

Motivational profiles of learners of Slavic languages: An intensive language learning setting

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Objectives and background. This project studies current post-secondary students enrolled in intensive Slavic language courses through the prism of motivational framework. The focus is on motivation because it is considered “one of the main determinants of second/foreign language achievement” (Dörnyei, 1994: 273).

Post-secondary student motivation in language learning has been a focus of many research studies (Cho, 2013; Dörnyei, 1994, 2001, 2003, 2005; Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2011; Gardner, 2010; Kikuchi, 2009; Kondo-Brown, 2013; Tsang, 2012). Notably, the research on motivation in the Slavic field is represented only by a few scholarly analyses that predominantly examine motivational aspects of learning Russian. Specifically, Brecht et al. (1995) investigated the reasons of American students for enrolling in beginner Russian, Romanov (2000) studied the correlation between learners’ motivation and their perceptions of the effectiveness of learning activities, and Geisherik (2004) compared the motivational profiles of heritage and non-heritage learners. Recently, Nedashkivska and Sivachenko investigated the motivational patterns of university students who express interest in Ukrainian studies¹. However, little research on motivation is known to have been conducted with respect to intensive summer language learning. Also, the current project is the first attempt to compare motivational profiles of

¹ Nedashkivska, A., & Sivachenko, O. Student Motivation Profiles: Ukrainian Studies at the Post-Secondary Level. Accepted for publication in *East/West Journal of Ukrainian Studies*.

learners of various Slavic languages in the same academic setting. Therefore, the objectives of this project are the following: a) to study motivational profiles of students enrolled in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian (B/C/S), Bulgarian, Czech, Russian, Polish, Slovak, and Ukrainian intensive language courses; b) to compare students' motivational profiles across the language groups based on quantitative and qualitative analyses of data; c) to compare the learners' perceptions with those of the instructors'.

Methodology. The methodology of the project builds on the well-known motivational framework proposed by Dörnyei (1994). The importance of the framework is widely recognized due to its potential to integrate a wide range of motivational components into one system (Romanov, 2000). According to the framework, Dörnyei categorizes motivation into three levels: the language level, the learner level, and the learning situation level. Motivation at the *language level* focuses on reasons to learn a language and is viewed as “an interplay of two components: integrative and instrumental motivations” (Dörnyei, 1994: 274). *Instrumental motivation* deals with potential pragmatic gains for learners, such as better job opportunities, a higher salary, better grades, etc. *Integrative motivation* is associated with learners' positive attitude towards the target language community, desire to interact with and even become similar to members of that community. The *learner level* considers individual characteristics that learners bring to learning process: abilities and cognition, desire to achieve certain learning goals, perception of progress, etc. Motivation at the *learning situation level* focuses on the learners' specific motives linked to a language learning setting and is further subdivided into course-specific, teacher-specific, and group-specific components. The *course-specific* component addresses the course organization, course load, relevance

of teaching materials, teaching methods and tools, learning tasks, etc. The *teacher-specific* aspect entails the personality of the instructor, their teaching style, feedback, grading system, relationship with students. The *group-specific* subcategory is linked to the group orientedness, cohesion, learning atmosphere, and learners' relationship with their peers within the group.

The described framework (Dörnyei, 1994) was used to develop interview questions for instructor participants, with certain elements adapted from Tsang (2012) and Wong (2007). The motivational questionnaire developed by Nedashkivska and Sivachenko (accepted manuscript, 2016) on the basis of Dörnyei's (1994) framework and adapted to the objectives of the present study was used to survey the student participants. The survey questionnaire consists of open- and close-ended questions to elicit data on the factors that influence students' decisions to enroll in intensive Slavic language courses. The interview questions are also open- and close-ended and aim at eliciting instructors' perceptions of their students' motives to learn Slavic languages.

