

## **Major Challenges in Learning Russian as a Foreign Language in Azerbaijani Schools: Interlingual Interference, Pedagogical Barriers, and Contemporary Methodological Solutions**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the principal challenges that Azerbaijani school learners encounter when studying Russian as a foreign language and offers a synthesis of contemporary methodological responses. Drawing on second language acquisition theory and empirical research on crosslinguistic influence, the study analyses systematic difficulties emerging from the substantial typological distance between Russian (an inflectional Indo-European language) and Azerbaijani (an agglutinative Turkic language). Particular attention is paid to phonetic interference, mastery of grammatical gender, the six-case declension system, verbal aspect, word-order flexibility, and stress placement — categories that are either absent or structured differently in the learners' first language. The paper further investigates lexical acquisition difficulties, psychological and motivational barriers, and methodological limitations of grammar-translation-based instruction still prevalent in many national schools. A qualitative synthesis of recent literature, methodological handbooks, and classroom-based studies is complemented by an analysis of typical learner errors documented in Azerbaijani educational contexts. The findings indicate that interlingual interference is the single most influential factor shaping learner output at the early and intermediate stages, and that its effects can be substantially mitigated through communicative, task-based, and technology-enhanced

instruction combined with systematic contrastive pedagogy. The study concludes that effective Russian-language instruction in Azerbaijani schools requires an integrated approach that accounts for learners' national and linguistic backgrounds, cultivates a supportive language environment, and balances explicit form-focused instruction with meaningful communicative practice.

**Keywords:** *Russian as a foreign language; Azerbaijani learners; interlingual interference; second language acquisition; teaching methodology; phonetics; grammar; lexicon; learner motivation; communicative approach*

## 1. Introduction

Russian remains one of the most widely spoken languages in the world and continues to serve as an important instrument of interethnic communication, higher education, science, and cultural exchange across the post-Soviet space. In Azerbaijan, competence in Russian retains considerable practical and academic value: it facilitates access to a large body of scientific and technical literature, enables mobility within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) academic space, and expands professional opportunities in cross-border business and cultural sectors. Consequently, Russian occupies a stable place in the curriculum of many general education schools in Azerbaijan, where it is taught either as a second foreign language or, in mixed-language schools, as a medium of instruction.

Despite this sustained institutional support, the empirical picture of learner outcomes remains uneven. Learners in Azerbaijani schools consistently exhibit persistent errors in pronunciation, morphology, and sentence construction, even after several years of formal instruction. These difficulties are not merely a function of individual ability or classroom time; they arise from deep structural differences between Russian and Azerbaijani. Russian is a fusional Indo-European language characterised by a rich system of nominal declension, grammatical gender, verbal aspect, and free but pragmatically constrained word order. Azerbaijani, by contrast, is an agglutinative Turkic language with no grammatical gender, a suffixal case system that operates on different semantic principles, a strictly consistent SOV canonical word order, and a phonological inventory that differs substantially from that of Russian (Odlin, 1989; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008).

Second language acquisition (SLA) research has long identified crosslinguistic influence — commonly referred to as interference or transfer — as one of the strongest predictors of the shape of learner language, particularly at the early and intermediate stages of development. Selinker's (1972) foundational notion of interlanguage frames learner production as a dynamic linguistic system shaped, in part, by the structural properties of the first language. More recent work confirms that transfer is neither uniformly positive nor uniformly negative: learners transfer categories, distinctions, and processing routines from their L1, and the impact of that transfer depends on the typological distance between the languages and on the type of

instruction learners receive (Ellis, 2015; Gass, Behney, & Plonsky, 2020). In the specific case of Azerbaijani learners of Russian, this typological distance is significant and multidimensional, which helps to explain the range of documented difficulties.

