

COMMON PRONUNCIATION DIFFICULTIES FACED BY UZBEK
LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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Abstract: *Pronunciation is an essential component of successful oral communication in a foreign language. For Uzbek learners of English, developing accurate and intelligible pronunciation can be challenging because the phonological systems of Uzbek and English differ in several important respects. This article examines common pronunciation difficulties faced by Uzbek learners of English from a comparative phonological perspective. Particular attention is given to vowel contrasts, unfamiliar consonants, consonant clusters, word stress, rhythm, and intonation. The article also considers the role of first-language interference in the development of pronunciation difficulties. The analysis is based on existing research on English pronunciation and English–Uzbek phonological differences rather than on original experimental data. The discussion demonstrates that Uzbek learners may experience difficulties when English sounds or phonological patterns do not have close equivalents in their first language. Segmental problems, such as the distinction between /ɪ/ and /i:/ and the production of /θ/ and /ð/, can occur alongside suprasegmental difficulties involving stress, rhythm, and intonation. The article argues that effective pronunciation instruction should address these difficulties systematically through focused listening, minimal-pair practice, articulatory awareness, and contextualized speaking activities.*

Keywords: *English pronunciation, Uzbek learners, phonology, first-language interference, vowel contrasts, consonants, word stress, intonation*

1. INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation plays an important role in successful communication because the way sounds are produced can influence both intelligibility and the listener's understanding of a speaker's message. Although pronunciation is sometimes treated as a secondary component of foreign language learning, difficulties with individual sounds, word stress, rhythm, and intonation can make spoken communication more difficult. Research in pronunciation pedagogy increasingly emphasizes intelligibility and effective communication rather than the complete elimination of a learner's accent.

For Uzbek learners of English, pronunciation can be particularly challenging because Uzbek and English have different phonological systems. Learners may encounter English sounds that are absent from Uzbek, vowel distinctions that are not organized in the same way in their first language, and consonant combinations that are unfamiliar. Recent research focusing specifically on Uzbek learners identifies vowel contrasts, dental fricatives, consonant clusters, stress, rhythm, and intonation among the recurring areas of difficulty.

One important source of these difficulties is first-language interference. When learners encounter an unfamiliar English sound, they may unconsciously interpret or produce it through the categories available in their native language. Consequently, an English sound may

be replaced by a sound that is perceived as similar in Uzbek. For example, research on Uzbek learners has reported difficulties distinguishing English /ɪ/ and /i:/, as in *ship* and *sheep*, while unfamiliar consonants such as /θ/ and /ð/ may also create difficulties.

Pronunciation difficulties are not limited to individual sounds. English also differs from Uzbek in its use of stress and rhythm. English is commonly described as a stress-timed language, while Uzbek has different rhythmic and stress patterns. As a result, Uzbek learners may transfer aspects of their first-language rhythm and stress patterns into English speech, producing pronunciation that may be grammatically understandable but less natural or less intelligible. Recent Uzbek-focused research identifies both segmental and suprasegmental differences as important sources of pronunciation difficulty.

The purpose of this article is to examine the most common pronunciation difficulties faced by Uzbek learners of English and to explain how differences between the two phonological systems contribute to these difficulties. The article also considers pedagogical approaches that can help learners develop clearer and more intelligible pronunciation. Rather than presenting original experimental findings, the article uses existing research and comparative phonological analysis to identify recurring problems and their possible causes.

2. Phonological Differences Between Uzbek and English

The pronunciation difficulties experienced by Uzbek learners can be partly understood by comparing the sound systems of Uzbek and English. English contains a relatively large inventory of vowel sounds, including short vowels, long vowels, and diphthongs. Uzbek has a comparatively smaller vowel system. This difference can make it difficult for Uzbek learners to establish separate phonological categories for English vowels that do not have close equivalents in Uzbek. Recent comparative research specifically identifies vowel replacement and confusion between English vowel categories as recurring problems among Uzbek learners.

The difference between English /ɪ/ and /i:/ is one example. The words *ship* and *sheep* differ in vowel quality and length, and this difference contributes to their different meanings. Learners whose first language does not organize these sounds in the same way may have difficulty hearing and producing the distinction consistently.

