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Strategies for Teaching the Phonetic Aspect of Russian as a Foreign Language in Georgian Schools

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the features of teaching the phonetic aspects of Russian to Georgian-speaking learners. By comparing the Georgian and Russian phonetic systems, it identifies the phonetic minimum of Russian and substantiates suitable teaching strategies.

The article advocates for a differentiated approach, recognizing the full similarities and partial differences between the phonetic systems of a foreign and a native language and combining imitation and articulation techniques. The educational phonetic minimum is organized around acoustic and articulatory methods, emphasizing the teaching of sounds frequently overlooked in Georgian textbooks. These sounds are crucial for enhancing students' pronunciation and listening skills.

For the first time, the paper proposes categorizing the Russian phonetic minimum based on teaching strategies appropriate for Georgian-speaking schools. This aids in developing curricula and methodological recommendations that can inform the creation of Russian as a foreign language textbooks and other educational materials.

Keywords: *phonetic minimum; differentiated approach; phonetic interference; Russian as a foreign language; Georgian-speaking audience*

Introduction

This paper discusses teaching the phonetic component of Russian as a second foreign language to a Georgian-speaking audience. It highlights key basic phonetic content to be taught through various pedagogical approaches. The Russian phonetic system is analyzed for its similarities and differences from Georgian phonetic systems.

In environments lacking a Russian-speaking context, phonetic interference is widespread among Georgian school students. For some students, phonetic obstacles are the primary hurdle to language mastery. Acquiring phonetic skills is essential for effective communication and supporting speaking and listening abilities. Sounds help differentiate meaning; if a learner cannot pronounce them correctly, conveying thoughts becomes difficult, and recognizing these sounds in speech presents a challenge. Intonation, speech tempo, and rhythm are vital for communication. Disrupting these elements hampers interaction and limits expressive capability. Therefore, developing accurate articulation skills in a foreign language requires targeted and sustained effort. Furthermore, phonetic

skills should be cultivated systematically, as they are often less stable and more vulnerable to loss of automatization.

Methodology

Teaching approaches and their relation to phonetic interference

All languages possess sounds, intonation patterns, stress, etc., that are more or less similar or different. The phonetic similarities and differences between foreign and native languages determine the approaches that should be used to develop phonetic skills when teaching a foreign language.

Phonetic **similarities** help teachers and students teach and master a foreign language. They do not require much time, and most importantly, help the student psychologically by creating the illusion of easy learning of a foreign language, ultimately contributing to learning motivation. The student and the teacher fully know the phonetic **differences** and devote sufficient time and energy to mastering them. As for the **partial** articulatory similarity of sounds, this circumstance poses a difficulty, and the reason for this is primarily phonetic interference. When pronouncing a partially similar sound, the articulatory habit of the native language dominates. At the same time, the student cannot distinguish between the sounds of the native and foreign languages, so the student has difficulty distinguishing between the pronunciation of familiar sounds, making learning/teaching their correct articulation much more challenging than mastering completely “foreign” sounds.

Partial similarity of sounds raises another important issue that often does not receive enough attention due to its perceived simplicity. Both students and teachers see this issue as straightforward. In such cases, similar sounds may formally resemble native sounds. However, in reality, minor differences in articulation or acoustics are the primary obstacles that hinder the development of pronunciation and phonemic awareness. L. V. Shcherba notes, "Special difficulties lie not in those sounds that have no analogues in the student's native language, but in those for which there are similar sounds in this latter language. [...]. We often overlook these differences because there is no apparent reason to notice them initially. Consequently, when learning a foreign language through simply imitating the teacher, we inevitably substitute the corresponding or nearest Russian sounds for the foreign sounds, confidently believing we are replicating what we hear, albeit with varying degrees of accuracy. This is how we often develop poor pronunciation, which we often hear from foreigners who speak Russian and tend to think they are imitating it more or less correctly (Scherba, 1974).

