

Factors Affecting the Acquisition of the Mother Tongue by Students Studying in Azerbaijani-Language Schools in Georgia

Aygul Isayeva

ADA University, Baku, Azerbaijan
Email: isayevaaygul2003@yahoo.com

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Abstract

In Georgia, not only has there been a yearly decline in the number of Azerbaijani-language schools, but significant problems have also emerged in the teaching of the mother tongue. After student admission to the Azerbaijani Language and Literature program at Ilia State University was suspended in 2006, the preparation of new specialists in this field in Georgia has come to a halt. Consequently, schools have experienced a shortage of qualified teachers in mother tongue education, leading to an increase in the number of non-specialist subject teachers assigned to teach the Azerbaijani language. The reduction of instructional hours for the mother tongue, serious translation errors in textbooks, the growing number of non-specialist subject teachers teaching the mother tongue in schools, and the elimination of the graduation (leaving certificate) examination in the mother tongue have all contributed to difficulties in Azerbaijani language acquisition among students. The main objective of this study is to investigate the factors affecting the acquisition of the Azerbaijani language among students studying in Azerbaijani-language schools in Georgia, from the perspectives of both teachers and students. A qualitative research method was employed in the study, involving three focus group discussions with 18 students and four semi-structured interviews with teachers. The research participants were selected through purposive sampling from four Azerbaijani-language schools operating in Georgia, including both urban and rural areas. During the analysis, both students and teachers identified several key factors affecting mother tongue acquisition: the teacher's subject matter knowledge, the absence of the leaving certificate exam in Azerbaijani language, the reduction of instructional hours for the mother tongue, serious errors made during the translation of textbooks from Georgian to Azerbaijani for other subjects,

and parents enrolling their children in Georgian-language schools. Additionally, teachers emphasized the importance of organizing supplementary activities and competitions related to the Azerbaijani language to improve mother tongue acquisition, while students highlighted the negative impact of regulations and restrictions imposed by the Georgian government. Considering that the findings obtained from this study will serve as a reliable resource for the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia and other educational policy institutions, certain recommendations have been developed regarding the development of the Azerbaijani language.

Keywords

Azerbaijani-Language Schools in Georgia, Azerbaijani Language, Mother Tongue Instructional Hours, Azerbaijani Language Teacher Shortage, Textbooks

1. Introduction

The mother tongue is considered a fundamental factor in preserving the national identity, existence, and spiritual values of every nation. From this perspective, the loss of a nation's mother tongue implies the disappearance of that nation from its geographical region. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2003), everyone has the right to receive education in their mother tongue without any interference. The study also emphasizes the importance of providing education in the mother tongue for every student in order to improve the quality of education. Based on the findings of Ozfidan's (2017) study, the mother tongue is a crucial determinant of academic achievement, and speaking the mother tongue at school enhances students' self-confidence, cognitive abilities, and freedom of expression. Access to mother tongue education in public schools, preventing the mother tongue from declining to the level of a mere household or colloquial language, and preserving national identity are among the most important issues for Azerbaijanis of Georgia.

The decline in the number of Azerbaijani-language schools operating in Georgia has correspondingly restricted Azerbaijani students' access to education in their mother tongue. Moreover, the absence of qualified Azerbaijani language instructors educated within Georgia has posed serious challenges to mother tongue instruction in schools. After student admission to the Azerbaijani Language and Literature program at Ilia State University was suspended in 2006, the preparation of new specialists in Azerbaijani language and literature in Georgia has been discontinued (Ilia State University, 2024). As a result, a shortage of qualified personnel in mother tongue education emerged in schools, accompanied by an increase in the number of non-specialist subject teachers teaching the mother tongue. The reduction of instructional hours for the mother tongue, serious errors made during textbook translation, the rise in non-specialist teachers teaching the mother

tongue, and the elimination of the graduation examination (leaving certificate) have all contributed to difficulties in Azerbaijani language acquisition among students.

This study investigates the factors affecting mother tongue acquisition among students attending Azerbaijani-language schools in Georgia. The research is timely and significant in terms of preserving the national identity of Azerbaijanis of Georgia. The findings are expected to serve as a reliable source for data-driven decision-making aimed at protecting the Azerbaijani language and ensuring its proper instruction in schools. Furthermore, the analysis of the existing scientific literature revealed that this topic has not been thoroughly explored and that there is a limited number of scholarly works available. This study aims not only to fill the existing gaps in the literature but also to empirically identify the current challenges preventing the Azerbaijani language from declining to the status of a home language among Azerbaijanis of Georgia, while contributing to solutions addressing these issues.

The results of the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (National Assessment and Examination Center, 2023) and other studies (Isayeva, 2024b; Tabatadze et al., 2014, as cited in Tabatadze, 2016) indicate that the Azerbaijani language proficiency of students attending Azerbaijani-language schools in Georgia is unsatisfactory. It is necessary to conduct research on the Azerbaijani language proficiency and skills of Azerbaijani students residing in Georgia, along with the factors affecting their academic outcomes. Furthermore, studies aimed at preventing the mother tongue from deteriorating to the level of a home language are also urgently required.

The primary aim of this study is to explore the factors influencing students' acquisition of the Azerbaijani language in Azerbaijani-language schools in Georgia, as viewed by both teachers and students. This research is significant in supporting decision-makers involved in the policymaking process concerning Azerbaijani-language schools operating in Georgia. The findings obtained at the conclusion of the study are expected to serve as a reliable resource for the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia and other institutions involved in educational policy.

The study conducted to investigate the factors affecting mother tongue acquisition among students attending Azerbaijani-language schools in Georgia sought to answer the following question:

What are the factors affecting the acquisition of the Azerbaijani language among students attending Azerbaijani-language schools in Georgia?

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Settlement of Azerbaijanis of Georgia and the History of Azerbaijani-Language Schools

Georgia is one of the most culturally diverse countries in the South Caucasus. Azerbaijanis, as one of the indigenous peoples of Georgia, represent the second

largest population group after Georgians and mainly reside compactly in the Kvemo Kartli (formerly known as Borchali) region. According to the 2014 population census, there are 233,000 Azerbaijanis living in Georgia, accounting for 6.3% of the total population (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2014). However, various community sources and local experts suggest that the actual number may be significantly higher, possibly exceeding half a million.

The ancient Georgian written sources also confirm that the ancestors of Azerbaijanis have inhabited the territory of modern-day Georgia for millennia and are indigenous to these lands. The earliest Georgian written record mentioning the presence of the Buntürk tribe along the Kura River in the 4th century BCE can be found in *Moktsevai Kartlisay* (The Conversion of Kartli) (Takaishvili, 1989: p. 33). The settlement of the Buntürk and Kipchak tribes within the territory of modern Georgia is also confirmed by another medieval Georgian chronicle, *The Life of the Kings of Kartli* (Mroveli, 1979: p. 60). In Hajiyev's (2014) study, based on medieval Georgian written sources, the significant role of the Buntürk, Kipchak, Pecheneg, Sabir, Khazar, Oghuz, and other Turkic tribes in the ethnogenesis of the Borchali-Qarapapaq and Akhaltsikhe Turks is examined, as well as the evolutionary stages of the Turkic ethnic presence in Georgia. The study of the history of schools is as important as the millennia-long settlement of Azerbaijanis in their historic homeland within the territory of Georgia. The opportunity for Azerbaijanis of Georgia to receive education in their mother tongue dates back to the 19th century.

The first Azerbaijani-language school in Georgia was established in Tbilisi in 1847-1848. In rural areas, the first such school was opened in 1877 in the village of Qızılhacılı in the Borchali region. By 1977, there were 174 Azerbaijani schools operating in Georgia (Ismayilli, 1977).

As shown in **Table 1**, at the beginning of the 1935-1936 academic year, 319 Azerbaijani-language schools were operating in Georgia, with a total enrollment of 31,371 students (Pashayev et al., 2012: p. 278). In 1944, the Ahıska Turks were deported from their homeland (National Museum of History of Azerbaijan, 2022). Consequently, Azerbaijani schools in Adigun, Akhaltsikhe, Aspindza, Akhalkalaki, and Bogdanovka were forced to close.

Currently, out of 116 Azerbaijani-language schools operating in Georgia, 79 are Azerbaijani sector schools, while the remaining ones are mixed/sectoral schools. Although Azerbaijani sections are maintained in the Karajalar village public school in Telavi municipality and the Khatistopli (Chatax—A. I.) village public school in Bolnisi municipality, all students attend classes exclusively in the Georgian sector (Education Management Information System Center, 2022). Since only the Georgian sector operates in both schools, a gradual decrease in the number of Azerbaijani teachers has been observed. The number of Azerbaijani-language schools operating in Georgia has changed over the years, as shown in **Table 2** (Garabagli, 2023: p. 967).

As shown in **Table 2**, during the Soviet era in 1989, 206 Azerbaijani-language schools operated in Georgia; currently, including sections, the number of these

schools stands at 116.

Table 1. Number of Azerbaijani-language schools in Georgia, 1935-1936 academic year.

