LINGUISTIC CHALLENGES IN LANGUAGE LEARNING: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF LEARNING AZERBAIJANI AND ENGLISH

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Abstract:

This empirical study examines the linguistic challenges encountered by two sets of learners: Azerbaijani students acquiring English and overseas students acquiring Azerbaijani. A mixed-methods strategy was employed to collect quantitative data through survey from forty individuals (n=40). The Azerbaijan language group (n=20) and the English language group (n=20) had similar challenges in grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and writing. Qualitative insights were derived from interviews with two language instructors, emphasizing concerns regarding pedagogical approaches, classroom social dynamics, and educator viewpoints. The research is based on Social Constructivism and Interlanguage Theory, which directed the analysis and shaped recommendations for addressing these difficulties.

Keywords: language learning, Linguistic challenges, foreign language, Azerbaijani linguistics, action research, comparative analysis

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1. Introduction

As a fundamental component of the four Cs (Critical thinking, Communication, Collaboration, and Creativity) essential for 21st-century learning, communication significantly influences individuals' academic and professional routes (Idrizi, 2023). Language skills are essential components of communication, as they form the core of both written and spoken exchanges, allowing individuals to convey and understand information effectively. Learning a new language is a complex process that holds significant importance and can be influenced by various factors, including linguistic, social, and pedagogical elements. All learners across various countries face challenges in acquiring new languages; however, specific difficulties may differ due to linguistic variations and the backgrounds of the learners. In my role as an educator, I have observed varying levels of engagement, motivation, and access to resources among Azerbaijani students learning English and international students learning Azerbaijani. Azerbaijani students frequently have access to a variety of English learning materials, immersive environments, and opportunities for social interactions with foreigners. In contrast, international students often face challenges in locating sufficient resources for learning Azerbaijani and finding individuals to engage with in the language. Upon observation, it is evident that both groups of learners face difficulties in applying the targeted language in their academic and everyday contexts.

1.1 Identification of the Problem

The study of foreign languages can present challenges, influenced by the language's origin and the learner's background, particularly due to differences from their native tongue. For example, the Azerbaijani language, as a member of the Turkic language family, features an agglutinative structure and vowel harmony, which may present challenges for learners who come from non-Turkic language backgrounds (Aliyeva, 2021). Conversely, English is classified as a Germanic language, characterised by intricate language patterns, a phonetic system, irregular grammatical rules, and an extensive vocabulary (Zenner, 2023). By recognising these linguistic challenges, educators can enhance language education within educational institutions, thereby providing more comprehensive support for student learning. Nevertheless, even with the increasing population of students from non-Turkic language backgrounds studying Azerbaijani as a foreign language, there is a limited understanding of the challenges they face in language acquisition, primarily due to the scarcity of research on this issue. Furthermore, while there remains a strong focus on English proficiency among Azerbaijani students, there is a scarcity of research exploring the challenges they face in the language learning process. Examining and contrasting these challenges is essential for assisting language instructors, curriculum designers, and students learning foreign languages, particularly Azerbaijani and English, in developing effective language learning strategies and identifying solutions to these difficulties. This study examined the linguistic challenges encountered in the acquisition of two distinct languages: Azerbaijani and English as

foreign languages. The challenges were examined by comparing the language learning processes of two distinct groups of students through a mixed-methods approach: one group comprised international students learning Azerbaijani as a foreign language, while the other group consisted of Azerbaijani students learning English.

1.2 Prevalence and Scope of the Problem

The languages presented, Azerbaijani and English, are crucial for academic, professional, and social interactions. Nonetheless, the various language challenges faced by learners impede their integration and result in diminished academic performance. Limited learning resources for acquiring the Azerbaijani language have been a significant challenge faced by international students studying in Azerbaijan. A research investigation into the life satisfaction of international students in Azerbaijan revealed that communication difficulties stemming from a language barrier posed the greatest challenge in their experiences (Koon & Mehdi, 2019). Azerbaijani students often encounter challenges with English pronunciation, influenced by historical and linguistic factors, including the comparison of letters (Pachina, 2019). Exploring these challenges is essential for the development of an effective language teaching methodology.

1.3 Research Objectives

This study aimed to explore and analyse the linguistic challenges faced by learners of Azerbaijani and English within an educational context. This study utilised a mixed-methods approach to achieve its objectives, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data into the analysis. Surveys were employed to gather statistical insights, while interviews with the instructors offered a more profound understanding of the challenges faced. This study aimed to:

- To identify the key linguistic challenges, such as vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, listening, writing, memory, reading, and speaking, faced by university students learning English and Azerbaijani as foreign languages.
- To compare the perceived difficulty levels of the linguistic challenges between students learning English and the Azerbaijani language.
- To determine whether there are statistically significant differences in the challenges reported by the two groups using quantitative analysis.

1.4 Research Questions

To achieve these objectives, the study addressed the following research questions:

1) Do students learn English and Azerbaijani as foreign languages at the university level experience similar linguistic challenges across key language learning domains?
2) There is no significant difference in the perceived linguistic challenges between students learning English and those learning Azerbaijani as foreign languages. (Null Hypothesis)

1.5 Definitions of Variables

The variables of the current study are the challenges of the language learners and the linguistic factors influencing the second language learning process. Talking about the challenges of the learners, we must focus on the difficulties that the learners have during the acquisition of a new language, which may stem from the learner's background, the learning environment, teaching approaches and methodologies, cognitive and psychological issues, etc.

Linguistic factors that may affect the language learning process are associated with the complexities of the target language and structural features: grammar, syntax, pronunciation, vocabulary, etc. (Samarajeewa & Mohammed, 2025).

