



# Phraseology and Language Attrition in an International School Context

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## Abstract

*First language attrition, the partial forgetting of one's mother tongue due to extensive exposure to a second language, is typically studied in migrants with limited native language input. However, this phenomenon is increasingly observed in international schools where English is the primary medium of instruction. This qualitative case study investigates the link between second language exposure and the decline of phraseological units in the native language within English-medium international schools. The study involves a semi-structured interview with a secondary school student in Azerbaijan. Continuous second language exposure has led to L2 interference at a phraseological level. Findings reveal that academic and sociolinguistic factors influence the deterioration of native language performance, depending on the quality and quantity of second language input. NVivo software was employed to assist in interview transcription, coding, and thematic analysis. The results illustrate the challenges faced by the participant in maintaining native language proficiency in an English-dominated environment, leading to language attrition, miscommunications, and altered phraseological units.*

**Keywords:** *attrition, crosslinguistic interference, phraseology, international schools*

## 1. Introduction

Language attrition refers to the decline in native language proficiency due to reduced use, often occurring when individuals adopt a second language (L2) as their primary means of communication [1]. These changes in the proficiency of the first language (L1) are affected by sociolinguistic factors (gender, age, class, occupation, education level, etc.) [2] and the speaker's linguistic environment [1]. The existing body of scholarly work on language attrition exhibits a notable trend towards investigations conducted within immigrant settings, while relatively limited attention has been dedicated to exploring language attrition phenomena within the context of international schools where English serves as the medium of instruction. This study explores the connection between L2 exposure and its impact on native speakers' proficiency in using phraseological units in their L1, highlighting language attrition dynamics in educational settings. Phraseology encompasses the fixed expressions, idioms, and formulaic language patterns that play a crucial role in native-like language use. Phraseological attrition, within the context of language attrition, refers to the erosion of these linguistic elements. Research indicates that individuals who predominantly use an L2 may exhibit alterations in their use of phraseological units [3]. They might rely more on literal or non-idiomatic language, leading to less native-like language production. Phraseological attrition is particularly evident in bilingual and multilingual communities, where individuals navigate between multiple languages and cultural contexts. This dynamic interplay can impact their ability to maintain a rich repertoire of idiomatic expressions in each language.

## 2. Methodology

Qualitative research is employed in applied linguistics to explore the extent to which individuals interact with experiences and phenomena in specific contexts [4]. This study investigates the connection between the quality and quantity of L2 input and the understanding and use of phraseological units in L1 within an international school setting. To gain a deeper understanding of language attrition, a qualitative case study approach was adopted [5] which allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon from a firsthand source.

An instrumental case study design was chosen to examine language attrition from a broader perspective rather than focusing on solving a particular case [5]. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, incorporating pre-designed closed questions while allowing flexibility for open-ended inquiries [6]. This approach encouraged the participant to share his insights beyond the structured questions.



## 2.1 Population and sampling

For the purpose of this study, a non-probability convenience sampling method was utilized, given the specific focus on high school students in international schools experiencing language attrition [5]. The educational background of the participant, an 18-year-old high school student, includes primary education with Russian as the medium of instruction, followed by a transition to an international school where English became the primary language of instruction. The shift to the international stream resulted in the removal of Russian from the curriculum for the past four years of secondary education. Provided that the participant is a school student, ethical considerations were paramount in this research to protect participants' rights and maintain research integrity [7]. The participant was provided with comprehensive information about the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. The participant was also informed that his involvement was entirely voluntary. Ethical approval was granted by the school principal, ensuring the study's anonymity and adherence to ethical standards.

## 2.2 Data collection and analysis

Data collection was centered on semi-structured interviews, exploring various aspects of language attrition, including daily language use, changes in L1 proficiency, challenges with idioms and phraseological units, L2 influence on the native tongue, and attitudes toward language attrition. Conducted in a one-on-one setting, these interview allowed for in-depth exploration of the participant's experiences and perceptions.

NVivo, a transcription software with versatile capabilities, was selected for its efficiency in transcribing qualitative interviews [5]. This choice simplified the transcription process, reducing the potential for errors compared to manual transcription. It ensured systematic segmentation and categorization of transcribed textual data, enhancing accuracy and consistency [8].

Thematic analysis, a widely accepted method in qualitative linguistic research, served as the cornerstone of data analysis [9]. This systematic approach is particularly well-suited for exploring intricate patterns and thematic nuances within qualitative data. It also aligns with the complexity of language use and attrition phenomena in linguistic research [10].

The coding process began with a deductive approach, applying predetermined codes based on research questions and objectives. Codes such as "Use of English (L2)", "Use of Russian (L1)", "Attitude", and "Language Attrition" are assigned to relevant segments of text. "Language Attrition" is further categorized into sub-codes: "Challenges", "L1 Interference", "Impact", and "Examples". This systematic approach ensured the consistent categorization and organization of data [8]. Table 1 demonstrates the retrieved codes and sub-codes, and the number of references in the interview.

