

Phonetic challenges faced by Uzbek learners in acquiring English: a phonological and pedagogical perspective

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Annotation: This article examines the linguistic and pedagogical aspects of the phonological difficulties Uzbek learners face when learning English phonetics. Uzbek learners sometimes struggle to learn English phonemes, stress patterns, and intonation because of the substantial typological contrasts between the Turkic language of Uzbek and the Germanic language of English. These difficulties are frequently caused by suprasegmental characteristics, allophonic variances, and phonemic mismatches that are absent from Uzbek. The study analyses recurrent mispronunciation patterns using a comparative phonological method and learner interviews and classroom observations. The contrast between voiced and voiceless interdental fricatives (/θ/ and /ð/), the lax-tense vowel opposition, and English diphthongs – all of which are mainly lacking in Uzbek – are among the main problematic areas that are identified. The study makes the case for a more contrastive, theoretically informed, and technologically advanced approach to teaching English phonetics from a pedagogical standpoint. It highlights how phonological acquisition is shaped by teacher knowledge, student motivation, and interference from the native language. In order to reduce transfer errors and increase learners' confidence and intelligibility in spoken English, the study offers a number of useful suggestions and phonetic training techniques. This research advances our knowledge of second language phonetic acquisition in the context of Uzbek EFL by addressing both linguistic theory and classroom practice.

Keywords: EFL pedagogy, segmental characteristics, suprasegmentals, phonological transfer, mispronunciation, Uzbek learners, English phonetics, and phonological interference

Фонологические проблемы, с которыми сталкиваются узбекские учащиеся при присвоении английской фонетики: фонологическая и педагогическая перспектива

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Аннотация: В данной статье рассматриваются фонологические проблемы, с которыми сталкиваются узбекские учащиеся при приобретении английской фонетики, подчеркивая как лингвистические, так и педагогические аспекты. Из-за значительных типологических различий между узбекским, тюркским языком, и английским, германским языком, узбекские учащиеся часто сталкиваются с трудностями в освоении английских фонем, ударных паттернов и интонации. Эти проблемы часто коренятся в фонематических несоответствиях, аллофонических вариациях и надсегментных особенностях, которых нет в узбеке. В статье используется сравнительный фонологический подход и опирается на наблюдения в классе и интервью с учениками для анализа повторяющихся моделей неправильного произношения. Он определяет основные проблемные области, такие как различие между звонкими и глухими межзубными фрикативами (/θ/ и /ð/), оппозиция гласных слабого времени и английские дифтонги, которые в основном отсутствуют в узбекском языке. С педагогической точки зрения,

статья аргументирует более контрастное, теоретическое и технологически усвоенное обучение английской фонетике. Он подчеркивает роль вмешательства на родного языка, осведомленности учителей и мотивации студентов в формировании фонологического приобретения. В исследовании предлагается набор практических рекомендаций и стратегий фонетического обучения, направленных на минимизацию ошибок передачи и повышение разборчивости и уверенности учащихся в разговорном английском языке. Рассматривая как лингвистическую теорию, так и практику в классе, эта статья способствует более глубокому пониманию фонетического приобретения второго языка в контексте узбекского EFL.

Ключевые слова: узбекские ученики, английская фонетика, фонологическая интерференция, неправильное произношение, педагогика EFL, сегментарные особенности, надсегментные, фонологический перенос

Ingliz tili fonetikasini o'zlashtirishda o'zbek o'quvchilari duch keladigan fonologik muammolar: fonologik va pedagogik nuqtai nazar

