

The Status of the Russian Language in Vietnam after 1991: From the Language of Power in the Socialist Era to a Specialized Language in Core Strategic Areas

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ABSTRACT: *This paper focuses on analyzing the status of the Russian language in Vietnam following the collapse of the Soviet Union (SU) in 1991. By drawing on a qualitative synthesis of 17 purposively selected secondary sources—opted mainly for their direct pertinence to Russian language education in Vietnam and their coverage of the post-1991 period—the paper combines policy discourse analysis and historical comparison to examine the changing status of Russian. The findings first indicate that Russian has transitioned its function from a “language of power” to a “specialized language” operating within several core strategic areas. It is also suggested that the language’s decline in universal status was inevitable, stemming from the geopolitical crisis and the fundamental shift in the Vietnam-Russia cooperation model from “ask-and-aid” to “market-driven”. Nevertheless, Russian has successfully repositioned itself as a strategic linguistic asset, secured by the framework of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) and evident across three key domains: security-defense, energy-economy, and culture. Overall, the current status of Russian in Vietnam is qualitatively sustainable due to robust bilateral relations and high-level political commitments, yet quantitatively limited by its inherent difficult-ness and fierce competition from dominant global languages. Most importantly, the paper also highlights the need to design training programs that integrate specialized vocabulary, technical communication skills, and cultural understanding, closely linked to professional contexts and strategic applications.*

KEYWORDS: Russian, Vietnam-Russia relations, language of power, specialized language.

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1. Introduction

Language is not merely a tool for communication; it also serves as a notion of a nation’s soft power and geopolitical influence, including that of Vietnam (Bukh, 2016). In Vietnam, shifts in the status of foreign languages have consistently reflected major changes in the country’s foreign policy and national development strategies. Throughout the Socialist era prior to 1991, Russian held a nearly absolute position, playing the role of the *language of power*. This status was evidenced by its widespread use in the national education system, its broad application across scientific, technical, and political fields, and its function as the gateway for thousands of Vietnamese students and officials to access knowledge in the former SU (Hà, 2016).

However, the collapse of the SU (1991) and Vietnam’s Đổi Mới (Reform) policy triggered a profound status crisis for the Russian language. The dissolution of the Soviet bloc led to a global decline in the language’s standing, even within the former Soviet republics (Trọng Thành, 2017). In Vietnam, English quickly ascended to a dominant position, resulting in a significant decrease in both the number of learners and the overall scope of Russian’s application in social and academic life. Recent studies have also documented difficulties in teaching and learning Russian, particularly among non-majored students, reflecting a loss of motivation due to its diminished universal appeal (Đông & Tâm, 2023).

Comparative research demonstrates that the status of the Russian language in post-Soviet

states is profoundly volatile, dictated by national policy choices. In the Baltic states, Russian underwent an intense process of “derussification” due to native language restoration policies, leading to a sharp decline in education and public life (Pavlenko, 2006; Popova, 2023). Conversely, in Central Asia—such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan—Russian maintains a robust role as a lingua franca owing to demographic factors and regional economic necessity. This divergence confirms that a language’s status is contingent upon political will and the supporting language ecology (Dietrich, 2005).

The status of the Russian language in Vietnam does not fit the two extreme models described above; instead, it falls into a *specialized maintenance model*. Similar to the case of Cuba (Bain, 2010), the Russian language in Vietnam faced a profound crisis following the termination of the “ask-and-aid” mechanism. However, the subsequent status recovery was not driven by mass cultural appeal but was secured by a politically-driven demand within the framework of the CSP. Its existence is concentrated in core sectors like security and energy, helping Russian maintain its value as a strategic linguistic asset, effectively shielded from universal competition.

This paper argues that the Russian language has not entirely disappeared but has instead transitioned into a newer, more strategic role in Vietnam: moving from a *language of power* with broad influence to a *specialized language* in core strategic fields. This functional shift is a direct consequence of maintaining and strengthening the Vietnam-Russia CSP amidst Russia’s deployment of its “pivot to Asia” strategy aimed at solidifying its regional position (Huyền, 2019). Accordingly, the importance of Russian in consolidating friendship among peoples in Asia remains emphasized (Thanh Nga, 2024).

Previous studies have primarily highlighted the overall decline of Russian or its role in cultural-psychological aspects, such as research on mutual perceptions between Russians and Vietnamese (Markovina *et al.*, 2022). Yet, little systematic work has deeply analyzed the specific functional transition of Russian within the core cooperation sectors vital for national security and

economic survival. Several related studies have only touched upon specialized issues, such as the teaching of military vocabulary (Minh & Ngọc, 2024) or tourism Russian (Mỹ & Chinh, 2021). This paper, therefore, addresses the mechanism and extent to which Russian is being maintained and utilized as an effective tool to promote cooperation in strategic fields, rather than just as a general foreign language.