2. Literature Review

The challenges in second and foreign language acquisition have been explored by various studies, mainly highlighting the linguistic, pedagogical, and social-cultural factors as the reasons behind those difficulties. Differences in phonological, lexical layers of the languages, the role of exposure to the learning materials in foreign language proficiency, a lack of people to interact with, and a mismatch between instructional strategies and learner needs were found to have impact on the foreign language learning by some researchers (Samarajeewa & Mohammed, 2025; Alasgarova *et al.*, 2024; Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Current action research employed the combination of two theories to analyze and interpret the data. Social Constructivism Theory, developed by Lev Vygotsky (1978), emphasizes that knowledge is constructed effectively through social interactions, cultural context, and collaborative activities (group projects, pair work) (Vygotsky, 1978). The theory highlights the significance of scaffolding by "*more knowledgeable others*", which can be teachers/tutors, peers, in the language learning context. Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), another crucial term in this theory, refers to the gap between what a learner can do alone and what they can do with the help of "*more knowledgeable others*" (Vygotsky, 1978).

In learning languages, ZPD supports learners to use language patterns confidently as they develop the needed skills with the help of language instructors. Interlanguage Theory, developed by Selinker (1972), provides insights into the linguistic challenges that second language learners encounter. According to Selinker (1972), they create a transitional mental language system during attempts to comprehend the L2. The linguistic challenges based on vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, syntax, etc., can be interpreted by using Interlanguage Theory. This theory employs some essential terms:

- Language Transfer – Learner tries to apply and transfer the rules and information from native language (L1) to the target language (L2).
- Fossilization – Repeated and wrong learnt linguistic mistakes become permanent.

- Overgeneralization – Learner applies one rule to each concept, making its application too wide, even if it is wrong.
- Transfer of Training – Linguistic mistakes derive from the wrong choice of methodology.

In this study, the combination of these theories helps to shed light on the types of linguistic errors faced by both Azerbaijani and international students and possible solutions to those challenges, which are mediated by social and environmental factors.

2.2 Challenges in Learning Azerbaijani as a Foreign Language

The number of international students studying at the different Azerbaijani Universities escalates every year. Studying and living in Azerbaijan makes it crucial to learn and speak the Azerbaijani language, which has a complicated agglutinative structure and vowel harmony as it belongs to the Oghuz branch of Turkic languages (Aliyeva, 2021). These types of linguistic factors are the possible barriers in front of the international students learning Azerbaijani due to the differences in their native tongue. There are a few studies investigating those challenges faced by international students by using mainly interviews and surveys as the predominant research tools among the existing literature.

The linguistic challenges encompass the complex grammatical structures, suffixation for tense, possession, case markers, etc., among the international students. A study that employed mixed-methods research indicated that the language challenges impeded international students' social lives in Azerbaijan: "*Nearly all study participants indicated their high level of concern for language barrier, when it comes to socializing and everyday communication.*" (Koon & Mehdi, 2019, p. 140). The participants of that study had a compulsory Azerbaijani language course, which somewhat helped them by learning vocabulary words and phrases; however, the language course itself was challenging for them, according to the international students' perceptions (Koon & Mehdi, 2019). Although the fact of *"[o]nly, Turkish students somehow take the upper edge, as their language shares similarity with Azerbaijani language"* (Koon & Mehdi, 2019, p. 140) may indicate that the main challenge in students' learning is the linguistic differences between the languages; it has not been investigated in the research, showing the gap in the literature. Furthermore, the study conducted by Musabayova (2021) demonstrated that besides the linguistic factors like unfamiliar phonetic systems and grammar complexities, the lack of specific teaching and learning materials designed for the international students was another challenge that they face while learning Azerbaijani. Also, the teaching methods were found to have major effects on the language learning of the foreign students at the Azerbaijani Universities. The chosen teaching methods, for example, grammar-translation method, may have a negative influence with the possibility to impede students' learning: "*Tərcümə üsulunda tələbənin diqqəti həmişə öz ana dili ilə öyrənəcəyi yeni dil arasında ikiləşir. Bundan basqa, təbiidir ki, bu parçalanmış diqqət şagirddə (əcnəbi tələbədə) öyrəndiyi ikinci dilə nisbətən, ona daha yaxın olan ana dili ətrafında toplanır.*" (Jabrayilova, 2014, p.77).

2.3 Challenges Faced by Azerbaijani Students While Learning English

As English is one of the most-used languages worldwide, it is also quite popular in Azerbaijan. Most educational settings, including schools, universities, courses, etc., teach English as a foreign language. While the language acquisition process goes smoothly in some settings, there are still challenges that the Azerbaijani students encounter due to the linguistic and environmental barriers. The study, which also employed mixed-methods research tools, explored the challenges of the students by focusing on the linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical factors that impact Azerbaijani students' writing proficiency in English (Urbaite, 2024). The results of the study that involved 150 Azerbaijani learners of English revealed that one of the major challenges was significant grammatical differences between Azerbaijani and English: "*Azerbaijani learners frequently struggle with these aspects due to the lack of equivalent structures in their native language, which complicates their ability to transfer concepts from Azerbaijani to English.*" (Urbaite, 2024, p. 46). Additionally, the cultural differences in rhetorical styles were found to lead to problems in English acquisition, according to Urbaite (2024). Moreover, another qualitative case study found that Azerbaijani students suffered in the grammatical structures in English, including the usage of prepositions, conjunctions, auxiliary verbs, etc. (Polat, 2018). According to Polat (2018), the structural differences between the native and target languages play a crucial role in the errors that the students make. Also, spelling and lexical errors were commonly observed in the findings of the study, showing that Azerbaijani students mostly have challenges while using collocations (Polat, 2018). Another study in Azerbaijan focused on a different aspect of the English language – the errors that students make while speaking English as a foreign language (Nigar, 2023). The main challenges were identified as linguistic ones, word order mistakes, misuse of articles, and overgeneralization of grammatical rules, etc., while the environmental factors, such as the lack of people speaking English to practice with, also played a significant role in their learning processes (Nigar, 2023).