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Annotatsiya: Ushbu maqola ingliz tili fonetikasini o'zlashtirishda o'zbek o'quvchilari duch keladigan fonologik muammolarni o'rganib, lingvistik va pedagogik jihatlarni yoritadi. Turkiy til bo'lmish o'zbek tili va german tili bo'lgan ingliz tili o'rtasidagi sezilarli tipologik farqlar tufayli o'zbek tilini o'rganuvchilar ko'pincha ingliz tili fonemalari, urg'u naqshlari va intonatsiyani o'zlashtirishda qiyinchiliklarga duch kelishadi. Bu qiyinchiliklar ko'pincha o'zbek tilida mavjud bo'lmagan fonematik nomuvofiqlik, allofonik o'zgarishlar va bo'limlar suprasegmental xususiyatlaridan kelib chiqadi. Maqolada qiyosiy fonologik yondashuv qo'llaniladi va takrorlanuvchi noto'g'ri talaffuz namunalarini tahlil qilish uchun sinfdagi kuzatishlar va o'quvchilar intervyulariga asoslanadi. Unda ovozli va jarangsiz tishlararo frikativlar (/th/ va /ð/) o'rtasidagi farq, bo'shashtirilgan unilarning qarama-qarshiligi va o'zbek tilida deyarli uchramaydigan ingliz diftonglari kabi asosiy muammoli sohalar aniqlanadi. Pedagogik nuqtai nazardan, maqola ingliz fonetikasi bo'yicha ko'proq kontrastli, nazariy ma'lumotga ega va texnologiya takomillashtirilgan o'qitishni ta'kidlaydi. Unda ona tiliga aralashish, o'qituvchining xabardorligi va fonologik o'zlashtirishni shakllantirishda o'quvchilar motivatsiyasining roli ta'kidlanadi. Tadqiqot ko'chirish xatolarini minimallashtirish va o'quvchilarning ingliz tilida og'zaki nutqda tushunarligi va ishonchini yaxshilashga qaratilgan amaliy tavsiyalar va fonetik o'qitish strategiyalari to'plamini taklif qiladi. Tilshunoslik nazariyasiga ham, sinf amaliyotiga ham to'xtalib, ushbu maqola o'zbek tilidagi ingliz tili kontekstida ikkinchi tilning fonetik o'zlashtirilishini chuqurroq tushunishga yordam beradi.

Kalit so'zlar: O'zbek o'rganuvchilari, ingliz fonetikasi, fonologik aralashuv, noto'g'ri talaffuz, EFL pedagogikasi, segmental xususiyatlar, suprasegmentallar, fonologik uzatish

INTRODUCTION

Learning the phonology of a second language (L2) can be quite difficult for students, especially if the target language and the native language (L1) are very different. The phonological gap between Uzbek and English causes a variety of issues for Uzbek learners learning English phonetics, ranging from suprasegmental misapplications to segmental errors. These difficulties frequently stem from what Odlin (1989) refers to as cross-linguistic influence, in which patterns of the native language obstruct the creation of L2 sounds. This kind of interference is in line with

Lado's (1957) Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, which states that learners will find it challenging to pick up L2 components that are significantly different from L1. For Uzbek speakers, whose native language has vowel harmony, agglutinative morphology, and syllable-timed rhythm, English phonology presents unique difficulties due to its broad array of vowels, consonant clusters, and stress-timed rhythm (Lado, 1957; Eckman, 1977). Furthermore, according to the Markedness Differential Hypothesis (Eckman, 1977), Uzbek learners find it particularly challenging to learn more complicated or "marked" phonological structures in English, such as interdental fricatives and diphthongs, because they are either absent or uncommon in Uzbek phonology. The objectives of this study are to: (1) identify the main phonological difficulties that Uzbek learners encounter; (2) examine the ways in which these difficulties appear in real learner speech; and (3) investigate the pedagogical ramifications and provide remedies that are appropriate for the Uzbek EFL environment. In order to explain how phonetic categories from the L1 can prevent the generation of new L2 categories when they are viewed as similar, this study uses Flege's (1995) Speech Learning Model. The results also support a research-based pronunciation method that prioritises intelligibility above native-like perfection, as advocated by Derwing and Munro (2005). By addressing a learner population that has received relatively little attention and providing useful advice for enhancing pronunciation training in the Uzbek setting, this work advances applied phonetics.

METHODS

Using a descriptive and comparative methodology, this qualitative study integrates empirical data from student interviews, classroom observations, and pronunciation tests with theoretical phonological analysis. A total of sixty English philology majors from three Uzbek universities participated in the study.