Codes and sub-codes	No of references
Use of English	3
Use of Russian	5
Attitude	2
Language attrition	20
Challenges	3
L1 Interference	2
Impact	9
Examples	6

Table 1 Codes and sub-codes

An inductive approach was subsequently employed, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data. This iterative process involved repeated reading and coding of interview transcripts, uncovering recurrent patterns and meaningful connections.

Themes were derived from coded data, and continuous discussions with the data enhanced the precision and clarity of identified categories (Figure 1). The overarching theme, "Decline in L1 Proficiency", underscores the central focus of the research. Sub-themes include "Impact on Communication", "L1 Interference in L2", "Decreased Input in L1", and "Efforts to Maintain L1".

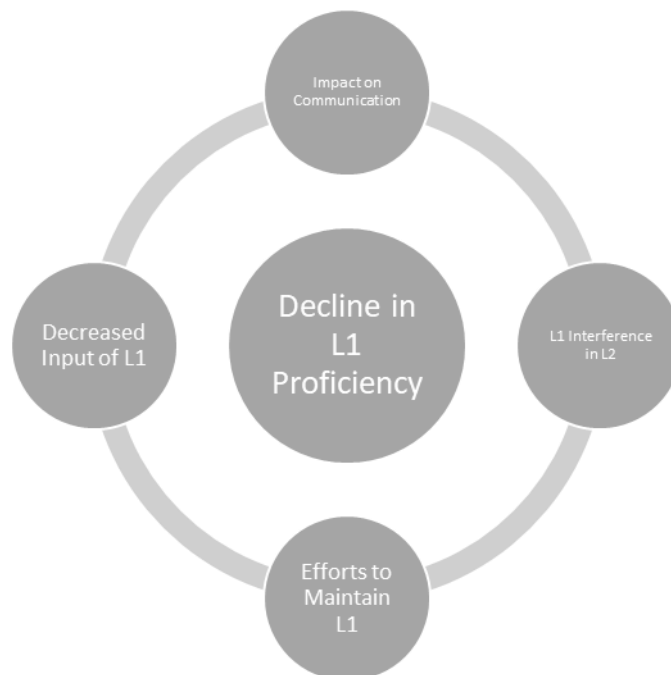


Figure 1 Themes

### 3. Discussion

This study contributes to the existing literature on language attrition and cross-linguistic influence (L2 to L1) by examining the participant's experiences within an international school context. The findings align with prior research indicating that L2 exposure, particularly in academic settings, can impact an individual's native language [1] [11].

The participant's self-identified decline in Russian proficiency, especially in writing and idiomatic usage, provides evidence of language attrition. What stands out in the participant's narrative are instances where language attrition resulted in miscommunication and confusion. For example, the participant shared, "I might say that something smells funny. And in Russian, I would say, 'смешно пахнет'. And he couldn't understand a word I was saying". This miscommunication occurred due to the direct translation of the phraseological unit "to smell funny" into Russian, which is interpreted as "to smell ridiculous". This illustrates how language attrition can lead to phrases that make sense to the speaker but bewilder the listener, showcasing the real-world consequences of language attrition and lost meanings in translation.

Similarly, the participant recalled a situation where their choice of words in Russian led to misunderstandings: "One time my dad was trying to pick me up, and I tried to say that I was down the road. And in Russian, I said 'я был внизу по дороге', which also didn't make any sense to him". This phraseological expression's direct translation, "to be down the street", led to an argument with the participant's father. In Russian, this phrase literally means "to go down the slope", but for the participant, who retained the English definition, it meant "some distance away from the same street". These instances of language attrition highlight both the decline in linguistic proficiency and the challenges in effectively conveying intended messages.

The influence of L2 on the participant's L1 is evident in occasional interferences and misunderstandings, reflecting the complexities of maintaining proficiency in a multilingual context. Furthermore, the participant's attitudes toward language attrition reveal a pragmatic approach, emphasizing the practicality of using English for academic and future professional endeavors. These findings underscore the challenges faced by the participant in preserving L1 proficiency while studying in an English-dominant environment, highlighting the intricate nature of language attrition [1] [12]. As English increasingly becomes the medium of instruction worldwide, the implications of language attrition gain significance in educational contexts.

### 4. Conclusion

The participant's experiences highlight the challenges of maintaining proficiency in L1 while predominantly engaging with L2. The study underscores that the quality and quantity of L2 exposure significantly impact native speakers' L1 proficiency, aligning with the concept of crosslinguistic



influence [13] [14]. The influence of L2 on L1 is evident through linguistic interference, leading to miscommunications and altered phraseological units in L1 [15] [16]. This research emphasizes the bidirectional relationship between languages in bilingual contexts and the need for further exploration of crosslinguistic influence mechanisms and preservation strategies in multilingual educational settings.

Despite limitations, such as a single-participant focus and convenience sampling, this study offers foundational insights for future research in similar settings. The qualitative approach complements quantitative studies and highlights the significance of individual experiences. Recommendations include broader and more diverse investigations into language attrition within formal education, comparative studies across languages and contexts, and the implementation of language support programs in international schools to recognize and nurture multilingualism.

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