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Pronunciation Challenges Faced by Uzbek Learners of English

Sayfullayeva Mohinabonu Ulug'bekovna

Student of English Philology Faculty, UZSWLU

sayfullayevamoxinabonu4@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: This study investigates the particular pronunciation difficulties encountered by Uzbek learners in acquiring English. It focuses on important phonetic difficulties such as mispronounced consonants and vowels, improper stress placement, and intonation problems. A mixed-methods strategy was used to identify mistake associated with Uzbek phonology. The research included surveys and a pronunciation assessment among 30 second-year university students, the research highlights recurring error patterns linked to the influence of Uzbek phonology. Results indicate that learners commonly struggle with English sounds like /θ/, /ð/, and /v/, as well as distinguishing vowel lengths. The study concludes that customized phonetic training, increased exposure to native English pronunciation, and focused listening exercises can significantly improve learners' pronunciation abilities.

Keywords: pronunciation, phonetics, Uzbek learners, English, phonological interference, language learners

INTRODUCTION

English has become an essential tool for professional communication and academic success in today's globalized world. However, many Uzbek university students, despite having a good command of vocabulary and syntax, face major obstacles in spoken communication due to pronunciation problems. These difficulties often place them at a disadvantage, especially during presentations, any setting that requires oral fluency or job interview. According to Seidlhofer (2001), "pronunciation is not only about producing correct sounds; it also reflects a speaker's identity and their belonging to specific communities" (p. 56). This means mispronunciation can unintentionally affect how others perceive a speaker's confidence or ability.

Fresh graduates are particularly vulnerable in this regard. Many graduates fail to impress prospective employers not because of a lack of knowledge, but due to their inability to articulate thoughts clearly. This difficulty becomes more noticeable during classroom debates and oral presentations where poor pronunciation can lead to embarrassment and loss of self-confidence. Over time, such experiences may discourage students from actively participating in professional and academic conversation.

Research conducted in Uzbek universities indicates that pronunciation issues are among the most persistent problems for English language learners. According to Babajanova and Babadjanova (2023), students commonly

struggle with English sounds that do not exist in Uzbek, such as /θ/, /ð/, and /v/, as well as with stress and intonation patterns (pp. 459–460). These problems are frequently rooted in first-language interference, which makes it hard for learners to tell the difference between voiced and voiceless consonants or short and long vowels.

Pronunciation problems is not only a linguistic concern but also a psychological one. Pupils who pronounce words incorrectly frequently experience self-consciousness, which impacts their willingness to speak publicly. This affects their academic performance and limits their career prospects. As Seidlhofer (2001) emphasizes, pronunciation plays a central role in enabling learners to participate in social and professional communities confidently (pp. 56–65). Therefore, more pronunciation training should be given greater attention in English language classrooms, particularly at the university level.

Despite being aware of its significance, in Uzbekistan many English programs still place minimal emphasis on pronunciation instruction. The focus is mostly on reading and writing skills, leaving oral fluency and phonetic competence underdeveloped. This gap in teaching practice makes it essential to develop targeted pronunciation interventions, such as listening-based activities, native-speaker exposure, and phonetic drills.

In summary, the literature clearly illustrates that pronunciation affects both personal confidence and linguistic performance. As Uzbek learners continue to engage with English in academic and professional settings, improving their pronunciation must become a core component of language instruction.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to investigate the pronunciation challenges faced by Uzbek learners of English. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to gain a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

3.1 Participants

The participants included 30 second-year undergraduate students from the English Philology department at a major university in Uzbekistan. All participants had studied English for at least five years and had intermediate-level English proficiency (B1–B2 on the CEFR scale).

3.2 Instruments

Two primary tools were used:

A pronunciation diagnostic test, which included 20 words and 10 sentences designed to assess segmental and suprasegmental pronunciation features.

A questionnaire, adapted from Fraser (2000), which asked students to self-assess their pronunciation difficulties and learning strategies. It included both multiple-choice and open-ended questions.

3.3 Procedure

Students were recorded individually while reading the test materials aloud. Their pronunciation was then evaluated by two expert raters using an analytic rubric covering sound accuracy, word stress, intonation, and fluency. After the recordings, the questionnaire was administered in written form. Ethical approval was obtained, and participants gave informed consent.

