

PAPER

PRONUNCIATION CHALLENGES FOR UZBEK LEARNERS AND EFFECTIVE CLASSROOM SOLUTIONS

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Abstract

The article discusses the major pronunciation challenges faced by Uzbek EFL learners and offers viable solutions to overcome these challenges. The research is based on the phonological variations between the Uzbek and English languages, which are the major pronunciation challenges faced by Uzbek EFL learners. The research design of the study is qualitative, which involves a literature review, observations, interviews, and analysis of the speaking samples of the learners. The findings of the research reveal that pronunciation challenges are major hindrances to the intelligibility of EFL learners. In light of the findings, the article offers viable solutions to overcome pronunciation challenges faced by Uzbek EFL learners. The solutions include TBLT, ALM, technology, and communicative activities. These solutions are based on intelligibility rather than native accent.

Key words: pronunciation challenges, Uzbek EFL learners, English phonology, classroom strategies, spoken English, intelligibility

Introduction

Pronunciation is a critical part of successful communication in English. However, it has been a major obstacle for Uzbek students learning English as a foreign language. The phonological contrasts between Uzbek and English often cause pronunciation mistakes. Pronunciation mistakes include vowel confusion, problematic consonant sounds, consonant cluster difficulties, and incorrect

stress and intonation. Although pronunciation is a critical part of English learning, it seems that there has been a lack of emphasis on pronunciation in English as a foreign language among Uzbek students. The purpose of this paper is to identify the main pronunciation problems experienced by Uzbek students and find solutions to overcome these problems.

The participants in this study are foundation medical students in the University of Business and

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science in Namangan. Their age range is between 18–21 years old. Their level of English ranges from A2 to B1 according to CEFR. Their main aim to learn English language is mainly due to their future academic purposes and personal interests. They have basic communication skills which means they can communicate each other facing some comprehension and fluency difficulties. They have global mistakes in terms of pronunciation and grammar which make difficult to produce natural and clear speeches on daily conversations. Their limited exposure to real-life communications and insufficient pronunciation cause frequent big problems such as mispronouncing some sounds, consonant clusters and misusing word stress.

Methods

This qualitative research used a multi-method design, which included literature review, classroom observation, and teacher interviews. The data was gathered from A review of the existing literature on pronunciation problems in L2 speakers, with a focus on Uzbek phonological characteristics. Classroom observations were carried out in the group of medical students at University of Business and Science in Namangan. The participants are aged 18–21 years old. Semi-structured interviews with six experienced English teachers on frequent pronunciation mistakes and teaching practices. Analysis of the audio-recorded speaking samples of the learners during oral exams and communicative activities to find out frequent pronunciation mistakes.

Results

The analysis revealed several key pronunciation challenges among Uzbek learners:

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- **Vowel Confusions:** Learners struggled to distinguish English vowels such as /I/ vs. /i:/ (e.g., *ship* vs. *sheep*) and /æ/ vs. /V/ (e.g., *man* vs. *mun*), due to fewer vowel distinctions in Uzbek.
- **Consonant Problems:** Interdental sounds /T/ and /D/ were frequently replaced by /s/ or /z/, and learners often confused /w/ and /v/ (e.g., *west* pronounced as *vest*). Final consonants were often dropped or devoiced.

Consonant Clusters: Learners tended to insert epenthetic vowels to break up clusters unfamiliar in Uzbek (e.g., *school* → *ischool*).

Stress and Intonation: There was a tendency to place equal stress on all syllables and use flat intonation, reflecting the syllable-timed nature of Uzbek compared to English's stress-timed rhythm.

Weak Forms and Schwa: Learners found it difficult to produce reduced vowel sounds and weak forms in connected speech, leading to unnatural and overly careful pronunciation. Teachers reported that these difficulties negatively affected learners' intelligibility and confidence in spoken English.

Discussion

The identified pronunciation challenges are consistent with phonological contrasts between Uzbek and English. To address these issues, the study suggests several effective classroom solutions:

Explicit Pronunciation Instruction: Regular, focused training on problematic sounds, including minimal pair exercises to enhance discrimination and production.

Use of Digital Tools: Incorporating language learning apps such as ELSA Speak or YouGlish allows learners to hear and practice authentic pronunciation.

Shadowing and Repetition: Techniques that improve rhythm, stress, and intonation by mimicking native speaker audio samples.

Communicative Activities: Role-plays, information-gap tasks, and peer feedback encourage natural use of target pronunciation features in context.

Pronunciation Journals: Encouraging learners to record and reflect on their pronunciation progress promotes self-awareness and motivation. These approaches promote intelligibility rather than native-like accent perfection and are adaptable to typical Uzbek EFL classrooms with limited resources.

Additionally, observers suggest to implement TBLT, ALM and other useful methods to improve students' pronunciation skills. Rilinng (2018) states that ALM focused on language learning through listening to and repeating (speaking) dialogues and drills that exemplified linguistic patterns in the

target language, the target always defined by an idealized native-speaker standard.

These methods are really beneficial to correct common and uncommon pronunciation mistakes, solve misused word stress problems and teach how to pronounce some sounds that are difficult for A2 learners in a clear and simple way. Based on the structural patterns presented in the dialogue (for example, noun or verb forms, questions or negation) structured drills were conducted, which Brooks equated to the musician playing scales as warm up and practice (1960). Drills took a variety of forms from simple repetition drills, to sentence build-up drills (“We go ... We go swimming ... We go swimming on Wednesday”; or “on Wednesday ... swimming on Wednesday, go swimming on Wednesday ... We go swimming on Wednesday”) to substitution drills of one or more elements (slot and filler activities where limited new vocabulary is introduced to fill a gap created in sentences exemplifying a specific pattern), to transformation drills (declarative to imperative sentences, or sentence combining to create relative clauses) (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011).

Conclusion

The pronunciation challenges for Uzbek learners of English stem from differences in their phonology and lack of attention to pronunciation in their learning process. To overcome these challenges, there is a need to employ different approaches such as TBLT and ALM, use of technology, and communicative activities such as using different activities that require completing different situations and scenarios. In this course that focuses on speaking and pronouncing words correctly, teachers should apply the framework by using the opposite approach, beginning from pronunciation to less structured speaking activities. The instructions should mainly focus on suprasegmentals such as stress, rhythm, intonation, and pitch since they make a great contribution to pronunciation. In this way, EFL teachers can help their learners improve their pronunciation of English.

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