Districts	Number of schools	Number of students			Total
		Preparatory class and Grades 1 - 4	Grades 5 - 7	Grades 8 - 10	
Adigun	61	5712	109	-	5821
Akhaltzikhe	55	3857	175	-	4032
Borchali	43	4151	834	-	4985
Aspindza	42	3186	212	-	3398
Bashketchid	39	3203	521	-	3724
Luxembourg	29	2544	531	37	3112
Akhalkalaki	9	771	30	-	801
Qarayazi	8	1273	120	-	1393
Gurciani	7	945	115	-	1060
Adjar ASSR	6	290	38	-	328
Tsalka	5	428	63	-	491
Lagodekhi	4	257	48	-	305
Kaspi	3	84	-	-	84
Tiflis	2	176	52	-	228
Tiflis city	1	492	150	68	710
Aghbulag	2	175	-	-	175
Sagarejo	1	215	46	-	161
Telavi	1	160	47	-	207
Bogdanovka	1	163	41	-	204
Gori	1	52	-	-	52
Total for the Georgian SSR	319	28,134	3132	105	31,371

Table 2. Number of Azerbaijani-language schools in Georgia.

Year	Number of schools
1989	206
1989	183
1999	167
2009	124
2024	116

In an interview, Despina Koiava, an official from the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, emphasized staff shortages as one of the main factors contrib-

uting to the decline in the number of Azerbaijani-language schools (Azizov, 2023). Civil society activist Dr. Aygul Isayeva also highlighted staff shortages, infrastructural challenges, and the growing tendency of parents to enroll their children in Georgian-language schools as key reasons for school closures in her interview with the Association for the Development of Civil Society in Azerbaijan (Hajili, 2022).

2.2. The Right to Education in the Mother Tongue for Azerbaijanis of Georgia

The rights of the non-Georgian population to receive education in their mother tongue are enshrined in the Constitution of Georgia. According to the Law on General Education adopted by the Georgian state and Article 4, Paragraph 3 of the Constitution of Georgia, individuals whose mother tongue is not Georgian have the right to receive full general education in their native language (Georgian Legislation, 2005). In 1992, the Council of Europe adopted the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages to protect and promote the languages of national minorities in Europe. This Charter, the only international treaty dedicated to the protection of minority languages, entered into force in 1998 (Council of Europe, 1998). Upon joining the Council of Europe in 1999, Georgia committed to ratifying the Charter (Council of Europe, 2016). Furthermore, Georgia has undertaken obligations before the Council of Europe by signing international conventions aimed at protecting the rights of the non-Georgian population living in the country, including the preservation of their mother tongue and culture (Human Rights Education and Monitoring Agency, 2019). According to The Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities, the right of persons belonging to national minorities to preserve their identity can be fully realized only if they are able to learn their mother tongue to an adequate level during the educational process. The Recommendations emphasize that states should implement proactive policies concerning the educational rights of minorities (Office of the Public Defender of Georgia, 2023).

2.3. Key Problems Facing Azerbaijani-Language Schools in Georgia

This section discusses the key challenges faced by Azerbaijani-language schools operating in Georgia, including teacher shortages, the reduction of instructional hours for the Azerbaijani language, insufficient subject knowledge among teachers, and issues related to the translation of textbooks.

2.3.1. Shortage of Qualified Teachers

One of the main challenges faced by non-Georgian-language schools is the shortage of qualified personnel, particularly the lack of professional teachers. After student admissions to the Azerbaijani Language and Literature program at Ilia State University were suspended in 2006, a shortage of teachers specializing in the Azerbaijani language emerged (Ilia State University, 2024).

As a result, the number of non-specialist subject teachers teaching the mother

tongue in Azerbaijani-language schools has increased. According to a telephone survey conducted in July and August 2024 with principals, acting principals, and teachers of 116 Azerbaijani-language schools operating in Georgia, it was found that there are 322 Azerbaijani language and literature teachers working in these schools. The statistics are presented in the table below.

Table 3. Number of Azerbaijani language and literature teachers.

Azerbaijani Language and Literature Teachers	Number
Subject Specialist Teacher	230
Non-specialist subject teacher	87
Having only secondary education	5
Total:	322

As shown in **Table 3**, out of 322 teachers, 230 graduated with a degree in Azerbaijani language and literature teaching, 87 are non-specialized subject teachers, and 5 have not received any higher or vocational education, having completed only secondary education. According to the survey results, in 59 out of the 116 schools, all teachers were specialized subject teachers, while in 20 schools, all were non-specialized subject teachers. In the remaining 37 schools, both specialized and non-specialized subject teachers were employed (Isayeva, 2024a).

2.3.2. Reduction in Instructional Hours for the Mother Tongue

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the transition period, interest in learning the Georgian language increased among the non-Georgian population. The number of Georgian language instruction hours was increased in non-Georgian-language schools, and several state-supported programs were implemented. However, while all Azerbaijani-language schools were allocated 5 hours per week for the Georgian language, the number of instructional hours for the mother tongue was reduced to 3 hours per week (2 hours for Azerbaijani language and 1 hour for Azerbaijani literature, or vice versa).

According to Order No. 40/N, issued by the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia on 18 May 2016 and entitled “*On the Approval of the National Curriculum*,” it is stated that: “A minimum of 3 and a maximum of 5 hours per week shall be allocated for the mother tongue of ethnic minorities. If a school allocates 1 or 2 hours per week to the teaching of a second foreign language, then only a maximum of 3 hours per week must be allocated to the mother tongue.” (Georgian Legislation, 2016). However, at the time of the approval of the national curriculum, the Azerbaijani language and literature subject was allocated 8 - 9 hours per week in primary grades, 5 - 7 hours per week at the general secondary education level, and 5 hours per week at the complete secondary education level without any conditions. Specifically, the distribution of instructional hours for subjects was outlined in Order No. 841, “On the Approval of the National Curriculum,” signed in 2006 by Aleksandre Lomaia, the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia.

The curriculum's timetable for Azerbaijani- and Armenian-language schools indicates that the subject "Mother Tongue and Literature" was allocated 8 - 9 hours per week in primary grades (Georgian Legislation, 2006).

Although Azerbaijani and Armenian languages are not included in the national curriculum, these languages are used as mediums of instruction in non-Georgian-language schools in Georgia, as stipulated by the Law on General Education (Mekhusla & Roshe, 2009). The mother tongues of national minorities are not part of the national curriculum, and these subjects are not listed in the Law on General Education. Therefore, the only possible document where these subjects are found is the timetable reflecting the distribution of instructional hours in the national curriculum. In non-Georgian-language schools in Georgia, minority languages are taught based on the curricula and textbooks of Azerbaijan and Armenia. While the weekly instructional hours in primary grades in these countries amount to 7 hours, in Georgia, it is 5 hours (in higher grades, 2 hours per week are allocated for the Azerbaijani language and 1 hour for literature, or vice versa). Differences in the curriculum (National Curriculum) also create difficulties for teachers, resulting in their inability to complete the prescribed program in the mother tongue textbooks within the academic year (Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, 2014).

The new curriculum in Georgia was first piloted in 2005 and subsequently implemented in the general education system starting from 2006. The first revised curriculum was in effect from 2006 to 2010, the second revised curriculum covered the period from 2011 to 2016, and the third revised curriculum spans from 2018 to 2024 (Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia, 2024a). When comparing the curricula of Azerbaijan and Georgia for the Azerbaijani language and literature subjects, certain differences can be observed (see Table 4).

Table 4. Differences between the education curricula of Azerbaijan and Georgia.

In Azerbaijan	In Georgia
Content strands of the Azerbaijani language subject (for grades I - XI)	Content strands of the Languages of Ethnic Minorities subject (for grades I - VI)
Listening—Comprehension and Speaking	Listening and Speaking
Reading	Reading
Writing	Writing
Language Rules (or Grammar)	
Content strands of the Azerbaijani Literature subject (for grades V - XI)	Content strands of the Languages of Ethnic Minorities subject (for grades VII - IX)
Literature and Life Realities	Text Comprehension and Analysis
Oral Speech	Sharing Knowledge and Ideas
Written Speech	Use of Language and Structural Features
	Use of Strategies

As shown in Table 4, the content strands of Azerbaijani literature include Literature and Life Realities, Oral Speech, and Written Speech. The content strands

of the Azerbaijani language consist of Listening—Comprehension and Speaking, Reading, Writing, and Language Rules (Institute of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2013). In Georgia's National Curriculum (National Teaching Plan), the Azerbaijani language and literature subjects are combined and listed under "Languages of Ethnic Minorities." The subject titled "Languages of Ethnic Minorities" combines language and literature and consists of three content strands (listening and speaking, reading, and writing) for grades I - VI, and four content strands (comprehension and analysis of texts, sharing knowledge and ideas, use of language and structural features, and use of strategies) for grades VII - IX. In grades X - XII, the mother tongue and literature of ethnic minorities are taught in an integrated manner. The subject "Languages of Ethnic Minorities" is a curriculum for language and literature that covers all ethnic minorities except Georgians (Ministry of Education, Science, and Youth of Georgia, 2024d).

Due to differences between the educational curricula of the two countries, Azerbaijani language and literature teachers in Georgia are not familiar with new methodologies and strategies for implementing the subject curricula. Providing these teachers with training on curriculum implementation could improve the quality of instruction.