Consonants also present difficulties. English includes sounds such as /θ/ and /ð/, which are not represented in the same way in Uzbek. Consequently, learners may substitute more familiar consonants for these sounds. Similar difficulties have been reported in recent studies of Uzbek EFL learners.

Another difference concerns consonant combinations. English permits a wide range of consonant clusters, including complex combinations at the beginning and end of words. Uzbek learners may simplify such clusters by omitting a consonant or inserting a vowel. Research on Uzbek learners provides examples of this type of cluster simplification, particularly in words containing unfamiliar consonant sequences.

These differences demonstrate that pronunciation difficulties should not simply be regarded as individual learner weaknesses. In many cases, they are predictable consequences of differences between the learner's first language and the target language.

3. Major Pronunciation Difficulties

3.1. Difficulty with English Vowel Contrasts

Vowels represent one of the most significant areas of difficulty for Uzbek learners. English contains several vowel distinctions that may not have direct counterparts in Uzbek. As a result, learners can have difficulty both perceiving and producing certain contrasts.

The distinction between /ɪ/ and /i:/ is particularly important. For example:

- *ship* /ʃɪp/ – *sheep* /ʃi:p/
- *live* /lɪv/ – *leave* /li:v/
- *sit* /sɪt/ – *seat* /si:t/

If learners do not clearly distinguish these sounds, words with different meanings may sound similar. Recent research involving Uzbek learners reports precisely this type of difficulty, with /ɪ/ and /i:/ sometimes being realized similarly.

Other English vowel contrasts can create similar problems. The important point is that pronunciation instruction should not focus only on producing individual sounds. Learners also need to develop the ability to **hear the difference between sounds** before they can consistently produce them.

3.2. The Dental Fricatives /θ/ and /ð/

The English sounds /θ/ and /ð/, found in words such as *think*, *three*, *this*, and *mother*, are another common difficulty for Uzbek learners.

Because these sounds are unfamiliar, learners may replace them with more familiar consonants. Such substitutions can affect intelligibility, particularly when the resulting sound creates another English word.

For example, learners may have difficulty maintaining the distinction between:

- *thin* and *tin*
- *three* and *tree*
- *then* and *den*

Research focusing on Uzbek learners repeatedly identifies /θ/ and /ð/ among the consonants that cause pronunciation difficulties.

The difficulty is partly articulatory. To produce /θ/ and /ð/, the tongue is positioned between or close to the upper and lower teeth while air passes through the narrow opening. Learners who have never used this articulation may naturally substitute a more familiar sound.

3.3. Consonant Clusters

English consonant clusters can also create difficulties. Words such as *school*, *street*, *texts*, and *asked* contain combinations of consonants that may be difficult for Uzbek learners to produce accurately.

When a consonant sequence is unfamiliar, learners may simplify it by deleting one of the consonants or inserting a vowel. For example, a learner may pronounce a word such as *school* with an additional initial vowel. Research on Uzbek EFL learners has documented consonant-cluster simplification and vowel insertion as recurring patterns.

These problems demonstrate the influence of first-language phonotactics. Learners tend to rely on familiar patterns when producing unfamiliar structures. Therefore, repeated practice with English clusters can help learners gradually develop greater control over these sequences.

3.4. Word Stress

Pronouncing individual sounds correctly does not automatically guarantee intelligible English pronunciation. Word stress is another important difficulty.

English words contain stressed and unstressed syllables, and incorrect stress placement can make a familiar word difficult for listeners to recognize. Uzbek learners may transfer stress patterns from Uzbek or may rely heavily on written forms when deciding where English stress should fall.

For example, the following pairs demonstrate how stress can distinguish grammatical categories in English:

- **PREsent** — noun
- pre**SENT** — verb
- **REcord** — noun
- re**CORD** — verb

Learners therefore need to develop awareness not only of individual phonemes but also of the rhythmic organization of English words.

Recent Uzbek-focused research identifies word stress as one of the major areas in which learners experience difficulties.

3.5. Rhythm and Intonation

Suprasegmental features such as rhythm and intonation are particularly important for natural spoken communication. English speech is strongly influenced by stressed syllables, while unstressed syllables are frequently reduced. Learners whose first language uses different rhythmic patterns may have difficulty reproducing this organization.