The situation is further complicated by non-linguistic factors. Many students study Russian primarily in the classroom, with limited exposure to authentic input outside school. Speaking anxiety, low intrinsic motivation, and fear of error can inhibit oral production, and instruction that is dominated by grammar-translation and rote memorisation tends to reinforce passive, receptive skills at the expense of productive, communicative competence (Horwitz, 2010; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). Under such conditions, learners may develop reasonable literacy in Russian while remaining unable to sustain even simple spontaneous conversation.

The present study addresses these interconnected issues. Its aim is to identify and systematise the principal difficulties encountered by Azerbaijani school learners of Russian, situate them within contemporary SLA and Russian-as-a-foreign-language (RFL) methodology, and outline evidence-based pedagogical responses. The analysis is guided by three research questions: (1) which categories of Russian linguistic structure pose the most persistent difficulties for Azerbaijani learners, and how are these difficulties related to L1 transfer? (2) which non-linguistic factors — psychological, methodological, environmental — amplify these difficulties in the school context? (3) which contemporary instructional approaches are best suited to mitigate these difficulties without disregarding learners' national-linguistic background?

## **2. Methods**

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on a structured review of the scholarly and methodological literature, combined with an interpretive analysis of documented learner errors in the Azerbaijani school context. The rationale for this design is twofold: (i) crosslinguistic influence between Russian and Azerbaijani is a well-established phenomenon documented in a substantial body of methodological literature, and (ii) a systematic synthesis of these sources — read through the lens of contemporary SLA — offers a coherent framework for practical pedagogical guidance.

The literature corpus was assembled from three complementary sources. First, foundational works on SLA, crosslinguistic influence, and second-language pedagogy published by internationally recognised academic publishers (Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, Routledge, Wiley-Blackwell) were included to provide the theoretical scaffolding. Second, methodological handbooks in the Russian-as-a-foreign-language tradition (Азимов & Щукин, 2009; Щукин, 2010) were consulted to ensure that the analysis reflects established RFL pedagogical thinking. Third, peer-reviewed articles from Scopus-indexed journals such as *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *TESOL Quarterly*, *Language Teaching*, and *IRAL* were used to incorporate contemporary empirical evidence on grammar instruction, feedback, motivation, and technology-mediated learning.

Inclusion criteria were: (a) direct relevance to phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical, or psychological aspects of second-language learning; (b) methodological rigour and reproducibility of empirical claims; (c) either a canonical status in the field or publication within the last decade to ensure currency. Sources not directly relevant to school-age learners or to typologically distant language pairs were excluded from close analysis, though several classic references were retained for their conceptual importance.

Analysis proceeded thematically. Recurring categories of difficulty reported across the literature and observable in Azerbaijani classroom practice were coded and organised into five domains: phonetic difficulties; grammatical difficulties (gender, case, aspect); lexical and semantic difficulties; psychological and motivational barriers; and methodological and environmental challenges. Each domain was then examined for the role of L1 transfer, the extent of documented pedagogical response, and the alignment of that response with contemporary SLA principles.

### **3. Results**

The synthesis identifies five interconnected domains of difficulty. These domains do not operate in isolation: phonological difficulties feed into listening comprehension problems, which reduce input processing efficiency; morphological complexity increases cognitive load, which in turn raises affective barriers; and methodological limitations amplify all of the above by narrowing opportunities for meaningful practice. The presentation below treats each domain in turn while noting the systemic connections.

#### ***3.1 Phonetic Difficulties***

The Russian phonological system differs from Azerbaijani in several respects that produce predictable interference. The Russian consonant inventory includes a productive palatalisation contrast (hard versus soft consonants) that is largely absent as a systematic distinctive feature in Azerbaijani. Learners frequently substitute the closest available native consonant, producing forms in which /tʲ/, /dʲ/, /sʲ/, /zʲ/, /nʲ/, /lʲ/ are realised as their hard counterparts, with predictable consequences for lexical distinctions (e.g., *мать* vs. *мат*, *брат* vs. *брать*).