Although previous study on Azerbaijani and English language acquisition offers significant insights, there is a deficiency of comparison studies addressing these issues. This disparity underscores the necessity for a study that explicitly contrasts the problems encountered by Azerbaijani and English learners, taking into account both linguistic and educational elements. This research seeks to address this gap by comparing language learning challenges in two distinct linguistic situations, providing insights into the broader domain of second language acquisition.

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, which combined both quantitative and qualitative research methods to explore the challenges faced by learners of Azerbaijani and English. Creswell (2018) indicates that mixed methods enable

researchers to get a comprehensive understanding of the problems by integrating statistical information with in-depth analysis.

3.2 Participants

This study included 40 language learners from a university and a language course, comprising two language instructors n=20 were international students learning Azerbaijani as a foreign language, while the other n=20 were Azerbaijani students learning English as a foreign language. Instructors taught Azerbaijani and English languages in the specified groups. The educational settings were chosen through a convenience sampling strategy, based on accessibility and relevance to the research topic (Creswell, 2018). The research employed a non-probability sampling technique, specifically purposive sampling, to select students and instructors. This approach facilitated the selection of participants with significant experience related to the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002).

3.3 Data Collection

Surveys were employed to collect quantitative data from the selected language learners to address the research questions. The survey questions were designed to gather background information on the learners and linguistic factors, facilitating comparison between the two learner groups. Qualitative data were gathered via semi-structured interviews with language instructors to gain insights into their perspectives regarding learners' challenges and teaching methodologies. The interview questions aimed to investigate teaching techniques, pedagogical strategies, and perceived challenges faced by learners.

3.4 Data Analysis

The survey responses were analysed with descriptive statistics and the chi-square test of independence to examine significant differences between two groups of learners regarding their perceived challenges, utilising SPSS. Interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis. Data analysis employed open coding to identify and categorise recurring themes and patterns. This approach is appropriate for exploratory research focused on comprehending complex, context-specific experiences (Patton, 2002).

3.5 Ethical Considerations

An interview protocol was created and distributed to the study participants, ensuring voluntary participation. Participants were briefed on the study's objectives and the research enquiries. Prior to the interviews, informed consent forms were secured to ensure participant confidentiality.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 In-depth Interview Results

The study examined the learner profile, teaching methods and materials, teachers' support in the class, the role of social interactions in language learning, and the linguistic challenges from the teacher's perspective in the groups that the surveys were conducted through in-depth interviews with two language instructors. One of the instructors was teaching English to the Azerbaijani students at university (EI – English Instructor), the other one was teaching Azerbaijani to the international students as a foreign language in the language course (AI – Azerbaijani Instructor). Results are presented under the defined themes based on the codes retrieved from both data sets in Table 1, thematic analysis for themes and categories.

Table 1: Thematic analysis for themes and categories

Themes	Codes	Interpretation
Learner Profile	Language level	The language level of the students
	Motivation level	Motivation level of the students and the reason behind low motivation
	Nationalities	The background information about students' nationalities and their native languages
	Communicative Language in the Class	Instructional language and the language used for communicating with each other within and outside the class
	Management skills	Students' self-discipline, time management and organizational skills
	Learning style	How learners learn better and effectively
Linguistic challenges	Alphabet	The challenges with the native alphabet (Cyrillic and Arabic) and Latin
	Grammar	The challenges in sentence structure, word order, specific language structures, tenses, suffix system, etc. and difficulties in applying them
	Pronunciation	The challenges in unfamiliar letter and word pronunciation
	Vocabulary	The challenges in learning and remembering new words, phrases, and collocations, and being able to apply those in spoken language
Teaching Methods & Support	Teaching methods	The most used teaching approaches and methods in the class are when delivering the lesson (e.g. Grammar-Translation, Communicative approach, etc.)
	Support with language skills	How teachers support students in those challenges and how he/she ensures that meaningful learning happens
	Teaching materials	What kinds of teaching materials are used, and their effectiveness, appropriateness to the student level
Social learning	Interaction types	What interaction types are used in the class (teacher-student, pair, group, whole class)
	Effectiveness of social interactions	If the interaction patterns used in the class are effective in language learning

	Social interactions outside of the class	If social interactions are accessible outside of the class, and how the teacher encourages them
Suggestions	Suggestions for language learning	Any suggestions/recommendations that the teachers have

4.1.1 Learner Profile

The English instructor characterized his students' language proficiency as lower-intermediate, while also encountering notable motivational and organizational difficulties. The report indicated that the students exhibited a lack of self-discipline, and their time management and organizational skills were insufficient to elevate their language proficiency to an intermediate level. English served as the primary language of communication in the Azerbaijani class, as indicated by AI, due to the international students from diverse backgrounds such as Russia, Arabic-speaking countries, Ukraine, and Pakistan possessing sufficient English proficiency, as evidenced by their IELTS scores. Both instructors noted a lack of motivation in their students. EI attributed the low motivation of Azerbaijani students to prior course failures, whereas AI identified repetitive grammar drills and insufficient speaking opportunities as contributing factors.

