



Challenges in Learning German as a Foreign Language: Linguistic, Cognitive, and Affective Dimensions

¹ Kovser Abbasova

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Abstract. *German as a foreign language presents learners with a uniquely demanding set of challenges that span the full spectrum of linguistic, cognitive, and affective dimensions of language acquisition. This article provides a systematic analysis of the principal difficulties encountered by learners of German as a foreign language (GFL), with particular attention to the Azerbaijani tertiary educational context. Drawing on second language acquisition theory, cognitive linguistics, and motivational psychology, the study identifies and theorizes four major categories of challenge: the morphological complexity of German case grammar and nominal inflection; the difficulties of German word order, particularly verb-second and verb-final constructions; the affective and motivational challenges associated with acquiring a language perceived as structurally demanding; and the methodological challenges of assessment and evaluation in GFL instruction. The analysis demonstrates that these challenges are not merely incidental difficulties of individual learners but reflect systematic structural properties of German that interact in predictable ways with the typological distance between German and learners' first languages, the cognitive demands of explicit grammatical learning, and the motivational conditions prevailing in foreign language classroom contexts. The article proposes a framework of evidence-based pedagogical responses to each category of challenge, drawing on recent research in contrastive linguistics, task-based language teaching, and learner motivation, and concludes with implications for curriculum design, assessment practice, and teacher development in GFL instruction.*

Keywords: *German as a foreign language, language learning difficulties, case grammar, morphological complexity, learner motivation, contrastive linguistics, second language acquisition, GFL pedagogy*

1. Introduction

German occupies a paradoxical position in the global landscape of foreign language learning. It is simultaneously one of the most widely studied foreign languages in the world — with over fifteen million learners enrolled in formal German language courses globally according to the Goethe-Institut's periodic surveys — and one of the languages most consistently rated by learners as structurally challenging, motivationally demanding, and pedagogically underserved relative to the

¹ Abbasova, K. Lecturer, Nakhchivan State University, Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan. Email: kevsarabbasova@ndu.edu.az. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-4929-9536>



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effort it requires (Bimmel, Kast, & Neuner, 2011). The structural complexity of German — its four-case nominal system, grammatical gender assignment, complex verb-second word order, productive compounding, and lexically conditioned government of prepositions — presents learners with challenges that are qualitatively distinct from those encountered in acquiring languages such as English or Spanish, which have largely shed the morphological complexity that German retains from the common Indo-European ancestor (Eisenberg, 2013).

In the Azerbaijani educational context, German is taught at secondary and tertiary levels as the primary or secondary foreign language alongside English, yet research into the specific challenges Azerbaijani learners face in acquiring German remains limited. Azerbaijani belongs to the Oghuz branch of the Turkic language family and is characterized by agglutinative morphology, postpositional syntax, verb-final word order, and the absence of grammatical gender — a typological profile that diverges substantially from German in virtually every relevant structural dimension (Johanson & Csató, 1998). The typological distance between Azerbaijani and German is thus considerably greater than that between German and related Indo-European languages such as English, Russian, or Persian, and this distance is predictably reflected in the elevated difficulty that Azerbaijani learners experience with German nominal morphology, word order, and gender assignment (Odlin, 1989).

This article provides a systematic analysis of the principal challenges in learning German as a foreign language, integrating insights from second language acquisition theory, contrastive linguistics, cognitive psychology, and motivational research. The analysis is organized around four major categories of challenge: morphological complexity and the German case system; syntactic challenges, particularly German word order; affective and motivational dimensions; and assessment and evaluation challenges. For each category, the article reviews the relevant theoretical and empirical literature, analyzes the specific difficulties involved, and proposes evidence-based pedagogical responses. The study contributes to the growing literature on German as a foreign language instruction in post-Soviet and Turkic-language contexts, and aims to provide practical guidance for teachers, curriculum designers, and learners navigating the demanding but rewarding enterprise of German acquisition.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundations of this analysis draw on three intersecting traditions. The first is contrastive analysis and typological distance research in second language acquisition. Lado's (1957) original contrastive analysis hypothesis proposed that learning difficulty is predictable from the structural differences between the learner's first language and the target language, and while the strong version of this hypothesis — which claimed that all errors are predictable from L1-L2 contrasts — has been substantially revised, the role of typological distance in shaping learning difficulty remains theoretically and empirically well-supported (Odlin, 1989; Kellerman & Sharwood Smith, 1986). Languages that are typologically distant from German — including



Turkic languages such as Azerbaijani, as well as East Asian languages — pose predictably greater challenges in areas of German morphosyntax where the structural distance is greatest.

