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# An exploratory study of demographics, goals and expectations of private online language learners in Russia

Olga Kozar<sup>a,\*</sup>, Naomi Sweller<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> Department of Linguistics, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia<sup>b</sup> Department of Psychology, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

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## ABSTRACT

There is a growing phenomenon of private online language tutoring worldwide, wherein learners hire language teachers via the Internet for one-to-one lessons. Research has yet to examine private online language learners and their characteristics. This study explored whether there is a statistically significant relationship between these learners' demographic characteristics, stated learning goals, prior learning experience and learners' expectations of their future tutors. In the study, statistical methods were used to analyse 121 application forms from one private online tutoring company in Russia. Findings reveal that the majority of learners are adult learners, and hire private online tutors for work-related and examination-related reasons. A significant correlation was found between learners' stated goals and their expectations of their future teachers. Learners who were studying for an exam tended to use such adjectives as 'strict' and 'demanding' when describing their 'ideal' teachers, while learners studying for work-related purposes reported desiring a 'result-providing' instructor. These findings were discussed in light of the self-determination theory and relevant studies on language learning motivation.

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## 1. Background

Learning and teaching outside mainstream educational institutions has become more widespread and varied in recent decades, thanks to various online resources brought by the digital revolution. This paper is one of the first attempts to explore a new and growing population – those students who choose to hire private language tutors and have lessons via popular audio/video chat tools (e.g., Skype). There are theoretical and practical reasons to study these students as it will (i) contribute to our understanding of a new social practice in the field of language learning and (ii) inform a wider educational community about a shifting demographic of current language learners, who are complementing or substituting their studies in mainstream educational institutions with private online tutorials. This study is particularly timely, considering that there are compelling reasons to expect private online tutoring to become widespread in the coming decade. [Ventura and Jang \(2010\)](#) conceptualized 'e-tutoring' from the globalization and offshoring lens and argued that there are sufficient economic grounds to predict a rapid growth of private tutoring via the Internet. Empirical data supports this prediction: a report by [Global Industry Analysts \(2012\)](#) indicated a sizeable rise in the online tutoring market and a recent study on private online

\* Corresponding author. 16/10 McKye Street, Waverton, Sydney 2067, Australia. Tel.: +61 0466401179.  
 E-mail address: [Olga.kozar@mq.edu.au](mailto:Olga.kozar@mq.edu.au) (O. Kozar).

language teaching in Russia suggested that there are hundreds of online tutoring websites offering language teaching services to Russian learners of English via tools like Skype (Kozar, 2012b).

Against this backdrop of the rapidly increasing industry of private online tutoring worldwide, this exploratory study seeks to (i) study a broad range of characteristics, such as age, gender, stated learning goals, expectations and prior learning experience of Russian learners of English who hire private online tutors via one private online company and (ii) to explore the relationships between the abovementioned factors among students from one private online tutoring company.

English language teaching in Russia has undergone a major transformation in the last 20 years (Ter-Minasova, 2005; Ustinova, 2005). The two decades which followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the adoption of neo-liberal market ideology saw an unprecedented interest in learning English. Fuelled by the demands of the new economy and a new globalized lifestyle, knowing English has become a highly desired and sought-after skill in professional and personal domains in Russia. These societal changes have coincided with the growth of information technology and rapid globalization, which also acted as a catalyst for learning English. This increased interest towards learning English has led to the growth of the private English-teaching industry in Russia, which is currently comprised of thousands of private language schools (Reshetnikova, 2011) and a great number of private language teachers, offering language teaching services to students of different ages (Kozar, 2013). An important recent development in the Russian language-teaching market is the emergence of private *online* language tutoring services (Kozar, 2012b). However, neither the learning goals, nor the expectations of learners hiring private one-to-one tutors online or the relationship between these factors have been investigated by prior research. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the following questions:

- 1) What are the demographic characteristics and prior learning experience of Russian learners of English who choose to hire private online language tutors?
- 2) Is there a relationship between students' demographic characteristics, prior learning experience and their expectations of their future instructors?

While there is evidence that there are considerable similarities between discursive practices of private online language schools in Russia (Kozar, 2014), findings from this study should not be generalized to other private online learners from Russia. Instead, this study aims to provide baseline data on a previously unexamined population and to motivate future research.

## 2. Research on demographic characteristics of private and online learners

In the absence of any research investigating demographic characteristics of customers of private online tutors, we review studies on the demographic characteristics of customers of face-to-face tutors, as well as studies investigating the demographic characteristics of online learner populations in mainstream education. The findings of these studies are used as a reference point for analysing our data on the demographic characteristics of private online English learners from Russia.

### 2.1. Customers of private face-to-face tutors

The social practice of private tutoring is considerably less researched than teaching in mainstream educational contexts due to the unregulated and free-lance nature of private tutoring. One-to-one tutoring also tends to operate “behind closed doors”, which limits research access to this learning environment (Gaunt, 2009, p. 2). While little has been documented specifically in regards to demographic characteristics of learners engaged in private face-to-face tutoring, existing literature appears to point to some trends associated with customers of private face-to-face tutors worldwide.

First, a common conceptualization of private tutoring as ‘shadow education’ suggests that a considerable portion of private face-to-face tutees worldwide are school-aged children and teenagers, who use private tutoring as a tool to improve their performance in mainstream education systems (Baker, Akiba, LeTendre, & Wiseman, 2001; Bray, 2010; Ireson & Rushforth, 2005; Southgate, 2009). Some studies also report that hiring a private tutor is strongly associated with students' finishing school and taking high stakes standardized examinations (Bray & Kwok, 2003; Buchmann, Condrón, & Roscigno, 2010).

Second, there might be a link between gender and students' likelihood of participating in private tutoring. Kim (2010) reported that more Korean females than males were participating in private tutoring; this gender bias, however, was not confirmed by other studies investigating customers of private online tutors in other countries (Dang, 2007; Elbadawy, Assaad, Ahlburg, & Levison, 2007).

Third, the demographic characteristics of face-to-face tutees may be linked with a country's socio-economic status. It has been proposed that countries with competitive market economies as well as those countries that have recently transitioned from a communist economy to a neoliberal one may have a higher rate of private tutoring than other countries (Bray & Silova, 2006). As for Russia, a recent study suggested that (i) English appears to be the most frequently offered subject for private tuition in Moscow, and (ii) private English lessons are advertised to learners of different ages, including school-aged children and adults (Kozar, 2013). To the best of our knowledge, no prior studies have examined customers of private tutors in Russia and the present study aims to fill in this gap by reporting on the characteristics and expectations of Russian learners of English who hire private tutors online.

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