This opinion remains relevant today, as such an attitude still applies in Georgian schools. A clear example is that textbooks accepted in Georgian schools for teaching Russian lack focus on practising the articulation of partially similar sounds and do not include suitable exercises. For instance, none of

the Georgian textbooks compares the pronunciation of Russian hard consonant sounds with their Georgian equivalents. Nonetheless, from the very first lessons, it is possible to draw parallels between the pronunciation of corresponding sounds in Russian and Georgian in words like: мама, Нана, папа, Тата (mother, Нана, daddy, Tata). Only through such comparisons can students realistically perceive the differences, recognizing that although these consonant sounds in Russian may resemble Georgian sounds — such as the “m” being voiced, velarized, and nasal in both languages — they are characterised by velarisation, which implies that the tongue must be pulled all the way back when pronouncing them. Georgian textbooks often overlook subtle sound differences and the varied pronunciation of interlingual words — even when the phonetic gap is substantial. For example, the word “bicycle” has markedly different pronunciations in Georgian and Russian — “велосипед” [vʲɛlʲɪsʲɪpʲe:t] and ველობიპედი [vɛlɔsɪpɛdi] - yet, no textbook offers exercises specifically aimed at practising the Russian pronunciation of this word. The student’s attention is not drawn to these phonetic differences. Some textbooks, when teaching individual sounds, include occasional tasks where students must read aloud sequences with hard and soft consonants (e.g., ма-ме, мо-ми). However, they do not systematically train students at the word level, where the “collision” (alternation) of soft and hard consonants occurs — a feature characteristic of Russian and entirely unnatural in Georgian.

In the Russian methodological literature, there are three main approaches to teaching the phonetic aspect of Russian as a foreign language (Balikhina, 2007; Chesnokova, 2015):

- 1) **The conscious-imitative (articulatory) approach** involves methodical and deliberate teaching of sound articulation, effectively developing correct pronunciation of individual sounds. However, in speech, these articulatory skills tend to be forgotten, students struggle to use them, and such teaching can be time-consuming and tedious.
- 2) **The imitative (acoustic) approach**, used in intensive courses, focuses on teaching pronunciation by imitating speech sounds and highlights auditory perception of speech. Georgian textbooks for learning Russian adopt this approach but do not recognise its main drawback - its effectiveness is limited to students with good phonemic hearing. As a result, the number of phonetic errors when applying this approach can be very high. E.N. Solovova questions this approach: “But does this mean that such a method is good for a modern school? This method is not suitable for a general school in its pure form. The percentage of errors is too high, sometimes it is unjustifiably high” (Soloviova, 2008).

- 3) **The differentiated approach** combines the first two strategies, is adaptable, and utilises both methods as needed. An alternative method to teaching sound articulation considers their similarities and differences. For similar sounds, imitation alone is sufficient, following the principle of “listen-repeat.” However, sounds that do not have an exact equivalent in Georgian or are only partially similar should be taught using elements of the articulatory approach. Understanding and correcting pronunciation should be approached with age-appropriate methods.

As we have noted, phonetic difficulties for a Georgian-speaking student relate to the pronunciation of sounds that are entirely unfamiliar to him and those that are partially similar. This illusory similarity leads to the most errors: the student believed he already knows the new sound, but even the slightest difference in articulation significantly changes it. This emphasizes the need for a differentiated approach:

- **Imitation** is sufficient when the sounds are similar or very close to each other;
- **Articulatory perception**, and specialized exercises are necessary for those sounds where the difference is noticeable but imperceptible to the student, which is crucial for developing correct pronunciation.

Thus, when teaching the phonetic aspect of the Russian language in Georgian schools, it is essential to choose the right approach based on the phonetic similarities and differences between the Georgian and Russian languages. For this, it is necessary to determine the phonetic minimum of the Russian language by formal criteria (list of sounds) and teaching strategies and approaches. Within the framework of this article, we will generally outline which approach - conscious or unconscious - is more acceptable for which phonetic material. As for specific approaches, methods, and exercises, this is the topic of another article.

