

# RS-15A: Thoughts on the Intensive Russian Training Course

After reading (b) (3) - P.L. 86-36 article, "Intensive Russian Training Course: From Scratch to Transcription Proficiency," in the Summer 1979 issue of *Spectrum*, several RS-15A graduates decided that it would be a good idea to add some of their thoughts to it in a follow-up article.<sup>1</sup> As students going through the RS-15A program, we saw some problems. A large portion of this article will be devoted to that subject, in the hope that our views may be helpful if and when similar programs are planned. We also had some thoughts about our jobs and about transcription itself. RS-15A gave us our language training — excellently, in fact. But the general feeling among transcribers is that, although language training is important, it does not necessarily make a good or even proficient transcriber.

The RS-15A program was large and extensive when it was only an idea and became even more so when it was implemented. It had its teething pains, and they affected everyone involved with the program. Bureaucracy caused many of them. Those presented here have

<sup>1</sup> In order to get students' opinion on the RS-15A program, I sent a questionnaire to all of the A6 transcription divisions. The answers were extremely enlightening and I'd like to thank everyone who took the time to put something down on paper.

only to do with the 15A course, because the students were directly affected.

The course was 58 weeks long (later shortened), eight hours a day, five days a week plus, at times, several hours of homework a night. Most of the students started from scratch, with the Russian alphabet and basics of the language. The course was divided into five phases: Phase I was basic grammar; Phase II was intermediate grammar (a huge exception to everything in Phase I, as one student put it); Phase III concentrated largely on translation and syntax; Phase IV was transcription technical training; Phase V was on-the-job training. We had native instructors throughout the first three phases.

One of my questions concerned the sequence of course material. Most students, but not all, were satisfied with it. The jump from simple to difficult material could have been easier to take if something in-between had been introduced. At one point we were reading Anna and Maxim stories, shortly afterwards the works of Ilf and Petrov.

Another problem involved the Computer Assisted Instruction (CAI) used in Phases I and II. In theory, it was a great idea. It not only was a help to the

students, but also to our instructors, who didn't have to drill us endlessly on vocabulary, noun declensions, verb conjugations, etc. But the fact is that many 15A students never saw a CAI terminal. The terminals at FANX II were often down. Later on, it was decided that FANX VI should have its own terminals, but they were not installed while we were taking the course. Anyone who has ever studied a foreign language knows that there is some rote memorization and drilling involved, especially in learning the basics. CAI is the perfect solution for this, but in the future, it should be made available to everyone.

Some students felt we should have gotten more instruction in the Soviet [redacted]

[redacted] These subjects were barely touched on at all; a few enterprising souls read up on them in their free time. Fortunately, many of our native instructors shared with us their experiences of living in the Soviet Union. One instructor is particularly famous among Russian-language students at the Agency (not just 15A students) for his war stories. Something as rich as Russian culture and history should not be practically ignored. A nation's culture is just as important as its language; it's part of it.

(b) (3) -P.L. 86-36 d in his article, "Failure to pass any phase of RLAP (Russian Linguist Acquisition Plan) results in immediate termination of employment for outside hires." The Russian Language Proficiency Test (LPT) was included in that, at least for the first graduating classes in 15A. We were told that if we didn't pass the LPT, we would be "separated" from the Agency. As the months of study wore on, many students became increasingly worried about the LPT — not because they didn't know the Russian language, but because their jobs and a promotion were at stake. We took the LPT and waited for the results with bated breaths. Some students already knew that they had performed poorly because of the pressure to pass and the sheer nervousness that resulted from it. This turned out to be the case when our scores came out — and a decision still hadn't been made as to what the passing score would be. When that was finally settled, students who failed were up in the air for several days because they didn't know whether they had a job or not. There was absolutely no excuse for this incident and others like it. A major complaint often heard from 15A students was that standards were set and not adhered to.

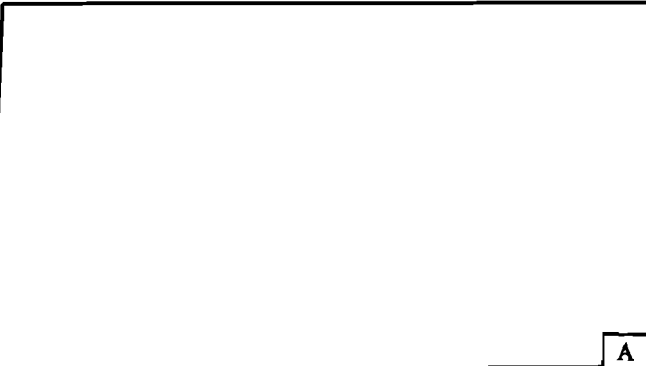
Phase IV gave us a small taste of transcription. The technical training program, as describe (b) (3) -P.L. 86-36 (b) (3) -P.L. 86-36 cle, was beneficial. The package was made up of about forty exercises based on Voice of

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America, Radio Volga, and classified sources. The further we progressed, the more difficult the exercises became. It was all good, but only in a nut-and-bolts manner. It did not prepare us, for example, to cope with the [redacted]

[redacted] It also didn't — and couldn't, for that matter — show us what transcription really is.

I spoke to 15A students and supervisors of transcribers, and received many written opinions about transcription. Time and time again they stressed the fact that a patient, supportive supervisor is essential in training and guiding a transcriber. For an apprentice, transcribing is very difficult and boring. There is much to learn about working aids and computer terminals. A transcriber must learn to judge whether a transcript



A transcriber has to realize that he will always be learning and will never know everything about his office's target, even if he's a "superscribe." This knowledge comes only from experience, and for precisely that reason Phase V is more valuable than all of the other phases of the program combined.

Transcription is an art; it cannot be taught. Transcribers develop their sense of hearing to a point above that of the average individual. A talented scribe is said to have a "good ear" just as a musician might. And just as a good musician does not play only what he sees, a transcriber does not write only what he hears. If we did that, our transcripts would be useless. "A good ear" implies that there is a great deal of reasoning and intuition involved in putting out a transcript; dozens of possibilities have to be explored. Not everyone has the ability to do that, and not all those who do, have a temperament suited to do the job. Transcription demands super-human patience and determination. It's a lot to ask of someone; most transcribers can't keep it up for more than a few hours at a time. As you can imagine, transcription has a high attrition rate.

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Not everyone can transcribe. Time is the only true test of that; nobody knows which proficient transcribers will become good transcribers. Since RS-15A graduates have had practically the best language training possible, it will be interesting to see in five years, perhaps, how many 15A graduates are good, strong transcribers. If a third of them are, I would say that the RS-15A program was a success.

(b) (3) - P.L. 86-36 graduated from high school in June 1977 and joined the Agency the following September. Since completing the RS-15A program in October 1978, she has worked as a voice language technician in A653. She is working toward an AB in Russian Area Studies.

(b) (3) - P.L. 86-36 replies:

*This is an excellent critique; I personally don't disagree with any of the author's statements. The reader must bear in mind that the Russian Linguist Acquisition Program, including of course the RS-15A subset, is the product of many, many people and organizations — a bureaucratic production. We intended to design a horse, but instead designed a camel! The business of the LPT is an example of bureaucratic snafu, and the criticism is justified. That being said, we can still be reasonably satisfied with the results and if we have to train from scratch again we will benefit from hindsight and do a better job. Good luck to all you RS-15A graduates. May you have satisfying and rewarding careers at NSA.*