The second tradition is cognitive approaches to grammar learning, particularly the concept of processing difficulty as theorized by VanPatten (1996) in his Input Processing model. VanPatten argues that learners prioritize the processing of lexical content over grammatical form when attending to input, and that grammatical forms that carry redundant or non-communicatively essential information are particularly susceptible to processing neglect and slow acquisition. Applied to German, this framework predicts — consistently with empirical observation — that the German case system, whose case distinctions are often morphologically redundant with word order cues, will be processed inefficiently by learners whose attentional resources are occupied with lexical content, leading to the characteristic persistence of case errors even at relatively advanced stages of acquisition (Eisenberg, 2013).

The third tradition is motivational psychology, particularly self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System (2009), which provide the theoretical framework for analyzing the affective challenges of German learning. The perception of German as a uniquely difficult language — a perception actively cultivated by a long tradition of humorous commentary, most famously Mark Twain's 1880 essay 'The Awful German Language' — creates a pre-learning affective context that can prime learners toward learned helplessness and premature attributions of failure to stable ability factors rather than to modifiable effort and strategy variables (Nuri & Ismayilli, 2025). Understanding and addressing this affective pre-loading is a necessary component of effective GFL pedagogy.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, literature-based analytical methodology integrating systematic review of the German as a foreign language (GFL) research literature with contrastive linguistic analysis and theoretical synthesis. The literature review encompassed peer-reviewed studies published in Scopus- and Web of Science-indexed journals between 2010 and 2025, identified through searches using the terms 'German as a foreign language', 'DaF', 'German case system acquisition', 'German word order L2', 'learner motivation German', and 'assessment foreign language learning'. Contrastive analysis draws on the grammatical descriptions of German in Eisenberg (2013) and Helbig and Buscha (2001), and of Azerbaijani in Johanson and Csátó (1998). The analysis synthesizes findings across these sources to produce a coherent account of the principal challenge dimensions and their pedagogical implications.

4. Morphological Complexity: The German Case System

4.1 Structure and Acquisition Sequence of German Cases

The German nominal case system — comprising nominative, accusative, dative, and genitive cases — is widely regarded as the single most challenging structural feature of German for learners from



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non-case-marking language backgrounds. Unlike the case systems of Latin or Russian, which are marked primarily through nominal suffixes, German case is marked through a complex interaction of article forms, adjectival agreement suffixes, and nominal suffixes that operates differently across the four grammatical genders (masculine, feminine, neuter) and three numbers (singular, plural), generating a paradigm of considerable complexity and, in the judgement of many learners, frustrating opacity (Eisenberg, 2013). The definite article alone has sixteen distinct surface forms across the case-gender-number combinations, though many of these are formally identical, creating systematic ambiguity that complicates both comprehension and production.

Acquisition research on the German case system has documented a consistent developmental sequence: learners typically acquire nominative case first, followed by accusative, with dative and genitive showing markedly slower acquisition rates that reflect both their morphological complexity and their lower frequency in everyday language use (Baten, 2011). The dative case is particularly problematic for learners, as its marking interacts with preposition government (requiring learners to memorize which prepositions govern dative, which govern accusative, and which govern alternating cases depending on semantic distinctions), verb government (a subset of verbs lexically select dative objects), and specific nominal contexts (the dative of interest, the dative of possession). This multi-layered conditionality makes dative acquisition dependent not only on morphological knowledge but on the gradual accumulation of lexically specific knowledge about preposition and verb government — a process that research suggests can extend over several years of instruction (Baten, 2011).

