dixon, 2016; Trudgill, 2016; Wardhaugh, 1999).

- involve extensive field experiences at different kinds of educational institutions in which the student would engage in observation and practicing teaching in increasingly complex and responsible ways, culminating in a full-time student teaching experience in which they would take full responsibility for all aspects of the classroom;
- prepare the future teacher to engage in ongoing reflective inquiry based on the objective of improving their pedagogical practice;
- ensure that the future foreign language teacher is dedicated to provision of the most appropriate educational experience for all students, meeting the social and academic needs of every pupil in their class;
- assist future teachers in developing the skills required to build connections with their pupils’ parents and the local community;
- encourage the future teacher to become a lifelong learner, dedicated to improving both their linguistic and pedagogical knowledge and skills through professional development and other kinds of opportunities.

The overarching objective of the sort of teacher preparation proposed here is for future Russian teachers from English-speaking backgrounds to have the linguistic and cultural knowledge and skills of an educated native speaker of Russian. Such a goal is virtually unachievable for a student raised and educated in the United States speaking English and taught through the medium of English. However, just because a goal may not be fully achievable does not mean it does not have value – indeed, in this particular instance this is precisely the sort of *aspirational* objective to which we must be committed.

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Научная статья

Обучение будущих учителей русского языка в США

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Аннотация. Усиливающаяся напряженность между Российской Федерацией и Соединенными Штатами Америки привела к серьезному сокращению числа студентов, желающих изучать русский язык, а также к отмене многих программ русского языка как на уровне K-12, так и на университетском уровне. В работе подтверждается необходимость улучшения подготовки будущих учителей русского языка в государственных школах США. Представлены прикладной философский анализ, политические исследования и обзор существующих программ по русскому языку и литературе в крупнейших университетах США. Проанализированы данные, связанные с уровнем владения русским языком учителей в США. Предложена модель реализации пятилетней программы подготовки будущих учителей русского языка в США. Основанная на типичной учебной программе бакалавриата модель включает курсовую работу по трем широким областям: общеобразовательные курсы (гуманитарные и естественные науки); русский язык и аффилированные с ним курсы; курсы, связанные с педагогикой.

Ключевые слова: преподавание, подготовка учителей, русский язык как иностранный, иностранный язык, образование

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