The paper concentrates on three key aspects. First, theoretically: contributing to a deeper understanding of language status transition within a changing geopolitical context. Second, strategically and economically: providing a theoretical foundation for assessing the indispensable importance of Russian as a tool for maintaining and developing cooperation agreements in critical sectors. Specifically, Vietnam is currently the largest trade partner of the Russian Federation in Southeast Asia (Phan Trang, 2024), requiring a workforce proficient in Russian to drive economy, trade, and investment. Third, education and security: determining Russian’s role in training human resources for military technical, security, oil and gas, and energy industries (Minh & Ngọc, 2024; Đông & Tâm, 2023), affirming that Russian remains a crucial soft power resource, intertwined with the shared identity and perspectives of the two nations (Hà, 2016).

To elucidate the aspects stated above, the paper addresses the following questions:

1. What are the key factors that directly led to the decline in the universal status of the Russian language in Vietnam after 1991?
2. How is the functional transition of Russian from the *language of power* to a *specialized language* specifically manifested in core strategic sectors?
3. What are the prospects and challenges for maintaining and promoting the specialized language role of Russian in Vietnam within the context of the current comprehensive strategic cooperation?

2. Literature review

2.1. Language of Power and Soft Power

In the Vietnamese context prior to 1991, the

Russian language was regarded as a *language of power*. This status was established through its tight link with the “ask-and-aid” (xin-cho) cooperation mechanism between Vietnam and the SU (Đinh, 2007), dominating economic, military, technical, and educational sectors (Hà, 2016). The subsequent decline of Russian’s status after 1991 is thus viewed as the diminished scope and effectiveness of a soft power resource and the cessation of its role as a universal language of power.

Russian in Vietnam represents a paradigmatic case of language status transformation driven by exogenous factors and the collapse of a geopolitical model. Before 1991, the SU effectively implemented an informal yet highly functional framework of Language Planning and Policy (LPP) toward Vietnam, positioning Russian as a priority language through large-scale programs of aid, technology transfer, and scholarship-based training (Đinh, 2007). The comprehensive patronage of the Soviet state ensured that Russian enjoyed a privileged status without the need to compete with other foreign languages.

Since the early 2000s, *soft power* has become a popular analytical tool in International Relations scholarship (Bukh, 2016). This concept emphasizes a nation’s ability to influence others through cultural appeal, political values, and foreign policy. Language, culture, and education are core components that constitute a nation’s soft power resources. Bukh’s study (2016) examines the perceptions of young elites in Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, regarding Russia’s image and soft power, thereby providing a basis for assessing its cultural outreach effectiveness.

The dissolution of the union created a huge policy vacuum. While other foreign languages, particularly English, benefited from Vietnam’s Đổi Mới policy and the forces of globalization, the absence of a clear and deliberate LPP framework for Russian in the early 1990s accelerated its decline in status (Đông & Tâm, 2023). This resulted in the near-complete loss of Russian universality within the civilian sphere. Despite this decline, Russia’s soft power has continued to sustain a strategic cultural sphere

of influence in Vietnam. Russian cultural centers and scholarship programs remain key instruments for maintaining bilateral relations and attracting young intellectual elites (Bukh, 2016). However, this influence has shifted from ideological dominance to serving explicitly defined diplomatic and strategic objectives..

Building on the above literature, several key concepts were applied as analytical lenses rather than operationalized variables, consistent with its qualitative and interpretive design. Specifically, the term *language of power* refers to a language whose status is sustained by geopolitical dominance and institutionalized political–economic patronage. Russian is thus treated as a language of power in Vietnam prior to 1991, when its widespread use was structurally embedded in the Soviet-sponsored ask-and-aid cooperation framework. Plus, the term *specialized language* is used to describe a language whose function is confined to specific professional, technical, or strategic domains rather than universal social use. In the post-1991 context, Russian in Vietnam is analyzed as a specialized language maintained within core sectors such as defense, energy, and high-level technical cooperation.

Furthermore, Russian is conceptualized as a *strategic linguistic asset* insofar as its continued use is politically guaranteed by high-level bilateral commitments, particularly within the framework of the CSP. In this sense, language functions not merely as a communicative tool, but as an institutional resource supporting long-term strategic trust and cooperation. Finally, *soft power* refers to capturing the cultural, educational, and symbolic mechanisms through which language contributes to sustaining bilateral relations. Within this study, it is understood as a relational and sector-specific mechanism rather than a universal or ideologically dominant force. These working definitions are believed to provide the conceptual grounding for the future analysis of Russian’s status transition in Vietnam.

2.2. Studies on Teaching and Learning Russian in Vietnam

The collapse of the SU in December 1991 generally diminished the status of the Russian

language (Trọng Thành, 2017). In Vietnam, numerous studies have confirmed a corresponding drop in the number of Russian learners and focused on identifying difficulties in teaching and learning Russian, particularly for non-specialized students at professional academies (Đông & Tâm, 2023). Furthermore, Russian is recognized as a foreign language with inherent challenges in pronunciation and expression (Trung Hiếu, 2019). The powerful rise of English and, specifically, Chinese amidst economic integration and geopolitical context has created fierce competition, hindering recovery efforts for Russian in Vietnam (Nguyễn & Lê, 2024). This reality has compelled the language to redirect its focus.