Vowel reduction — the systematic weakening of unstressed vowels in Russian — is another major source of error. Azerbaijani vowel harmony operates on entirely different principles and does not produce comparable qualitative reduction. Learners tend to preserve full vowel qualities in unstressed positions, resulting in unnatural rhythmic patterns and, in extreme cases, comprehension difficulties for native listeners. The mobility of Russian word stress compounds the problem: stress is lexically specified and can shift within paradigms (e.g., *голова́* → *го́ловы*), whereas Azerbaijani stress is highly regular and predominantly word-final. This mismatch predicts, and empirical observation confirms, systematic stress-placement errors in learner production.

Additional phonetic challenges include the palatal glide /j/ in orthographic contexts unfamiliar to Azerbaijani learners, the affricate /tʃ/, and the fricatives /ʃ/, /z/, /ɛ:/. Contemporary phonetic pedagogy emphasises the value of contrastive minimal-pair training, explicit articulatory description, and technology-mediated feedback (e.g., automatic speech recognition-based pronunciation feedback) as effective countermeasures (Chapelle & Sauro, 2017).

### ***3.2 Grammatical Difficulties: Gender, Case, and Aspect***

Grammatical gender is arguably the single most difficult morphological category for Azerbaijani learners because Azerbaijani has no grammatical gender at all. Russian assigns masculine, feminine, or neuter gender to every noun, and this classification governs adjective agreement, pronominal reference, past-tense verbal agreement, and numeral concord. Learners must therefore acquire not only the gender of each new noun but also the elaborate agreement pattern that follows from it — a task made more difficult by the fact that gender in Russian is only partially predictable from noun endings and includes systematic exceptions (e.g., *папа*, *дядя* as masculine; *путь* as masculine; *мать*, *дочь* as feminine consonant-stem exceptions).

The Russian case system presents a second, equally serious challenge. Russian nouns, adjectives, and pronouns decline for six cases, each with distinct singular and plural forms and further variation by gender and stem type. Azerbaijani does possess a case system, but it operates through a small number of transparent agglutinative suffixes attached to invariable stems, without gender or fusional variation. The conceptual mapping between the two systems is only partial: for example, the Russian instrumental case has no direct Azerbaijani analogue, while the semantic distribution of the genitive across possession, negation, partitivity, and adnominal quantification exceeds the coverage of any single Azerbaijani suffix. Contemporary error analyses consistently identify case selection and agreement as leading sources of accuracy loss in learner output (Ellis, 2006).

Verbal aspect represents a third major difficulty. The Russian aspectual system organises verbs into perfective and imperfective pairs and encodes distinctions of completion, boundedness, iteration, and progression that are grammaticalised throughout the verbal paradigm. Azerbaijani expresses similar semantic distinctions primarily through lexical means and tense forms rather than through a binary aspectual opposition. As a result, learners frequently select the wrong aspect, use imperfective forms where perfective is required for a single completed event, or overuse periphrastic constructions to compensate for the absence of an intuitive L1 equivalent (Ellis, 2015). Systematic contrastive presentation of aspectual pairs, together with meaningful input in which the two members of a pair contrast in interpretable ways, is essential for effective instruction.

### ***3.3 Lexical and Semantic Challenges***

Vocabulary acquisition poses well-known challenges in any second language, but several factors intensify them in the Russian-Azerbaijani context. Lexical density in Russian is high, and productive derivational morphology means that a single root can yield a large family of prefixed and suffixed forms with subtle semantic distinctions (e.g., идти, приходить, уходить, заходить, обходить, переходить). Learners with limited exposure often memorise individual lexical items without acquiring the derivational patterns that would allow them to expand vocabulary systematically (Nation, 2013).

Polysemy, idiomatic expressions, collocations, and metaphorical extensions constitute a further layer of difficulty. Direct translation from Azerbaijani frequently produces unidiomatic or unintelligible output, particularly for expressions involving prepositional government, aspectual verbs, and culturally embedded metaphors. Rote memorisation, still widespread in classroom practice, is a poor match for the acquisition of such multiword, context-sensitive knowledge; incidental learning through extensive reading and structured contextual exposure yields substantially better retention and productive use (Nation, 2013).