For Azerbaijani learners, the challenge of German case is compounded by the typological contrast between the two languages' nominal morphology. Azerbaijani, as an agglutinative language, marks grammatical relations primarily through postpositional suffixes applied to nominal stems in a transparent, one-suffix-one-meaning pattern that is structurally quite different from German's portmanteau article system, in which a single article form simultaneously encodes case, gender, and number in a pattern that is neither transparent nor compositional. The Azerbaijani learner must therefore not only acquire a new grammatical category — grammatical gender has no analog in Azerbaijani — but must also learn to process and produce a type of morphological marking that is fundamentally alien to the grammatical logic of their first language (Odlin, 1989; Johanson & Csató, 1998).

4.2 Grammatical Gender: Acquisition and Pedagogical Responses

Grammatical gender in German — the obligatory assignment of all nouns to one of three genders (der, die, das) — presents an additional dimension of morphological challenge that is particularly acute for speakers of genderless languages such as Azerbaijani, Turkish, or Finnish. Unlike the biological sex-linked gender of some Romance languages, German grammatical gender is largely arbitrary from a semantic perspective: das Mädchen (the girl) is neuter, die Gabel (the fork) is feminine, and der Mond (the moon) is masculine, assignments that follow no principle of natural



gender and must therefore be individually memorized for each noun. Research suggests that learners from genderless L1 backgrounds are significantly slower to acquire accurate German gender assignment than learners from gendered L1 backgrounds, and that gender errors persist into advanced stages of acquisition in ways that case errors typically do not (Eisenberg, 2013).

Pedagogical research has identified several evidence-based approaches to supporting gender acquisition. The most effective is the explicit teaching of gender-predictive morphological and phonological cues: a substantial proportion of German nouns have gender-predictive suffixes (nouns ending in -ung, -heit, -keit, -schaft are feminine; nouns ending in -chen, -lein are neuter; nouns ending in -er, -ig, -ling are typically masculine), and systematic instruction in these cues substantially reduces the proportion of gender assignments that must be individually memorized (Szagun, Stumper, & Schramm, 2006). The integration of gender as a lexical property to be recorded together with the noun form — presenting vocabulary items as 'die Tür' rather than 'Tür', ensuring that the article form is encoded as part of the lexical entry — is a widely recommended strategy whose effectiveness is supported by the psycholinguistic literature on lexical storage and retrieval.

5. Syntactic Challenges: German Word Order

5.1 *Verb-Second and Verb-Final Constructions*

German word order is governed by a set of principles that are typologically unusual among European languages and that interact in complex ways to produce surface orders that can appear highly variable and unpredictable to learners accustomed to more rigid word-order languages such as English. The two most fundamental principles are the verb-second (V2) constraint, which requires that the finite verb occupy the second constituent position in main clauses regardless of which constituent occupies first position, and the verb-final constraint, which places the non-finite verbal complex (infinitives, past participles, separable prefixes) at the end of the clause in both main and subordinate clauses (Eisenberg, 2013). The interaction of these two principles produces the characteristic German pattern in which the verbal elements of a clause are split between the second position and the final position — 'Ich habe gestern das Buch gelesen' (I have yesterday the book read) — a pattern that has no close analog in English, Azerbaijani, or any of the other languages most commonly known by Azerbaijani learners.

The challenge of German word order for foreign learners is both productive and receptive. In production, learners must simultaneously manage the fronting of non-subject constituents for topical or contrastive emphasis (which triggers inversion of subject and verb), the placement of the non-finite verb at the end of the clause, and the obligatory verb-final order in embedded clauses introduced by subordinating conjunctions. The cognitive demand of managing all these operations simultaneously — while also attending to case marking, gender agreement, and lexical retrieval — generates the characteristic processing bottlenecks that produce word-order errors even in otherwise proficient learners (VanPatten, 1996). In reception, the verb-final pattern in subordinate



clauses means that learners must often hold the syntactic frame of a clause in working memory for an extended period before the verb that closes it — and thus determines the temporal, aspectual, and modal interpretation of the entire clause — is processed.

