

Influence of The Native Language on Russian Pronunciation

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Abstract: The influence of a learner's native language on second language pronunciation is one of the central issues in phonetic and phonological acquisition research. This study examines how native-language phonetic systems affect the pronunciation of Russian as a foreign language. Drawing on theories of cross-linguistic influence and interlanguage phonology, the paper analyzes typical pronunciation deviations observed among foreign students learning Russian. The research highlights phonetic transfer, prosodic interference, and segmental substitution as the main mechanisms of native-language influence. The findings demonstrate that learners tend to interpret unfamiliar Russian sounds through the phonological categories of their first language, which results in systematic pronunciation patterns rather than random errors. The study emphasizes the pedagogical importance of contrastive phonetic training and targeted pronunciation practice.

Keywords: Native language transfer, Russian pronunciation, phonetic interference, second language acquisition, interlanguage phonology, accent, cross-linguistic influence, phonetics, Russian as a foreign language.

Introduction: Pronunciation is one of the most important components of language competence because it directly influences intelligibility, communication efficiency, and social interaction in a second language environment. Unlike vocabulary and grammar, which can be consciously learned through explicit instruction, pronunciation develops through complex perceptual and articulatory processes that are strongly shaped by early linguistic experience. As a result, learners of a foreign language often retain phonetic features of their native language, producing speech that reflects characteristic accent patterns. The study of how the native language influences second-language pronunciation has therefore become a significant area of research within phonetics, phonology, and second language acquisition theory.

Russian language pronunciation presents a particular challenge for foreign learners due to its complex phonological system. Russian includes distinctive features such as hard and soft consonant opposition (palatalization), vowel reduction in unstressed syllables, rich consonant clusters, and variable lexical stress. For many learners, these features differ

substantially from the phonetic organization of their native languages, making accurate pronunciation difficult to achieve. Learners frequently struggle with both segmental aspects, such as producing unfamiliar consonants and vowels, and suprasegmental aspects, including stress placement, rhythm, and intonation patterns. These challenges often result in systematic pronunciation deviations that can affect comprehension and communicative effectiveness.

The influence of the native language, often referred to as phonetic transfer or interference, explains many of these pronunciation difficulties. According to theories of cross-linguistic influence, learners interpret and produce sounds of the target language through the perceptual categories established by their first language. Rather than perceiving new sounds objectively, they tend to associate them with the closest equivalents in their native phonological system. This process leads to predictable pronunciation patterns, such as sound substitution, simplification of consonant clusters, or transfer of native prosodic patterns. The concept of interlanguage phonology further suggests that learners develop an intermediate

pronunciation system that combines features of both the native and target languages, gradually evolving as proficiency increases.

Recent studies in bilingual phonetics and speech acquisition demonstrate that pronunciation learning is dynamic and influenced by continuous interaction between linguistic systems. Research indicates that native-language influence can affect not only sound production but also speech perception, meaning that learners may fail to recognize certain distinctions present in Russian if those contrasts are absent in their first language. Furthermore, prosodic elements such as stress and intonation are often transferred unconsciously, contributing significantly to foreign accent and sometimes leading to pragmatic misunderstandings. These findings highlight that pronunciation errors are not random but reflect deeper cognitive and linguistic processes.

In educational contexts, understanding native-language influence is essential for developing effective teaching methods. Traditional pronunciation teaching has often focused on mechanical repetition or imitation without addressing underlying cross-linguistic differences. However, contemporary approaches emphasize contrastive analysis, perception training, and explicit articulation instruction to help learners develop new phonological categories. By identifying the specific ways in which native-language structures interfere with Russian pronunciation, educators can design targeted interventions that improve intelligibility and accelerate phonetic adaptation.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how learners' native languages influence their pronunciation of Russian and to analyze common patterns of phonetic transfer observed among foreign students. The research aims to examine both segmental and suprasegmental levels of pronunciation, identify the primary sources of interference, and discuss their implications for teaching Russian as a foreign language. Through theoretical analysis and review of empirical findings, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of pronunciation acquisition and to provide practical recommendations for improving phonetic instruction in multilingual classrooms.

METHOD

The influence of the native language on Russian pronunciation manifests through systematic phonetic and phonological processes that shape how foreign learners perceive, interpret, and produce speech sounds. These processes are not случайные ошибки but rather predictable outcomes of cross-linguistic interaction between the learner's first language and the target language. The main part of this study

examines the primary mechanisms of native-language influence, focusing on segmental features, suprasegmental characteristics, cognitive perception factors, and pedagogical implications.

One of the most visible effects of native-language influence appears at the segmental level, where learners substitute unfamiliar Russian sounds with the closest equivalents available in their native phonological system. Russian includes several phonetic features that may be absent or differently distributed in other languages, such as the opposition between hard and soft consonants, complex consonant clusters, and specific vowel qualities. Learners whose native languages lack palatalization often neutralize this distinction, producing hard consonants in contexts where softness is required or vice versa. Such substitutions can alter word meaning and reduce intelligibility.

Similarly, voicing contrasts and consonant assimilation rules in Russian may cause difficulty for foreign students. Learners tend to apply articulatory habits formed in their native language, resulting in deviations in voicing or aspiration patterns. For example, speakers of languages with strong aspiration contrasts may pronounce Russian stops with excessive aspiration, while learners from languages without final devoicing may fail to apply this rule correctly. These tendencies reflect articulatory transfer, where previously automatized motor movements influence the production of new sounds.

Another common phenomenon is the simplification of consonant clusters. Russian allows combinations of several consonants within a single syllable, which may be difficult for learners whose native languages prefer simpler syllable structures. As a result, students often insert additional vowels, omit consonants, or alter pronunciation patterns to match familiar phonotactic rules. These adaptations show that learners prioritize ease of articulation and rely on existing linguistic experience when confronting unfamiliar structures.