4.1.2 Linguistic Challenges

The linguistic challenges were similar in the acquisition of both English and Azerbaijani. Both instructors agreed that grammar was one of the biggest challenges for their learners. Although the Azerbaijani students could recognize the grammatical patterns and do drilling exercises error-free, applying them in speaking and within context was a huge challenge for them. Similarly, grammar was a main obstacle in the learning process of international students learning process. AI explained this challenge's source as the Azerbaijani agglutinative structure, leading to frequent confusion with word endings and suffixes:

> *"They're able to do the grammar, but they're not able to apply it in context and to speak."* (EI)

> *"They often confuse dative and accusative endings in Azerbaijani."* (AI)

Additionally, vocabulary acquisition was also a difficulty in both cases. While EI reported that the main vocabulary issue was interfering with the meaning in collocations due to word-by-word translation by the learners, AI noted that international students struggled in learning and remembering the new words due to the lack of cognates between their mother tongue and the target language.

Lastly, problems with pronunciation, which were derived from the unfamiliar sounds and letters in the target languages, were recognized by both instructors. Particularly, AI emphasized the unfamiliar sounds, including "ə", "ğ", and "ı", creating problems in the learners' pronunciation. The reason behind this challenge was the difference between the international students' native alphabet, which was mainly the

Cyrillic and Arabic alphabet. Despite their familiarity with Latin graphics due to the English language, the sounds that do not exist in this alphabet lead to pronunciation challenges.

4.1.3 Teaching Methods & Support

According to the insights provided by two instructors, they employed contrasting methodologies in their teaching. AI explicitly noted that she applies the Grammar-Translation method, which includes grammatical drills, pure translation of the simple texts from native to Azerbaijani, etc., because she considers accuracy and grammatical control of the language as a prerequisite for further speaking. Although she acknowledged that the learners were more willing to do speaking activities and were bored with drilling, she recognized their fear of making mistakes and a possible drop in their confidence if they spoke without a thorough and accurate grammatical background. In contrast, EI integrated real-life context and humor into the teaching process to create meaningful learning experiences, reflecting the Communicative approach:

> *"I try to use humor because they remember things better when I personalize it, when I talk about things in the context of Azerbaijan, for instance."* (EI)

> *"I employ the Grammar-Translation Method. I know that this method gives my learners the foundation they need to be successful."* (AI)

To scaffold students' learning, EI used chunking strategies and adapted listening tasks to reduce cognitive load. AI supported students with building a basis for the sentence structure and uses bilingual vocabulary lists, sentence translations, and short written texts to develop their vocabulary, showing a different approach in scaffolding from EI. Despite the similarities in the challenges of the students, there was a notable difference in the accessibility of teaching and learning materials. English, as a universal language, made it easy to reach out and use the reading, listening materials, worksheets, etc. EI noted that the materials were suitable for students' levels and did not lead to any challenges for them, but supported their learning. In contrast, AI described the lack of quality resources tailored for international students to learn Azerbaijani, and she heavily relied on self-made materials, which were moderately enough. This can also be one of the reasons behind learning Azerbaijani as a foreign language.

4.1.4 Social Learning

As indicated in the theoretical framework of the study, students learn better and effectively when they learn in groups collaboratively, socializing with their peers (Vygotsky, 1978). The effectiveness of social interactions in language learning was also investigated in this study. Both instructors acknowledged the possible effectiveness of social learning in the class. However, while EI used pair and small group work, AI mostly relied on teacher-centered instruction. EI noted that using social interactions was a

powerful strategy in language learning; however, in the given class, although the students improved their social skills while working collaboratively, language learning fell behind, and the focus of the course was forgotten. The reason why the students were distracted in group work may derive from their lack of intrinsic motivation in the learning process. Due to academic responsibilities, their purpose was to pass the course, which played an external motivational role for them. Moreover, EI acknowledged the importance of cultural aspects in language learning, saying that it was significant to acquire the language while learning the culture:

"Don't translate… When you learn English, you learn the culture too. The two go together. You can't separate them." (EI)

Comparatively, international students had intrinsic motivation to learn the language, as they did not have any external responsibility to pass or fail in the language course. However, AI preferred to utilize more teacher-centered approaches, diminishing the amount of pair/group interactions to prevent accuracy-related errors. Additionally, students struggled to find people to communicate with outside the class to socialize. Although the teacher encouraged them to watch local TV with subtitles or use simple Azerbaijani apps to get more authentic content, it did not compensate for real social interaction:

"However, they cannot find people to communicate with too much because when they cannot speak Azerbaijani, there are very few people who can speak English to help." (AI)

In conclusion, the qualitative data gathered from two language instructors demonstrated that in both situations, similar linguistic challenges, including grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, were encountered. However, their teaching methods, scaffolding strategies, and teaching materials diverged based on their methodological beliefs, learners' backgrounds and characteristics.

4.2 Survey Results

To investigate the linguistic challenges faced by Azerbaijani and international students in foreign language learning, a survey was conducted with 20 English and 20 Azerbaijani language learners in two different language institutions. Data was analyzed by using SPSS, including the reliability test, descriptive analysis of the participants' demographics, and crosstab comparisons.

4.2.1 Reliability Test

A Cronbach's Alpha of .605 was gained for a 7-item scale (Table 2), measuring the linguistic challenges of the learners, which indicates that the data was reliable, as seen in (Collins, 2007).

Table 2: Data Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.605	7

4.2.2 Participant Demographics

The descriptive analysis of the participants' demographic data indicated a varied array of racial backgrounds. This information is essential in comprehending how these factors may affect the study's outcomes. Azerbaijani participants are the predominant group, with n=20 students, which represents 50% of the valid responses. Russian participants are the second-largest group, comprising n=4students (10%). Other nationalities, including Turkish, Arab, Czech, Ukrainian, and Slovakian, each account for minor shares ranging from 5% to 7.5%. Nationalities such as Georgian, Mexican, Pakistani, and Kazakh each contribute a single participant, representing 2.5% each. The cumulative percentage facilitates the visualization of sample composition; for instance, by incorporating Azerbaijani, Georgian, and Mexican individuals, we account for 55% of the sample. This illustrates the variety of nationalities in the sample, with a distinct majority originating from the largest group. The allocation of participants among different nationalities offers a detailed representation of the sample structure as indicated in Table 3.