2.3.3. Teachers' Subject Knowledge Level

In 2015, the National Center for Teacher Professional Development (Teachers' House), under the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture of Georgia, initiated activities aimed at the professional development of teachers, approved a career advancement scheme, and implemented several reforms. As a result of these reforms, four statuses were established for the teachers: practicing teacher, senior teacher, lead teacher, and mentor. Teachers can obtain the next status after participating in certification exams, which in turn leads to salary increases (National Center for Teacher Professional Development, 2015). However, Azerbaijani language and literature teachers were not given the opportunity to participate in certification exams and benefit from career advancement until 2022 (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture of Georgia, 2022). Consequently, Azerbaijani language and literature teachers continued their teaching activities for seven years with very low salaries.

In 2022, a total of 239 Azerbaijani language and literature teachers holding the practicing teacher status participated in the national certification examination. Of these, only 18 candidates managed to surpass the minimum required threshold of 61%, and merely 9 were granted the senior teacher status (National Center for Teacher Professional Development, 2024).

This outcome reflects broader systemic challenges. Between 2015 and 2022, Azerbaijani language and literature teachers were excluded from the national teacher certification process and professional advancement framework. Consequently, they were not provided with access to professional development or qualification-enhancing training programs. The absence of such support mechanisms over a seven-year period significantly contributed to their low performance in the

certification exams.

2.3.4. Students' Proficiency in Their Mother Tongue

In February 2024, an Azerbaijani language assessment test was administered to students attending Azerbaijani-language schools in Kvemo Kartli (Marneuli, Gardabani, Dmanisi, Bolnisi, Tetrtskaro), Kakheti, and Tbilisi. The results of the test revealed that students' proficiency in their mother tongue was significantly low. A total of 609 students from grades 8 to 12 participated in the test. The test included both open- and closed-ended questions tailored to each grade level and assessed reading comprehension and grammar skills in the Azerbaijani language. The maximum possible score was 100 points. According to the results, the average score among 609 students was 26 points. Out of the total, 591 students scored below 65, and only 18 students achieved 65 or more points. These findings demonstrate that students' level of proficiency in their mother tongue is unsatisfactory. The results indicate that students struggle with reading comprehension, lack full command of Azerbaijani grammar, and tend to use the language primarily at the household or conversational level (Isayeva, 2024b).

The results of the "First Regional Olympiad in the Azerbaijani Language" also indicated a low level of students' proficiency in their native language. A total of 94 students from grades 8 - 12 of Azerbaijani-language schools located in Kvemo Kartli (Marneuli, Gardabani, Dmanisi, Bolnisi), Kakheti, and Tbilisi participated in the Olympiad. Of these, 91 students scored below 65 points, while only 3 students scored 65 points or higher. The average score of the 94 students was 37.77 points (Isayeva, 2025).

Students' low reading comprehension skills in Azerbaijani-language schools were also reflected in the PISA 2022 assessment results. According to PISA 2022 data, the academic performance of Azerbaijani-speaking students was significantly lower than that of students in Georgian- and Russian-language schools. The score gap between Georgian- and Azerbaijani-speaking students was 73 points in mathematics, 80 points in reading, and 81 points in science. As shown in **Table 5**, students from Azerbaijani-language schools received the lowest scores in the reading domain compared to the other two domains. Specifically, the reading performance gap between Azerbaijani- and Georgian-speaking students was 80 points, while the gap between Azerbaijani- and Russian-speaking students was 95 points (National Assessment and Examinations Center, 2023).

Table 5. Student achievement in schools according to PISA 2022 results.

	Reading	Mathematics	Science
Georgian-speaking students	377	394	388
Russian-speaking students	392	393	399
Azerbaijani-speaking students	297	321	307

According to the PISA 2018 results, the lowest performance was also recorded

among students of Azerbaijani-speaking schools. The gap in reading comprehension between students of Georgian- and Azerbaijani-speaking schools was 96 points, while the gap between students of Russian- and Azerbaijani-speaking schools was 112 points (National Assessment and Examinations Center, 2020). Based on the results of both PISA 2018 and 2022, the significantly low achievement of students from Azerbaijani-speaking schools in the reading domain can be attributed to a shortage of qualified teaching staff and the lack of provision of quality education.

Based on the study by Tabatadze et al. (2014, as cited in Tabatadze, 2016), it is noted that students in non-Georgian language schools, particularly at the primary level, perform poorly in reading both in their native and second (state) languages. Among ethnic minority groups, Azerbaijani students showed the lowest performance. Of the students who participated in the assessment, 44.2% scored low, 19% scored average, 25.6% scored above average, and only 10% scored high in their native language, Azerbaijani. The low quality of native language instruction is reported to negatively affect the learning of other subjects, especially Georgian as a second language (GSL). Additionally, the inefficiency of linguistic transfer is emphasized as one of the contributing factors.

2.3.5. Challenges Encountered in the Translation of Textbooks

The provision of textbooks to non-Georgian-speaking schools during the Soviet era was supported by neighboring countries. Textbooks in the Azerbaijani language were published by the “Azərənəşr” publishing house, established in 1920, which is considered the first printing press in the East. After the establishment of the “Maarif” publishing house in 1960 on the basis of “Azərənəşr,” the publication of textbooks was entrusted to this publishing house. The supply of Azerbaijani-language textbooks to Azerbaijani-speaking schools in Georgia was facilitated through these publishing houses (Azerbaijan National Library, 2020). Translation of textbooks for non-Georgian-speaking schools in Georgia began in 2005, and a considerable number of errors were detected in the translations due to improper editing (Tabatadze, 2016). Although nearly 20 years have been spent on translating textbooks intended for non-Georgian-speaking schools, in the 2024-2025 academic year, textbooks used in schools still contain a significant number of content, lexical, and grammatical errors, as well as elements of discrimination against national minorities. For example, in the 5th-grade mathematics textbook authored by Caparidze et al. (2021: p. 64), the lexical norm was violated, as the phrase “...the weather was variable” (“...hava dəyişkən idi”) was translated as “...the weather was different in various ways” (“...hava müxtəlif cür idi”). For example, on the same page, the grammatical norm of Azerbaijani was violated: the phrase “...avqustun beşində və onunda yağış yağdı” (“...it was raining on the fifth and tenth of August”) was mistranslated as “...avqustun beşində və onundayağış yağdı” (“...in August five and tens rain was falling”). Elements of discrimination against national minorities are also observed in the textbook, as all the boys’ and girls’ names in the textbook consist exclusively of Georgian names.

In the 3rd-grade mathematics textbook authored by Gogishvili et al. (2020: p.

42), the lexical norm was violated, as in the phrase “Qvantsa 3 lari qoydu” (“Qvantsa 3 laris putted”). On the same page, an orthographic rule violation was observed: “Aleksandr 86-dan əvvəlcə 30-u çixdi” (“Aleksandr 86 from first 30 subtracted”). As in other textbooks, this textbook also does not include any Azerbaijani names. In the 2nd-grade mathematics textbook authored by Gogishvili et al. (2023: p. 42, 63, 70), some task explanations were not translated into Azerbaijani and are provided in Russian.

In the 9th-grade textbook titled Civics, a phonetic norm violation was observed. On the cover of this book, authored by Bachilava et al. (2022), instead of writing “Şagird kitabı” (“Student book”), it is written as “Şagid kitab” (“Studnt bok”), with one missing letter in each word. As in the textbooks, numerous errors are also present in the methodological guide for teachers. For example, the methodological guide for the 2nd-grade “Art” subject, intended for teachers and authored by Kldiashvili et al. (2024), was printed upside down.

The lack of substantial improvement in the quality of textbook translations intended for Azerbaijani-language schools over a period of nearly 20 years reflects the inability of the responsible institutions to find an effective solution to the problem. The inaccurate translation of textbooks and the violation of the norms of the Azerbaijani literary language not only hinder students’ understanding of the subject itself, but also negatively affect their ability to express themselves correctly in their mother tongue.

3. Methodology

A qualitative research method was used in the study of the topic. The qualitative research method helps to provide a rich description of phenomena (Sofaer, 1999). As a research design, the phenomenological approach—one of the six main approaches in qualitative research—was employed. In qualitative methodology, focus group discussions and interviews are the most commonly used data collection methods. Through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews, it is possible to explore the views of both students and teachers in a detailed and comprehensive manner. To answer the research question more clearly, as well as to highlight the importance of focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews, the data sources are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Data sources.

