Multilingualism, identity, and inequality in English language learning: a sociolinguistic profile of 9th-grade learners in Uzbekistan

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Annotation   *This article explores the sociolinguistic realities of a multilingual group of ninth-grade students in a Russian-medium school in Uzbekistan, focusing on the intersection of language ideologies, identity, and educational access. Drawing on sociolinguistic theory (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Lippi-Green, 2004; Phillipson, 1992), the paper analyzes how home languages (Uzbek, Russian, Tajik) interact with school-based Russian-medium instruction and English acquisition. Findings highlight how linguistic hierarchies privilege Russian-dominant learners while marginalizing Tajik-speaking students who often learn English through an additional intermediary language. These dynamics impact learner confidence, participation, and equity in assessment. The study argues for a sociolinguistically responsive pedagogy that validates students' multilingual repertoires and challenges deficit perspectives. Recommended practices include translanguaging, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and assessment designs that value communicative effectiveness over native-speaker norms. This article contributes to discussions of multilingual education, equity, and World Englishes, offering a context-specific perspective on how sociolinguistic inequalities shape English learning in post-Soviet Central Asia.*
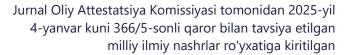
Keywords   *Identity, multilingualism, English language, sociolinguistic profile, gender*

Многоязычие, идентичность и неравенство в изучении английского языка: социолингвистический профиль учащихся 9-х классов в Узбекистане

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Аннотация   *В данной статье рассматриваются социолингвистические реалии многоязычной группы девятиклассников русскоязычной школы в Узбекистане, с акцентом на пересечение языковых идеологий, идентичности и образовательного доступа. Опираясь на социолингвистическую теорию (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Lippi-Green, 2004; Phillipson, 1992), работа анализирует, каким образом домашние языки (узбекский, русский, таджикский) взаимодействуют с русскоязычным школьным обучением и усвоением английского языка. Результаты показывают, что языковые иерархии привилегируют учащихся с доминирующим русским, в то время как таджикоязычные ученики оказываются в невыгодном положении, так как часто изучают английский*

через дополнительный промежуточный язык. Эти динамики влияют на уверенность учащихся, их участие и справедливость в оценивании. В статье выдвигается аргумент в пользу социолингвистически чувствительной педагогики, которая признаёт многоязычные репертуары учащихся и отвергает дефицитарные взгляды. Рекомендуемые практики включают транслингвинг, культурно устойчивую педагогику и разработку форм оценивания, ориентированных на коммуникативную эффективность, а не на нормы носителей языка. Данная статья вносит вклад в дискуссии о многоязычном образовании, равенстве и мировых вариантах английского языка, предлагая контекстно-специфическую перспективу того, как социолингвистическое неравенство влияет на изучение английского языка в постсоветской Центральной Азии.

Ключевые слова   *Идентичность, многоязычие, английский язык, социолингвистический профиль, гендер*

Ko'p tillilik, identitet va tengsizlik ingliz tili o'rganishda: O'zbekistondagi 9-sinf o'quvchilari sotsiolingvistik profili

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Annotatsiya   *Ushbu maqolada O'zbekistondagi rus tilida ta'lim oladigan maktabning 9-sinf o'quvchilari orasida kuzatilgan ko'p tillilik sharoitida yuzaga keladigan sotsiolingvistik holatlar tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqotda til mafkuralari, identitet va ta'lim imkoniyatlarining kesishuvchi nuqtalari markazga olingan. Sotsiolingvistik nazariyaga (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Lippi-Green, 2004; Phillipson, 1992) asoslanib, maqolada uy tili (o'zbek, rus, tojik) va maktabdagi rus tilidagi ta'lim jarayoni hamda ingliz tilini o'zlashtirish o'rtasidagi o'zaro munosabatlar tahlil qilinadi. Natijalar shuni ko'rsatadiki, mavjud til ierarxiyalari rus tilida ustun bo'lgan o'quvchilarga imtiyoz beradi, tojik tilida so'zlashuvchi o'quvchilar esa ko'pincha ingliz tilini yana bir vositachi til orqali o'rganishga majbur bo'ladi. Bu jarayon ularning o'ziga ishonchi, darslarda faolligi va baholashdagi tenglikka salbiy ta'sir ko'rsatadi. Maqolada o'quvchilarning ko'p tilli kompetensiyalarini qadrlovchi va "kamchilikka asoslangan" qarashlarni inkor etuvchi sotsiolingvistik yondashuv zarurligi ta'kidlanadi. Tavsiya etilgan amaliyotlar qatoriga translanguaging, madaniy jihatdan barqaror pedagogika va "ona tiliga yaqinlashish" me'yorlariga emas, balki kommunikativ samaradorlikka asoslangan baholash tizimlarini yaratish kiradi. Ushbu maqola ko'p tilli ta'lim, tenglik va "Jahon ingliz tili" haqidagi ilmiy muhokamalarga hissa qo'shib, postsovet Markaziy Osiyoda ingliz tili o'rganishga sotsiolingvistik tengsizlik qanday ta'sir ko'rsatishini ochib beradi.*