Discussion

Russian Phonetic Minimum in the Context of Differentiated Teaching to Its Georgian-Speaking Audience

A general comparison of the phonetic systems of the Georgian and Russian languages allows us to identify the phonetic minimum, determine what should be given special attention, and decide which approach should be applied when teaching specific sounds or phonetic phenomena.

Based on the similarities and differences in sounds and phonetic phenomena between Georgian and Russian, three groups are distinguished:

1. There are sounds and phonetic phenomena in the Russian language that have **no equivalents in the**

Georgian language; therefore, more time and focus should be dedicated to teaching them. It is necessary to incorporate elements of conscious articulatory teaching.:

- 1.1 The Georgian language does not possess the consonants “Щ”, “Й”, “Ф”. However, although the sound “Ф” is foreign to the Georgian phonetic system, it is not unknown to schoolchildren because English is taught in Georgian schools as the first foreign language. Therefore, when teaching this sound, it is sufficient to use an unconscious imitative approach.
- 1.2 The vowel “Ы” is one of the most challenging sounds for a Georgian-speaking student; when teaching it, it is also necessary to pay attention to the positional change of the vowel “и” and its transformation into this sound, for example, С Ириной – с[Ы]риной.
- 1.3 The stress in Georgian is weak and fixed, falling at the beginning of a word, while the stress in Russian falls in different places in different words and changes place even in the case of a change of one word form, for example, *ва́жно–важны́–важн́ее*. Georgian-speaking students, as a rule, have difficulty perceiving the stress at the auditory level, therefore they cannot use the stress correctly, and special exercises are needed to fix and use the stress consciously. In general, teaching stress should begin from the very first lesson and follow the student at all stages.
- 1.4 Georgian does not possess the sounds that result from the first and second qualitative reduction of the vowels “а”, “о”, “е”, “я”. These are only partially covered in Georgian school textbooks; notably, the second weak reduction is not addressed at all in Georgian schools. This significantly hinders not only the correct pronunciation in the future but also the development of the ability to understand oral speech at a fast pace.
- 1.5 There is no “j” sound in the Georgian language, so pronouncing iotated vowels - е, ё, ю, я - as two separate sounds is unfamiliar to the Georgian phonetic system. It is worth noting that the English language assists Georgian-speaking students in pronouncing these sounds at the beginning of a word and after a vowel within a word (e.g., “яма”, “поём”), whereas for their pronunciation after the soft -ь- and hard -Ъ- signs (e.g., “семья”, “въезд”), a conscious imitation approach should be employed.
- 2. The articulation of Russian and Georgian sounds partially overlaps**, as mentioned above, but interference causes the greatest difficulties in teaching; therefore, developing pronunciation skills requires a conscious imitation approach.
- 2.1 The main articulatory features of Georgian and Russian consonants are mostly similar. However, in Georgian, there is no opposition between soft and hard consonants, which is a key feature in Russian consonants. Unlike Georgian, Russian hard consonants are characterised by

velarisation and full tongue lowering at the back, while soft consonants are palatalised. The distinction between soft and hard consonants in Russian is vital for word meanings, for example, рад-ряд, быть-бить, лук-люк, and others. As mentioned, Georgian does not include the sound “j,” which, among other functions, helps to produce soft consonants. Georgian speakers find the pronunciation of soft consonants entirely unfamiliar, so systematic work is necessary to develop correct pronunciation of these sounds.