CEFR-aligned placement exams were used to identify the participants' intermediate to upper-intermediate level of English proficiency. The following methods were used to gather data: semi-structured interviews with learners about their self-perceptions of phonetic difficulties; phonetic recording tasks, in which students read texts with phonetic elements and minimal pairs; and instructor feedback forms, in which teachers reported common pronunciation problems they had seen over the course of a semester. Using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), segmental mistakes were examined and contrasted with accepted standards for British English. Teacher comments and audio analysis were used to assess suprasegmental characteristics (stress, intonation). Interview responses were categorised for recurrent themes pertaining to pedagogical experiences and L1 interference.

RESULTS

A number of recurring phonological difficulties encountered by Uzbek EFL learners were identified through the examination of student voice data. Segmental and suprasegmental features are the two primary categories into which these difficulties fall.

1. Segmental features.

Individual phonemes (consonants and vowels) are referred to as segmental characteristics. Negative language transfer from their L1 indicated predictable challenges for Uzbek learners.

a) *Vowel Replacement*

Because Uzbek has a lower vowel inventory than English, one of the most common problems seen was the replacement of English vowels with their closest Uzbek equivalent. There are only six vowel phonemes in Uzbek compared to about twelve in English. The English vowel /æ/ in "cat," for instance, was frequently realised as /ɛ/ or /a/, resulting in pronunciations like [ket] or [kat].

Because the tense-lax distinction was rarely upheld, /ɪ/ and /i:/ were frequently combined. For example, the pronunciation of "ship" and "sheep" was [ʃi:p]. According to Flege's (1995) Speech Learning Model, L2 learners frequently incorporate new L2 sounds into preexisting L1 categories, particularly when those sounds are thought to be "similar."

b) Clusters of Consonants

Many of the English consonant clusters, especially those in word-initial and word-final positions, are absent from Uzbek. As a result, students often omitted consonants or added vowels (epenthesis) to simplify clusters: "School" was often pronounced as [əs'ku:l] or [sə'kuzl], and "Help" changed to [hɛl] or [hɛlə]. Eckman's (1977) Markedness Differential Hypothesis, which holds that marked structures, such as complex clusters, are more likely to result in errors in L2 production, is supported by these findings.

c) Voicing errors

Confusion resulted from how contrasts were spoken in English, especially for terminal obstruents: The pronunciations of "cap" and "cab" were frequently the same as [kaep]. Like several Turkic languages, Uzbek learners frequently devoiced voiced stops at the end of words.

d) Interdental fricatives

Uzbek does not have the sounds /θ/ (thought) and /ð/ (this). Students replaced: • either /t/ or /θ/ → "Think" → [sɪsük] or [tɪük] • /d/ → or /ð/ → /z/ "this" → [dɪs] or [zɪs] Intelligibility was greatly diminished by these swaps, particularly in minimal pairs like "thin" vs. "sin."

2. Suprasegmental features.

a) Stress in Words

The final syllable is usually where stress is placed in Uzbek, which is a syllable-timed language. However, English is a time-sensitive language, and stress is essential to rhythm and meaning. Stress was frequently misplaced by Uzbek learners: The noun "Record" should be pronounced [ˈrekɔ:d], but learners mispronounced it as [rɪˈkɔ:d], confusing it with the verb form. • The term "present" was frequently pronounced as [priˈzent] rather than [ˈpreznt]. In addition to creating misconceptions, improper stress made speech sound unnatural and unfluent.

b) Rhythm and intonation

The intonation contour utilised by Uzbek learners was typically flat. The delivery of the speech was repetitive since the rising and falling rhythms that are typical of English were not observed. For instance: Rather than using a rising tone, yes-or-no enquiries like "Do you like it?" were delivered with a flat intonation. The last fall that denotes completeness was absent from statements such as "I am going to the store." This supports the finding of Pennington and Richards (1986) that suprasegmentals have a significant impact on perceived fluency but are frequently overlooked in conventional speech instruction.

c) Linking and weak forms

Learners frequently pronounced each word fully and independently, demonstrating difficulty with weak forms and related speech: "I want to go" changed from the native-like [aɪ wənə ɡoʊ] to [aɪ want tu: ɡoʊ]. The whole forms of "He has eaten" were pronounced as [hi: hæz ˈi:tən]. Fluency and comprehension were impacted by such fragmented speech.