Kalit so'zlar   *Identitet, ko'p tillilik, ingliz tili, sotsiolingvistik profil, gender*

Introduction

Sociolinguistics, as a field, investigates the interplay between language and society, with special attention to how social variables such as ethnicity, gender, class, and region shape language use and perception (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015). In language education, these insights become essential when addressing diverse classrooms where linguistic, cultural, and social identities converge. This paper presents a sociolinguistic profile of a group of 9th-grade students in a Russian-medium school in Uzbekistan, each navigating a complex multilingual environment shaped by language ideologies, regional diversity, and educational expectations. This paper applies sociolinguistic theory to describe not only the learners themselves, but also their current learning context and the sociolinguistic realities of their future language use. With support from course literature and sociolinguistic research, I will examine how factors such as linguistic background, multilingualism, identity, and language bias affect both instruction and assessment. The implications for pedagogy and ethical language assessment will be discussed to inform sociolinguistically responsive teaching practices.
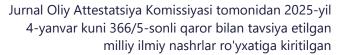
Sociolinguistic Profile of a Group of Learners

The learner group consists of 15 ninth-grade students enrolled in a Russian-medium school in Uzbekistan. All students are English language learners (ELLs), with English proficiency estimated at an intermediate level (IELTS band scores between 3.0 and 4.0). The students come from linguistically diverse homes, speaking Russian, Uzbek, and Tajik to varying degrees. While Russian is the dominant language of school instruction, English classes are taught primarily in Russian, with occasional use of Uzbek. The learners come from mixed socioeconomic backgrounds, with some residing in urban areas and others commuting

from rural villages. To analyze the sociolinguistic dynamics more deeply, the class can be divided into two subgroups, each with distinct linguistic and identity-related characteristics.

Subgroup 1: Tajik Home Language, Learning English via Uzbek

This subgroup consists of students who speak Tajik at home, are educated in Russian at school, and are learning English through Uzbek. This layered multilingual exposure presents both opportunities and challenges. From a sociolinguistic perspective, these learners are navigating what Bucholtz and Hall (2005) call positional identities straddling different linguistic hierarchies within school and community contexts. Although multilingualism can support metalinguistic awareness (Deumert, 2011), these learners may also experience cross-linguistic interference, especially between Tajik and Uzbek. Uzbek, as a Turkic language, differs structurally from Indo-Iranian Tajik, which may cause confusion in acquiring English grammar or syntax (Schilling, 2011). Additionally, learning English through a third language (Uzbek) rather than their dominant home language (Tajik) can lower comprehension and motivation (Fought, 2011). Sociocultural identity further complicates these learners' experience. Students may feel caught between their home language and the more socially dominant Russian or Uzbek languages at school. As Lippi-Green (2004) explains, dominant ideologies often stigmatize non-standard or minority languages, potentially impacting learners' participation and sense of belonging.