Intonation can also affect how an utterance is interpreted. Rising and falling pitch patterns can signal questions, statements, surprise, uncertainty, or other pragmatic meanings. Uzbek learners may therefore produce grammatically correct sentences while still sounding less natural because of differences in stress, rhythm, or intonation.

Recent research on Uzbek learners identifies these suprasegmental features alongside segmental problems such as vowel and consonant difficulties.

4. The Role of First-Language Interference

One of the main explanations for pronunciation difficulties in second-language learning is first-language interference. Learners do not approach a new language without an existing phonological system. Instead, they interpret and produce unfamiliar sounds through categories and patterns that have already been established in their first language.

This principle is particularly relevant to Uzbek learners of English because the two languages differ in their vowel systems, consonant inventories, syllable structures, stress patterns, and rhythmic organization. Recent research on Uzbek EFL learners describes pronunciation problems as systematic outcomes of phonological differences between the two languages rather than as random individual mistakes.

For example, when Uzbek learners encounter the English /ɪ/–/i:/ distinction, they may not initially perceive the two vowels as sufficiently different to require separate phonological categories. Similarly, the English dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ may be replaced by sounds that

are more familiar from Uzbek. These patterns illustrate how learners can rely on existing L1 categories when developing their L2 pronunciation.

First-language interference can also affect syllable structure. When English contains a consonant cluster that is unfamiliar to a learner, the learner may simplify the structure by deleting a consonant or inserting a vowel. Such processes are understandable from a learning perspective because they allow the speaker to produce the unfamiliar sequence using patterns that are more consistent with the phonological system already available to them.

Importantly, first-language interference should not be viewed exclusively as a negative phenomenon. Knowledge of the learner's first language can help teachers predict areas that may require additional attention. Comparative analysis of Uzbek and English can therefore provide a useful basis for planning pronunciation instruction.

5. Pedagogical Implications

The identification of recurring pronunciation difficulties has important implications for English language teaching in Uzbekistan. Pronunciation instruction should not be limited to asking learners to repeat words after the teacher. Instead, learners should receive systematic opportunities to perceive, analyze, produce, and use problematic sounds and prosodic features in meaningful communication.

5.1. Developing Perception Before Production

An important first step is helping learners hear distinctions that are difficult for them. If learners cannot reliably distinguish two sounds, producing the distinction accurately is likely to remain difficult.

Minimal-pair activities can therefore be useful. Pairs such as *ship–sheep*, *live–leave*, *thin–tin*, and *three–tree* can help learners notice differences in vowel quality, vowel length, and consonant articulation.

Listening activities can also be combined with identification tasks. For example, learners can listen to a series of words and indicate which word they hear before attempting to pronounce the words themselves. This approach develops phonological awareness rather than relying entirely on imitation.

An intelligibility-based approach to pronunciation similarly emphasizes perception as an important component of successful spoken communication and recommends prioritizing pronunciation features according to their effect on intelligibility.

5.2. Articulatory Awareness

Learners can benefit from understanding how problematic sounds are physically produced. This is particularly relevant to /θ/ and /ð/, because these sounds require an articulatory position that may be unfamiliar to Uzbek speakers.

Teachers can demonstrate tongue position, airflow, and voicing and then allow learners to practice the sounds gradually. Visual diagrams, mirrors, video demonstrations, and teacher modeling can make articulatory information easier to understand.

The purpose should not be to overwhelm learners with theoretical phonetics. Rather, a small amount of articulatory information can help learners understand why a particular sound is different from the sound they naturally produce.

5.3. Practicing Consonant Clusters

Consonant clusters require gradual and repeated practice. Instead of asking learners to immediately produce a complex word at natural speed, teachers can break the word into manageable stages and gradually increase the speed.

For example, learners can practice individual consonants first, then shorter sequences, and finally the complete word. Reading aloud, controlled repetition, and short communicative activities can help learners transfer this practice into connected speech.

This is particularly important because cluster difficulties are not simply problems with individual consonants. Learners must also develop the ability to organize several consonants within an English syllable without inserting unnecessary vowels or deleting sounds.

5.4. Teaching Stress, Rhythm, and Intonation

Pronunciation teaching should also include suprasegmental features. Learners need to understand which syllables receive prominence, how unstressed syllables are produced, and how intonation contributes to meaning.