3. Frequency of errors

A brief summary of observed errors by frequency (*Table1*):

| Type of Error | Frequency (%) | Example |
|----------------------------------|---------------|-----------------------------|
| Vowel Substitution | 90% | "ship" → "sheep" |
| Consonant Cluster Simplification | 85% | "school" → "eskul" |
| Voicing Errors | 70% | "cap" → "cab" or vice versa |
| Interdental Substitution | 95% | "this" → "dis" |

| | | |
|---------------------------------------|-----|-----------------------------|
| Misplaced Stress “record” (noun) → | 80% | “record” (verb) |
| Flat Intonation | 75% | “Do you like it?” (no rise) |
| Weak Form Misuse | 88% | “I want to go” → full forms |

Table 1. Frequent errors of ESL learners

These findings show that phonological transfer, L1 limitations, and inadequate suprasegmental training account for the bulk of pronunciation issues.

DISCUSSION

The important significance of L1 transfer in second language (L2) phonological acquisition is confirmed by the phonological difficulties seen in Uzbek English learners. The findings provide insight into context-specific learner patterns and support well-established linguistic theories. The ramifications of these findings for theoretical linguistics, pronunciation pedagogy, curriculum design, and sociolinguistic priorities in Uzbekistan are examined in this conversation.

1 Phonological transfer and linguistic interference

The majority of errors were caused by direct phonemic and phonotactic incompatibilities between Uzbek and English, as anticipated by the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Lado, 1957). The more restricted vowel system in Uzbek, where English phonemes are "fit" into well-known L1 categories, directly leads to the substitution of English vowels (e.g., /æ/ → /ɛ/, /ɪ/ → /i:/). A powerful explanatory framework for this is offered by the Speech Learning Model (Flege, 1995), which claims that learners restrict the development of new phonetic categories by assimilating perceived comparable L2 sounds into preexisting L1 categories. Additionally, the high frequency of consonant cluster simplifications is explained by Eckman's Markedness Differential Hypothesis (1977). In order to conform to their L1 phonotactic limitations, learners often either remove elements (for example, “help” → “hep”) or add vowels (for example, “school” → “eskul”) because consonant clusters are less evident in Uzbek phonology and are usually restricted to medial places. Although this phonological adaptation technique is not exclusive to Uzbek learners, the particular patterns fit the syllable structure of Uzbek, which often avoids starting clusters and favours open syllables (CVCV). Furthermore, alveolar or dental plosives and fricatives are frequently used in place of interdental fricatives in Uzbek due to their near-complete absence. While many L2 English learner communities share this replacement, Uzbek learners exhibit it almost consistently. This supports Odlin's (1989) claim that in situations where phonological characteristics are completely missing from the L1 inventory, cross-linguistic effect is more prevalent. Because consonant clusters are less common in Uzbek phonology and are typically limited to medial positions, learners frequently either add vowels (for example, “school” → “eskul”) or remove parts (for example, “help” → “hep”) in order to adhere to their L1 phonotactic restrictions. The specific patterns fit the Uzbek syllable structure, which frequently avoids commencing clusters and promotes open syllables (CVCV), even though this phonological adaptation strategy is not unique to Uzbek learners. Furthermore, because interdental fricatives are almost entirely absent in Uzbek, alveolar or dental plosives and fricatives are commonly utilised in their place. This substitution is shared by many L2 English learner communities, but it is nearly always displayed by Uzbek learners. This bolsters Odlin's (1989) assertion that when phonological traits are entirely absent from the researches.