The interviews of instructors and the administration of the student surveys took place in June and July 2016 at the Summer Language Institute (SLI), University of Pittsburgh. The participants in this study were 12 language instructors, 10 female and 2 male, and 81 Slavic language learners, 48 female and 33 male. The students were enrolled in the following intensive language courses: I) beginner, intermediate and advanced B/C/S [12], II) beginner Bulgarian [2]; III) beginner Czech [4], IV) beginner Polish [4], V) beginner, intermediate, advanced and 4th year of Russian [49], VI) beginner Slovak [6], and VII) beginner Ukrainian [4].

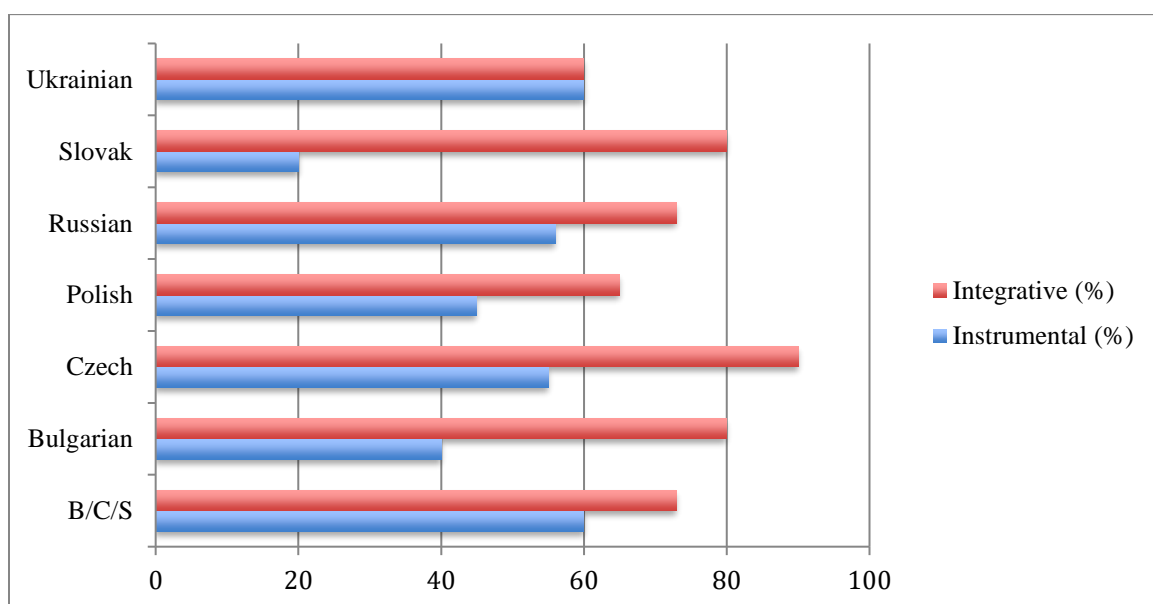
35% of student participants indicated their Slavic heritage, with 61% of those participants learning the language of their heritage, and 39% -- learning a Slavic language other than the language of their heritage. Interestingly, 14% of participants were studying their second and third Slavic language. Also, 42% of participants indicated that they wanted to continue with the current language learning, and 33% of participants expressed their interest in learning other Slavic languages. Ten out of twelve instructors are native speakers of the language of instruction, one instructor is bilingual and one instructor studied the language of instruction as a foreign language. All instructors received formal education in foreign language teaching and are experienced language teachers.

Data analysis and results. In the present study the student and instructor data sets are studied quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative data were elicited through participants' responses to close-ended questions, while qualitative data were provided by open-ended questions. The results of the quantitative and qualitative analysis are presented in accordance with the three levels, proposed by Dörnyei's (1994) framework.