Research question	What are the factors affecting the acquisition of the Azerbaijani language among students attending Azerbaijani-language schools in Georgia?
Purpose	To identify the factors affecting students’ acquisition of their mother tongue
Method	Qualitative/Interview
Research instrument	Focus group discussion Semi-structured interviews

Continued

Sampling	Purposive sampling
Research participants	Students Teachers
Source	Transcript

3.1. Research Participants and Instruments

There are 116 Azerbaijani-language schools operating in Georgia. These schools are located in the regions of Tbilisi (3 schools), Kvemo Kartli (104 schools), and Kakheti (9 schools) (Education Management Information System Center, 2022). In this study, the two main target populations selected were students and teachers. Since it was difficult to cover all schools in the research, the accessible population was selected through purposive sampling from four Azerbaijani-language schools operating in Georgia, including urban and rural schools where the study was conducted (Isayeva, 2024b). Purposive sampling is one of the most widely used sampling methods in qualitative research. The researcher selects the most productive sample to answer the research question (Marshall, 1996). Eleventh-grade students were selected to participate in the study. Since 11th-grade students are about to graduate, they are expected to have already mastered all the rules and norms of the Azerbaijani language, including speech culture, lexical and grammatical rules, and to be able to provide more comprehensive answers to the research questions. The education system in Georgia comprises 12 years of schooling. Because 12th-grade students are occupied with university preparation and do not attend school regularly, it is challenging to involve them in the study due to time constraints. Additionally, there is no Azerbaijani language textbook available for the 12th grade (textbooks are imported from Azerbaijan). For these reasons, 11th-grade students, rather than 12th graders, were selected to participate in the research. During the preparation of the research instruments (focus groups), students with weak, average, and good academic performance all had the opportunity to be selected. Three focus group discussions were organized, each including 6 students, ensuring the participation of a total of 18 students.

Patton (1990: p. 169) recommends that participants in qualitative research be “information-rich” for purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is used to select respondents who are likely to provide relevant and useful information (Kelly, 2010: p. 317). The teachers participating in the study were experienced, having a minimum of 10 years of work experience and teaching Azerbaijani language in secondary education. These experienced teachers had opportunities to periodically monitor changes in the number of Azerbaijani language teaching hours in the National Curriculum and possessed sufficiently extensive knowledge on the subject. In this study, to identify factors affecting mother tongue acquisition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four teachers as a research instrument during the data collection process.

Two research instruments were developed for this study, depending on the tar-

get group. A focus group discussion protocol was designed for students, while a semi-structured interview protocol was intended for teachers.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

To identify the factors affecting the acquisition of the Azerbaijani language in Azerbaijani-language schools operating in Georgia, focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were used during the data collection process. Three focus group discussions with students and four semi-structured interviews with teachers were conducted online via the “Google Meet” and “WhatsApp” platforms. With the participants’ permission, their responses were recorded using an audio recording device.

The data obtained from three focus group discussions and four semi-structured interviews were transcribed into computer text format and prepared for analysis. After processing the transcripts, coding was conducted. In this study, axial coding was used.

4. Findings

According to Babbie (2022: p. 391), axial coding is used when identifying significant concepts. Mapping the concepts helps to visualize the relationships between ideas, creating a clearer understanding and facilitating data analysis. Based on the findings obtained, the following conceptual map was developed. Figure 1 illustrates the relationships among the concepts:

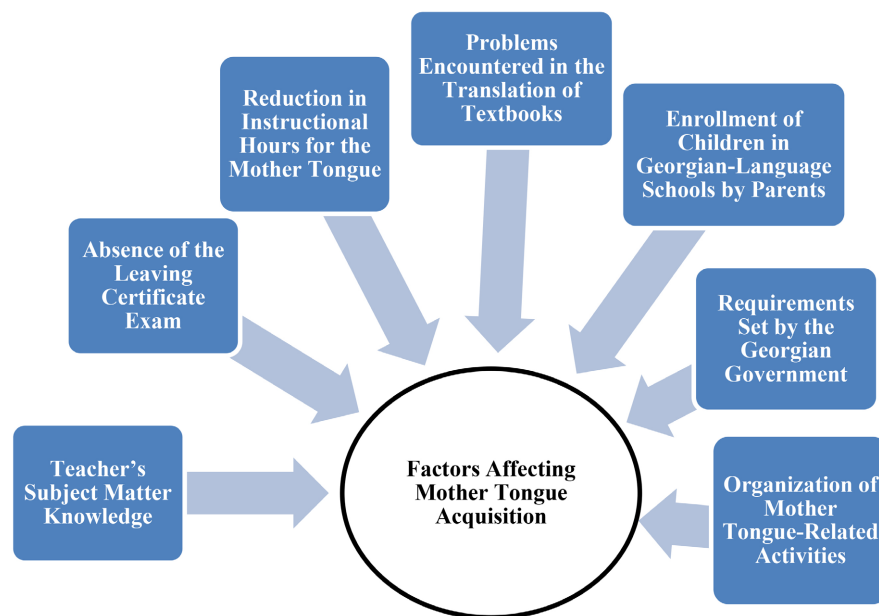


Figure 1. Conceptual map.

4.1. Findings Obtained from Focus Group Discussions Conducted among Students

During the focus group discussions, students were coded numerically as S1, S2,

S3, and so on. The factors affecting mother tongue acquisition have been grouped according to the codes and categories listed in **Table 7**:

Table 7. Codes and categories obtained during the focus group discussion.

Codes	Categories	Frequency of the Same Idea
Speaking in literary language, colloquial language, language education, strong education in Azerbaijan, educated teacher, weak education in Georgia, weak teachers, knowledge, lesson level	Teacher's Subject Matter Knowledge	18
Students' irresponsibility, graduation exams (leaving certificate), mother tongue exam, decreasing interest in the mother tongue	Absence of the Leaving Certificate Exam	11
Inability to complete the curriculum, failure to conclude the topic, unnecessary extra lessons, poor comprehension	Reduction in Instructional Hours for the Mother Tongue	12
Numerous errors, incorrect translation, word order disruption, orthographic errors, omitted letters, poor-quality translation, grammatical errors	Problems Encountered in the Translation of Textbooks	10
Low number of children in the Azerbaijani section, uninformed parents, parents with limited worldview, Georgian section	Enrollment of Children in Georgian-Language Schools by Parents	5
State policy, assimilation, prohibitions, limited hours allocated to the Azerbaijani language	Requirements Set by the Georgian Government	6

Category 1: Teacher's Subject Matter Knowledge. All of the students identified the teacher's subject matter knowledge as a key factor affecting their low level of proficiency in their mother tongue. S2 emphasized the importance of the teacher's knowledge in the subject: "The more a teacher knows, the more they can pass on to us." S7 noted the heavy responsibility placed on primary school teachers: "Most of the responsibility falls on primary school teachers. If primary school teachers have a good level of knowledge, they can pass that knowledge on to us." S8 confirmed this opinion: "I also think it depends on primary school teachers. My primary teacher didn't teach very well." S15 compared the education they received in Azerbaijan with the one they are currently receiving in Georgia and pointed out that the mother tongue is poorly taught in Georgia: "The education I received in Azerbaijan was very different. In Georgia, an elderly teacher taught us, it was okay. But the teachers who taught me in Azerbaijan were much more competent. The teachers in Azerbaijan are far better than those who studied in Georgia. In Georgia, there is pressure on the Azerbaijani language." According to S16, it would be more beneficial if mother tongue and literature teachers working in Azerbaijani-

language schools in Georgia were educated in Azerbaijan: “In my opinion, all the teachers who teach the Azerbaijani language in Georgia should be educated in Azerbaijan. This is my personal opinion. Azerbaijani language and literature teachers should be educated in Azerbaijan. Teachers educated in Georgia are very weak.” S17 also emphasized that the education and teachers in Azerbaijan are of higher quality compared to those in Georgia:

“I studied in Baku for five years. Education in Baku is much stronger. There is a huge difference between the education in Azerbaijan and in Georgia—not a small one, but a massive difference. Studying in Baku is more difficult; here, everything is easier. For example, when I came from Baku, I had already learned the math that students were studying here. In Baku, we had to take exams to move from one grade to the next. There’s no such thing here—not even a leaving certificate exam. In Baku, not every student could get a top grade; I used to struggle too. If I got a 3, I was grateful. But it’s not like that here. You can choose to learn the subject or not—teachers are lenient. They dictate spelling tests, but grade them gently. But in Baku, it wasn’t like that. Students who failed the test were not allowed to remain in the current class or advance to the next grade. We had monthly Azerbaijani language tests in Baku and grammar notebooks where we had to write the rules every day. The level of teaching in Baku was much higher.”

S14 noted that the education they received in Baku was of higher quality: “I also studied in Baku for three years before coming to Georgia. It was better in Baku. Here, everything is very simple and easy.” S18 identified the teacher’s subject matter knowledge as a key factor in mastering the mother tongue: “Teachers should be trained in the language. It depends on the teacher’s knowledge in the subject.”

Participants emphasized the importance of learning at school the language spoken at home, noting its positive impact on speech development, that they learn the meanings of unfamiliar words at school, and highlighted the teacher’s role in this process (S1, S2, S3, S4, S6, S7, S10, S11, S13, S14, S16, S17, S18). S1 stated, “We speak colloquial language at home, but at school we learn the literary language; therefore, it is very important to learn our mother tongue at school. For good learning, the teacher’s knowledge level must be high.” Although students study in Azerbaijani-language schools, some were observed to have difficulty understanding the meanings of certain words. In response to the seventh question in the focus group discussion, “How would you assess the current situation of Azerbaijani language teaching?”, most students evaluated the teaching as average or poor and attributed this to the teacher’s knowledge level (S1, S2, S3, S4, S6, S7, S10, S11, S13, S14, S16, S17, S18). In fact, S13 asked, “I did not understand the word ‘teaching (*tədris* [Azerbaijani]).’ Could you please explain?”