Subgroup 2: Russian Home Language, Limited Uzbek Proficiency

This subgroup includes students who speak Russian at home and school, with minimal exposure to Uzbek. These students benefit from consistency between their home and instructional languages and may have greater access to Russian-language learning

The Lingua Spectrum
Cogito, ergo sum

Jurnal Oliy Attestatsiya Komissiyasi tomonidan 2025-yil 4-yanvar kuni 366/5-sonli qaror bilan tavsiya etilgan milliy ilmiy nashrlar ro'yxatiga kiritilgan

resources. In terms of sociolinguistic advantage, they are positioned closer to the school's linguistic norms, which may boost academic confidence and participation (Bayley & Villarreal, 2018). However, these learners also carry certain sociolinguistic limitations. Their limited multilingual exposure may reduce their ability to transfer knowledge across languages a skill that supports English acquisition in more multilingual learners (Kim & Richardson, 2018). Furthermore, Russian-dominant students may adopt deficit views of other languages due to linguistic bias. Baugh's (2005) work on linguistic profiling is relevant here, as these students may unconsciously marginalize their peers who speak Uzbek or Tajik, reinforcing social divides in the classroom. Despite these differences, both subgroups share challenges in English language acquisition, particularly in navigating sociolinguistic expectations tied to academic English. The varied linguistic repertoires and identity affiliations of these learners highlight the importance of differentiated instruction and assessment grounded in sociolinguistic awareness.

Sociolinguistic Profile of the Learning Context

The current learning context for these 9th-grade learners is a Russian-medium public school in Uzbekistan. While Russian serves as the primary language of instruction, both Uzbek and Tajik are part of students' lived linguistic realities, especially outside of school. This context reflects the broader multilingual landscape of Uzbekistan, where Russian retains prestige from the Soviet era, and Uzbek is the national language, while Tajik remains regionally and socially marginalized. At the school level, the linguistic hierarchy privileges Russian, followed by Uzbek, and lastly Tajik. As Kachru (1990) argued in his framework on World Englishes, language hierarchies are often internalized and reflect postcolonial power structures. These dynamics are visible in this school, where students who speak only Tajik may feel linguistically and socially inferior, particularly when Russian is upheld as the

"standard" language of academic success. The classroom environment reflects dominant language ideologies that associate Russian with intelligence, modernity, and academic achievement beliefs reinforced by teacher attitudes, curriculum materials, and peer interactions (Lippi-Green, 2004). These ideologies may unconsciously marginalize Uzbek- and Tajik-speaking students, especially when instruction is conducted exclusively in Russian, creating disparities in access to content and participation. Socioeconomic disparities further shape this context. Urban students, typically with better access to Russian-language media, the internet, and test preparation resources, are more likely to succeed in this environment. Rural students, many of whom are Uzbek or Tajik speakers, often face limited access to English resources and experience greater difficulty adjusting to Russian-dominant instruction. This disparity aligns with Phillipson's (1992) concept of linguistic imperialism, which highlights how language access can reinforce social inequality. Thus, this learning context is not just multilingual it is also stratified, with significant implications for how learners view their languages and identities.

Sociolinguistic Profile of the Context Where English Will Be Used

While English is currently taught within a Russian-language framework, its real-world applications extend far beyond the classroom. For these students, English represents opportunity: for university entrance, global communication, and future employment. However, the transition from classroom English to real-world English use introduces another layer of sociolinguistic complexity. Many of these learners aim to pursue higher education in Uzbekistan or abroad. In either case, proficiency in Standard English particularly academic and formal varieties is essential. The expectations for English use in universities and global contexts often mirror those of native-speaker norms, which disadvantages learners whose exposure is shaped by multilingual

instruction in Russian or Uzbek (Calder, 2020). Moreover, access to higher education often hinges on high-stakes assessments like IELTS or TOEFL, which are not always linguistically equitable (Eades, 2011). Students from Tajik-speaking backgrounds, in particular, face dual challenges: mastering a foreign language (English) through another foreign language (Uzbek or Russian) and navigating assessments rooted in unfamiliar linguistic and cultural assumptions. As Bucholtz and Hall (2005) emphasize, language learning cannot be separated from the identities and interactions that shape it. When learners' sociolinguistic realities are misaligned with institutional expectations, motivation, and performance suffer. Additionally, for students who transition from rural to urban areas for college or employment, language expectations shift dramatically. Urban institutions may demand higher fluency, fewer regional accents, and stronger command of academic register. In these transitions, linguistic profiling (Baugh, 2005) becomes relevant not just in pronunciation or grammar, but in how language reveals background, education, and class. As Lippi-Green (2004) argues, accent discrimination persists in many professional and academic contexts. Thus, students whose English carries traces of Uzbek or Russian pronunciation may face negative judgments in interviews or public settings, even if their language is comprehensible.
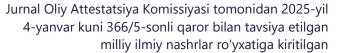
Pedagogical Implications