Based on the results of the quantitative analysis, the majority of the learners at the *language level* show more or less similar results: the integrative motivation prevails over the instrumental in all groups but Ukrainian. Specifically, in the Ukrainian group, integrative reasons for learning the language are mentioned by 60% of participants, and, interestingly, instrumental reasons are also mentioned by 60% of participants, which shows that integrative and instrumental motivators are equally important for learners of Ukrainian. As can be seen from Figure 1, the highest integrative motivation is demonstrated in the Czech (90%), Bulgarian (80%) and Slovak (80%) groups, where the number of students who claim their target language heritage is the largest. Importantly,

the factor that contributes most to participants' integrative motivation is the desire to be able to communicate with native speakers (mentioned by 100% participants in all groups), while the lowest level of integrative orientation is attested to the desire of learning the language of their heritage. The exception is the Slovak group, where 5 out of 6 participants (83%) indicate that they want to learn Slovak as it is their heritage language.

Figure 1. The subject area level



Notably, there are some participants in the majority of the groups who claim their target language heritage, but who do not indicate the importance of learning the language as language of their heritage. The highest instrumental orientation is found in B/C/S (60%) and Ukrainian (60%) groups, with the lowest in Slovak (20%). The most motivating instrumental factor across all groups is future career gains associated with the target language. The least motivating factors are: 1) degree requirement (Bulgarian, Czech, Polish, Slovak, Ukrainian – 0%, B/C/S – 25%, Russian – 37%), 2) opportunity of

boosting GPA (Bulgarian, Polish – 0%, Ukrainian – 25%, Russian – 31%, Slovak – 33%, Czech – 50%, B/C/S – 55%).

With respect to the qualitative data, the reasons for enrolling into Slavic language courses do not quite mirror the quantitative results. Specifically, the most frequently mentioned motive by learners of B/C/S, Russian and Ukrainian is linked to career purposes, which is part of the instrumental orientation. The most motivating factors in other groups belong to the integrative plane: 1) living in the target country (Bulgarian), and 2) interest in the target culture, history, politics, etc. (Czech, Polish, Slovak). However importantly, interest in the target culture is the second most frequently mentioned motive in the B/C/S, Russian and Ukrainian groups, making it the most important motivator mentioned by all participants overall. It is also worth mentioning that although the ability to communicate with native speakers remains one of the most important motives for the majority of respondents, communication purposes vary across the groups. While students in the Bulgarian, Czech and Slovak groups learn the target language predominantly to communicate with family, friends, and native speakers while travelling or living in the target culture, the learners of B/C/S, Polish, Russian and Ukrainian stress the need for communication in the target language for professional purposes. Another interesting observation is that many students across the groups also point out that learning a Slavic language brings them enjoyment (Example 1), provides them with an intellectual challenge (Example 2) as well as skills that many do not have (Example 3):

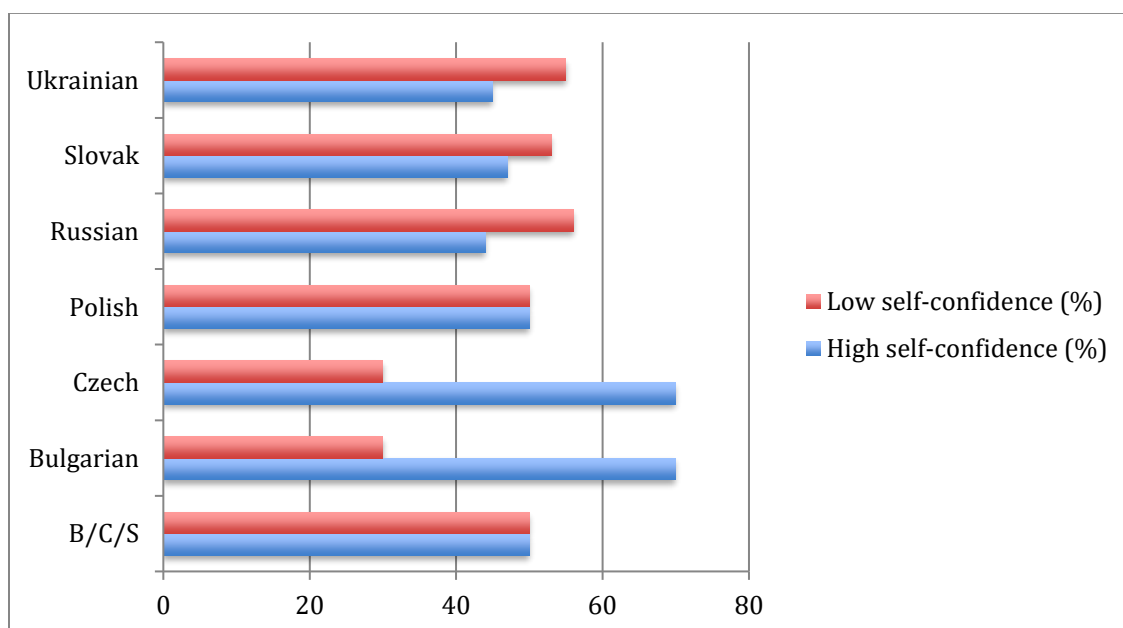
- (1) I like it. It's interesting and fun.
- (2) It is a good intellectual endeavor.
- (3) Knowing how to speak any Slavic language is a unique ability.

