Difficulties in Learning Russian Grammar among Beginner-Level Students from India

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Abstract

This study investigates the difficulties encountered by beginner-level Indian students when acquiring Russian grammar. Unlike their native Indo-Aryan languages, Russian reshapes words heavily through inflectional endings tied to cases, verbal aspect, and grammatical gender. The primary aims are to identify which grammatical areas cause the greatest difficulty and to analyse the underlying causes of these challenges.

Data were collected through grammar test results, structured classroom observations conducted over one full academic semester, and questionnaires completed by 60 first-year undergraduate students at the A1 proficiency level. Findings indicate that case endings, verbal aspect distinctions, and adjective-noun agreement are the most problematic areas, with error rates of 70%, 68%, and 50% respectively. Mother-tongue interference — where learners transfer structural patterns from Hindi and other Indian languages — combined with limited exposure to authentic Russian input, emerges as the dominant causal factor.

Analysis of these difficulties suggests that instructional approaches should shift towards contrastive grammar analysis and communicatively oriented practice tasks. This reorientation offers a clearer pathway for refining the teaching of Russian as a foreign language (RFL), particularly for learners based in India.

Keywords: *Russian as a foreign language, grammar acquisition, Indian students, case system, verb aspect, language interference.*

Аннотация (Russian Abstract)

Изучение того, как начинающие студенты из Индии сталкиваются с трудностями при освоении русской грамматики, составляет основу данной работы. В отличие от их родных индоарийских языков, русский язык активно изменяет формы слов с помощью окончаний, связанных с падежами, глагольными формами и родом. Наибольшие сложности вызывают падежные окончания, выражение временно-видовых значений глаголов, а также согласование прилагательных с существительными. Влияние родного языка на мышление учащихся приводит к интерференции, что замедляет прогресс при недостаточном контакте с живой русской речью.

Ключевые слова: *русский язык как иностранный, усвоение грамматики, индийские студенты, падежная система, вид глагола, языковая интерференция.*

1. Introduction

The growing educational and trade ties between India and Russia have prompted a marked increase in Indian students enrolling in Russian language programmes. Nevertheless, learners at the initial stages of acquisition consistently encounter substantial challenges with the grammatical architecture of Russian. Understanding the nature and origins of these difficulties is essential for designing effective instructional interventions.

Russian is a highly inflected language: nouns, pronouns, adjectives, and numerals decline across six grammatical cases — nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, instrumental, and prepositional — each governing different syntactic roles within a sentence. By contrast, Hindi and most other Indo-Aryan languages spoken in India rely principally on context, postpositions, and relatively fixed word order rather than on case inflection. This fundamental structural divergence constitutes the primary source of difficulty for Indian learners.

Verbal morphology presents an equally significant challenge. Russian verbs are organised into aspectual pairs: an imperfective form for ongoing, habitual, or repeated actions, and a perfective form for completed actions with a defined outcome. This aspectual system has no direct equivalent in Indian languages, making the acquisition of accurate aspect usage particularly demanding. Grammatical gender adds a further layer of complexity: Russian has three genders — masculine, feminine, and neuter — which determine adjectival agreement and the form of past-tense verb endings. Indian languages typically employ only binary gender distinctions, rendering the neuter category unfamiliar.

Finally, the relatively free word order of Russian, while semantically permissible due to its inflectional system, tends to confuse Indian learners accustomed to the stricter subject-verb-object syntax of their native tongues. When learners transfer familiar structural patterns from their first language, the result is systematic grammatical interference that impedes progress.

This study aims to identify which specific grammatical features present the greatest difficulty for Indian beginners studying Russian, and to explore the causes underlying those difficulties. A detailed understanding of early error patterns, shaped by typological differences between the languages, is a prerequisite for developing pedagogically sound, learner-centred curricula for Russian as a foreign language (RFL) in the Indian educational context.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Participants

The study recruited 60 undergraduate students between 18 and 22 years of age from various Indian universities. All participants were enrolled in Russian language programmes at the A1 proficiency level and had no prior formal instruction in Russian. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from each student prior to data collection.

2.2 Research Design

A mixed-methods design was employed, combining quantitative measurement of grammatical error frequencies with qualitative investigation of learner perceptions and classroom dynamics. This approach enabled both statistical identification of high-difficulty areas and deeper contextual understanding of the factors contributing to those difficulties.

2.3 Instruments

Three data collection instruments were used. First, a written grammar diagnostic test assessed performance across four core areas: case ending usage, verbal aspect selection, adjective-noun gender agreement, and word order. Second, a structured questionnaire with Likert-scale and open-ended items captured students' self-reported perceptions of difficulty and their attitudes towards Russian grammar learning. Third, systematic classroom observations were conducted across the full academic semester to document recurring error patterns in real-time communicative and written tasks.

2.4 Procedure

Participants completed the written grammar diagnostic test at the end of the first semester. Test scripts were scored and error frequencies calculated per grammatical category. Questionnaire data were collected in the same session and analysed using descriptive statistics. Classroom observations were recorded in standardised field notes and subsequently reviewed for recurring patterns of difficulty. Quantitative and qualitative data were triangulated to produce a comprehensive picture of learner difficulties.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

All participants enrolled voluntarily and provided written informed consent after being fully briefed on the study's purpose and procedures. Student identities were anonymised throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting. The study complied fully with the institutional ethical guidelines of Osh International Medical University, Kyrgyzstan. No external incentives were offered, and participants were free to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

3. Results

Analysis of the grammar diagnostic tests and classroom observation data revealed four primary areas of persistent difficulty, as summarised in Table 1 below.