Table 3: Participants and Nationalities

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Azerbaijani	20	48.8	50.0	50.0
	Georgia	1	2.4	2.5	52.5
	Mexican	1	2.4	2.5	55.0
	Czech	2	4.9	5.0	60.0
	Pakistan	1	2.4	2.5	62.5
	Russian	4	9.8	10.0	72.5
	Turkish	3	7.3	7.5	80.0
	Ukrainian	2	4.9	5.0	85.0
	Arab	3	7.3	7.5	92.5
	Slovakian	2	4.9	5.0	97.5
	Kazakh	1	2.4	2.5	100.0
	Total	**40**	**97.6**	**100.0**	

Research Question 1: Do students learning English and Azerbaijani as foreign languages at the university level experience similar linguistic challenges across key language learning domains?

4.3 Language Currently Being Learned at University

The table summarizes the distribution of foreign languages currently being studied by university students. Out of 41 total respondents, 40 provided valid responses. Among these, an equal number of students reported studying Azerbaijani (n = 20, 50.0%) and English (n = 20, 50.0%), indicating a balanced interest in both languages. One response was missing (2.4%), which slightly reduced the total percentage of valid responses to

97.6%. The cumulative percentage shows that all valid responses are accounted for by these two language groups, with Azerbaijani reaching 50.0% and English completing the total at 100.0%. This suggests that the language learning choices at this university are currently limited to these two options, with no other foreign languages reported. See Table 4 below.

Table 4: What language are you currently learning at university as a foreign language?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Azerbaijani	20	48.8	50.0	50.0
	English	20	48.8	50.0	100.0
	Total	40	97.6	100.0	
Missing	System	1	2.4		
Total		**41**	**100.0**		

4.4 Descriptive Statistics of Language Learning Skills

The descriptive analysis for language learning skills revealed a wide range of proficiency levels among participants, with some individuals demonstrating advanced abilities while others showed more basic skills. This diversity in language learning aptitude highlights the varied backgrounds and experiences within the sample, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of language acquisition capabilities. The table presents the means and standard deviations for seven language learning skills based on responses from n=40 participants. Among the skills assessed, writing essays or long texts had the highest mean score (M = 4.33, SD = 0.83), indicating that participants felt most confident in this area. In contrast, remembering words over time had the lowest mean score (M = 2.93, SD = 1.05), suggesting it was perceived as the most challenging skill. Pronunciation (M = 3.58, SD = 1.03), vocabulary (M = 3.53, SD = 1.01), and reading comprehension (M = 3.50, SD = 0.85) were rated moderately high, reflecting relative confidence in these receptive and productive skills. Grammar (M = 3.45, SD = 1.26) and understanding spoken language (M = 3.00, SD = 1.11) received mid-range scores, indicating moderate perceived proficiency. Overall, the results suggest that while learners feel relatively confident in writing and vocabulary-related tasks, they may require additional support in memory retention and listening comprehension. As presented in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics of Language Learning Skills

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Grammar	3.4500	1.25983	40
Vocabulary	3.5250	1.01242	40
Pronunciation	3.5750	1.03497	40
Understanding Spoken Language	3.0000	1.10940	40
Writing Essays or Long Texts	4.3250	.82858	40
Remembering Words Over Time	2.9250	1.04728	40
Reading Comprehension	3.5000	.84732	40

4.5 Duration of Language Learning

The table presents the distribution of how long students have been learning their current foreign language. Out of 41 total respondents, 40 provided valid responses. The most common duration was 6–12 months, reported by 13 students (32.5%), followed closely by both less than 6 months and 1–2 years, each reported by 11 students (27.5%).A smaller portion of students, 5 individuals (12.5%), reported studying the language for more than 2 years. The cumulative percentages show that 60% of students have been learning the language for less than a year, and 87.5% have been learning it for less than two years, indicating that the majority of learners are relatively new to the language. Only one response was missing (2.4%). These results suggest that most students are in the early stages of their language learning journey, which may have implications for curriculum design and instructional support.

Table 6: How long have you been learning this language?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Less than 6 Months	11	26.8	27.5	27.5
	6-12 Months	13	31.7	32.5	60.0
	1-2 years	11	26.8	27.5	87.5
	More than 2 Years	5	12.2	12.5	100.0
	Total	40	97.6	100.0	
Missing	System	1	2.4		
Total		**41**	**100.0**		

4.6 Self-Reported Language Proficiency Level

The table summarizes participants' self-assessed proficiency in the foreign language they are currently learning. Out of 41 total respondents, 40 provided valid responses. The majority of students identified as having an intermediate level of proficiency (n = 24, 60.0%), followed by beginner level (n = 14, 35.0%). Only 2 students (5.0%) reported an advanced level of proficiency. The cumulative percentages show that 95% of learners consider themselves to be at either the beginner or intermediate level, indicating that most students are still in the process of developing their language skills. One response was missing (2.4%). These findings suggest that instructional strategies should primarily target beginner and intermediate learners, with limited need for advanced-level content at this stage. See Table 7 below.

Table 7: Students' current language level

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Beginner	14	34.1	35.0	35.0
	Intermediate	24	58.5	60.0	95.0
	Advanced	2	4.9	5.0	100.0
	Total	40	97.6	100.0	
Missing	System	1	2.4		
Total		**41**	**100.0**		

4.7 Gender Distribution of Participants

The table presents the gender distribution of the participants. Out of 41 total respondents, 40 provided valid responses. Among them, 24 participants (60.0%) identified as female, while 16 participants (40.0%) identified as male. One response was missing (2.4%). The data indicate a higher representation of female participants in the sample. This gender imbalance may be relevant when interpreting other findings, especially if gender is expected to influence language learning experiences or outcomes. See Table 8 below for the gender distribution of participants.