The decline of Russian's universal status also led to a serious crisis within the national Russian language education system. Numerous universities reduced their program scales, closed their Russian departments, or merged them with other faculties in order to remain operational (Nguyễn & Lê, 2024). The transition from a mandatory language in technical and scientific disciplines to an optional foreign language required a fundamental restructuring of the curriculum. This shift was not merely a change in content but a profound transformation in educational philosophy, from training general teachers and interpreters to developing highly specialized professionals who meet sector-specific demands (Minh & Ngọc, 2024).

Facing these challenges, research has concentrated on solutions to “keep the flame alive” (giữ lửa) for Russian, primarily by promoting positive attitudes, creating learning environments, and fostering passion among students (Lê, 2022). Significantly, the shift in demand is reflected in specialized language studies, such as overcoming difficulties in teaching tourism Russian (Mỹ & Chinh, 2021) or methodologies for teaching military vocabulary at specialized academies (Minh & Ngọc, 2024). These studies suggest that Russian still presents considerable opportunities due to less competition in certain niche sectors (Giáo dục & Thời Đại, 2024), and serves as a “venue for spreading the love for Russian language and culture” (Ngọc

Liên, 2024). These studies all indicate that, for Russian language education to be effective today, instruction must be closely aligned with professional contexts and specialized learning outcomes, marking a complete departure from the generalized, mass-oriented teaching methods of the old days.

2.3. Studies on Vietnam-Russia Bilateral Cooperation

The history of Vietnam–Russia relations is categorized into distinct periods (Đinh, 2007). The period before 1990 is described as a “golden age,” laying the foundation for deep friendship and strategic trust. Following the crisis of the early 1990s, multilateral cooperation was officially resumed on June 16, 1994. This relationship was subsequently upgraded to a CSP in 2012 (Hà, 2016), reflecting a high level of political commitment and trust that has endured historical challenges. Research on mutual perceptions between the Russian and Vietnamese peoples (Markovina *et al.*, 2022) also confirms the enduring friendship and trust built across generations, serving as a foundation for future cooperation (Hà, 2016).

Research emphasizes a fundamental shift in the economic cooperation model: moving from the ask-and-aid mechanism to an equal, mutually beneficial, market-based approach (Đinh, 2007). This transition paved the way for boosting bilateral economic and trade relations. Currently, Vietnam is Russia's largest trade partner in Southeast Asia (Phan Trang, 2024). Strategic and economic cooperation sectors are robustly maintained and developed, specifically: oil and gas (Vietsovpetro (VSP) joint venture, exploration, power plant investment); military and technical (Russia as a leading military equipment supplier, requiring specialized military vocabulary instruction at academies (Minh & Ngọc, 2024), alongside security cooperation (Đông & Tâm, 2023)); and technology and industry (manufacturing, auto assembly, and peaceful use of nuclear energy).

However, the bilateral relationship is inevitably affected by the regional geopolitical environment. Studies analyze that this cooperation is bolstered by Russia's foreign policy adjustments,

particularly its “pivot to Asia” strategy (Huyền, 2019), positioning Vietnam as a priority in the Asia-Pacific. The rise of China and escalating strategic competition among major powers in Southeast Asia also profoundly transformed the regional landscape. This necessitates Vietnam maintaining both firm and flexible relations with traditional partners like Russia to ensure strategic balance and preserve its standing (Trần, 2006). As a result, this cooperation is perceived as a critical strategic move, demonstrating Russia’s use of soft power and cultural appeal to strengthen its regional presence (Bukh, 2016).

2.4. Research Gap

Despite the existence of in-depth studies across two main areas: (1) analysis of Vietnam–Russia foreign relations, economics, and geopolitics, and (2) research on teaching and learning the Russian language, a critical research gap persists in integrating these two fields.

Works on strategic cooperation often stop at depicting the areas of partnership and signed agreements without deeply analyzing the role of the Russian language as a *strategic linguistic asset* in sustaining and developing these sectors. Simultaneously, linguistic studies have only touched upon specialized aspects (military, tourism) but have failed to place this functional shift within the comprehensive context of foreign and economic policy to explain the maintenance of its specialized status. In other words, no integrated study has systematically analyzed the mechanism, extent, and effectiveness of Russian’s functional transition into a specialized language within the economic, energy, and security cooperation areas. This research mainly aims to fill this gap by focusing on clarifying this functional transition, thereby providing a comprehensive assessment of the Russian language’s actual and sustainable position in Vietnam in the new era.

3. Methodology

This is a qualitative study designed to synthesize and interpret secondary data to analyze the transition in the Russian language’s status in Vietnam before and mainly after 1991.

Overall, the study is explicitly designed as a narrative qualitative synthesis rather than a systematic review. Its purpose is to interpret language status transitions within a specific geopolitical and historical context, rather than to provide exhaustive coverage or statistically replicable findings.