Grammatical Feature	Error Rate (%)	Primary Error Type	Underlying Cause
Case Endings	70%	Confusion of nominative, accusative, and genitive; errors with preposition-case assignment	Absence of case inflection in Hindi; no equivalent system in L1
Verbal Aspect	68%	Incorrect selection of perfective vs. imperfective; errors in past and future aspect usage	No aspectual pairing in Indian languages; concept lacks L1 parallel
Adjective-Noun Agreement	50%	Gender mismatch between adjective and noun; incorrect past-tense verb forms	Binary gender system in L1; neuter category absent in Indo-Aryan languages
Word Order	46%	Imposition of rigid SVO order; misplacement of adverbs and focus particles	Fixed word order in Hindi and English influencing Russian sentence construction

Table 1. Summary of grammatical error rates and primary error types identified in the diagnostic test (n = 60).

3.1 Case Endings

Case endings yielded the highest error rate across the sample, with approximately 70% of case-related items answered incorrectly. The most frequently confused forms were the nominative and accusative cases, followed by errors in selecting the genitive in prepositional phrases. Learners demonstrated particular difficulty when prepositions governed case selection, suggesting that the relationship between prepositions and case assignment was not yet internalised. Classroom observations corroborated test data: students frequently used the base (nominative) form regardless of the syntactic role of the noun in a sentence.

3.2 Verbal Aspect

Verbal aspect errors occurred at a rate of 68%, making it the second most challenging feature. Most errors involved learners selecting the imperfective form in contexts requiring a perfective, particularly in past-tense narrations of completed events and in future-tense constructions expressing single, bounded actions. Questionnaire data indicated that the majority of students found the concept of aspect fundamentally unfamiliar, with several noting that the distinction between imperfective and perfective had no analogue in their native languages. This absence of an L1 conceptual scaffold appears to be the principal obstacle to aspect acquisition.

3.3 Adjective-Noun Gender Agreement

Adjective-noun agreement errors were recorded in approximately 50% of relevant test items. Incorrect gender assignment was most frequent for neuter nouns, which lack a direct equivalent in the binary gender systems of most Indian languages. Past-tense verb forms, which in Russian are inflected for grammatical gender rather than person, also generated substantial errors. Students consistently applied masculine agreement forms as defaults, reflecting a transfer strategy based on the binary gender distinctions of their first languages.

3.4 Word Order

Although Russian permits relatively free word order owing to its inflectional system, learners demonstrated a strong tendency to impose the rigid subject-verb-object sequences typical of Hindi and English. This produced grammatically permissible but pragmatically inappropriate sentences in which information structure — topic, focus, and contrast — was not correctly signalled. Error rates on word order tasks stood at approximately 46%, and classroom observations noted that students rarely exploited the flexibility of Russian word order even in oral production tasks.

4. Discussion

The findings are consistent with predictions derived from contrastive analysis of Russian and Indo-Aryan languages. The high error rate in case usage aligns with extensive prior research documenting case acquisition difficulties among learners whose native languages do not employ nominal inflection. The near-absence of grammatical case in Hindi means that Indian learners must acquire not only new morphological forms but also an entirely new conceptual framework for understanding how grammatical relationships are encoded within the sentence.

The elevated error rate in verbal aspect reflects a similar problem of conceptual novelty. Unlike the tense systems common to Indian languages, Russian aspect concerns the internal structure of an event — whether it is construed as bounded and complete or as unbounded and ongoing — rather than its temporal location. This distinction is subtle, learnable, but requires sustained, contextualised exposure and explicit contrastive instruction to internalise.

Mother-tongue interference is a unifying explanation across all four error categories. Learners consistently applied structural logic derived from Hindi and other L1 patterns to Russian, producing predictable error types. Limited exposure to authentic Russian discourse outside the classroom compounded these difficulties: without sufficient comprehensible input, learners lack the opportunities to encounter and self-correct grammatical patterns in naturalistic contexts.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings support a contrastive approach to grammar instruction in which Russian and Indian language structures are systematically compared and

contrasted. Explicit attention to the points of divergence — particularly case, aspect, and gender — combined with communicatively oriented practice tasks that require learners to use these structures in meaningful contexts, is likely to accelerate acquisition and reduce the persistence of fossilised errors. Corrective feedback strategies that direct learners' attention to both the erroneous and the target form, rather than simple correction, have also been shown to be more effective for promoting restructuring of interlanguage grammar.

5. Conclusion

This study confirms that beginner-level Indian students learning Russian face substantial and predictable grammatical challenges, concentrated in four key areas: case endings, verbal aspect, adjective-noun agreement, and word order. These difficulties arise principally from the typological distance between Russian and Indo-Aryan languages, exacerbated by limited access to authentic Russian input and a lack of pedagogical approaches specifically designed to address cross-linguistic interference.

The practical implications are clear. Russian language curricula for Indian learners should incorporate systematic contrastive analysis, ensuring that points of structural divergence are made explicit rather than assumed to emerge through implicit exposure. Communicatively focused tasks — role-plays, narrative activities, interactive exercises — should be integrated from the earliest stages to develop procedural control over the grammatical structures that cause the greatest difficulty.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs tracking learner progress across multiple semesters to examine how grammatical accuracy in these areas develops over time and in response to different instructional interventions. The present findings, while focused on one institutional setting, offer a replicable framework for investigating RFL acquisition among Indian learners and for designing evidence-based teaching materials and teacher training programmes.

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