### ***3.4 Psychological and Motivational Barriers***

Alongside these structural difficulties, affective factors exert a strong influence on learner outcomes. Foreign-language classroom anxiety — the situation-specific apprehension that many learners experience during oral tasks — is one of the most consistently documented negative predictors of speaking performance (Horwitz, 2010). In the Azerbaijani school context, this anxiety is often intensified by peer judgement, teacher-fronted classroom dynamics, and evaluative feedback practices that emphasise error at the expense of communicative success.

Motivation, by contrast, is a well-established positive predictor of sustained language study. Contemporary motivational theory frames learner engagement in terms of the interaction between the ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). Instruction that helps students visualise concrete personal futures involving Russian — academic, professional, cultural — is more likely to sustain effort than instruction that treats Russian primarily as an examination subject. Similarly, self-determination-theoretic accounts identify autonomy, competence, and relatedness as key drivers of intrinsic motivation; classroom practices that grant learners meaningful choice, provide calibrated challenge, and cultivate a supportive peer community are therefore of direct practical importance.

### ***3.5 Methodological Challenges and Limited Language Exposure***

A recurring theme across the literature and classroom observation is that methodological choices amplify or attenuate the structural difficulties described above. Grammar-translation-based instruction, though useful for developing metalinguistic awareness and reading comprehension, provides insufficient opportunity for communicative practice and can leave learners unable to convert declarative knowledge of rules into procedural, spontaneous

production. Contemporary methodology therefore favours a balanced approach that combines explicit form-focused instruction with communicative, task-based, and content-based activities (Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011).

Timely, informative corrective feedback is a further critical factor. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that oral corrective feedback — particularly forms such as recasts, prompts, and metalinguistic feedback — produces measurable gains in accuracy, with medium to large effect sizes across a range of target structures (Lyster & Saito, 2010). Hattie and Timperley (2007) emphasise that effective feedback answers three questions for the learner: where am I going, how am I going, and where to next. Classrooms in which feedback consists primarily of undifferentiated evaluative marking do not exploit this potential.

Finally, the language environment beyond the classroom is decisive. In many Azerbaijani schools, learners hear little or no Russian outside of instructional time; input is limited to textbooks and short classroom exchanges. Technology-mediated resources — authentic video with subtitles, adapted graded readers, learner-oriented podcasts, and communicative applications — can substantially widen the input base and provide opportunities for interaction beyond school hours (Chapelle & Sauro, 2017). Frameworks such as the CEFR Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2020) further support the design of graded, mediation-focused activities that connect classroom learning to real-world language use.

#### **4. Discussion**

Read together, the five domains of difficulty analysed above point to a single overarching diagnosis: the challenges faced by Azerbaijani school learners of Russian are systematic and structurally motivated rather than incidental. They are the predictable consequence of teaching a fusional Indo-European language, with rich inflectional morphology, elaborate aspectual semantics, and a phonological system marked by palatalisation and mobile stress, to learners whose L1 is a typologically distant agglutinative language with no grammatical gender, a different case semantics, and a different prosodic profile. This structural framing has direct implications for pedagogy.

The first implication concerns the role of contrastive analysis. Although modern SLA has moved beyond the strong version of the contrastive analysis hypothesis, the more moderate position — that crosslinguistic influence is real, systematic, and pedagogically relevant — is well supported (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008; Odlin, 1989). Teachers of Russian in Azerbaijani schools benefit from explicit knowledge of the structural points at which L1 and L2 diverge, and from the ability to design targeted exercises addressing those specific points. This does not entail returning to grammar-translation as a general methodology; rather, it means embedding informed contrastive attention within a broader communicative framework.

