

Russian Language Learning At AMU: A Critical Analysis Of Challenges And Opportunities

Dr. Ravinder Singh (Ph.D)^{1*}

^{1*} Assistant Professor of Russian, Department of Foreign Languages, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India

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Abstract

This article describes the system of teaching Russian language at Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), paying special attention to the history and objectives of the establishment of the Department of Foreign Languages, offering courses in Russian language at AMU. The article also discusses the challenges that teachers sometimes face, and indicates the trends in the development of Russian language studies at AMU.

Key words: *Russian as a foreign language, spirit of the country, trends, academic programs, language studies, culture, linguistic background, target audience.*

Established in 1875, Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) is one of India's oldest and most venerable central universities. Known for its commitment to academic excellence and innovation, AMU has gained international recognition and attracts students from diverse backgrounds. The university is ranked eighth among the top 20 universities in India. With an enrollment of over 40,000 students, AMU offers a wide range of academic programs through its 98 departments organized into 12 faculties.

Recognizing the importance of global languages and India's strategic geopolitical position, AMU established the Department of Foreign Languages in 2015. The inclusion of Russian language courses reflects the university's commitment to providing students with opportunities to learn a language of global significance.

Another reason for the introduction of Russian language training at AMU is the profound interest in Russian literature, which has a long history at the institution. It's worth noting that AMU has produced numerous renowned social activists and reformers who played key roles in India's anti-British movement. Revolutionary Russian-Soviet literature profoundly influenced them. Exposed to new revolutionary ideas through translated works in Urdu and Hindi, they were inspired to fight against injustice, exploitation, and British colonial oppression.

Many of these translated works are still preserved in the university's Central library. Students can access a vast collection of Russian literature, including works by renowned authors like *Gogol, Lermontov, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Gorky, Bunin, Sholokhov, Solzhenitsyn*, and others, translated into Urdu, Hindi, and English. Despite the fact that the works of these writers are not part of the curriculum, they are in demand and are read with curiosity by the university's students.

Established nine years ago, the Department of Foreign Languages at AMU offers undergraduate, postgraduate and PhD courses in five languages, including Russian. As one of India's leading language centers for Russian language and literature studies, the department has made significant strides in a relatively short time. Due to high demand, the department limits enrollment in our bachelor's and master's Russian language programs. We accept 20 students annually for the bachelor's program and 10 for the master's.

Being a central university, AMU adheres to the guidelines of the University Grants Commission of India and hence it operates under the CBCS (Choice Based Credit System) suggested by the University Grants Commission of India. The CBCS system mandates that students, in addition to their core subjects, must also study auxiliary subjects. At AMU, a minority institution with a predominantly Muslim student body, these additional subjects often include Urdu language, Islamic theology, Quran, Islamic history, and culture. During the first four semesters of the Bachelor of Arts in Russian program, students, in addition to Russian language courses, also study subjects such as Islamic Theology, West Asian History and Society, Urdu, English, and Environmental Studies.

In the bachelor's degree course, from the first to the third semester, 24 academic hours are taught per week. Of these 24 hours, only 6 are allocated to teaching Russian in the first three semesters, and in the fourth, out of 18 hours, 6 hours are allocated to teaching Russian. In-depth Russian language study begins in the fifth semester,

when all academic hours are dedicated to Russian language courses. Unlike the bachelor's program, the master's program focuses exclusively on Russian language and literature. The Master's program consists of 20 academic hours of Russian language per week in the first semester, increasing to 24 hours per week in subsequent semesters. Upon completion, students are required to submit a Master's thesis.

However, in the process of teaching Russian at AMU, teachers experience the following challenges:

- **Insufficient teaching time:** Limited academic hours allocated for Russian language teaching.
- **Scarcity of resources:** Lack of comprehensive manuals and materials on the Russian language.
- **Diverse linguistic backgrounds:** Polylingual nature of the student body poses challenges in teaching.
- **Limited exposure to native speakers:** Insufficient opportunities for interaction with native Russian speakers.
- **Lack of awareness of current events:** Limited exposure to contemporary Russian culture, events, and trends.
- **Geographic constraints:** Challenges associated with limited mobility and opportunities for international exchange.

A dearth of academic hours for Russian language teaching

A significant challenge faced by Russian language teachers at AMU is the limited instructional time. The CBCS curriculum, while necessary for the university's operations, restricts in-depth study of the Russian language within the bachelor's degree program. The limited six hours per week allocated for Russian language instruction in the first four semesters hinder students' ability to develop balanced language skills in speaking, writing, listening, and reading. While the CBCS system may be effective for other disciplines, it poses significant challenges for foreign language learning. The limited instructional time in the initial semesters hinders students' language proficiency, making it difficult for them to fully engage with the intensive coursework in the later stages.

Insufficient Russian language resources

As a relatively new department, we have struggled to acquire sufficient textbooks and resources for undergraduate and graduate students over the past nine years. To supplement the limited resources, teachers often share personal copies of textbooks and books. However, even these resources can be insufficient, leading to decreased student motivation and interest in independent learning.

Polylingual nature of the classrooms

Many AMU students hail from rural areas and small towns, often exhibiting multilingualism in Hindi, Urdu, and English, but with limited fluency and strong regional accents. This linguistic diversity poses unique challenges for Russian language teaching. Teachers often spend significant time correcting English language errors, which detracts from Russian language instruction. This, combined with the students' challenges in mastering Russian pronunciation, stress, and grammar, further complicates the learning process.