Category 2: Absence of the Leaving Certificate Exam. Most participants viewed the absence of a graduation exam in the Azerbaijani language as a negative issue (S1, S2, S3, S6, S7, S9, S10, S12, S14, S16, S17). For example, S1 said, “I think the lack of exams in the Azerbaijani language affects how well the language is learned.” Another participant expressed their opinion as follows: “I believe Azer-

bajani should be included in university entrance exams. We need to prepare for this language” (S6). In response to the question, “What is the most important issue for you from today’s discussion?”, S9 replied:

“I think the most important issue is the absence of the leaving certificate exams. It’s true that some children might be happy because it’s easier. Sometimes I also think that maybe I won’t do well on the exam and won’t get the certificate. But on the other hand, I believe these exams are truly necessary for us to become knowledgeable. We shouldn’t choose the easy way; leaving certificate exams should exist.”

Another student agreed with this opinion: “The most important thing is the leaving certificate exams. Having exams makes students more responsible” (S7). S10 emphasized the negative impact of the absence of exams in Azerbaijani on interest in the mother tongue: “Because there are no exams, students are not motivated to study. Some students say, ‘There is no exam, so why should we learn Azerbaijani?’” S12 agreed with S10’s view and noted that since exams exist in Azerbaijan, students there are more responsible: “In Azerbaijan, exams take place, and based on the results, students move from grade to grade. But in Georgia, there are no exams, so interest in the mother tongue is low, and students approach it irresponsibly.” S14 complained that in university entrance exams, Azerbaijanis only take tests in “Logic and Mathematics,”¹ which negatively affects their knowledge level:

I believe having leaving certificate exams is important. Everyone who wants to study medicine, law, etc., only takes exams in logic and mathematics. For example, shouldn’t those who want to become doctors know chemistry? They should. Mathematics alone is not enough. But now, all the students go only to tutors and study just math and logic. They don’t study any other subjects at school. However, if there were leaving certificate exams, students would be afraid of failing the exam and would feel responsible. Since there is no leaving certificate exam, everyone does as they please. We receive the certificate without taking the exam. We go to tutors for one subject and get admitted to university. Then we say that we were accepted to university. Exams should exist for us to be knowledgeable. Of course, there should also be an exam in our mother tongue.

S16 emphasized the importance of leaving certificate exams: “There should be leaving certificate exams; children must have knowledge in every subject. They should not only excel in mathematics and logic but also learn other subjects well.”

Category 3: Reduction in Instructional Hours for the Mother Tongue. The 11th question in the focus group discussion was about whether the curriculum is fully covered. Additionally, as a probe question, students’ attitudes toward the reduction of instructional hours in the mother tongue were explored. In their an-

¹Within the framework of the “1 + 4” education program, students from ethnic minorities take a “General Aptitude” exam, which includes logic and mathematics sections, and are admitted to higher education institutions under favorable conditions. They first attend a one-year Georgian language preparatory course, followed by four years of study in their selected specialization at university.

swers to previous questions, students had already emphasized the reduction of mother tongue instructional hours. Most students noted that having fewer instructional hours negatively affects language acquisition (S1, S2, S3, S4, S6, S7, S9, S10, S14, S16, S17, S19). S1 highlighted that they were unable to fully complete the Azerbaijani language textbook even by the 10th grade. S3 linked the inability to cover the curriculum to the reduced instructional hours in the mother tongue: "Having fewer instructional hours affects us negatively. We go through Azerbaijani language material too quickly. Therefore, we cannot grasp it well. We study Azerbaijani only 2 hours per week." S4 agreed with this opinion: "Compared to previous years, instructional hours have been reduced, and some topics cannot be fully covered. Because of this, we fall behind in class." S7 noted that Azerbaijani is taught only once a week. S16 suggested that it would be more beneficial to teach the mother tongue instead of some other subjects:

We study many unnecessary subjects. For example, traffic rules. Why do I need that? My own mother tongue is left aside. We study traffic rules twice a week. It would be better if that time was devoted to the Azerbaijani language. Or, traffic rules could be taught once a week, and the other hour allocated to Azerbaijani language.

S17 emphasized the importance of teaching Azerbaijani instead of some other subjects: "There are subjects that are not taught well. For example, art and music. Instead of these subjects, we could learn Azerbaijani. It would be better if more Azerbaijani language lessons were taught." S2 stated, "Azerbaijani is taught two hours a week. It would be better if it was taught more." S6 agreed with this opinion: "I think instructional hours for the mother tongue should not be reduced; this is our native language and should have more teaching hours."

Category 4: Problems Encountered in the Translation of Textbooks. The 9th question in the focus group discussion concerned the translation of textbooks used in schools. Students reported that there were numerous errors in the textbooks, which made it difficult to understand the content (S1, S2, S3, S5, S8, S9, S11, S13, S15, S18). S1 stated that there were serious errors in their math and history textbooks, including inadequate and incorrect translations. He added that some textbooks included content in both Azerbaijani and Georgian, and the overall quality was poor. S3 said that some sentences were difficult to understand due to incorrect word order. S8 shared that in their math textbooks, sentences had been translated word-for-word, which made them incomprehensible. He added that many sentences were incorrect and that they sometimes had to fix them on their own to understand the meaning. S9 also noted the high number of mistakes in the math books, emphasizing that these were not isolated errors but rather widespread issues. He pointed out spelling mistakes, incorrect word usage, and missing letters. S11 reported that there were noticeable mistakes in history textbooks, especially in the 11th-grade books, which were published by the state. However, he said it was unclear whether these errors were intentional. S13 mentioned encountering similar issues in history and physics textbooks. S15 empha-

sized that textbooks translated from Georgian into Azerbaijani were of poor quality and contained many errors, which negatively affected learning. Similarly, S18 pointed out that there were frequent grammatical errors caused by poor translation quality.

Category 5: Enrollment of Children in Georgian-Language Schools by Parents. Although most participants emphasized the importance of studying in the mother tongue within the Azerbaijani sector, they noted that some parents make incorrect decisions due to lack of awareness and limited worldview (S2, S10, S15, S18, S19). The 14th focus group question was related to additional comments. S2 mentioned the declining number of Azerbaijani-language schools in recent years and expressed concern that they may soon disappear entirely. One of the main reasons, according to S2, is the parents themselves. S2 said, “I think in five years there will be no Azerbaijani sector in our school. The number of students is low. It is gradually disappearing. Parents are enrolling their children in the Georgian sector. Parents lack awareness and have a limited worldview.” S15 also stated that parents are enrolling their children in the Georgian sector and that this is not a good thing. According to S19, parents should enroll their children in the Azerbaijani sector. He emphasized that there are many advantages to studying in the Azerbaijani sector. He added that students in the Georgian sector need private tutors, while those studying in the Azerbaijani sector do not.

Category 6: Requirements Set by the Georgian Government. Focus group participants identified the requirements and regulations set by the Georgian government as a negative factor affecting the acquisition of the mother tongue (S13, S14, S15, S16, S17, S18). S13 emphasized that the requirements imposed by the Georgian government have a negative impact on learning the mother tongue:

Currently, there are 9-year schools in the regions. The school principals want to transform these schools into 12-year institutions, but they are not given permission. The Georgian government states that if a school is to become a 12-year institution, it must be Georgian-language only—exclusively Georgian-language. If this happens, many schools that currently go up to the 9th grade will become exclusively Georgian-language, and as a result, the Azerbaijani language will significantly decline. Eventually, the Azerbaijani language may reach the point of near extinction in Georgia.

S15 also agreed with these views, stating: “Living in Georgia has an impact. I don’t believe they want the Azerbaijani language to advance. They smile to our faces, but act against us behind our backs. In words, we are friends, but there is no real progress.” S18 remarked, “The country you live in can also have an impact. For example, in Georgia, the Azerbaijani language is taught only twice a week. But in Azerbaijan, it is taught more frequently,” thus linking the reduction in instructional hours for the mother tongue to the policies pursued by the Georgian state. S17 expressed his opinion as follows:

Not knowing one’s own language is something like an assimilation process. Azerbaijanis living in some regions do not know their native language. They even

use expressions like “give me that maqida².” In my opinion, this means assimilation. The Georgian government should create conditions for us to learn and preserve our mother tongue.

When students expressed their opinions, other students also confirmed them. No objections to any opinion were observed. Everyone agreed with the statements made.

4.2. Findings Obtained from Semi-Structured Interviews Conducted among Teachers

Fifteen, twenty-two, thirty-three, and forty-eight years of professional experience Azerbaijani language and literature teachers participated in the semi-structured interview. The participants were coded as M1, M2, M3, and M4. Their opinions regarding the factors affecting the acquisition of the mother tongue were classified into relevant codes and categories based on common characteristics, as shown in **Table 8**:

Table 8. Codes and categories obtained from the semi-structured interviews.