Activities such as marking stressed syllables, clapping or tapping rhythmic patterns, shadowing short recordings, and comparing question and statement intonation can help learners notice these features.

For example, learners can compare:

PREsent	—	noun
pre SENT	—	verb

They can then practice the words in short sentences rather than studying stress only as an isolated rule.

Levis argues for an intelligibility-based approach that includes word stress, consonant clusters, rhythm, connected speech, prominence, and intonation among the features that deserve attention in pronunciation teaching.

5.5. Focusing on Intelligibility Rather Than Native-Like Perfection

An important implication of contemporary pronunciation research is that the goal of pronunciation instruction does not necessarily need to be the complete elimination of a learner's foreign accent. Instead, instruction should prioritize clear and effective communication.

Derwing and Munro emphasize mutual intelligibility as an important goal in pronunciation teaching, while Levis argues that some pronunciation features have a greater effect on intelligibility than others.

This principle is particularly relevant in the Uzbek EFL context. Teachers have limited classroom time and therefore need to prioritize pronunciation features that are most likely to affect understanding. Difficult sounds such as /θ/ and /ð/, important vowel contrasts, consonant clusters, word stress, and major intonation patterns can receive focused attention while learners continue developing an individual accent.

Discussion

The evidence reviewed in this article suggests that pronunciation difficulties among Uzbek learners of English are systematic and can be partly explained by differences between the Uzbek and English phonological systems. The difficulties occur at both the segmental and suprasegmental levels.

At the segmental level, learners may experience difficulty with English vowel contrasts, unfamiliar consonants, and complex consonant clusters. At the suprasegmental level, stress, rhythm, connected speech, and intonation can create additional challenges. Recent research conducted in Uzbekistan reports these same categories of difficulty and emphasizes the role of cross-linguistic influence.

However, the existence of a pronunciation difficulty does not mean that every Uzbek learner will make the same error. Individual differences, amount of exposure to English, age, motivation, previous pronunciation instruction, and opportunities for communication can all influence pronunciation development.

It is therefore more useful to view L1 interference as a **predictive factor** rather than a fixed explanation for every learner's pronunciation. Comparative phonological analysis can help teachers anticipate potential difficulties, but learners' actual pronunciation should still be assessed individually.

The review also highlights the importance of integrating pronunciation with communicative language teaching. Pronunciation should not be treated as an isolated activity that occurs only during occasional phonetics lessons. Learners need opportunities to apply pronunciation features in dialogues, presentations, discussions, and other forms of authentic spoken communication.

This approach is consistent with the broader movement in pronunciation pedagogy from a purely native-speaker model toward an intelligibility-oriented model. The objective is not necessarily to make Uzbek learners sound indistinguishable from native speakers, but to help them produce speech that listeners can understand easily and that allows them to participate confidently in English communication.

CONCLUSION

Pronunciation is an essential part of successful English communication, and Uzbek learners may face a number of systematic difficulties because the phonological systems of Uzbek and English differ in important ways. The present review has identified several major areas of difficulty, including English vowel contrasts, the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/, consonant clusters, word stress, rhythm, and intonation.

The analysis indicates that first-language interference provides an important explanation for many of these difficulties. When English sounds or phonological patterns do not correspond closely to those of Uzbek, learners may rely on familiar L1 categories and structures. This can lead to sound substitution, vowel insertion, consonant deletion, misplaced stress, and differences in rhythm and intonation.

Nevertheless, pronunciation difficulties should not be considered permanent limitations. With appropriate instruction, learners can develop greater awareness and control of unfamiliar English sounds and prosodic features. Effective instruction should combine perception and production activities, minimal-pair practice, articulatory explanations, consonant-cluster training, and work on stress, rhythm, and intonation.

Most importantly, pronunciation teaching should be connected with communicative goals. Contemporary pronunciation research emphasizes intelligibility rather than the complete elimination of a foreign accent. Therefore, English teachers in Uzbekistan should

prioritize pronunciation features that have a meaningful effect on understanding and provide learners with opportunities to practice these features in authentic communicative contexts.

In conclusion, the pronunciation difficulties faced by Uzbek learners are largely predictable from the linguistic differences between Uzbek and English, but they are also teachable and manageable. A systematic, intelligibility-oriented approach can help learners develop clearer pronunciation, greater confidence, and more effective participation in spoken English communication.

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