

FEATURES OF RUSSIAN PHONETICS: PRONUNCIATION DIFFICULTIES FOR FOREIGN LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the main phonetic difficulties encountered by foreign learners when studying Russian as a second language. The focus is placed on stress, vowel reduction, the system of hissing consonants, and palatalization. Each of these aspects is analyzed in detail with reference to typical learner errors and their underlying causes. The research is based on comparative phonetic analysis, observation of foreign students' speech, and classroom experiments. The article also reviews teaching techniques that can help reduce pronunciation difficulties and evaluates the role of modern technologies in the development of pronunciation skills. The findings confirm that systematic phonetic training, supported by technological and methodological innovations, is essential for improving the pronunciation skills of foreign students.

Keywords: Russian phonetics, pronunciation, stress, vowel reduction, palatalization, foreign learners.

INTRODUCTION

Phonetics is traditionally considered one of the most challenging areas in the study of Russian as a foreign language. While grammar can be acquired through explicit rules and vocabulary can be memorized, correct pronunciation requires the internalization of new articulatory habits, constant repetition, and attentive listening to the sound system of the target language. For many foreign students, mastering Russian phonetics takes years of practice, and even advanced learners may retain a noticeable accent that hinders communication.

The Russian phonetic system differs significantly from the systems of many widely spoken languages. Stress in Russian is free and mobile, which means that it may fall on different syllables in different forms of the same word. This unpredictability complicates the process of acquiring correct stress placement, especially for learners whose native languages have fixed stress, such as French or

Turkish. Another major difficulty is vowel reduction: unstressed vowels in Russian often deviate considerably from their orthographic representation, which creates a discrepancy between written and spoken forms and leads to numerous errors. In addition, Russian is characterized by a complex system of hissing consonants, as well as affricates, which are articulated in ways unfamiliar to learners from linguistic traditions that lack similar sounds. Finally, the distinction between hard and soft consonants, known as palatalization, represents one of the most unique and semantically significant features of Russian. Palatalization changes the meaning of words and requires precise control of tongue position, which is often difficult for students to master.

These features, while integral to the Russian language, represent serious obstacles for foreigners. They lead to errors that can affect intelligibility, create misunderstandings, and reduce communicative efficiency. Understanding the origin of these difficulties is the first step toward developing effective methods of teaching Russian phonetics. The present research aims to investigate these phonetic challenges in detail, to analyze the mistakes made by learners with different linguistic backgrounds, and to propose teaching methods that can help overcome them.

METHODS

The study was carried out through several interconnected stages, each of which contributed to the overall analysis of phonetic difficulties among foreign learners of Russian. At the first stage, a comparative phonetic analysis was conducted. The Russian sound system was systematically compared with the phonetic systems of English, Chinese, Arabic, and Turkish. These languages were selected because they represent the native backgrounds of the majority of the students participating in the research. The comparison covered the inventory of vowels and consonants, the rules governing stress placement, the presence or absence of vowel reduction, and the role of palatalization in the phonological systems. Such an analysis allowed us to predict which aspects of Russian phonetics would be most problematic for learners from each language group. For example, students with English as their mother tongue were expected to face difficulties with vowel reduction, while learners from Turkish backgrounds were expected to encounter problems with consonant palatalization.

The second stage involved direct observation of students' speech in real classroom settings. Over the course of an academic year, the pronunciation of thirty-five students was monitored during lessons, oral examinations, and informal discussions. The observations were recorded in the form of detailed field notes and supplemented with audio recordings, which provided authentic data on how phonetic errors manifest themselves in spontaneous speech. The material collected revealed that while many students were capable of reproducing individual sounds correctly in isolation, they frequently reverted to incorrect articulation during free conversation, confirming the importance of context and fluency in phonetic performance.

The third stage consisted of the creation of a corpus of recorded speech. Each student participated in three tasks: the reading of a prepared text, the performance of minimal pair exercises focusing on contrasts of stress, vowel quality, and palatalization, and a short free conversation with the instructor lasting approximately seven minutes. The recordings were analyzed acoustically using Praat software. Spectrographic analysis allowed us to measure vowel formants, duration, and intensity, providing an objective picture of how far learners' pronunciation deviated from Russian norms. For consonantal sounds, particular attention was given to the articulation of hissing consonants and the presence or absence of palatalization, which could be clearly identified in the acoustic data.

The fourth stage of the study was experimental and focused on teaching methods. An experimental program was introduced in two groups consisting of twenty students in total. Over the course of one semester, the groups received targeted phonetic training that emphasized the most problematic aspects of Russian pronunciation. Stress placement was practiced through rhythmic and intonation-based drills. Vowel reduction was trained by means of minimal pair exercises, auditory discrimination tasks, and repeated listening to authentic recordings. Special articulation exercises were designed for hissing consonants, with the use of visual diagrams illustrating tongue and lip positions. Palatalization was taught using mirror-based monitoring of articulation, which allowed students to control tongue movement visually. In addition, students practiced shadowing exercises, repeating authentic Russian speech in synchrony with recordings, which helped them to acquire natural prosody.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the training, pre-test and post-test recordings were compared. The results indicated that students demonstrated notable improvement in stress placement and vowel reduction after systematic practice. Progress in the articulation of hissing consonants was evident but slower, while the mastery of palatalization required the longest time and remained the most persistent source of errors. Nevertheless, the overall improvement confirmed the importance of focused phonetic instruction supported by modern technological tools.