Table 8: Gender Distribution of Participants

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	16	39.0	40.0	40.0
	Female	24	58.5	60.0	100.0
	Total	40	97.6	100.0	
Missing	System	1	2.4		
Total		**41**	**100.0**		

4.8 Perceived Difficulty of Learning New Vocabulary by Gender

A crosstabulation was conducted to explore gender differences in the perceived difficulty of learning new vocabulary, including words, phrases, and collocations. Among male participants (n = 16), 18.8% disagreed, 25.0% were neutral, 31.3% agreed, and 25.0% strongly agreed that vocabulary learning is challenging. Among female participants (n = 24), 16.7% disagreed, 37.5% were neutral, 29.2% agreed, and 16.7% strongly agreed. Overall, the majority of both male and female participants reported either agreement or neutrality regarding the difficulty of vocabulary learning. Notably, a higher proportion of female participants (37.5%) reported a neutral stance compared to males (25.0%), suggesting that females may be more ambivalent or varied in their perceptions. Meanwhile, males were slightly more likely to strongly agree (25.0%) than females (16.7%), indicating a potentially higher perceived challenge among some male learners. These findings suggest subtle gender-based differences in how vocabulary learning is experienced, with males showing slightly more polarization in their responses and females tending toward neutrality, as presented in (Table 9) cross-tabulation males and female in both English and Azerbaijani Language course: learning new vocabulary, phrases, collocations is challenging for me.

Table 9: Cross-Tabulation Male and Female in English and Azerbaijani Language Course: Learning new vocabulary - words, phrases, collocations - is challenging for me

		Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Male /Female	Male	3	4	5	4
	Female	4	9	7	4
Total		**7**	**13**	**12**	**8**

Research Question 2: There is no significant difference in the perceived linguistic challenges between students learning English and those learning Azerbaijani as foreign languages. (Null Hypothesis)

4.10 Similarity in Learning Azerbaijani vs. English

To examine whether students learning English and Azerbaijani as foreign languages at the university level experience similar linguistic challenges, a series of independent samples t-tests was conducted. The tests compared the two groups across eight key areas of language learning difficulty: vocabulary acquisition, grammar, pronunciation, listening comprehension, writing, memory retention, reading comprehension, and speaking fluency. The results indicated that there were no statistically significant differences between the two groups in any of the challenge areas (p > .05). Specifically, the mean scores for both groups were closely aligned, suggesting that learners of both languages perceive similar levels of difficulty. While students learning Azerbaijani reported slightly higher difficulty in pronunciation (M = 3.85, SD = 1.09), listening (M = 3.30, SD = 1.08), and writing (M = 4.55, SD = 0.51) compared to their English-learning peers, these differences were marginally non-significant with p-values ranging from .087 to .093. These findings support the conclusion that students learning English and Azerbaijani face broadly similar linguistic challenges. The absence of significant differences suggests that common factors such as instructional methods, learner background, or cognitive demands may influence language learning experiences across both groups. See (Table 10) group statistics and (Table 11) Independent Samples Test.

Table 10: Group Statistics

	What language are you currently learning at the University as a foreign language?	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I find it difficult to understand and apply grammar rules in the target language.	Azerbaijani	20	3.6500	1.30888
	English	20	3.2500	1.20852
Learning new vocabulary - words, phrases, collocations - is challenging for me	Azerbaijani	20	3.6000	.99472
	English	20	3.4500	1.05006
I have difficulties with pronunciation in the target language.	Azerbaijani	20	3.8500	1.08942
	English	20	3.3000	.92338
Understanding spoken language in real conversations is difficult for me	Azerbaijani	20	3.3000	1.08094
	English	20	2.7000	1.08094
Writing essays, reports, or long texts in the target language is challenging.	Azerbaijani	20	4.5500	.51042
	English	20	4.1000	1.02084
I struggle to remember new words over time	Azerbaijani	20	2.9500	.94451
	English	20	2.9000	1.16529
I feel confident in understanding written texts in the target language	Azerbaijani	20	3.4000	.94032
	English	20	3.6000	.75394
Rate the following statements on a scale:	Azerbaijani	20	3.8000	1.15166
	English	20	3.4000	.88258

I make frequent mistakes when speaking spontaneously.					