The second implication concerns instructional balance. The evidence reviewed here supports an integrated model in which explicit form-focused instruction on high-difficulty

categories (gender assignment and agreement, case selection, aspectual pairs, palatalisation) is combined with substantial communicative and task-based practice. Focus-on-form techniques — brief, contextualised attention to linguistic form embedded within meaning-focused activity — offer a productive middle ground between decontextualised drilling and pure communicative practice (Ellis, 2006, 2015). Systematic input flooding of difficult structures, structured input activities, and output tasks with corrective feedback loops are particularly effective.

The third implication concerns the affective dimension. Reducing speaking anxiety and cultivating durable motivation are not optional add-ons but preconditions for productive skill development. Classroom practices that normalise error as evidence of learning, provide low-stakes rehearsal opportunities before public performance, and foreground learners' personal futures with Russian are consistent with both the anxiety literature (Horwitz, 2010) and the motivational literature (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). At the institutional level, redesigning assessment to reward communicative success in addition to formal accuracy sends a strong signal about what is valued.

The fourth implication concerns the language environment. In contexts where authentic Russian input is scarce outside the classroom, the school is responsible not only for teaching the language but also for supplying the exposure that would elsewhere come from the linguistic surround. Digital resources make this feasible in ways that were not available even a decade ago: curated video libraries, adapted podcasts, well-designed applications, and structured online interaction with peers or tutors can substantially raise the total volume of comprehensible input to which learners are exposed (Chapelle & Sauro, 2017). Zone-of-proximal-development considerations (Vygotsky, 1978) argue for input that is calibrated slightly above current productive competence and mediated by explicit support.

The role of the teacher, viewed against this backdrop, is not diminished but redefined. Effective teachers of Russian in Azerbaijani schools are, simultaneously, linguistic diagnosticians who can predict interference-based errors from their knowledge of the two language systems; methodologists who can integrate explicit and communicative techniques appropriately; motivators who understand what sustains adolescent engagement; and curators of input who select and structure the resources that shape learner exposure. This is a demanding professional profile, and it points to the importance of ongoing teacher development, subject-specific methodological training, and the availability of high-quality contrastive teaching materials adapted to the Azerbaijani school context (Азимов & Щукин, 2009; Щукин, 2010).

Certain limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. The analysis is based on a qualitative synthesis of literature and documented classroom observation rather than on new large-scale empirical data collection. The findings are therefore best read as a theoretically informed framework for further empirical inquiry. Future research should include longitudinal error analyses in Azerbaijani schools, quasi-experimental evaluations of specific instructional

interventions, and studies of learner motivation and identity across grade levels. Comparative research examining the trajectories of Azerbaijani learners of Russian and of English would also help isolate factors specific to the Russian-Azerbaijani pair from more general SLA effects.

## 5. Conclusion

The difficulties experienced by Azerbaijani school learners of Russian are neither random nor primarily attributable to individual limitations. They arise systematically from the substantial typological distance between the two languages, are amplified by affective and methodological factors, and are attenuated or exacerbated by the design of instruction and by the availability of authentic input. Phonetic interference, grammatical gender, the six-case system, verbal aspect, and lexical density constitute the principal structural obstacles, while limited language exposure, classroom anxiety, and grammar-translation-heavy methodology constitute the principal contextual obstacles.

The evidence reviewed supports an integrated pedagogical response that combines contrastively informed, form-focused instruction on high-difficulty structures with substantial communicative and task-based practice, timely and informative corrective feedback, motivationally rich classroom design, and enriched input through technology-mediated resources. Such an approach is fully consistent with contemporary SLA theory and with the established RFL methodological tradition, and it is well suited to the specific structural profile of Azerbaijani learners.

Ultimately, the study confirms that Russian remains a valuable investment for Azerbaijani learners — academically, professionally, and culturally — and that the observed difficulties, though real, are tractable. With careful methodological design, competent and well-supported teachers, and a rich language environment, Azerbaijani school learners can develop durable communicative competence in Russian. Realising this potential requires not only better classroom practice but also sustained institutional attention to teacher education, curriculum design, and assessment reform. The strategic value of that investment for the broader educational, cultural, and economic life of the country is considerable.

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