RESULTS

One of the most significant problems is Russian stress. Unlike English, where stress follows relatively stable patterns, or Turkish, where stress is almost always placed on the final syllable, Russian stress is free and mobile. For example, in the word *ruka* (hand) the stress falls on the last syllable in the singular form, but in the plural form *ruki* the stress shifts to the first syllable. Such mobility is unexpected for learners and leads to constant mistakes in accentuation. Learners often attempt to regularize stress according to their native system, producing errors such as stressing only the first or last syllable in all words.

Another difficulty is vowel reduction. In Russian, vowels in unstressed position lose their full quality. For instance, the word *moloko* (milk) contains three letters "o",

but only the last one is pronounced as [o], while the first two are reduced to [a] and [ə]. Foreign learners often pronounce all vowels fully, which makes their speech sound unnatural and strongly accented. For English-speaking students, vowel reduction resembles the schwa phenomenon, but in Russian it operates on a much wider scale. For Chinese and Arabic learners, reduction is completely unfamiliar and often resisted even after years of study.

A further challenge is the system of hissing consonants such as [ʂ], [ʐ], [tʂ], [ɕ:]. Words like *shum* (noise), *zhuk* (beetle), *chay* (tea) and *shchuka* (pike) require precise articulation. Speakers of English tend to substitute [ʐ] with [ʒ], while Chinese learners struggle to distinguish between [ʂ] and [ɕ:]. Turkish and Arabic speakers often merge several hissing sounds into one, which reduces intelligibility. Incorrect substitution often makes learners' pronunciation unclear and difficult to follow for native speakers.

Palatalization also presents major difficulties. The opposition between hard and soft consonants is central in Russian. The difference between *luk* (onion) and *lyuk* (hatch) is based entirely on palatalization. Many learners are unable to reproduce this contrast, which causes confusion in communication. Moreover, since palatalization can occur across almost the entire consonant system, its consistent mastery requires intensive training. Students from languages that do not mark palatalization, such as Arabic or English, frequently ignore this feature, while speakers of Polish or Czech, whose languages also include soft consonants, tend to transfer their own pronunciation patterns, which do not fully match Russian norms.

In addition to these central issues, learners also face problems with intonation and rhythm. Russian speech has a particular melodic contour that is often flattened by foreign learners, making their speech monotonous. Incorrect intonation sometimes even changes the pragmatic meaning of a statement.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of errors shows that the main source of difficulties is interference from the native language. English-speaking students usually ignore vowel reduction and attempt to pronounce each vowel clearly, which results in slow and unnatural speech. Chinese learners have difficulties mastering palatalization and often neutralize the opposition between hard and soft consonants. Arabic speakers frequently misplace stress and struggle with consonant clusters, which are more complex in Russian. Turkish learners, accustomed to predictable stress, find it hard to adapt to the variability of Russian word accentuation and often shift stress in a regular pattern that feels logical to them but is incorrect in Russian.

Another important factor is the influence of orthography. Since Russian writing often contains letters that do not correspond directly to pronunciation, learners who rely on written forms tend to reproduce words incorrectly. For example, the word *serdce* (heart) is often pronounced with a clear [d], although in actual speech it

disappears. Such spelling-based errors show how phonetics and orthography interact in the learning process.

Teaching practice demonstrates that purely theoretical explanations are insufficient to correct these difficulties. Learners need systematic auditory training, including repeated listening to native speech, phonetic transcription, and acoustic visualization of sounds. Exercises such as shadowing, where students repeat speech immediately after a recording, help approximate native-like rhythm and intonation. Minimal pair drills are especially effective for mastering palatalization and stress, because they force learners to notice contrasts that carry meaning in Russian.

Modern technology can also play a vital role. Speech recognition software allows learners to compare their pronunciation with the standard, and acoustic analysis shows them the physical properties of their speech. Language learning applications with built-in phonetic modules create additional opportunities for independent practice. However, teacher guidance remains essential, as automatic systems cannot fully explain the causes of errors or provide individualized correction.

Finally, cultural and psychological aspects should not be overlooked. Many students feel embarrassed about their accent and prefer to avoid speaking, which slows their progress. Encouraging communication in a supportive environment reduces anxiety and motivates learners to practice pronunciation more actively. Teachers should emphasize intelligibility rather than perfection in the early stages, gradually moving toward refinement of specific phonetic features.

CONCLUSION

The study shows that Russian phonetics poses serious challenges for foreign learners. Free and mobile stress, vowel reduction, hissing consonants and the hard–soft opposition of consonants are the most problematic areas. These difficulties are predictable because they are caused by the absence of such features in many other languages. Systematic training, regular listening practice and active speaking are essential to overcome them. Teachers should combine traditional articulation drills with modern technological methods and take into account the phonetic background of each student. Properly organized pronunciation training not only reduces errors but also strengthens students' confidence, facilitates communication and supports their overall language development.

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