The multilingual and stratified nature of the learner group described above requires an instructional approach that is flexible, inclusive, and grounded in sociolinguistic realities. Language instruction must go beyond grammar drills and vocabulary memorization; it must respond to learners' lived experiences, identities, and language ideologies (Schilling, 2011). According to TESOL Standard 1, instruction must reflect the features of language learners need to acquire. For this group, instruction should prioritize academic English structures while also recognizing how

these may differ from the structures of Russian, Uzbek, or Tajik. Teachers must explicitly address cross-linguistic interference, especially for students learning English through a third language. At the same time, teachers must actively validate students' home languages. Research shows that linguistic and cultural validation fosters learner motivation and identity development (Fought, 2011; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Multilingual strategies, such as allowing learners to compare English grammar with their first or second languages, can deepen understanding and affirm students' full linguistic repertoires. TESOL Standard 3 emphasizes the importance of selecting appropriate methodologies and classroom practices. A sociolinguistically informed approach requires the adoption of inclusive instructional models such as translanguaging and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Lippi-Green, 2004). These approaches challenge language hierarchies and affirm students' linguistic identities.

Assessment Implications

Assessment for this learner group must be designed and implemented with ethical care, linguistic sensitivity, and sociolinguistic awareness. Both internal assessments (school-based) and external assessments (IELTS, TOEFL) present significant challenges, particularly for students from marginalized linguistic backgrounds. Most standardized assessments favor students with exposure to Standard English and test-taking conventions (Eades, 2011). Tajik-background students, who learn English through Uzbek and may have limited exposure to test-prep materials, are at a disadvantage. This raises ethical concerns around test bias and linguistic profiling (Baugh, 2005). To promote equity, internal assessments should allow for linguistic flexibility. In speaking assessments, emphasis should be placed on communicative effectiveness, not native-like pronunciation, reflecting the realities of World Englishes (Kachru, 1990). Formative assessments such as portfolios and collaborative projects can

provide a more comprehensive picture of language growth. Teachers must also act as advocates in navigating external assessments. This may include preparing learners for biased expectations, lobbying for accommodations, or raising awareness about assessment equity at the institutional level (Phillipson, 1992; Lippi-Green, 2004).

Conclusion

Language educators must recognize that every classroom is a sociolinguistic ecosystem in which language use does not merely convey information it constructs identity, mediates power, and determines access to opportunity. In multilingual, multicultural contexts such as the 9th-grade classroom in Uzbekistan explored in this paper, language learning is deeply intertwined with learners' social positions, home languages, and the institutional ideologies that surround them. For these learners navigating a complex web of Russian, Uzbek, Tajik, and English the classroom is not just a site of linguistic development, but a space where their sense of self and belonging is continuously negotiated. These learners do not come to class as blank slates. They arrive with rich linguistic repertoires, cultural knowledge, and lived experiences that shape how they learn and how they are perceived. As this paper has shown, factors such as home language, gender, socioeconomic status, and regional identity intersect to influence both how language is taught and how it is received. When schools and educators fail to acknowledge these sociolinguistic factors, they risk reproducing inequality both in access to learning and in learners' confidence to participate fully. Thus, the role of the language teacher extends far beyond grammar and vocabulary instruction. Language educators are cultural brokers, identity supporters, and, most importantly, advocates. We must consciously design our pedagogies to affirm diverse linguistic identities, dismantle harmful language ideologies, and resist deficit perspectives that marginalize learners based on how they speak. Our assessments, too, must reflect a commitment to fairness and cultural responsiveness, valuing communicative competence over native-speaker ideals and accounting for the social realities our learners face. In sum, the language classroom is a powerful site for equity or inequity. As educators, we must choose to use that power in ways that affirm, include, and empower. By applying a sociolinguistic lens to our practice, we can foster not only language acquisition but also a sense of agency, dignity, and future possibility for all learners.

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