Examples 1-3 show that not all participants' motives can fit either the integrative or the instrumental plane within Dörnyei's (1994) framework, which warrants further investigation.

With respect to the instructor data, the results of the interview analysis echo the student survey findings: instructors' personal observations indicate that the most important motivators for their students are the ability to communicate in the target language for personal and professional purposes, and the interest in the target culture, history, politics.

The analysis of student quantitative data at the *learner level*, presented in Figure 2, demonstrates that the highest level of self-confidence is found in Bulgarian (70%) and Czech (70%) groups, somewhat lower self-confidence is recorded in Russian (44%), Ukrainian (45%) and Slovak (47%) groups. Notably, 50% of the participants in Polish and B/C/S groups demonstrate high self-confidence, while the other 50% do not feel confident about their language learning progress.

Figure 2. The learner level



A closer look at the qualitative data allows to see that the low self-confidence possibly stems from the intensive nature of the course: the prevailing majority of the beginner learners view the intensive course as much more difficult than they expected before. Importantly, for some participants the intensive nature of the course is rather a source of concern, while for others, particularly in the Slovak group, – a strong motivator that can help progress in language learning within a very short period of time. Such a positive perception is mostly observed in the comments of the participants who are learning their second or third Slavic language. Consider example 4.

- (4) I think my knowledge of Ukrainian is immensely helpful, especially with regard to reading comprehension and listening, especially given that I've never studied Russian before.

Example 4 clearly demonstrates how a learner can benefit from transferring their knowledge and skills from one Slavic language context into another, which contributes to their overall success in language learning and thus boosts their self-confidence.

The more negative perception of language learning progress and confidence level is found in all beginner groups, with the Russian group showing the most concerns. Specifically, participants link their low confidence to their low ability to communicate in the target language, which stems from their inability to fully master the material within a short period of time. Therefore, these learners stress the need for more practice, particularly conversational. In the Russian beginner group, where the number of students is relatively larger, this issue is even more prominent: some students indicate that they are not able to catch up with a fast pace of the course, and smaller groups would be more conducive to learning. Notably, the satisfaction with the progress and the level of self-confidence grow with the level of language proficiency, which is observed in the upper-level B/C/S and Russian groups. Consider Examples 5-7.

- (5) I feel confident about knowledge of grammar, but not confident in using it in conversation.
- (6) I feel that the grammar and vocabulary haven't been fully naturalized, that is I have to think about what I am saying and it does not come naturally.
- (7) Conversation would seem to promote progress most effectively.

These examples show that more advanced learners demonstrate more positive attitude to the progress and the level of self-confidence. However importantly, it also demonstrates the need for more conversational practice.

Similar trends are observable in the instructor data: instructors are aware of the struggle of some students, and try to accommodate to their learning needs accordingly. Notably, in the instructors' opinions, their students are progressing well, given the fact that it has been only the third week of the program. They are certain that as the program continues, students' self-confidence will grow along with the ability to converse in the target language.