Beyond individual sounds, native-language influence strongly affects suprasegmental aspects of speech, including stress placement, rhythm, and intonation. Russian lexical stress is mobile and unpredictable, and it directly influences vowel reduction patterns. Learners whose native languages have fixed stress systems frequently place stress incorrectly or pronounce unstressed vowels too clearly, producing speech that sounds unnatural to native listeners. Incorrect stress placement can also lead to misunderstanding, as stress in Russian may distinguish lexical meanings.

Intonation patterns are equally susceptible to native-

language transfer. Foreign learners often impose their native melodic contours on Russian speech, leading to pragmatic mismatches or unintended emotional interpretations. For example, rising intonation patterns common in one language may sound questioning or uncertain in Russian contexts where falling intonation is expected. Rhythm and timing differences further contribute to a foreign accent, as learners may maintain syllable-timed speech habits instead of adopting the stress-timed rhythm characteristic of Russian.

Research in second-language phonology suggests that suprasegmental features are often more resistant to change than individual sounds because they are deeply embedded in cognitive and communicative habits. Consequently, prosodic interference may persist even among advanced learners who have achieved relatively accurate segmental pronunciation.

A crucial aspect of native-language influence lies in perception. Learners do not simply imitate foreign sounds but interpret them through the categories established by their first language. If Russian phonemes fall within the perceptual boundaries of existing native categories, learners may fail to recognize them as distinct sounds. This perceptual assimilation leads to incorrect production because learners reproduce what they hear according to their own phonological system.

The relationship between perception and production explains why pronunciation errors often remain stable over time. Without explicit training, learners may not notice subtle acoustic differences between similar sounds. Studies in bilingual phonetics indicate that repeated exposure and targeted listening activities can gradually reshape perceptual categories, enabling learners to develop more accurate pronunciation. This process demonstrates that phonetic acquisition involves cognitive restructuring rather than simple articulation practice.

The concept of interlanguage phonology provides a framework for understanding how pronunciation evolves during language learning. Learners create an intermediate phonological system that combines elements of both the native and target languages. This system changes gradually as learners receive new input and feedback. Early stages are usually characterized by strong native-language influence, while later stages show partial adaptation to Russian phonetic norms.

Importantly, pronunciation development does not occur uniformly. Some phonetic features may improve rapidly, while others remain resistant due to their absence in the learner's native language or limited exposure. Individual factors such as age, motivation, language environment, and frequency of interaction

with native speakers also affect the degree of phonetic adaptation. Immersion contexts often facilitate more natural acquisition of pronunciation patterns compared to classroom-only learning.

Understanding native-language influence has direct practical value for teaching Russian pronunciation. Traditional methods based solely on repetition or imitation may not address the underlying causes of pronunciation difficulties. More effective approaches include contrastive phonetic analysis, where learners compare sound systems of their native language and Russian to become aware of key differences. Explicit explanation of articulatory mechanisms and visual demonstrations can help learners develop new motor patterns.

Perception-based training is also essential, as accurate production depends on the ability to hear phonological distinctions. Activities involving minimal pairs, stress recognition, and intonation practice allow learners to refine auditory discrimination skills. Additionally, integrating pronunciation instruction into communicative activities rather than isolated drills encourages automatic use of correct phonetic forms in real speech.

Overall, the analysis shows that native-language influence shapes Russian pronunciation at multiple levels and should be viewed as a natural stage of language development rather than a failure. By recognizing systematic error patterns, educators can provide targeted support that facilitates gradual movement toward more native-like pronunciation.

CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrates that the influence of the native language is a fundamental and inevitable factor in the acquisition of Russian pronunciation by foreign learners. Pronunciation difficulties arise mainly from cross-linguistic transfer, whereby learners rely on the phonetic and phonological categories of their first language when perceiving and producing Russian sounds. This influence manifests at both segmental and suprasegmental levels, including phoneme substitution, simplification of consonant clusters, incorrect stress placement, and transfer of native intonation and rhythmic patterns. These deviations are systematic and reflect the developmental nature of interlanguage phonology rather than random mistakes.

The analysis confirms that pronunciation acquisition is closely linked to perceptual processes. Learners interpret unfamiliar Russian sounds through existing native-language categories, which may prevent accurate perception and, consequently, correct production. Therefore, pronunciation errors often persist until learners develop new perceptual

boundaries and articulatory habits. The concept of interlanguage phonology explains this gradual process, showing that learners create an intermediate phonological system that evolves over time through exposure, practice, and feedback.

The study also highlights that suprasegmental features such as stress and intonation are particularly resistant to change, as they are deeply rooted in cognitive and communicative habits formed in early language development. In addition, factors such as learning environment, motivation, and frequency of interaction with native speakers significantly influence the extent of phonetic adaptation. Learners immersed in authentic Russian-speaking contexts tend to achieve higher levels of pronunciation accuracy than those relying solely on classroom instruction.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings emphasize the importance of targeted pronunciation teaching strategies. Effective instruction should include contrastive analysis between the native and Russian phonological systems, explicit articulatory guidance, perception training, and contextualized communicative practice. Viewing pronunciation errors as natural stages of development allows educators to provide supportive and systematic correction rather than focusing solely on eliminating accent features.

In conclusion, native-language influence shapes Russian pronunciation in predictable and structured ways, offering valuable insight into the processes of second language phonological acquisition. Understanding these influences enables teachers to design more efficient teaching methods and helps learners develop greater pronunciation awareness. Future research may focus on comparative studies involving learners from different linguistic backgrounds and longitudinal investigations to better understand how pronunciation competence develops over time in Russian as a foreign language learning contexts.

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