Codes	Categories	Frequency of the Same Idea
Non-specialist subject teachers, teachers reaching retirement age, staff shortage, quality teaching, non-professionals	Teacher’s Subject Matter Knowledge	4
Irresponsibility, decreasing student interest, inclination toward the mother tongue	Absence of the Leaving Certificate Exam	4
Inability to complete the curriculum, comprehension difficulties, obstacles to teaching	Reduction in Instructional Hours for the Mother Tongue	4
Poor-quality translation, unprofessional translators, meaningless sentence structure, translation errors, literal translation, incorrect spelling rules, negative impact on comprehension	Problems Encountered in the Translation of Textbooks	4
Code-mixing in speech, need for parental awareness, colloquial language, Georgian section, Azerbaijani section, parental indifference	Enrollment of Children in Georgian-Language Schools by Parents	4
Olympiads, competitions, contests, national holidays, national and spiritual values, Novruz holiday	Organization of events related to the Azerbaijani language and literature subject	4

Category 1: Teacher’s Subject Matter Knowledge. M1, M2, M3, and M4 noted the presence of non-specialist subject teachers in Azerbaijani-language schools, as

²“Maqida” means “table” in Georgian.

well as the low subject knowledge level of most teachers. M1 mentioned that when preparing teachers for certification exams, their knowledge level was very low and that due to staff shortages in neighboring schools, subjects such as Azerbaijani language were being taught by music, English, or Georgian language teachers. M2 stated that a teacher who is not a specialist cannot teach their subject well. M3 emphasized that a tragic situation is occurring in the schools:

This is a very sensitive issue for us. One of the biggest problems is the lack of new teachers specializing in Azerbaijani language and literature. Most of the current teachers are approaching retirement age. The majority of teachers currently teaching Azerbaijani do not have a strong command of their subject. It is so tragic that teachers who do not even know basic phonetic rules are teaching the Azerbaijani language. This situation arises due to a shortage of qualified staff. Because there are no specialist subject teachers, non-specialist teachers are forced to be employed. There are no professional teachers; to prevent classes from being canceled, non-specialist teachers are assigned to teach. This situation worsens year by year. If this problem is not resolved soon, the condition of our schools will be very poor.

M4 also complained about the presence of non-specialist subject teachers at the school where they teach and their inability to teach Azerbaijani language effectively:

There are non-specialist subject teachers in our school who have only earned one credit in the subject exam. These teachers do not have a deep understanding of Azerbaijani grammar and therefore cannot teach the language thoroughly to the students. For example, when I teach non-conjugated verbs, verbal nouns, infinitives, etc., I know these topics 100%, but non-specialist teachers do not. These topics are not covered in the new textbooks, so I use additional materials to clarify them. Non-professionals do not know these topics in depth. Those who have graduated in another specialty and then teach Azerbaijani cannot teach the subject as specialists. Every teacher should teach in their own field of expertise.

Category 2: Absence of the Leaving Certificate Exam. M1, M2, M3, and M4 emphasized that the absence of a final examination in the Azerbaijani language in schools leads to a decline in both interest and responsibility toward the subject. All four teachers identified the lack of certificate (Attestat [Azerbaijani]) exams as a major factor negatively affecting the acquisition of the mother tongue. In response to the question “What are the main factors affecting the acquisition of the mother tongue?”, M1 replied as follows:

The situation is not good—there is no exam, and students are not studying. Certain measures must be taken to increase students’ interest and sense of responsibility. The first and foremost of these measures is the introduction of an examination. A final (graduation) exam in the mother tongue is absolutely necessary. If there is an exam, the student’s responsibility and interest will increase. A graduation exam is essential. According to information published in the media, final exams are expected to be reinstated in 2027. I sincerely request that the Azerbaijani

language and literature subject be included in these final exams.

M2 agreed with these opinions and additionally noted that since the school principal is Georgian, no specific demands are made regarding the teaching of the Azerbaijani language, and there are no strict requirements. The responsibility for conducting tests among students falls entirely on the teacher. According to M2, in addition to graduation exams, including Azerbaijani language and literature in university entrance examinations could also increase students' sense of responsibility:

It would be good if the Azerbaijani language were included not only during school years but also in university entrance exams. Our students, those studying under the 1 + 4 program, take exams only in mathematics. It would be beneficial if they also took exams in Azerbaijani language and literature. This would positively contribute to the development of the language. Additionally, it would be good if Azerbaijani were taught at the university level as well.

M4 also emphasized the importance of having graduation exams in order to ensure that students are more responsible:

If there were an exam in the subject of Azerbaijani language and literature, students would be more responsible. The teaching of the mother tongue would develop more effectively. Students say that since there is no exam in Azerbaijani language, it is not worth preparing for this subject. If the final exams were reinstated and included the Azerbaijani language and literature subject, students' interest and inclination toward their mother tongue would increase. If there were an exam in the mother tongue, students would develop a sense of responsibility. I would very much like for there to be a mother tongue exam in all Azerbaijani-language schools in Georgia. If this happens, students' responsibility will increase, and they will take it more seriously.

Category 3: Reduction in Instructional Hours for the Mother Tongue. Regarding the question of whether they are able to complete the curriculum, M1, M2, M3, and M4 stated that they are unable to cover the full program due to the insufficient number of teaching hours allocated for the mother tongue. They emphasized that the limited instructional time negatively affects students' acquisition of the Azerbaijani language. All four teachers noted that in many Azerbaijani-language schools, only three hours per week are allocated to the mother tongue, which has to be divided between Azerbaijani language and Azerbaijani literature. M2 even pointed out that five hours per week would still be insufficient and that it would still be difficult to complete the curriculum:

Of course, we are unable to complete it. Three hours per week for the Azerbaijani language and two hours for literature is far too little. It's just not enough. I took both textbooks (Azerbaijani Language and Azerbaijani Literature) and went to the principal, asking: "Is it possible to fit these two books into just five hours?" When I was a student, we had seven hours per week. Now, the program remains unfinished—it's impossible to cover everything.

M3 also complained about the insufficient number of teaching hours and the

necessity to assign students more material to study on their own as a result:

We give a lot of material, which becomes a burden for the students. Literature and Azerbaijani language are graded together, taught as one subject. In most schools, 2 hours per week are allocated for Azerbaijani language and 1 hour for literature. It is the same in our school—only 3 hours in total. I tell the students to bring both textbooks, and I cover both in class. This is tiring because it's difficult to teach two subjects in 45 minutes. Three hours is very little. This negatively affects both completing the curriculum and the students' language acquisition.

M4 emphasized that the limited number of teaching hours is insufficient to fully cover the curriculum:

The limited number of teaching hours hinders the full instruction of the mother tongue. For example, if we allocate only one hour to the noun section, it will not be sufficient for students to fully grasp that topic. This lowers the quality of teaching and makes it impossible to complete the curriculum. The same applies to the literature subject. What can the teacher teach? What can they ask the students? The weekly teaching hours are very limited.

Category 4: Problems Encountered in the Translation of Textbooks. Apart from the Azerbaijani Language and Azerbaijani Literature textbooks, all other textbooks for Azerbaijani-language schools operating in Georgia are prepared within Georgia. Textbooks for other subjects are translated from Georgian into Azerbaijani. M1, M2, M3, and M4 stated that these textbooks are of very poor quality and negatively affect the students' understanding. M1 emphasized that these textbooks are translated by non-professionals and explained that this is the reason for the serious errors found in the books:

Textbooks for all subjects are translated very poorly. I believe that the translations are done by non-specialists. Eldar (a pseudonym) is a mathematics teacher. He often brings the math textbook and shows it, saying, "Look, what do you understand from this? Look at the sentence structure." There are meaningless sentences and strange sentence constructions that are impossible to understand. The other textbooks contain numerous unclear and poorly constructed sentences, which hinder students' comprehension. The translation work should be done by someone who knows the job well, someone who is proficient in both the mother tongue and the subject matter. A good translator and a good specialist should work together. Anyone who knows a little Georgian is assigned to do the translation. This is a painful issue for us and an important matter that needs to be addressed.

M2 gave similar responses to M1's statements: "I often hear from other teachers and students that textbooks are not translated properly. Most mistakes occur in the math textbook. They do not correctly understand what they read, so they make many errors. The presence of so many mistakes negatively affects language acquisition." M3, on the other hand, emphasized that the Azerbaijani language and literature textbooks are satisfactory, but there are problems in the other textbooks:

Our textbooks (Azerbaijani language and literature) come from Azerbaijan and

are satisfactory. Modern methods are used. The Azerbaijani language and literature textbooks enable children to work independently. However, I often hear complaints from my fellow teachers about other subjects. Even in teachers' certification exams, there are many mistakes. The shortcomings cause difficulties. It would be better if these textbooks were prepared by professionals. When I have free time, I look through the history and geography books, and there are complaints from the students. It negatively affects the students' understanding.

M4 highlighted the shortcomings in the textbooks and additionally noted that students transferring from the Georgian section to the Azerbaijani section face difficulties with the textbooks they used in their previous section:

Teachers complain a lot. The other textbooks are full of mistakes. The ideas are not conveyed correctly. They are translated literally, which causes dissatisfaction among teachers. When children see these mistakes in the textbooks, they think that this is how it should be, and as a result, they get used to incorrect spelling rules. Moreover, students who have transferred from the Georgian section to the Azerbaijani section have developed very bad habits from the textbooks they used in Georgian. No matter how much I explain to them that a sentence should begin with a capital letter, they still make the same mistake. They write sentences starting with lowercase letters because they are used to it. This is because in the Georgian language there are no capital and lowercase letters. All the words in the textbooks used in the Georgian section are written in lowercase letters. I occasionally make them do dictation exercises. Even the best students write their names and surnames in lowercase letters.

