

PAPER

PHONETIC INTERFERENCE IN UZBEK LEARNERS' PRODUCTION OF ENGLISH SOUNDS

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Abstract

This study investigates phonetic interference observed in the production of English sounds by Uzbek learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The research examines how the phonological structure of the Uzbek language influences learners' articulation of English segmental and suprasegmental features. Using a contrastive and acoustic-phonetic approach, speech samples from university students were analyzed to identify systematic pronunciation deviations. The findings reveal that differences in consonant inventory, vowel reduction, syllable structure, and stress patterns lead to predictable interference errors. The study highlights the pedagogical importance of incorporating contrastive phonetic training and instrumental analysis into pronunciation instruction in Uzbek EFL contexts.

Key words: phonetic interference, cross-linguistic influence, Uzbek EFL learners, pronunciation, contrastive phonetics, acoustic analysis

The acquisition of accurate pronunciation in a second language is widely recognized as one of the most challenging aspects of language learning. This difficulty is particularly evident when learners attempt to produce sounds that do not exist in their native phonological system. In such cases, learners tend to rely on familiar articulatory habits, which leads to what is commonly described as phonetic interference or negative transfer.

Phonetic interference refers to the influence of a speaker's first language (L1) on the production

of sounds in a target language (L2), often resulting in systematic deviations from native-like pronunciation. The phenomenon is not random but is shaped by structural differences between the two languages involved. In the context of Uzbek learners studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL), these differences are especially pronounced because English and Uzbek belong to different linguistic families and exhibit contrasting phonetic, phonological, and prosodic features.

English is characterized by a rich consonant

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inventory, complex consonant clusters, vowel reduction in unstressed syllables, and a stress-timed rhythmic organization. Uzbek, in contrast, has a more symmetrical vowel system, relatively simple syllable structures, limited consonant clustering, and a tendency toward syllable-timed rhythm with predictable stress placement. These typological distinctions create fertile ground for cross-linguistic influence during second-language speech production. Uzbek learners often interpret English sounds through the filter of their native phonological categories, substituting unfamiliar sounds with the closest equivalents available in Uzbek. As a result, pronunciation errors observed among Uzbek learners frequently reflect structural adaptation rather than lack of knowledge.

The present study investigates how Uzbek phonetic patterns interfere with the production of English sounds and seeks to identify the most recurrent areas of difficulty. The research is based on speech data collected from thirty undergraduate students majoring in English at a university in Uzbekistan. All participants had studied English for several years and demonstrated intermediate to upper-intermediate proficiency levels. To elicit relevant pronunciation features, participants completed a series of tasks including the reading of isolated words, sentence-level production, and short instances of spontaneous speech. The materials were carefully designed to include English phonemes and phonotactic structures known to be problematic for speakers of Uzbek, such as interdental fricatives, consonant clusters, reduced vowels, and contrastive stress patterns.

Analysis of the recorded material revealed consistent substitution patterns in the production of English consonants absent from the Uzbek sound system. One of the most prominent examples involved the interdental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/, which do not occur in Uzbek. Learners frequently replaced /θ/ with /s/ or /t/, producing forms such as *think* as *sink* or *tink*, while /ð/ was often realized as /z/ or /d/, as in *this* pronounced *dis*. These substitutions can be explained articulatorily: Uzbek lacks dental fricatives and instead relies on alveolar consonants, prompting learners to select the nearest articulatory configuration available to them. This reflects a common cross-linguistic

strategy in which unfamiliar sounds are assimilated to familiar phonetic categories.

Another significant area of interference emerged in the treatment of consonant clusters. English permits complex initial and final clusters, as seen in words like *spring*, *texts*, and *glimpsed*, whereas Uzbek syllable structure typically favors consonant-vowel patterns and restricts cluster complexity. Uzbek learners often inserted vowels to break up unfamiliar clusters, producing *spring* as *sipring* or *espring* and *texts* as *tekis*. This phenomenon, known as epenthesis, allows speakers to reshape foreign phonotactic structures into forms compatible with native-language constraints. Such adaptations demonstrate that pronunciation errors frequently arise not from articulatory inability but from deeply ingrained syllable-structure preferences.

Vowel production also showed strong evidence of native-language influence, particularly in the absence of vowel reduction. English relies heavily on the schwa /ə/ and other centralized vowels in unstressed syllables, contributing to its characteristic rhythmic pattern. Uzbek, however, maintains clearer vowel quality regardless of stress, and reduction plays a far less significant role. Consequently, learners tended to pronounce unstressed vowels with full articulation, saying *about* as [abaut] rather than /bat/ and *teacher* as [titer] instead of /tit/. Acoustic measurements confirmed that vowel duration and quality remained relatively stable across stressed and unstressed syllables, indicating transfer of Uzbek vowel stability into English speech.

Prosodic features provided further evidence of phonetic interference. English lexical stress is variable and can distinguish meaning, whereas Uzbek stress is more predictable and often falls on the final syllable. Many participants shifted English stress toward the end of words, producing *TABLE* as taBLE and *DOCTOR* as docTOR. This stress reallocation altered not only word-level prominence but also overall rhythm, reducing the contrast between stressed and unstressed syllables that is essential for intelligibility in English. Instrumental analysis demonstrated weaker intensity differences and more uniform syllable timing, reinforcing the observation that Uzbek learners tend to impose

syllable-timed rhythm onto English utterances.

The findings of this study support theoretical models of second-language speech learning which argue that learners perceive and produce new sounds through the framework of existing phonological knowledge. When phonetic categories in the target language are sufficiently different from those in the native language, learners may fail to establish new distinctions unless they receive explicit instruction and perceptual training. In the case of Uzbek learners, the lack of interdental fricatives, limited consonant clusters, absence of systematic vowel reduction, and fixed stress tendencies collectively shape a recognizable accent pattern. These features illustrate how cross-linguistic influence operates simultaneously at segmental and suprasegmental levels.

From a pedagogical perspective, the results highlight the necessity of integrating contrastive phonetics into English pronunciation teaching in Uzbekistan. Traditional instruction often emphasizes grammar and vocabulary while treating pronunciation as secondary, yet the data show that intelligibility issues stem from predictable structural mismatches that can be addressed through targeted training. Teaching strategies should therefore include explicit explanation of articulatory settings, guided practice with problematic sounds, and exposure to rhythmic and stress-based exercises that develop awareness of English prosody. The use of acoustic visualization tools, such as spectrograms and waveform analysis, can further enhance learners' ability to notice distinctions that are not immediately apparent through listening alone.

In conclusion, phonetic interference in Uzbek learners' production of English sounds arises from systematic differences between the phonological systems of the two languages rather than from random error. Uzbek learners adapt English pronunciation to fit native articulatory habits, syllable patterns, and rhythmic organization, leading to recurring substitutions, vowel insertion, lack of reduction, and stress misplacement. Recognizing these patterns allows educators and researchers to move beyond error correction toward informed pedagogical design grounded in cross-linguistic analysis. By addressing the specific

sources of interference identified in this study, pronunciation instruction can more effectively support Uzbek learners in developing clearer and more intelligible English speech, thereby enhancing their communicative competence in international contexts.

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