5.2 Separable and Inseparable Verb Prefixes

A further syntactic challenge specific to German is the system of separable verb prefixes — verbal particles that can either remain attached to the verb stem or be detached and moved to the end of the clause depending on the syntactic context. In 'Er ruft seinen Freund an' (He calls his friend up), the prefix *an-* is separated from the verb *anrufen* and appears at the end of the clause; in the infinitive 'Er muss seinen Freund anrufen' (He must call his friend), the prefix remains attached. The rules governing prefix separation — and the distinction between separable and inseparable prefixes, which is partially but not fully predictable from phonological form — constitute a productive source of errors for learners across all proficiency levels and represent a genuine structural complexity of German that is not replicated in any of the languages typically known by Azerbaijani learners (Helbig & Buscha, 2001).

6. Affective and Motivational Challenges

The affective dimensions of learning German as a foreign language are shaped by a cultural narrative of extreme difficulty that surrounds the language in both popular discourse and educational contexts. Mark Twain's essay, humorous textbooks such as 'Der Dativ ist dem Genitiv sein Tod', and the widely circulated claim that German is 'the hardest language in the world' collectively create an affective pre-loading for many learners that primes them for difficulty, failure, and premature cognitive closure. Research in attribution theory suggests that when learners encounter difficulties that they attribute to stable, uncontrollable factors — the inherent impossibility of German grammar, their own inadequate linguistic aptitude — they are more likely to reduce effort, disengage from the learning process, and ultimately abandon the language entirely than when they attribute the same difficulties to controllable, modifiable factors such as insufficient practice time, inappropriate learning strategies, or inadequate exposure (Dörnyei, 2001).

Student motivation plays a critical and multidimensional role in determining outcomes in GFL instruction. Nuri and Ismayilli (2025) emphasize that motivation is not a fixed learner characteristic but a dynamic, context-sensitive process that is actively constructed through learners' interactions with instructional materials, teacher feedback, peer relationships, and the broader social meaning they attach to the target language. In the Azerbaijani educational context, where German lacks the immediate communicative utility and global prestige of English, instrumental motivational orientations — learning German for career advancement, educational access to German-speaking universities, or economic opportunity — must be explicitly cultivated alongside whatever intrinsic interest the language's structural properties and cultural associations can generate (Nuri & Ismayilli, 2025).



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The concept of foreign language anxiety (FLA) — the specific anxiety that language learners experience in the foreign language classroom — is particularly relevant to GFL instruction given the structural complexity that makes error-production in German virtually inevitable even for careful and well-prepared learners. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) identified FLA as a distinct form of situational anxiety that is reliably predicted by self-perceived communicative incompetence and fear of negative evaluation. The German classroom, with its demanding grammatical requirements and the high frequency of correctable errors that German morphosyntax generates, creates conditions that are particularly conducive to FLA unless instructional design explicitly addresses the affective environment. Creating what Krashen (1985) terms a low-affective-filter environment — one characterized by psychologically safe error correction, encouragement of communicative risk-taking, and the normalization of difficulty as an expected feature of German acquisition rather than evidence of individual inadequacy — is a necessary condition for effective GFL instruction.

7. Assessment and Evaluation Challenges in GFL

Assessment and evaluation in foreign language learning present challenges that are particularly acute in GFL contexts, where the morphosyntactic complexity of German generates a disproportionately high error frequency even among genuinely progressing learners. Ismayilli (2024) notes that conventional assessment approaches in foreign language instruction — including timed written tests, grammatical accuracy measures, and translation exercises — tend to measure the decontextualized recall of grammatical rules rather than the communicative competence that is the ultimate goal of language instruction, and that this mismatch between assessment practice and instructional goals systematically distorts the feedback signal that both learners and teachers receive about learning progress.