Category 5: Enrollment of Children in Georgian-Language Schools by Parents. Parents enrolling their children in Georgian-language schools is also one of the main concerns for teachers. M1 emphasized that in some regions Azerbaijani is used only at the level of a household language, and that by parents placing their children in Georgian-language schools, the mother tongue will deteriorate even further:

In the area where we live, parents do not prefer education in Azerbaijani. During assessments, students frequently question the relevance of the material, asking, "Why do I need to learn this?" or "How will I use this in real life?" In the Telavi region, Azerbaijanis speak very poorly, using colloquial language. I explain to the children that if this continues, one day they too will speak like that. I tell them that if there is no Azerbaijani-language school, and if you don't study in an Azerbaijani-language school, your languages will get mixed, and your speech will include mixed languages. This will be a problem for you in the future.

M2, however, complained that parents need to be better informed, that it is possible to learn Georgian even in the Azerbaijani sector, but despite this, parents still enroll their children in the Georgian-language section:

Parents are also largely to blame. They take their children by the hand and bring them to Georgian-language schools. Parents need to be educated and informed. They are often unaware of what is happening in the schools. It is possible to learn

Georgian better in the Azerbaijani sector. When parents understand this, they take their children out of the Georgian sector and enroll them in the Azerbaijani sector.

M3 viewed parents enrolling their children in the Georgian section as a negative development and linked it to the declining interest in the Azerbaijani language.:

Enrollment in the first grade is very low. Parents place their children in the Georgian section. The people in our village say, “Why do I need Azerbaijani?” Even those from our own community have a very negative influence. The lack of interest in the Azerbaijani language leads to the mother tongue remaining only at the level of a spoken language used at home; it is not used at an academic level and, as a result, does not develop.

M4 spoke about parents’ indifference toward their mother tongue, shared his own past mistake and subsequent regret, and discussed the government’s policy aimed at attracting Azerbaijani children to Georgian-language schools:

Our school has both a Georgian and an Azerbaijani sector. Influenced by my environment, I enrolled my own grandson in the Georgian section, which was one of my biggest mistakes. After teaching him our mother tongue at home, I noticed that he understood better. I saw that he grasped things faster and more thoroughly in his own language. Parents have a superficial and indifferent attitude toward our mother tongue and enroll their children in Georgian-language schools. Every day, many children leave Georgian-language schools. These schools send new, comfortable “marshrutkas” (minibuses) to pick up children and bring them back to their villages.

Category 6: Organization of events related to the Azerbaijani language and literature subject. M1, M2, M3, and M4 emphasized that organizing events, olympiads, and competitions related to the mother tongue and literature would have a positive impact on language acquisition. M1 highlighted the importance of holding contests and national celebrations in schools:

Certain competitions and events should be held in the mother tongue. It is necessary to promote national and spiritual values. Schools should organize events related to our national identity, mother tongue, and culture. Some events are even banned in schools. Believe me, the Novruz holiday hasn’t been celebrated at all in the past 10 years. For the first time, we celebrated Novruz in 2024. Such events are greatly needed to increase students’ interest and sense of responsibility.

M3 mentioned that during their time as a student, olympiads used to be held, but in the 22 years they have been working at the school, not a single olympiad has been organized:

It would be good to organize competitions and olympiads among Azerbaijani-language schools. Such olympiads would spark interest and enthusiasm among students. Back when I was a student, in the late 1980s (and even earlier), olympiads used to be organized. Our teachers would take us to the district center, to Gardabani, or students from Gardabani would come to our school to participate in competitions. I have been working at the school for 22 years, and during these 22 years, not a single olympiad has been organized.

M4 also emphasized the importance of organizing events related to the mother tongue but noted that no action has been taken by the state in this regard: “Knowledge competitions among students have a very positive impact on the development of the mother tongue. However, no olympiads or competitions related to our mother tongue are organized by the state. It would be good if competitions were held among schools.”

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the factors influencing students’ acquisition of their mother tongue in Azerbaijani-language schools operating in Georgia. While there is a significant body of research on ethnic minorities’ low proficiency in the Georgian language, very limited studies have been conducted on their mother tongue. In this regard, the present research can be considered *one of the first studies* to address this issue. A qualitative research method was employed to identify the factors affecting mother tongue acquisition: focus group discussions were held with students, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers. Despite the scarcity of existing literature, the findings are interpreted in a comparative framework with results from other relevant studies.

According to the research findings, both students and teachers identified the *teacher’s subject knowledge* as a key factor influencing the acquisition of the mother tongue. According to Cinkir and Kurum (2019), one of the main responsibilities of a teacher is to transfer knowledge and share their experiences with students. A high level of subject-specific education is essential for effective teaching, and every teacher is expected to be an expert in the subject they teach. According to Auseon (2019), a teacher’s professional knowledge affects all stages of the teaching and learning process: content planning, implementation, assessment, and reflection.

Non-specialist subject teachers have difficulty answering students’ questions, which is related to their low content knowledge (Villano-Ac, 2024). If a teacher is not knowledgeable about a topic, this can lead to the spread of misconceptions. Therefore, the teacher struggles to respond to various questions from students regarding the topic (Jadama, 2019).

The increase in the number of non-specialist subject teachers in Azerbaijani-language schools in Georgia and the shortage of qualified personnel in the mother tongue have been identified in several studies (Isayeva, 2024a; Tabatadze & Gorgadze, 2015). Additionally, the poor performance of Azerbaijani language and literature teachers in the 2022 certification exams, with only 18 teachers passing the 61% barrier, indicates that the majority of teachers have a low level of subject knowledge (National Center for Teacher Professional Development, 2024). The low level of teachers’ contemporary knowledge and skills in both the subject matter and its methodology can be identified as one of the main factors affecting students’ acquisition of their mother tongue. Specifically, the results of the *Azerbaijani Language* test conducted in February 2024 among 609 students attending Azerbaijani-language schools, as well as the outcomes of the *First Regional Olym-*

piad in the Azerbaijani Language held in 2025 with 94 participants, revealed significant problems in mother tongue acquisition (Isayeva, 2024b; Isayeva, 2025). Furthermore, the results of PISA 2018 and PISA 2022 indicate that students in Azerbaijani-language schools performed significantly lower in reading literacy compared to their peers in Georgian- and Russian-language schools. This discrepancy can be attributed to a shortage of qualified teaching staff and the failure to ensure quality education. The low quality of instruction in the Azerbaijani language and students' limited proficiency in their mother tongue were also confirmed in the study by Tabatadze et al. (2014, as cited in Tabatadze, 2016).

Based on the findings of this study, both students and teachers identified the *absence of the Leaving Certificate Exam in the Azerbaijani language* as one of the main factors negatively affecting mother tongue acquisition. In response to the question “Which of the issues we discussed today is the most important to you?”, the majority of students during focus group discussions, as well as all teachers during interviews, emphasized the importance of including a Leaving Certificate Exam in the Azerbaijani language.

Looking at global practices, the case of Ireland appears to resonate with the current situation in Georgia. Following the Great Famine, the Irish language was marginalized, and English—associated with power, progress, and the promise of a better future—was prioritized (Ó Ceallaigh & Ní Dhonnabháin, 2015; Ó Fiannachta, 1974). As a result, the Irish language faced the threat of extinction. However, timely reforms led to the revitalization of the Irish language. One significant reform was the mandatory teaching of Irish in schools and the requirement to pass an Irish language exam to obtain a school-leaving certificate (Ó Ceallaigh & Ní Dhonnabháin, 2015). A similar situation has arisen in Georgia with the suppression of the Azerbaijani language, which now faces the risk of being relegated to the status of a colloquial or household language.

In the 2018-2019 academic year, a decision was made to cancel the leaving certificate exams for 11th and 12th grade students in Georgia (Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of Georgia, 2019). According to the opinions of students and teachers participating in the study, the cancellation of the leaving certificate exams reduced students' interest in their mother tongue and led to irresponsibility. Similar to the example of Ireland, making the Azerbaijani language leaving certificate exam mandatory in Georgia could increase students' interest in their mother tongue.

Based on the findings, both students and teachers emphasized the *reduction in mother tongue instructional hours* as a key factor affecting the acquisition of the mother tongue. The majority of students and teachers involved in the study complained that due to the limited number of instructional hours, they were unable to complete the curriculum in full. The report of the Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality (2014) also reflected that teachers were unable to complete the curriculum outlined in the mother tongue textbooks. For a long time, 8 - 9 hours per week were allocated to the subject “Mother Tongue

and Literature” in primary grades (Georgian Legislation, 2006). However, the term “Mother Tongue and Literature” was later replaced by “Language of Ethnic Minorities.” Subsequently, in many schools, the mother tongue and literature were taught under certain conditions, and the weekly hours were reduced to as low as 3 hours (Georgian Legislation, 2016; Ministry of Education, Science, and Youth of Georgia, 2024d). Since the term “ethnic minority” causes irritation among Azerbaijani Georgians, it is recommended that this term be removed from the educational program and replaced with “Azerbaijani Language” and “Azerbaijani Literature” as it was previously.