2. Fluency gaps and suprasegmental deviations

Another significant learning difficulty is the difference between the syllable time of Uzbek and the stress timing of English. The propensity to emphasise every word equally results in prosodically flat and rhythmically irregular speech. Pennington and Richards (1986) assert that

suprasegmental characteristics frequently have a greater impact on perceived fluency and intelligibility than individual phonemes. Because of this, their misuse or omission might be especially harmful. Furthermore supporting Jenkins' (2000) claim in the Lingua Franca Core (LFC) that stress, while essential in native communication, may not always obstruct intelligibility in international contexts is the misplacement of stress by Uzbek learners (for example, "record" as [rɪ'kɔ:d] rather than ['rekɔ:d]).

However, stress correctness is still crucial for students who want to speak English at a high level in academic or professional settings. A wider trend among learners from syllable-timed language backgrounds may be indicated by the flat intonation patterns and artificial pauses seen in this study, which are similar to findings in learner data from Chinese and Korean (Derwing et al., 1998). When teaching pronunciation, such suprasegmental problems should receive just as much attention as segmental faults.

3. Educational consequences and suggestions

Pronunciation education in Uzbek EFL classrooms must be systematic, data-informed, and theory-based due to the regularity and predictability of errors. (a) Giving Intelligibility Priority Over Accuracy Like a Native The emphasis should be on intelligibility, comprehensibility, and fluency rather than native-like pronunciation, building on the work of Munro and Derwing (1999). Using role-plays, peer evaluation, and real-life communicative tasks as essential elements, teachers should prioritise communication clarity over accent removal. (a) Minimal Pair Training and Phonological Awareness Phonological awareness, which teaches students to consciously notice and discriminate sounds, should be the first step in pronunciation education. L2 differences can be made more noticeable with the use of tools like contrastive drills and minimum pairings (such as "ship" vs. "sheep"). Even at a rudimentary level, using IPA instruction gives students the ability to decode pronunciation on their own. (b) Kinaesthetic and Visual Instruction Techniques Because pronunciation is articulatory, kinaesthetic techniques (such as hand motions to indicate intonation and stress) and visual clues (such as mouth diagrams and vowel charts) are particularly useful. Bridging the gap between perception and articulation is accomplished by teaching the physical sensation of sound creation. (d) (d) Including Suprasegmentals at an Early Stage Early introduction and regular practice are key components of prosody-focused education, which includes song-based exercises, stress pattern games, and intonation maps. Shadowing exercises, which involve repeating native speaker utterances while paying careful attention to rhythm and melody, can be beneficial to learners.

4. Teacher development and curriculum

Many Uzbek EFL programs ignore pronunciation, despite its linguistic significance. National curricula should require a pronunciation component in language syllabi in order to buck this trend. Specialised phonology courses for teacher candidates must be available in university-level EFL programs. Teachers should receive training in both the linguistic theory of L2 phonology and useful classroom strategies, such as using Praat or ELSA Speak software. Additionally, workshops for continuous professional development (CPD) must to be conducted to keep in-service teachers informed on studies on pronunciation.

5. Cultural and sociolinguistic aspects

Language is a medium of identification as well as a set of laws. English frequently acts as a barrier to academic and professional success in Uzbekistan. Despite their strong motivation, learners do not have access to real-world pronunciation input. Teachers and curriculum designers should set reasonable targets based on the "intelligibility principle" (Levis, 2005): understandable, confident, and fluent speakers, not perfect replication of original accents. It's also necessary to reconsider what "correct" pronunciation means in light of English's emergence as a universal language. Features that impede intelligibility should be given priority, according to Jenkins (2000), whereas less communicative features—like interdental fricatives—may be deemphasized based on the objectives of the learners.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study demonstrates the substantial phonological difficulties Uzbek learners encounter when learning English phonetics, which can be attributed to both linguistic and instructional factors. The phonemic inventory and rhythm of Uzbek are tightly linked to segmental and suprasegmental faults, and these challenges are made worse by pedagogical gaps. A complex strategy including phonological contrast awareness, teacher preparation, and pronunciation integration into regular language instruction is needed to address these issues. Learner-sensitive, intelligibility-focused pedagogy can help Uzbek EFL classes help students become more confident and articulate speakers of English. Future study might concentrate on longitudinal studies that monitor students' phonological development over time, as well as experimental studies that assess certain pronunciation therapies.

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