The assessment of German proficiency is further complicated by the need to balance accuracy and fluency dimensions that, in the early and intermediate stages of acquisition, frequently trade off against each other. Learners who prioritize accuracy produce fewer errors but communicate less; learners who prioritize fluency communicate more but produce more grammatical errors. Assessment frameworks that weight accuracy heavily — as many traditional GFL assessment instruments do — may inadvertently discourage the communicative risk-taking and output production that SLA research identifies as necessary conditions for acquisition, creating a systematic perverse incentive that runs counter to the pedagogical goals of communicative language teaching (Ismayilli, 2024; Dörnyei, 2001). Portfolio-based, process-oriented, and task-based assessment approaches that evaluate learners' developing communicative competence across multiple performance contexts and over time, rather than their accuracy on single decontextualized test events, offer more pedagogically valid alternatives that better support the kind of language development that GFL instruction aims to achieve.

8. Pedagogical Responses and Implications



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The analysis of the four principal challenge dimensions of GFL learning converges on a set of evidence-based pedagogical principles. In addressing morphological complexity, pedagogical approaches should integrate explicit grammatical instruction with extensive communicative practice, ensuring that grammatical forms are always encountered and practiced within meaningful discourse contexts rather than as isolated paradigms. The explicit teaching of gender-predictive cues, the systematic presentation of vocabulary with their articles, and the use of color-coding systems to distinguish the three genders in written materials have all demonstrated effectiveness in supporting gender acquisition (Szagun, Stumper, & Schramm, 2006). For case acquisition, a task-based approach that exposes learners to case distinctions in communicatively purposeful contexts — rather than requiring them to manipulate case paradigms in decontextualized exercises — aligns more effectively with the processing tendencies identified by VanPatten's (1996) input processing model.

In addressing word-order complexity, extensive exposure to authentic German discourse — both spoken and written — is the most powerful available tool, as it allows learners to develop the implicit procedural knowledge of German word order that explicit rule instruction alone cannot generate. Consciousness-raising activities that direct learners' attention to specific word-order patterns in authentic texts, combined with production tasks that require the deployment of those patterns in communicatively motivated contexts, represent the pedagogical synthesis most strongly supported by the available evidence (Ellis, 2015). For separable prefix verbs, the explicit teaching of the distinction between separable and inseparable prefix classes, combined with the systematic inclusion of prefix verbs in vocabulary learning with their complete citation form, is recommended.

For the affective and motivational dimensions, GFL teachers are well-positioned to reshape the cultural narrative of German difficulty by explicitly foregrounding the rewards and pleasures of German acquisition alongside its challenges, by normalizing the error-rich developmental process as an expected and productive feature of complex language learning, and by cultivating learners' sense of growing competence through carefully designed tasks that allow success at the appropriate level of challenge (Dörnyei, 2009; Nuri & Ismayilli, 2025). The cultivation of what Dörnyei terms the ideal L2 self — a vivid, personally compelling image of oneself as a competent German speaker — is a particularly powerful motivational intervention in contexts where instrumental motivation is limited by the restricted communicative ecology of German in non-German-speaking environments.

9. Conclusion

This article has provided a systematic analysis of the principal challenges in learning German as a foreign language across morphological, syntactic, affective, and assessment dimensions. The findings demonstrate that the difficulties learners encounter in GFL are not random or unpredictable but reflect the systematic structural properties of German in interaction with the



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typological distance between German and learners' first languages, the cognitive demands of explicit morphosyntactic learning, and the motivational conditions that prevailing cultural narratives and institutional practices create. For Azerbaijani learners specifically, the typological distance between Azerbaijani's agglutinative, verb-final, genderless structure and German's inflectional, verb-second, gendered structure is a central determinant of the particular difficulty profile they face.

The pedagogical implications of this analysis are clear: effective GFL instruction must address all four challenge dimensions simultaneously, integrating explicit morphosyntactic instruction with extensive communicative practice, designing assessment frameworks that capture developing communicative competence rather than decontextualized grammatical accuracy, and actively cultivating the motivational and affective conditions that enable learners to sustain the long-term effort that German acquisition demands. Future research should investigate the specific difficulty profiles of Azerbaijani and other Turkic-language learners of German in more detail, compare the effectiveness of different instructional approaches across these learner populations, and examine the long-term motivational trajectories of GFL learners in contexts where German has limited immediate communicative utility. The challenges of German are real and substantial — but they are pedagogically addressable, and the linguistic, cultural, and professional rewards of German acquisition are commensurate with the effort they require.

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