3.1. Pedagogical Setting

This paper focuses on the shift in status, examines the functional transformation of the Russian language within the context of geopolitical, economic, and social changes in Vietnam. The scope encompasses two significant historical periods: pre-1991 (the era of the language of power tied to the ask-and-aid cooperation model) and post-1991 to the present (the era of decline in universal status but transition to a specialized language role). The data used consists of secondary data compiled by the researcher from a total of 17 sources, including academic literature, policy documents, and mainstream media reports (see 3.3.1. for detailed sampling process).

3.2. Design of the Study

The paper applies Qualitative Analytical and Synthetic Research, based on the method of Qualitative Document Analysis. The core objective of this design is not only to describe the decline but also to explain why Russian has maintained a crucial role in core strategic areas. More importantly, the design aims to systematically synthesize findings from prior individual studies to derive new, integrated arguments regarding the language’s strategic role.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

3.3.1. Sources Identification

The secondary sources were drawn from three main outlets: (1) national peer-reviewed academic journals in Vietnam focusing on linguistics, education, and international relations; (2) international academic journals indexed in open-access databases; and (3) official policy documents and reports published by Vietnamese governmental agencies and

reputable mainstream media outlets. The publication time range primarily spans from 2006 to 2024, with a concentration between 2016 and 2024 to capture contemporary developments in Russian language education and Vietnam–Russia relations. Earlier sources were included selectively when they provide essential historical or theoretical grounding for the pre-1991 period. This study adopts a purposive sampling strategy rather than exhaustive retrieval, consistent with the interpretive goals of a qualitative narrative synthesis rather than a systematic review.

3.3.2. Sampling Process

To enhance the transparency of the sampling process, the selection of the secondary sources was based on explicit criteria. Inclusion criteria require direct relevance to three domains: (1) Russian education in Vietnam (especially in specialized sectors), (2) Vietnam–Russia bilateral relations before and after 1991, and (3) theoretical concepts of soft power and language of power. Exclusion criteria involve general linguistics works unrelated to Russian, or foreign policy analyses not addressing the role of language or culture. The total of 17 selected sources was assessed as sufficient to reach data saturation in this qualitative study, ensuring the comprehensiveness of policy and linguistic arguments in core strategic sectors.

3.3.3. Policy Discourse Analysis

This method was employed to analyze policy documents, diplomatic reports, and strategic analyses concerning Vietnam–Russia relations. The analysis focuses on identifying and interpreting key terminology such as: CSP (2012), strategic sectors (oil and gas, military), and Russia’s “pivot to Asia” strategy. The goal is to clarify how high-level political discourses shape actual demand and sustain Russian’s role as an effective tool for promoting bilateral cooperation agreements and investment projects (Phan Trang, 2024).

3.3.4. Qualitative Synthesis of Prior Studies

All academic literature related to Russian linguistics and education is categorized to identify

recurring themes and patterns. This synthesis process serves two purposes: first, to determine the objective and subjective factors that led to the overall decline in Russian’s status (Đông & Tâm, 2023); second, to synthesize specialized studies (such as those on military vocabulary or tourism Russian) to demonstrate the language’s specialization within specific academic and professional settings where Russian is maintained as a less competitive foreign language (Giáo dục & Thời Đại, 2024; Minh & Ngọc, 2024).

3.3.5. Historical Comparison

This serves as the foundation for answering the research question regarding the status transition. The analysis is conducted by systematically contrasting the arguments gathered between phase 1 (pre-1991) and phase 2 (post-1991). The comparison focuses on: (1) contrasting the economic cooperation model from “ask-and-aid” to “equal, market-driven” (Đinh, 2007) and (2) comparing the role of the language of power with that of the specialized language. This process highlights the nature of the change, hence confirming one of the paper’s main arguments about the functional transition of the Russian language.

3.4. Conceptual Clarification and Analytical Scope

This study employs several key analytical constructs, including “language of power,” “specialized language,” and “soft power,” which are theoretically grounded in sociolinguistics and international relations scholarship. Given the qualitative and interpretive nature of the research, these constructs are not operationalized as measurable variables in a quantitative sense. Instead, they function as conceptual lenses guiding the interpretation of policy discourse, historical trajectories, and sector-specific language use.

Specifically, “language of power” is understood as a language whose status is sustained by geopolitical dominance and institutionalized political–economic patronage, while “specialized language” refers to a language maintained through functionally delimited, sector-specific demand rather than mass social use. Finally,

“soft power” is employed analytically to capture the symbolic, cultural, and relational dimensions through which language supports strategic cooperation. The study therefore acknowledges that these constructs serve explanatory and interpretive purposes rather than variable-based causal testing.