The analysis of the participant quantitative data at the *learning situation level* (see Figure 3a-c) demonstrates that overall in all groups participants show satisfaction with the group atmosphere, course organization, teaching materials and their instructors. While course- and instructor-specific components are perceived predominantly positively by participants (see Figure 3b-c), the group-specific component (see Figure 3a) is viewed less positively. A closer look at participants' responses reveals that somewhat lower results on the assessment of this component may be linked to students' concerns about the difference in language proficiency of the learners and its possible negative impact on their language learning progress. Such concerns are expressed by students in all groups: Czech (100%), Russian (90%), Slovak (83%), Bulgarian (50%), Polish (50%), Ukrainian (50%), B/C/S (42%).

Figure 3a-c. The learning situation level

Figure 3a. The learning situation level: group-specific component

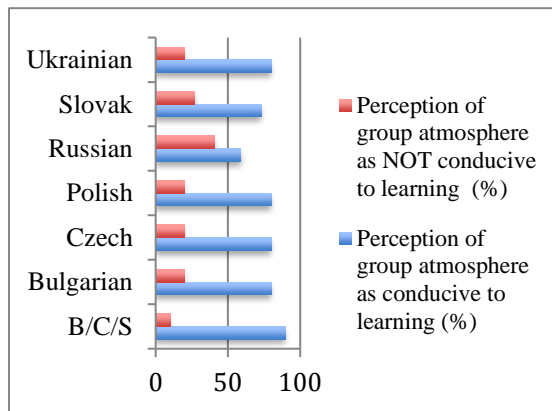


Figure 3b. The learning situation level: course-specific component

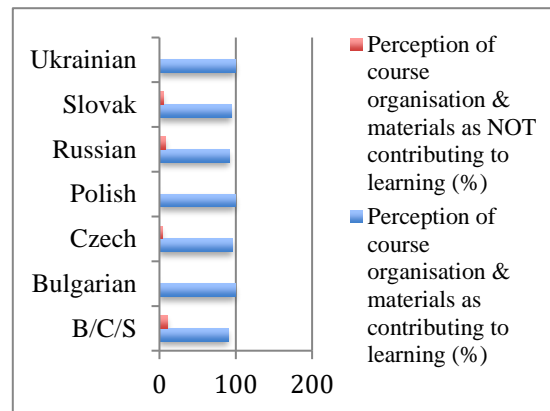
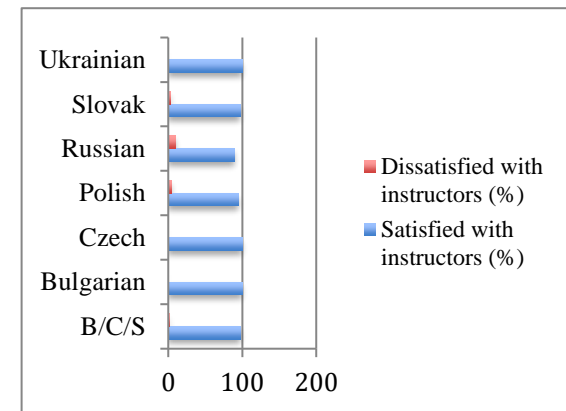


Figure 3c. The learning situation level: instructor-specific component



A gap in student proficiency levels within a single group emerges as a concerning demotivator in the qualitative data set as well. This theme is particularly commented upon in the upper-level Russian groups. For example:

- (8) There are a couple students who are keeping the rest back as they're slower learners than others.
- (9) Sometimes more advanced students make it difficult to follow what is happening in class.
- (10) There is a wide variety of strengths and weaknesses, abilities and challenges, previous knowledge in the class, learning gaps that there is no time to fill in an intensive accelerated program.

Examples 8-10 clearly show that a language proficiency gap is perceived as a serious obstacle to language learning by both more and less advanced students. Also, it is necessary to note that language proficiency gaps along with different learning backgrounds and abilities not only can hinder successful language acquisition, but can place a large burden on instructors, which is frequently mentioned during interviews. Notably, in the majority of the groups, instructors manage to deal with these issues due to a relatively smaller number of students in the class. However, Russian instructors face even more challenges: the number of students, particularly in the lower-level groups, may exceed 20 and accommodating to various learner needs becomes an extremely challenging job.