Table 10: Independent Samples Test

Variable Items		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
I find it difficult to understand and apply grammar rules in the target language.	Equal variances assumed	.360	.552	1.004	38	.322
	Equal variances not assumed			1.004	37.761	.322
Learning new vocabulary – words, phrases, and collocations – are challenging for me	Equal variances assumed	.120	.731	.464	38	.645
	Equal variances not assumed			.464	37.889	.645
I have difficulties with pronunciation in the target language.	Equal variances assumed	.345	.560	1.722	38	.093
	Equal variances not assumed			1.722	37.006	.093
Understanding spoken language in real conversations is difficult for me	Equal variances assumed	.004	.950	1.755	38	.087
	Equal variances not assumed			1.755	38.000	.087
Writing essays, reports, or long texts in the target language is challenging.	Equal variances assumed	2.029	.162	1.763	38	.086
	Equal variances not assumed			1.763	27.941	.089
I struggle to remember new words over time	Equal variances assumed	.983	.328	.149	38	.882
	Equal variances not assumed			.149	36.438	.882
I feel confident in understanding written texts in the target language	Equal variances assumed	1.731	.196	-.742	38	.463
	Equal variances not assumed			-.742	36.285	.463
Rate the following statements on a scale: I make frequent mistakes when speaking spontaneously.	Equal variances assumed	1.732	.196	1.233	38	.225
	Equal variances not assumed			1.233	35.594	.226
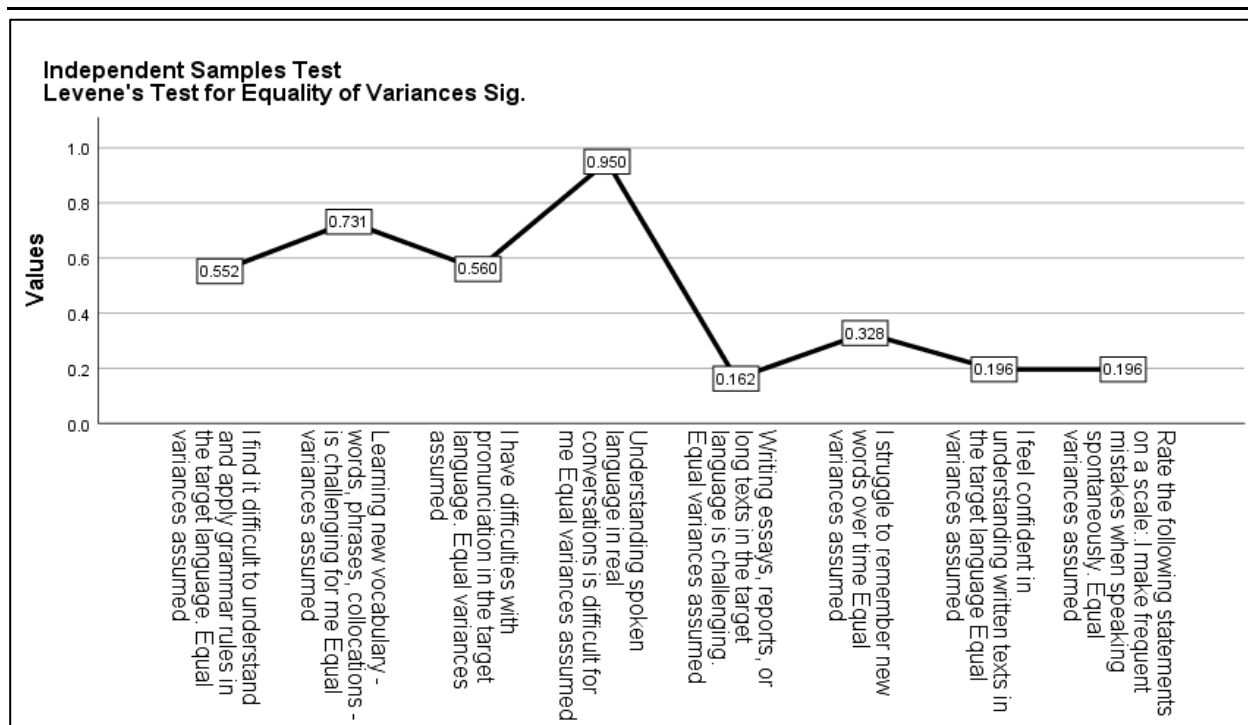
Figure 1: Independent Samples Test

4.11 Levene's Test for Equality of Variances

Prior to conducting independent samples t-tests, Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was performed to assess whether the assumption of equal variances was met for each language learning challenge. The test results are visualized in the accompanying graph, which displays the significance values (p-values) for each item. The significance values for all items ranged from .162 to .950, with none falling below the conventional alpha level of .05. Specifically, the p-values were as follows: Grammar: p = .552, Vocabulary: p = .731, Pronunciation: p = .560 Listening comprehension: p = .950, Writing: p = .162, Memory: p = .328, Reading comprehension: p = .196. These results indicate that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was not violated for any of the variables. Therefore, it was appropriate to proceed with independent samples t-tests assuming equal variances. This strengthens the reliability of the subsequent group comparisons and the validity of the conclusion that students learning English and Azerbaijani face similar linguistic challenges. The null hypothesis (H$_0$) posited that there is no substantial difference in the linguistic difficulties encountered by students learning English and Azerbaijani as foreign languages. The independent samples t-tests indicated that none of the comparisons reached statistical significance at the standard alpha threshold of .05. While several items (e.g., pronunciation, hearing, and writing) neared significance (p values ranging from .087 to .093), they failed to satisfy the criteria for rejecting the null hypothesis. Consequently, the null hypothesis is upheld. The statistics do not offer adequate evidence to assert that the two groups significantly differ in their perceived language learning challenges.

5. Discussion

The study aimed to determine if university students learning English and Azerbaijani as foreign languages face similar linguistic challenges. It found no significant differences in all eight assessed areas, suggesting that learners of both languages face similar levels of difficulty in their language learning journeys. However, students learning Azerbaijani reported slightly higher mean scores in areas like pronunciation, listening, and writing, which were not statistically significant. These differences may reflect variations in language structure or learner familiarity, but they are not strong enough to suggest fundamentally different learning experiences. The overall similarity in perceived challenges may be attributed to shared factors such as instructional methods, learner motivation, and cognitive demands of acquiring a new language. The findings have important implications for language instruction, as educators can design curricula and support services that address common learner needs across language programs, rather than tailoring interventions solely based on the target language. The results of both qualitative and quantitative data demonstrated that although the students of different language learning groups underwent specific situations, both groups experienced significant linguistic challenges, such as struggles in grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and writing. The findings of the research were analyzed and interpreted by using the existing literature and the combination of two theories: Social Constructivism and Interlanguage theory.