3.5. Analytical Reliability and Interpretive Consistency

The reliability of the qualitative analysis is ensured through systematic cross-referencing of multiple secondary sources across three domains: Russian language education, Vietnam–Russia strategic cooperation, and language–power theory. Rather than applying a formal coding procedure, the study adopts an iterative comparative reading strategy, identifying recurring themes, conceptual alignments, and convergent interpretations across independent studies.

This approach is consistent with qualitative synthesis and conceptual analysis research designs, where the primary objective is interpretive coherence and analytical plausibility rather than inter-coder reliability. While no formal coding software or category matrix is employed, the triangulation of policy documents, academic literature, and historical accounts are believed to strengthen the internal consistency of the findings.

3.6. Theme Identification and Interpretive Procedure

Themes were identified through iterative close reading and comparative analysis of the selected texts. Rather than applying a formal coding scheme, the study employed an inductive thematic synthesis approach, in which recurring concepts, argumentative patterns, and explanatory frameworks were gradually consolidated across sources.

Interpretive consistency was ensured by repeatedly cross-checking how similar claims were articulated in independent studies and across different source types (e.g., academic research, policy discourse, and historical accounts). Emerging themes were retained only when supported by multiple sources or when strongly

anchored in established theoretical literature.

Given the narrative and conceptual nature of this qualitative synthesis, the objective was not procedural replicability in a positivist sense, but analytical transparency and interpretive plausibility. This approach acknowledges the contextual specificity and researcher-mediated interpretation inherent in qualitative status-transition research.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Research Question 1: What are the Key Factors that Directly Led to the Decline in the Universal Status of the Russian Language in Vietnam after 1991?

4.1.1. Empirical Synthesis of Key Factors

Drawing on the synthesis of prior studies, this subsection identifies three recurring factors that contributed to the decline of the universal status of the Russian language in Vietnam after 1991. First, the geopolitical shock of the SU’s collapse in December 1991 eliminated the political and economic sponsorship framework, causing Russian’s status to erode globally (Trọng Thành, 2017). Next, as discussed in section 2.1., the transition from the subsidized ask-and-aid mechanism to a market-driven cooperation model fundamentally altered the linguistic demand structure, thereby reducing the universal role of Russian in civilian sectors. Third, intense competition from English in globalization and Chinese in regional cooperation placed Russian at a disadvantage, compounded by its inherent learning difficult-ness, hindering the motivation of general students (Đông & Tâm, 2023; Trung Hiếu, 2019).

4.1.2. Interpretive Discussion

From an interpretive perspective, these empirical patterns can be understood through the theoretical lens of language ecology and soft power. Ultimately, this decline directly reflects the failure of the language of power when the soft power mechanism supporting it collapses. Theoretically, this finding strongly reinforces the theory of language ecology and the correlation between language and national power. Bukh (2016) notes that language,

culture, and education are core sources of soft power. When the SU dissolved, the political and economic resources that drove Russian's appeal and dominance vanished (Trọng Thành, 2017). The status of Russian declined in proportion to the weakening economic and political strength of its patron state. Russian ceased to be a language of power because it no longer represented global technological, political, or economic dominance, but rather transitioned into a specialized diplomatic or technical language.

Historically and economically, the change in the cooperation model is the pivotal factor explaining the loss of the language's universality. Pre-1991, Russian held a mandatory status as it was the sole means to access technology, military expertise, and education programs under the ask-and-aid mechanism. As Vietnam shifted toward a market economy and cooperation based on mutual benefit and equality, English immediately became the default language for trade, investment, and international integration. This shift forced the language to retreat from the universal domain and seek a new functional role to survive. Consequently, Russian did not disappear but was pushed out of the universal scope to secure a sustainable position in maintained strategic cooperation sectors (Đinh, 2007).

4.2. Research Question 2: How is the Functional Transition of Russian from the “Language of Power” to a “Specialized Language” specifically Manifested in Core Strategic Sectors?

4.2.1. Empirical Synthesis Across Core Sectors

Based on the synthesis of policy documents, institutional reports, and prior academic studies, this subsection summarizes how Russian functions within three core strategic sectors. The transition from a universal “language of power” to a “specialized language” (Hà, 2016) means Russian now functions as a strategic linguistic asset guaranteed within the CSP framework. This specialization is clearly demonstrated through the synthesis of arguments across three critical cooperation areas:

Security and Defense: Available studies suggest that Russian continues to play a

functionally significant role within specialized security and defense institutions in Vietnam, particularly through formal training programs at academies such as the People's Security Academy and the Military Science Academy (Đông & Tâm, 2023). In these settings, Russian is primarily used for professional training, technical instruction, and the comprehension of specialized military documentation. This is reinforced by studies on teaching specialized military vocabulary (Minh & Ngọc, 2024), showing the persistent need for human resources to service technical and defense contracts. Existing evidence indicates that Russian proficiency in these institutions is valued not only for communicative purposes but also for ensuring accurate understanding of technical terminology, operational procedures, and partner-specific working norms. While English serves as a general international language, it may not fully substitute for Russian in defense-related cooperation, where linguistic precision and contextual familiarity are critical for operational safety and technology transfer. Consequently, the maintenance of specialized Russian-language training programs within military academies is not merely a technical requirement but a strategic decision aimed at safeguarding national defense autonomy.