With respect to course organization and teaching materials, participants' responses to open-ended questions are predominantly positive across all groups and echo the quantitative results. However, qualitative data also yield some concerns linked to learners' inability to fluently communicate in the target language. A number of participants stress the need for teaching tools and approaches that can provide them with opportunities for more conversational and speaking practice both in and outside the class, which, in their opinion, should not be limited to communication with classmates and

instructors only. Specifically, learners note that their communication skills could only benefit from socializing with heritage speakers from local Slavic communities as well as with native speakers through various digital technologies, e.g., videoconferencing. Notably, the usage of newest technologies as learning and teaching tools is frequently commented on both in instructor and student data sets. Specifically, instructors and the majority of the students demonstrate satisfaction with the variety and amount of technology integrated in the courses. Among the mentioned technologies are power point presentations, YouTube videos, CDs with video and audio recordings. However, when asked what other technology they would like to work with, some student participants, especially those who are familiar with various online learning tools through other courses, voice their desire for computer labs to practice their pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar skills, as well as suggest a number of interactive online tools to be integrated into their home assignments.

Another theme, which pertains to course organization, is related to the cultural components of the program, e.g., foreign movie events, cultural barbecues, singing and cooking classes organized by the SLI. These events are very frequently commented on by instructors as an effective tool to immerse learners in the target cultures, though quite rarely mentioned in the student data sets. However importantly, some participants gladly participate in them and are willing to participate in even more cultural events, especially those that can bring them outside campus to meet with the members of local Slavic communities. Also, some respondents voice their desire to participate not only in the target culture activities, but also to get exposure to other Slavic cultures.

The next observation pertains rather to the program than course organization, however, deserves some attention. The majority of student participants and instructors emphasize the importance of more active marketing and advertising of the language courses offered at the SLI. For example:

- (11) I think that the Slavic courses at the SLI could receive increased enrollments by making more concentrated advertising efforts during the school year.
- (12) There should be more marketing through scholarship programs, e.g., Fulbright, through other universities. I would not have known about it if I had not accidentally talked to a former SLI student.
- (13) I think they should advertise the program more, and also be more descriptive on their website.
- (14) The program lacked initial communication – there is not much information on the website that describes the program.

Examples 11-14 show that the information about the SLI course offerings is not easily available to the potential students. Meanwhile, in the opinions of the participants, an increased awareness of the program would result into increased enrollments. In relation to this, they suggest organizing marketing campaigns and making the SLI webpage more informative.

With respect to the teacher-specific component, students' comments are exclusively positive. The positive perception of instructors stems from such qualities as approachability, flexibility and patience; teaching style; instructors' approach to feedback and grading. The prevailing majority of students, particularly in the upper-level Russian groups, value the fact that their instructors are native speakers of the target language. For example:

- (15) Love learning from my professor because she only speaks Russian, so you have to find a way to get your message across.
- (16) [instructor's name] only speaks Russian, which makes it much easier to focus on the Russian language in class.

Examples 11-12 show that when an instructor only speaks the language of instruction, it provides learners with full immersion and forces them to communicate in the target language. Such an approach contributes to the language learning progress and is recognized by learners as a benefit.

Conclusions and recommendations. The analyses presented in this paper allows for discussing motivational profiles of students enrolled in Slavic language courses at the SLI as viewed from both learners' and instructors' perspectives. Specifically, the results of quantitative and qualitative analyses at the language level revealed that learners are overall integratively motivated: the majority of participants were learning Slavic languages in order to communicate for personal and professional purposes and satisfy their interest in the target culture. In some groups, i.e., Slovak, the desire to learn a language was closely linked to the learners' heritage. The instrumental orientation, which was marked as important as integrative in the Ukrainian group but less important in the rest of the groups, was strongly associated with current or future career gains. Also, it is necessary to note that many participants indicated motives for learning languages, e.g., enjoyment, intellectual challenge, feeling of uniqueness, that can be categorized neither as instrumental nor integrative orientations.