Limited exposure to native speakers

The lack of opportunities for students to interact with native Russian speakers limits their exposure to authentic language use and cultural nuances that can only be fully conveyed by native speakers. Efforts to hire a native Russian speaker are hindered by Aligarh's remote location and limited opportunities, making it difficult to attract qualified native Russian trainers.

Lack of awareness of major events and activities in the Russian language

Major Russian language events, seminars, master classes, festivals, and competitions are primarily organized in Delhi, often supported by the Russian Center for Science and Culture or the Russian Embassy. Geographic constraints often limit our students' access to major Russian language events, seminars, and workshops organized in Delhi. This hinders their ability to stay updated on current trends, evaluate their language skills, and participate in language exchange activities.

Limited mobility

Many of our students, hailing from small towns and villages, express a preference for local employment opportunities. While some graduates successfully pursue careers in major cities like Delhi, Noida, and Gurugram or advanced their studies at prestigious institutions like Jawaharlal Nehru University and Delhi University, others, particularly female students, opt to remain in their hometowns despite their strong Russian language skills. They hope to find employment locally, but limited opportunities in small towns for foreign language speakers often restrict their career prospects.

Our department is actively addressing these pressing issues and has sought support from university management. We remain optimistic about finding solutions to these challenges.

Development trends and opportunities

Despite the above problems, Russian language teaching at AMU is experiencing the following development trends:

Constantly growing interest in the Russian language

Our department actively works to popularize the Russian language in the city of Aligarh. Sometimes we hold special lectures on the Russian language, readings of Russian poems, and an annual day of the department. We invite students and teachers from other faculties of the university to these events. On the one hand, this is a good motivation for our students, and on the other hand, these events generate great interest among students of other disciplines in studying Russian. The growing interest in Russian is evidenced by the fact that more than 200 students take the entrance exam every year, but due to the limited number of places, only 20 students are selected for the bachelor's course.

Introduction of new Russian language courses

Having started its work in 2015, our department could only offer a bachelor's degree course, taking into account the wishes and aspirations of students, in 2018 we decided to introduce a master's degree course in Russian. In order to continue the development and research in Russian, recently a PhD course in Russian Language studies has been offered.

We also have plans to start a special course on translation. This course will be unique because there is no university in India that could offer a course specifically on translation after the bachelor's degree. The course will last for one year. For those students who want to work and do not want to continue their studies in the master's degree, this course will be very useful. This one-year course on translation will give them a great opportunity to acquire the skills and abilities that professional translators need at work.

Sometimes people come to us who really want to learn Russian, given such a huge interest in learning the language, in the future we plan to create short-term courses, namely: a certification course, a diploma course, an advanced course, an intensive course. Given this, we can confidently say that Russian language training in Aligarh is in demand and is actively developing.

Collaborations with foreign universities

Our department is trying to collaborate with other universities to improve the quality of teaching Russian and expand the possibilities of Russian language research at AMU. An example is the signing of an agreement in 2017 on cooperation with the Russian-Tajik Slavic University. According to the memorandum, both universities will organize online master classes for students, conferences and seminars. Both sides also agreed that our students can study Russian at the Russian-Tajik Slavic University. Our diplomas will also be accepted at this university, thanks to which students can enter a master's degree after completing a bachelor's degree or a postgraduate course after a master's degree. Our department interacts with Russian universities with the aim of developing joint cooperation.

Using effective methods and strategies in teaching Russian

Since no method of teaching Russian as a foreign language is comprehensive, Russian as a foreign language teachers sometimes use combined methods. In this case, equal attention is paid to translation-grammar, communicative, audiovisual methods, and sometimes direct ones. We often play language games, role-play and dialogues, create real situations, conduct virtual excursions to famous places in Russia. In addition, at the initial stage of training, we sometimes edit the texts of works of Russian literature, prepare various exercises (pre-text and post-text) based on these texts, not only to develop the habit of reading more in students, but also to introduce them to Russian literature. To practice pronunciation and stress, special lectures are organized every week in the language lab.

Opening of private institutes offering Russian language courses

As noted above, our department has been teaching Russian for 9 years now. Until recently, it was difficult to find a person in the small city of Aligarh who would study Russian, but thanks to the joint work of teachers and the quality of teaching in our department, Russian has become one of the popular foreign languages in Aligarh, so those students who do not pass the entrance exam with us study Russian in private institutes. Over the last few years, the number of such private institutes has grown rapidly, because in India, a person who knows Russian, in addition to teaching, has great opportunities to work as a translator or interpreter in many government agencies and organizations, such as the Ministry of Defense, the Army, the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Tourism and embassies, as well as a full-fledged employee in Russian companies. We are pleased that our students work in these institutes. Thus, we can say that in a short period of time our department has achieved a lot and laid the foundation for the development of education, as well as further research in the Russian language.

The outcome of our dedication and hard work is significant contribution in popularizing the Russian language and teaching it in India. We are constantly working to improve our department, to create one of the main institutes for the study of the Russian language in India, but at the same time, the task remains to solve the difficulties that are encountered in the process of teaching the Russian language in our university.

We very much hope that the Russian Centre for Science and Culture, the Russian Embassy, Rossotrudnichestvo and the Russkiy Mir Foundation will also play a significant role in improving our department so that it becomes the best centre for Russian language and its research in India, becoming an example for other universities offering courses in Russian language.

Such small steps and joint efforts all over the world can bring revolutionary changes in the field of Russian language education and research, and at the same time realize the dream of the famous Russian writer I.S. Turgenev, who advised: “Take care of our language, our beautiful Russian language – it is a treasure, it is an inheritance passed on to us by our predecessors! Treat this powerful tool with respect; in the hands of those who are skilled, it is capable of performing miracles.”

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