In Georgian schools, some time is allocated to teaching pronunciation of soft consonant. However, this is insufficient, especially since the teaching of hard consonants is not the main focus, as previously noted. Like A. Akishina, we believe that special attention should be given to pronouncing these consonants: “When teaching Russian consonants, it is necessary to remember that in languages without a contrast of hardness and softness, there are not only soft consonants but also hard ones. In such languages (English, French, German, Spanish, Hindi, Urdu and many others), consonants are neutral concerning distinctiveness based on hardness or softness; there is neither systematic palatalisation nor velarisation. Consequently, the distinctiveness of hardness in Russian must be specifically taught (Akishina, 2011). Others also advocate for dedicated teaching of hard consonants; for example L. Kryuchkova (Kryuchkova, 2009) suggests special exercises to train the ability to articulate hard consonants.

Within the framework of the pronunciation of hard consonants, we consider it necessary to emphasise the necessity of conscious teaching the alternation of soft and hard consonants within one word, as well as emphasising the teaching of the pronunciation of the consonants “ж”, “ш” and “ц”. In the Russian language, these sounds are always complex. They are characterised by the formation of geminated (doubled) variants during contact assimilation, for example, “ЗЖ” - [ЖЖ] безжизненный, без жалости, “ДЦ” - [ЦЦ] двадцать, тридцать, which is not characteristic of the Georgian language in the case of the consonants “ж” and “ц”.

2.2 In this section, we highlight the cluster of consonants at the end of commonly used Russian words, such as: тр (театр, центр, литр), гр (тигр), сл (смысл), пр (Днепр, Кипр), etc. When pronouncing the endings of these words, an irrational vowel often appears between the two consonants, resulting in sounds like “теат[ɣ]р” and “тиг[ɣ]р”. Our observations indicate that Georgian-speaking students find it particularly difficult to pronounce this sound correctly; they tend to pronounce it similarly to the Russian word “театра”. Therefore, in addition to other core phonetic challenges in Russian, we believe this particular pronunciation aspect warrants special attention.

We emphasise once again that because the partial articulatory coincidence causes significant difficulties, it is essential to dedicate ample time to teaching the sounds of this subgroup during Russian

language instruction, as: “The “imaginary” similarity of the sounds of the native and target languages leads to the emergence of quite serious problems in the process of pronunciation training” (Barkhudarov, 2015).

3. Phonetic phenomena which are *similar* in Georgian and Russian. The phonetic minimum of this subgroup does not pose a problem for Georgian-speaking students; therefore, their teaching is quite feasible using the “listen-repeat” principle:

3.1 There are voiced and unvoiced sounds in both Georgian and Russian. Positional changes of voiced and unvoiced sounds characterize both languages. For example, the devoicing of the voiced consonant in Russian - “дуб” - “ду[п]” and in Georgian - გავაკეტებ (gavakete[p]).

3.2 There are minor differences in Georgian and Russian intonation structures, but they are similar in the three main intonation patterns. For example, in Georgian, the stress falls on the interrogative word in a sentence containing such a word. In Russian, the interrogative word is the focus of the intonation construction. The intonation of a declarative sentence is also similar - in Georgian, it is pronounced calmly, and the sound lowers at the end of the sentence, just as in Russian, where the intonation center features a descending melody.

Below is a table showing the phonetic material and the best approach for teaching it in a Georgian-language school.

Imitative approach	Conscious imitative approach
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assimilation Voicing• Assimilation Unvoicing• Quantitative Reduction• Intonation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Soft and Hard Consonants• Stress• Reduced Vowels• Sounds Missing in the Georgian Language• Assimilation• Irrational Vowel at the End of a Word

Conclusion

In this article, we have outlined the minimum of the phonetic material and a differentiated approach to teaching essential for developing the phonetic skills in Georgian-speaking students learning Russian as a foreign language. Specifically, unconscious imitation is relevant only when there is complete or near-complete phonetic similarity. Conversely, conscious and systematic practical training is required for foreign or only partly similar sounds. The definition of the phonetic minimum and the establishment of differentiated learning strategies create an opportunity to develop standard programme recommendations, which will significantly enhance the practice of teaching Russian in Georgian-speaking schools. This approach promotes the development of phonetic skills and enhances overall competence in listening and spoken language.

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