The analyses at the learner plane showed that the level of learners' confidence varied across groups: students with prevailing low confidence were found in Russian, Ukrainian and Slovak groups, students with prevailing high confidence – in the Bulgarian and Czech groups, and an equal number of students with low and high confidence was found in Polish and B/C/S groups. The source of low confidence stemmed from the intensive nature of the program, i.e., learners found the courses much more challenging

than they had expected, and was closely linked to students' dissatisfaction with their low ability to fluently communicate in the target language.

At the learning-situation level overall all groups reported positively on the group atmosphere, course organizations, teaching materials and their instructors. However, many flags were raised with respect to the gap in learners' language proficiency levels, which was most frequently reported as an obstacle to successful language acquisition. The relevance of teaching materials was also addressed, and emphasized the need for technologically enhanced teaching tools and approaches that could contribute to the development of various learners' skills. Additionally, valuable comments were made on the cultural component of the program, in which participants expressed their desire to receive a richer exposure to the target as well as other Slavic languages and cultures. Also, both student participants and instructors stress the importance of more active advertising of the program and updating the SLI web-page in order to attract more students. Importantly, the analyses also highlighted learners' satisfaction with their instructors, and this positive attitude was linked to instructors' personalities as well as to their native proficiency in the language of instruction, which, in its turn, served as a powerful motivator for the students to communicate in the target language.

Overall, the results of the analyses and findings of the current study, I believe, have some practical values and applications. For this reason, I will conclude with some recommendations that stem from the analyses of student and instructor data sets, and my personal observations. These recommendations may prove to be useful to instructors, area coordinators, language program designers and program administrators.

First, there is an acute need for well-planned marketing campaigns, targeting

potential and returning students. The information about the program needs to be made available to various cultural/heritage communities, other universities and their students, departments of Slavic Studies, and departments that prepare professionals in the fields where knowledge of less commonly taught languages is essential.

Second, the information about the program on the SLI web-page may need some thoughtful reorganization with a more detailed description of each language course's objectives, structure, and content. It would also be useful for prospective students to know which key skills and topics will be targeted in a particular language course. Additionally, the emphasis on the importance of the knowledge of Slavic languages in the current social and political climate, complemented by success stories and shared experiences of the program alumni, I believe, would only benefit the program.

Third, as mentioned previously, 33% of students would consider studying other Slavic languages. More exposure to the Slavic languages and cultures offered by the SLI curricula may aid the retention of the students in the program. I would recommend organizing more events and activities highlighting a certain Slavic culture, during which the SLI students could be offered the opportunity to participate in various on-campus and off-campus activities: handcraft workshops, cultural lectures, meetings with members of local Slavic communities, and conversational clubs, where students can learn simple phrases in other languages. Such exposure may trigger students' interest and make them want to study another language at the SLI.

Next, with the ability to communicate with native speakers for personal and professional purposes being the main learning objective of the students, there is a voiced need for teaching tools and approaches that can provide learners with more opportunities

for the development of their conversational skills. In relation to this, interaction with heritage and native speakers – other than instructors and classmates – needs to be considered. Also, the learners' request for more active integration of newest digital and online technologies, especially those that offer more communication practice, into course curricula needs special attention of instructors.

Lastly, a gap in language proficiency levels of students had a major impact on learners' perception of their language learning progress, confidence level, and group atmosphere. With respect to this, appropriate placement tests may make the atmosphere in the group less stressful and more conducive to learning.

Some of these recommendations are not new, however they offer some insights into the factors that motivate learners of Slavic languages to enroll in intensive summer programs, and which aspects attract students to these courses. Also, they pinpoint the aspects in the course curricula at the SLI that deserve attention and special consideration in order to meet the learners' needs, and make the programs more attractive and appealing to existing and prospective students.

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