

Knowledge of Russian in Azerbaijan

Although over 20 years have passed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russian remains the most commonly spoken language in Azerbaijan after the official language (Azerbaijani). In addition to being considered by many as [a native language](#) and used in daily life in Azerbaijan, [Russian appears to be a lingua franca](#) for communication between different ethnic groups and with other post-Soviet countries.

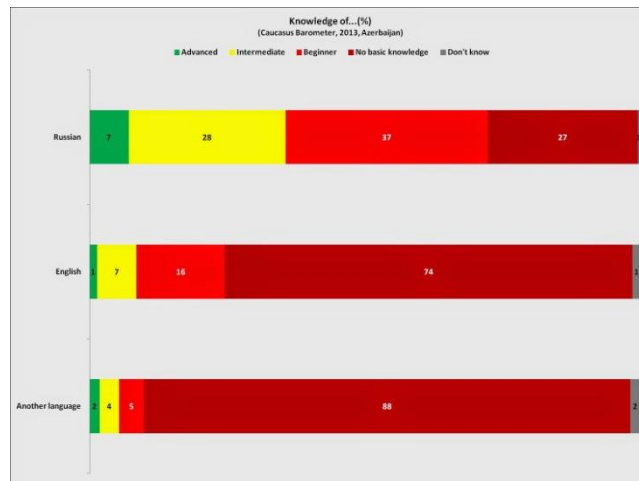
According to [research](#) conducted under the supervision and request of the International Department of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation in 2012, the number of people who speak Russian in the post-Soviet space has significantly decreased since 1991 (from 119.5 million people in 1990 to 93.7 million in 2010). There are [330 schools](#) and more than [20 higher education institutions](#) with Russian as a language of instruction in Azerbaijan. The number of schoolchildren studying in Russian has more than halved in Azerbaijan since 1990 (from 250 thousand students to 94.7 thousand). However, this decrease was moderate in the second decade of Azerbaijan's independence (from 107.5 thousand to 94.7 thousand). Another interesting fact is that in Azerbaijan, the decrease in the number of schoolchildren studying in Russian was slight compared to other South Caucasus Republics (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Number of schoolchildren studying in Russian in South Caucasus Republics in 1990/1991, 2000/2001, and 2010/2011; thousand persons.

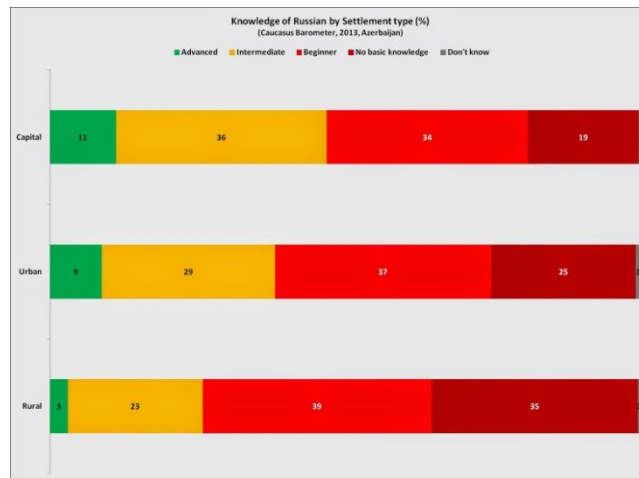
	1990/1991	2000/2001	2010/2011	2010/2011-1990/1991
Azerbaijan	250.0	107.5	94.7	-155.3
Armenia	92.0	9.2	1.5	-90.5
Georgia	207.0	38.1	8.5	-198.5

Source: <http://voprosik.net/pozicii-russkogo-yazyka-v-mire/>

According to the Caucasus Barometer 2013 (CB), today 72% of people in Azerbaijan say they have at least a beginner's level knowledge of Russian. Results from the CB also show that approximately a fourth of the population has at least a beginner's level in English, and about a tenth claims to speak another language besides Azerbaijani, Russian or English. These results corroborate with the 2009 census, where people had to indicate their native and spoken language, and assess their language skills. The CB shows that 7% of the population say they are advanced Russian speakers, and [AzStat](#) indicates that this percentage is 7.6%. In addition, according to AzStat, English is fluently spoken by 0.8% of people in Azerbaijan.



According to self-assessments in the CB, Russian is mostly spoken in the capital and in urban areas (81% and 75%, respectively); 11% of people in Baku say they have an advanced level of Russian, whereas only 3% of those living in rural areas say they fluently speak Russian.

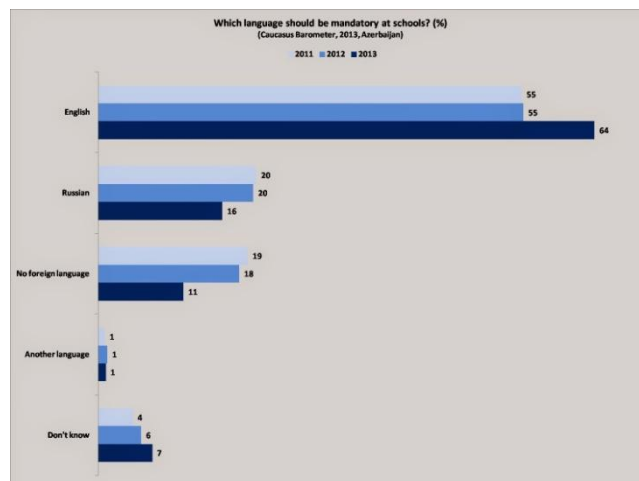


In addition, Azerbaijanis older than 56 years old are more likely to say they have a more advanced level of Russian (11%) than those who are younger. Better Russian skills among those older than 35 can be explained due to the Soviet heritage and need for a good knowledge of Russian to get a good job.



Although predictably, but still notably, people who perceive their knowledge of Russian as higher also tend to have higher levels of education. Similarly, people with a higher education (even if incomplete) are more likely to say they have advanced English skills (12%). Most of them are students currently pursuing their education and actively learning and practicing English.

Another notable fact about the English language is that over half of people in Azerbaijan (64%) think that English should be mandatory in schools, whereas there are fewer supporters of Russian (16%) in 2013. Moreover, according to the CB, the number of supporters for English has increased (from 55% in 2011 and 2012 to 64% in 2013). The fact that English is preferred over Russian is directly related to the circumstances dictated by international economic society. Azerbaijan's economic growth attracts more foreign companies and English is a requirement for employment in most of them. In its turn, Russian in Azerbaijan is mostly used on a daily basis.



Interestingly, for many years Azerbaijan has had the lowest percentage of Russian speakers among the South Caucasus republics, although, in total, the number of people speaking Russian is high and the country has the largest Russian community in the South Caucasus ([119.3 thousand Russian people in Azerbaijan, 7.5 thousand in Armenia, and 45 thousand in Georgia](#)). Nevertheless, despite the decreasing number of people who speak Russian, the language remains the major foreign language of communication.

To further explore these issues, we recommend accessing Caucasus Barometer data [here](#). To get more information about the status of the Russian language in the post-Soviet space, see this [article](#) with results of the research conducted for the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation.

By Aynur Ramazanova