Economy and Energy: In the economic and energy sectors, existing policy reports and prior studies indicate that Russian remains an important working language in selected joint ventures, most notably VSP, as well as in cooperation projects related to the peaceful use of nuclear energy (Phan Trang, 2024). Within these institutional settings, Russian is reportedly used for technical documentation, operational guidelines, professional training, and internal communication among specialists. VSP remains a symbolic model of former Soviet–Vietnamese and now Vietnam–Russian economic cooperation, is not merely a commercial project but a strategic cooperation mechanism consistently maintained and strongly developed. Within VSP, Russian remains the primary working language used in technical documentation, complex operational procedures, and internal communication among experts. This continuity is not a matter of

historical habit but the result of a self-sustaining linguistic–technical ecosystem refined over more than four decades of collaboration. In this context, the continued use of Russian in these enterprises reflects not merely historical legacy, but the persistence of a shared technical–linguistic ecosystem developed over decades of cooperation (Đinh, 2007). However, this role is functionally confined to specific enterprises and projects, rather than extending across the broader civilian economy.

Culture and Soft Power: Russian plays a role in consolidating the friendship and trust built across generations (Markovina *et al.*, 2022), sustained through activities promoting the language and culture (Ngọc Liên, 2024), and the emergence of narrowly specialized training fields such as tourism Russian (Mỹ & Chinh, 2021). These initiatives function less as instruments of mass cultural diffusion and more as mechanisms of selective cultural continuity, targeting specific groups of learners with professional, historical, or affective ties to Vietnam–Russia relations. In this cultural domain, Russian no longer operates as a dominant soft power resource, but rather as a relational and symbolic language that reinforces long-standing networks of trust, shared memory, and institutional cooperation. As a result, cultural and educational programs increasingly emphasize experiential engagement, heritage-based learning, and practical application over broad linguistic proficiency. Accordingly, research on Russian language education has

shifted its focus toward fostering learner motivation and engagement rather than solely emphasizing academic proficiency (Lê, 2022). This pedagogical reorientation reflects the system’s ongoing struggle for institutional survival—maintaining program scale and learner retention—alongside efforts to enhance professional quality. In this sense, motivation-oriented teaching strategies can be understood not merely as pedagogical innovation, but as an adaptive response to the language’s structurally reduced social reach.

4.2.2. Interpretive Discussion

Taken together, these sector-specific findings suggest that Russian has repositioned its value within clearly delimited strategic niches, where competing global languages lack comparable historical depth or specialized technical embeddedness. This repositioning should therefore be understood as sector-specific and institutionally bounded, rather than indicative of a broader revival of Russian as a universal foreign language in Vietnam. In military and oil/gas cooperation, effective communication requires a deep understanding of technical terminology, established work procedures, and, most crucially, the strategic trust cultivated over decades (Hà, 2016). Russian acts as a bridge language, not only technically but also ideologically and culturally, within these core joint ventures (Đinh, 2007).

The maintenance of this language status is guaranteed by high-level political commitment.

Table 1. Russian before and after 1991

	Phase 1 (Pre-1991)	Phase 2 (Post-1991 – Present)
Core status	Language of power (language of the socialist bloc)	Specialized language (critical in several certain fields)
Cooperation model	Ask-and-aid mechanism (aid, political preference)	Equal, market-driven mechanism (mutual benefit, investment)
Scope of application	Universal (mandatory in education, technology, popular culture, etc.)	Specialized (limited to core strategic sectors only)
Foreign language competitiveness	Low or virtually none	High (especially English and Chinese)
Mechanism of maintenance	Geopolitical and ideological power of the SU	Politically-driven demand secured by the CSP

Terms in policy discourse like “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” and the “pivot to Asia” strategy create an indispensable framework for the demand for Russian-speaking personnel. This implies that as long as high-tech, defense, and oil/gas projects continue, the need for specialized Russian would be sustainably maintained. This specialization is the clearest evidence that Russian has transitioned from a tool of universal soft power to a strategic asset serving clearly-defined national security and economic goals (Bukh, 2016).

4.3. Research question 3: What are the Prospects and Challenges for Maintaining and Promoting the Specialized Language Role of Russian in Vietnam within the Context of the Current Comprehensive Strategic Cooperation?

4.3.1. Empirical synthesis

4.3.1.1. Prospects

The qualitative synthesis clarifies the factors accounting for the sustainability of Russian’s specialized status. Strategic sustainability is ensured by the commitment to upgrade relations to a CSP (2012), which guarantees that the need for Russian-proficient personnel in core sectors would not decline. This is reinforced by Russia’s “pivot to Asia” strategy and Vietnam’s requirement for strategic balance among major powers (Trần, 2006).