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data (error frequencies, test scores) were analyzed using basic descriptive statistics, including percentages and averages. Qualitative data from open-ended questionnaire responses were thematically analyzed to identify patterns in learners' perceptions and challenges.

Results

The analysis revealed several consistent patterns in learners' pronunciation errors:

4.1 Segmental Errors

Interdental sounds (/θ/ and /ð/) were mispronounced by 90% of participants, often replaced with /s/, /t/, or /z/.

The voiced /v/ was frequently replaced by /w/ or /b/ in words such as very, voice, and seven.

Vowel length distinctions (e.g., ship/sheep, bit/beat) were not consistently maintained by 73% of learners.

4.2 Suprasegmental Errors

Incorrect word stress placement occurred in 65% of multisyllabic words.

Flat or unnatural intonation was evident in the sentence-reading task. Most students used a rising tone throughout, even in statements.

4.3 Questionnaire Responses

80% of students stated they lacked exposure to native or fluent English speakers.

67% expressed discomfort when speaking in public due to pronunciation anxiety.

Many students indicated that pronunciation was not given enough attention in their English classes.

Discussion

The findings confirm that Uzbek learners face both segmental and suprasegmental challenges in English pronunciation. These results align with previous studies such as Babajanova & Babadjanova (2023), who highlighted similar phonetic issues among Uzbek students.

The substitution of interdental fricatives (/θ/, /ð/) and labiodental sounds (/v/) can be explained through negative transfer from Uzbek phonology, which lacks these sounds. As Jenkins (2000) notes, such phonological mismatches are common across L1-L2 boundaries and require explicit instruction.

Suprasegmental errors, including intonation and stress, suggest that learners have limited phonological awareness—a factor closely tied to listening input and prosodic training (Seidlhofer, 2001). The lack of appropriate models in English classes contributes to this gap, as does an overemphasis on grammar and reading skills at the expense of speaking and listening.

Moreover, students' self-reported anxiety and avoidance of oral participation reflect how pronunciation is deeply tied to self-confidence and identity in language learning. As Fraser (2000) argues, pronunciation instruction must go beyond phonetic drills to include awareness-raising and confidence-building activities.

The study suggests that improved outcomes could be achieved through:
Integrating pronunciation instruction into every level of English teaching.

Providing students with audio-visual input featuring native pronunciation.

Encouraging peer interaction and speaking practice in safe, supportive environments.

Utilizing technology-based tools, such as speech recognition and pronunciation apps.

Conclusion

This research has explored the key pronunciation difficulties faced by Uzbek learners of English, focusing on both segmental sounds (such as /θ/, /ð/, /v/) and suprasegmental features like stress and intonation. The results clearly indicate that these challenges are influenced by the structural differences between Uzbek and English phonology, a lack of focused pronunciation instruction, and insufficient exposure to natural spoken English.

The significance of accurate pronunciation in academic and professional contexts cannot be overstated. Mispronunciation can impact learners' self-confidence, communication abilities, and career prospects. Therefore, pronunciation should not be treated as a supplementary skill, but as an essential part of English language education.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following practical recommendations are suggested:

1. Incorporate Pronunciation in Curriculum

Universities and language centers should integrate pronunciation training as a core component of English language programs rather than treating it as optional.

2. Use Authentic Listening Materials

Students should be regularly exposed to native and near-native English input through videos, podcasts, and films that highlight natural pronunciation features.

3. Implement Technology Tools

Applications such as Elsa Speak, YouGlish, or Google's speech recognition tools can help learners get real-time feedback on their pronunciation.

4. Provide Teacher Training

English teachers should receive specialized training in phonetics and pronunciation teaching techniques, enabling them to address students' pronunciation issues effectively.

5. Encourage Speaking Practice

Learners must be encouraged to participate in speaking activities, debates, and presentations to boost their confidence and reduce pronunciation anxiety.

6. Tailored Feedback

Teachers should give individualized feedback to help learners correct their errors and become more aware of problematic sounds. By implementing these strategies, learners can develop clearer, more confident pronunciation, leading to greater academic success and professional opportunities.

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