According to the findings of this study, one of the factors affecting the acquisition of the mother tongue is the presence of serious *errors in the translation of textbooks for other subjects from Georgian into Azerbaijani*. The majority of teachers and students emphasized the abundance of orthographic, grammatical, and content-related mistakes in the textbooks and noted that the poor quality of translation hinders the proper understanding of subject content. Issues related to content, vocabulary, grammar, phonetics, and translation quality—as well as elements of discrimination against various minorities—in textbooks designed for non-Georgian-language schools have been highlighted in several studies and government reports. These sources have emphasized that inadequate translations significantly hinder comprehension (Tabatadze, 2015, 2016; Office of the Public Defender of Georgia, 2009, 2018; Committee on Education and Science of the Parliament of Georgia, 2022). Despite nearly two decades having passed since the introduction of translated textbooks for non-Georgian-language schools, the norms of the Azerbaijani literary language continue to be severely violated, and the responsible authorities still face difficulties in resolving this issue.

The majority of students and teachers involved in this study identified *parents enrolling their children in Georgian-language schools* as one of the main factors affecting the acquisition of the mother tongue. Participants emphasized the lack of awareness and limited worldview of parents, highlighting the need for their enlightenment. Although no specific studies have been conducted in Georgia regarding the impact of such parental decisions on the mother tongue, similar research has been carried out in international contexts. For instance, based on the findings of a study conducted by Naom and Sarah (2014) in Kenya, some parents preferred their children to receive education in English rather than in their mother tongue, as they believed that English would determine their children’s future academic careers, employment opportunities, and overall success in life. On the other hand, parents who supported mother-tongue education emphasized its importance for the expression of culture, history, and identity. The study concluded that there is a strong need to raise parents’ awareness by explaining the benefits of mother-tongue education and clarifying that such education does not hinder their children’s ability to learn English.

The findings of the study conducted in Kenya are also similar to the results obtained in Georgia. In Georgia, some parents also enroll their children in Geor-

gian-language schools with the hope that it will increase their chances of future employment and financial stability. In Azerbaijani-language schools, the number of weekly hours dedicated to Georgian language instruction exceeds that of the mother tongue, and students have the opportunity to achieve high proficiency in both languages, provided that qualified specialists are available.

The importance of education in the mother tongue has been emphasized in the scientific research of several scholars, and there is a need to raise parents' awareness in this regard (Baker, 2000, 2006, 2016; Cummins, 1984, 2000, 2001). UNESCO (2003) confirmed that ethnic minorities have the right to learn their mother tongue without being subjected to any pressure, linking this right to human rights. In Ozfidan's (2017) study, it was confirmed that speaking the mother tongue at school enhances students' thinking skills, self-confidence, and academic achievement, and it was emphasized that the use of the mother tongue plays a vital role in preserving culture and identity.

When students use their mother tongue, they understand the content of other subjects (such as mathematics, science, art, music, and physical education) more effectively, and as a result, they do not fall behind in those subjects. In primary education, mother tongue instruction is a fundamental foundation for students' academic achievement across various subjects within school curricula (Cummins, 1984). According to Tabatadze (2018), learning in the first (mother) language contributes to the development of both the first and second languages; thus, allocating more time to the development of the first language significantly enhances the learning of the second language. As Cummins (1984: p. 101) states, "The first language is so crucial for the child's emotional and academic well-being that its development should be considered a high, even the highest, priority in the early years of schooling." Although the importance of education in the mother tongue is emphasized by many researchers, in Georgia, within the framework of the bilingual education system, it is observed that in some Azerbaijani-language schools, certain textbooks are gradually being introduced not bilingually but entirely in Georgian. Such practices limit mother tongue instruction. For example, the textbook *Our Georgia*, prepared by the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia for grades V and VI, is entirely in Georgian (Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia, 2024b, 2024c). In addition, grammatical and content-related errors in the translation of other textbooks were also confirmed in the study by Bobghishvili et al. (2016).

In addition to the factors mentioned above, students also identified the *laws, regulations, and restrictions imposed by the Georgian state* as factors affecting the acquisition of their mother tongue. Participants in the study associated the reduction of mother tongue class hours, the requirement for Azerbaijani-language schools to undergo a process of "Georgianization" in order to extend from a 9-year to a 12-year system, the fact that Azerbaijanis in certain regions speak their mother tongue only at a household level, and the frequent use of mixed language including Georgian, with the language policies pursued by the Georgian govern-

ment. The crucial role of state policy in the protection of the mother tongues of ethnic minorities is also reflected in the study by Naom and Sarah (2014). That study recommends structuring the education system to support language policy—including the recruitment of professional teachers, teacher training, and the consideration of language in school textbooks.

The fact that the Azerbaijani Language and Literature teaching program has not been reinstated for almost two decades in Georgia, combined with the persistence of serious textbook issues, the conditional nature of mother tongue instruction, and the reduction of weekly teaching hours, may be seen as indicators of broader state policies regarding minority language education.

Finally, based on the findings of this research, teachers emphasized the *importance of organizing additional activities and competitions related to the Azerbaijani language* in order to support its acquisition. The participating teachers complained about the absence of any state-organized Olympiads, competitions, or events related to the Azerbaijani language, and even about the ban on celebrating Novruz Bayram in schools for the last 10 years until 2024. The significance of holding various events and competitions has also been highlighted in the research of other scholars. According to Hudson and Sheldon (2013), the main purpose of organizing Olympiads and subject competitions in almost all school subjects is to provide talented students with opportunities to demonstrate their deep and extensive knowledge in a specific subject. Moreover, Olympiads and competitions generally offer more intellectual challenges compared to national curricula and school tests.

The findings obtained from this study align with the current situation in Georgia. The decreasing number of Azerbaijani-language schools over the years, the absence of teacher preparation programs in Azerbaijani language and literature for nearly 20 years in Georgia, the increasing number of non-specialist subject teachers in schools, the fact that teachers without higher education are teaching the mother tongue, the reduction of weekly Azerbaijani language and literature class hours from 9 to as low as 3 in many schools, and the consistent violation of the literary norms of the Azerbaijani language in textbooks translated over the past 20 years have been identified as factors affecting the acquisition of the mother tongue.

5.1. Policy Recommendations for the Institutions Responsible for Implementing Education Policy

Based on the findings of the study, the following suggestions and recommendations will be presented to the Ministry of Education, Science, and Youth of Georgia, as well as to other structures responsible for the implementation of education policy, with the aim of supporting the development of the Azerbaijani language in Azerbaijani-language schools operating in Georgia:

1. It is recommended to revise the National Curriculum developed by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Youth of Georgia and to allocate 5 hours per

week for the subject of Azerbaijani language and literature. For primary grades, it is suggested that the weekly instruction time be set at 7 hours, as is the case for the Georgian language in Georgian-language schools (in Georgian-language schools, 7 hours per week are allocated to Georgian language instruction in primary grades). It is proposed to abolish the policy of reducing mother tongue instruction hours in favor of a second foreign language (3 - 5 hours).

2. It is recommended that the leaving certificate exams in Azerbaijani language and literature be reinstated.
3. It is proposed to include the Azerbaijani language and literature subject in the university entrance examinations.
4. It is recommended to establish an expert group for the translation of textbooks other than Azerbaijani language and literature. The expert group should include a translator, subject matter specialists, language experts, and specialists from Azerbaijan. Unfortunately, in Georgia, only one person is involved in the translation of textbooks.
5. It is recommended to use Azerbaijani male and female names in textbooks prepared for Azerbaijani-language schools in order to eliminate elements of discrimination.
6. It is proposed to establish an Azerbaijan–Georgia University for the preparation of specialists in Azerbaijani language and literature, as well as bilingual and multilingual specialists in other subjects in Georgia.
7. It is proposed to establish a specialty in “Azerbaijan Studies” or “Azerbaijani Language and Literature Teaching” under the Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University. (Note: The university has had an “Armenian Studies” program for many years).
8. It is recommended to lift the bans on holding national holidays (for example, Novruz) in Azerbaijani-language schools.
9. It is recommended to replace the term “language of the ethnic minority” in the curriculum (National Teaching Plan) with “Azerbaijani language and literature.” Just as the phrase “Georgian language and literature” is used in the curriculum for Georgian-language schools, it is proposed to use “Azerbaijani language and literature” for Azerbaijani-language schools.

These proposals and recommendations submitted to state institutions are expected to play a significant role in the productive functioning of Azerbaijani-language schools.

5.2. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Like any study, this research also has limitations, and some recommendations for improvement in future research will be provided. Due to time constraints, only a qualitative research method was applied, involving 3 focus group discussions with a total of 18 students and semi-structured interviews with 4 teachers. To obtain a more comprehensive picture, it is recommended to organize focus group discus-

sions with more students and interviews with more teachers in other villages and cities. This study utilized only qualitative methods; incorporating mixed methods could further enhance the research. Additionally, quantitative research methods could involve a larger number of participants. The research participants in this study were students and teachers. For future studies, it is also recommended to investigate the opinions of parents, school principals, and education experts.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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