In specialized fields (military, oil/gas), Russian faces less competition (Giáo dục & Thời Đại, 2024), allowing training institutions to focus on high-quality, deep specialization. Current studies have focused on inspiring and promoting culture (Lê, 2022) as a survival strategy. Finally, the intergenerational cultural exchange and enduring friendship serve as a sustained source of soft power (Markovina *et al.*, 2022), generating learning motivation for a specific segment of students.

4.3.1.2. Challenges

In parallel with the prospects, several intrinsic challenges are clearly identified. Despite less competition in specialized fields, the dominance of English as a global lingua franca and the strong rise of Chinese in regional economic cooperation still reduce the general motivation

and appeal of Russian (Nguyễn & Lê, 2024). Furthermore, studies point out the intrinsic difficulties of learning Russian, such as grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary, as major barriers to expanding the training scale (Đông & Tâm, 2023). This leads to a shortage of recruitment sources and limits Russian’s ability to expand its influence beyond specialized sectors.

4.3.1.3. Sustainability

The current status of the Russian language can be determined to be qualitatively sustainable but quantitatively limited. On the one hand, Russian’s specialized status is a mechanism mandated by high-level political commitment, creating a barrier that shields the language from fierce market competition. In other words, Russian’s value lies in its depth of expertise and strategic reliability (Hà, 2016). This is the differentiating factor from other foreign languages. Vietnam’s balancing foreign policy and Russia’s pivot strategy together sustain the demand for specialized personnel in military, energy, and nuclear sectors.

On the other hand, qualitative sustainability partly leads to quantitative limitation. The lack of universality prevents Russian from attracting a large number of students as English does. Labor market preferences for English and Chinese diminish motivation among non-specialized students, resulting in reduced scale and quality of entry-level recruitment (Đông & Tâm, 2023). This inadvertently poses an existential challenge for training institutions: how to ensure input quality when recruitment scale is shrinking?

4.3.2. Interpretive Discussion

From a strategic and educational perspective, these patterns indicate that non-universality may function simultaneously as a structural limitation and a protective mechanism. On the one hand, the limited social reach of Russian constrains student recruitment and restricts the scalability of language programs, particularly when compared with globally dominant languages such as English, Chinese, and Korean, which are strongly aligned with immediate labor market incentives. On the other hand, this very constraint reduces exposure to market-driven pressures

of mass language education, allowing Russian to retain a high degree of functional specificity and institutional stability within strategically bounded sectors.

In educational terms, non-universality encourages a shift from quantity-oriented training toward depth-oriented specialization. Rather than competing for large enrollments, Russian language programs are increasingly oriented toward cultivating advanced linguistic competence, technical communication skills, and sector-specific expertise required in defense, energy, and high-technology cooperation. This specialization aligns closely with the needs of strategic institutions, where linguistic accuracy, cultural familiarity, and long-term trust are valued over broad communicative reach.

From a strategic standpoint, the continued use of Russian within these domains reflects a form of politically sustained linguistic demand that is less susceptible to fluctuations in popular language preferences. The language's function is thus embedded in institutional practices, professional training pipelines, and long-standing cooperative frameworks rather than in mass cultural consumption. Accordingly, the status of Russian in Vietnam after 1991 can be conceptualized as a strategic trust language—maintained not through widespread appeal

or economic ubiquity, but through its role in facilitating stable, high-stakes cooperation in security, energy, and high-technology sectors where trust, continuity, and shared professional culture remain paramount.

5. Conclusions and recommendation

5.1. Conclusions

The transformation of the Russian language in Vietnam after 1991 should not be interpreted as the decline of a “power language,” but rather as a functional restructuring toward specialization. Russian continues to serve as a reliable channel of communication and a symbolic medium of the Vietnam–Russia strategic partnership, even though it has largely receded from public linguistic life. This shift offers a new perspective for political linguistics: a language may sustain its “power” not through the number of speakers but through its strategic value and symbolic significance within the international relation structure.

First, regarding the *decline of universal status*, the diminishing presence of Russian was not an isolated event but an inevitable outcome of the geopolitical rupture caused by the dissolution of the SU in 1991. The loss of ideological and economic patronage, along with the transition from an *aid-based* to a *market-based and egalitarian* cooperation model, eroded the demand for Russian as a universal language and opened the door to fierce competition from English and Chinese.

Second, as for the *shift toward specialization*: Russian successfully adapted by repositioning itself as a *specialized strategic language*—a linguistic asset protected within the framework of the CSP. This specialization is evident across three key domains: Security and Defense – through military-technical training and lexicon development at specialized academies; Energy and Economy – as a working language at enterprises such as VSP; and Culture – as a vehicle for reinforcing mutual trust and friendship. This transformation represents a form of politically-driven linguistic demand that remains qualitatively stable despite quantitative limitations.