Being one of the most challenging areas in language learning, the participants of this research noted their challenges with the grammar and sentence structure in the target language. The qualitative data revealed that Azerbaijani students who learn English were confronted with problems in the application of the grammar patterns, particularly in speaking practices. This finding aligns with the results of studies conducted by Urbaite (2024) and Polat (2018), which emphasize the main role of the structural differences between the native and target languages in the usage of prepositions, conjunctions, auxiliary verbs, etc. Similarly, the international students learning Azerbaijani as a foreign language also highlighted the challenges in the complex suffixation cases, which is also supported by the study by Aliyeva (2021). According to this research, the main reason behind the challenges faced by international students is the complicated agglutinative structure and vowel harmony of Azerbaijani, which is completely different from the languages belonging to non-Turkic language groups. These grammatical challenges in both groups' cases can be well-explained by the Interlanguage Theory. Language transfer and overgeneralization play a crucial role in grammatical errors, in which learners try to apply the rules of L1 to the target language and overuse some grammatical patterns even if it is not needed (Selinker, 1972). The challenges regarding the collocations within contextual usage and lexical errors were recognized by the findings of the study by Polat (2018) and Nigar (2023); however, these studies could not explain the reasons behind those challenges. In the current study, vocabulary usage and remembering the new words, especially the usage of the collocations in English, were also defined as one of the

main challenges by the participants. The reason why the students struggle with the usage of collocations was explained in this study: as they frequently rely on the word-by-word translation, students misunderstood the meanings, which led to their misuse of them. The results of this study showcased that international students had more difficulties in remembering words over time than Azerbaijani students, which could be explained by the fact that international students had less exposure to real-life interactions to practice the vocabulary, rather than Azerbaijani students. Social Constructivism theory supports the point that vocabulary usage in foreign language learning can be developed more meaningfully through interactions and contextual usage (Vygotsky, 1978). The same results were encountered in the study conducted by Koon & Mehdi (2019), generalising the linguistic challenges faced by internationals in Azerbaijan.

According to the quantitative data, writing was found to be the most challenging skill in language learning for both groups, being one of the similarities between learner groups. The reason why Azerbaijani students struggled in writing was the influence of complex grammatical and lexical differences in English, as explained by Urbaite (2024). Additionally, this research found that the lack of teaching and learning materials impeded international students' learning process, which also aligned with the findings of the study by Musabayova (2021). Social Constructivism theory suggests that the challenges in writing can be solved through guided writing tasks, scaffolding, and peer collaboration (Vygotsky, 1978).

Pronunciation was the strongest differentiator between international and Azerbaijani students. While Azerbaijani students found pronunciation in English slightly challenging due to the differences between the native and target languages, supported by Pachina (2019), international students struggled more with pronunciation in Azerbaijani, because of the more complex phonetic system and unfamiliar sounds, such as "ə", "ğ". This finding also aligns with the results of another research by Musabayova (2021), emphasizing the difficulties of international students in pronunciation of the words in Azerbaijani due to unfamiliar sounds. Interlanguage theory explains phonetic errors by suggesting that fossilization and insufficient transfer of training play a crucial role in those mistakes (Selinker, 1972). Similarly, Social Constructivism supports the importance of constructive feedback, scaffolding, and collaborative learning to prevent mistakes in the target language (Vygotsky, 1978). However, these were lacking in a part of the international students in this study; it was found that the instructor used Grammar-Translation method for teaching and did not prefer to use group/pair work in the class. As Jabrayilova (2014) found in her study, Grammar-Translation method may have negative effects on the international students' learning of Azerbaijani. Thus, one of the main reasons behind the challenges of the international students may be the wrong choice of teaching method and the lack of interactions within the classroom.

6. Recommendations

The study suggests that students learning English and Azerbaijani as foreign languages face similar linguistic challenges. To improve language instruction and support, educators should develop unified support strategies, focus on pronunciation and listening activities, strengthen writing instruction, use diagnostic assessments to identify individual needs, and promote cross-language collaboration. These strategies can help students improve their pronunciation, listening comprehension, and writing skills. Additionally, regular formative assessments can help monitor progress and ensure responsive support. Cross-language collaboration can foster mutual understanding and shared learning strategies. Future research should explore additional factors influencing language learning experiences, such as learner motivation, prior exposure, and instructional context. These recommendations aim to improve language instruction and support for students in both languages.

7. Conclusion

The research investigated the linguistic difficulties encountered by university students studying English and Azerbaijani as foreign languages. No substantial variations were identified in language learning difficulty across eight critical domains: vocabulary acquisition, grammar, pronunciation, listening comprehension, writing, memory retention, reading comprehension, and speaking fluency. The results indicate that challenges in language acquisition may be more widespread than those pertaining to specific languages. Although certain regions exhibited slightly greater difficulty for Azerbaijani learners, these variations lacked statistical significance. The study underscores the necessity of formulating inclusive and thorough language training strategies that cater to prevalent learner needs. By concentrating on common issues, educators can improve the efficacy of language programs and offer fair assistance to students irrespective of the target language. Subsequent research ought to investigate these tendencies more comprehensively, employing bigger and more heterogeneous samples while accounting for variables such as learner motivation, past exposure, and instructional setting. The research indicates that linguistic difficulties in foreign language acquisition are influenced by interlanguage elements and external factors, including teaching methodologies, learning resources, and exposure to the language in external contexts. To mitigate linguistic difficulties, measures can be implemented, including deconstructing intricate grammar, vocabulary, and writing structures, instructing language within relevant contexts, and offering prompt and constructive feedback. These acts are based on Social Constructivism and Interlanguage principles to facilitate significant learning experiences.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this study. We affirm that we have no personal, financial, or professional affiliations with any organizations or entities that could be perceived as influencing the outcomes of this research. This study was conducted with objectivity and impartiality, and every effort was made to ensure that the findings were unbiased and free from external influence. Our work is driven by a commitment to advancing educational excellence through rigorous research and ongoing professional development. We remain dedicated to staying informed about the latest innovations in educational practices to better support our students and colleagues.

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