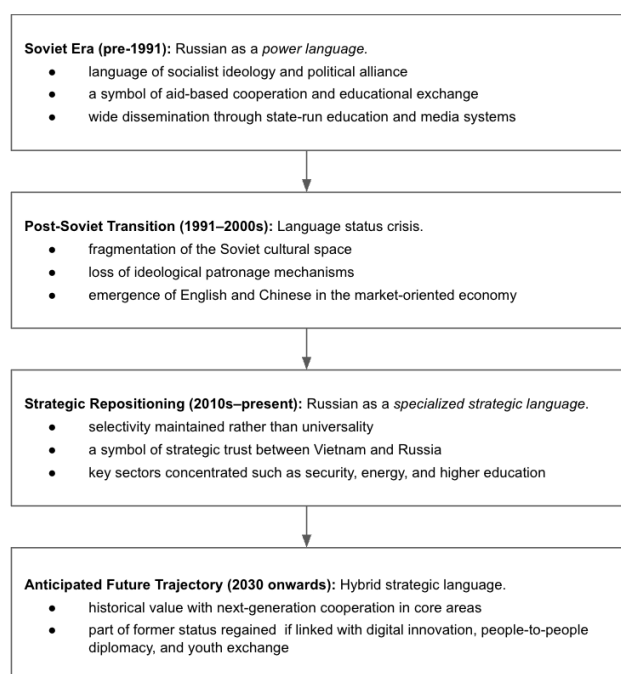


Figure 1. Shift Model of Russian in Vietnam

Third, concerning *future prospects and challenges*: the specialized status of Russian in Vietnam is qualitatively stable due to high-level political commitments and its exclusivity in military-technical and energy sectors. Nevertheless, it remains limited in scale due to inherent academic difficult-ness and competition from global lingua francas, posing significant challenges in recruitment and language training. Thus, any future strategy for Russian language development in Vietnam should focus on advanced specialization and professional excellence.

From an educational perspective, the paper carries important implications for the design and implementation of Russian language education programs in Vietnam. Firstly, they highlight the necessity of aligning curricula with specialized professional contexts, particularly in strategic sectors such as defense, energy, and diplomacy, where Russian continues to serve as a critical working language. Traditional, generalized approaches to language instruction are insufficient; instead, programs should emphasize sector-specific vocabulary, technical communication skills, and cultural literacy to prepare students for real-world applications.

Secondly, the paper stresses the value of motivating learners through strategic relevance, demonstrating that Russian proficiency can directly support career opportunities in bilateral cooperation projects and specialized industries. Finally, it is suggested that program designers should consider flexible, modular curricula that allow learners to develop deep expertise in niche areas, ensuring that Russian language education remains sustainable and strategically meaningful despite competition from global languages such as English and Chinese.

It can also be said that the future survival of Russian in Vietnam may depend on whether both sides can transform their traditional friendship into next-generation cooperation in technology, education, and cultural exchange. If successful, Russian will evolve beyond being a “language of the past” to become a bridge between history and the future of Vietnam–Russia relations. From a methodological perspective, the study demonstrates how qualitative synthesis and

policy discourse analysis can be effectively employed to examine language status transitions, while also acknowledging the interpretive nature and contextual specificity of such an approach.

5.2. Limitations

This paper primarily relies on qualitative synthesis (secondary data analysis) through the examination of academic works, policy documents, and relevant discourse. Accordingly, several limitations exist: *Lack of primary empirical data*: The paper did not employ primary quantitative or qualitative methods (e.g., student surveys, interviews with lecturers, or representatives from strategic enterprises such as VSP). This limits the precision of assessing actual demand and the effectiveness of specialized Russian language training; *Limited generalizability*: The findings are synthesized from prior studies focusing on selected specialized institutions, and therefore may not be fully generalizable to the broader civilian Russian-language system or other economic sectors in Vietnam.

This study does not apply a fixed analytical framework or formalized coding logic aimed at replication. Instead, it follows an interpretive, theory-informed approach designed to explain language status transition within a specific geopolitical and educational context. Thus, the findings should be understood as analytically transferable rather than strictly replicable. The researcher acknowledges their positionality as a scholar trained in both language studies and international studies, with some prior academic engagement in Vietnam–Russia relations. While this positionality provides contextual sensitivity and domain knowledge, it may also shape interpretive emphasis, particularly in assessing strategic value and policy relevance. To mitigate potential interpretive bias, the analysis consistently triangulates claims across independent sources and avoids reliance on single-case evidence or anecdotal data.

5.3. Recommendations

To overcome these limitations and deepen the understanding of Russian’s current status

in Vietnam, future research should pursue the suggested directions: *Empirical studies on sectoral demand*: Quantitative surveys and qualitative in-depth interviews with policymakers and experts in Vietnam–Russia strategic enterprises (particularly in energy, defense, and aviation) should be conducted to identify precise workforce needs and linguistic competency standards for specialized Russian; *Evaluation*

of specialized language training effectiveness: Comparative studies on the linguistic proficiency and professional performance of graduates in Russian versus other foreign languages across specialized fields should also be undertaken. Such research would inform targeted improvements in curriculum design, particularly in professional vocabulary training and communication skills for specific industries.

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