

THE IMPORTANCE OF ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION SKILLS AMONG UZBEK HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AND EFFECTIVE METHODS FOR THEIR DEVELOPMENT, INCLUDING THE ROLE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

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Abstract.

In contemporary Uzbekistan, English has become increasingly important due to academic mobility, international employment, and growing global interconnectedness. As a result, mastery of spoken English especially accurate and intelligible pronunciation has become a critical component of communicative competence for high school students. Despite strong motivation to learn English, many learners face persistent challenges in producing natural pronunciation because of structural differences between English and Uzbek, limited access to authentic input, and insufficient phonetic instruction. This article examines the significance of pronunciation within second language competence, identifies the major difficulties encountered by Uzbek learners, and evaluates effective pedagogical strategies, including recent advancements in AI-supported pronunciation training tools.

Introduction

The expanding role of English as a global lingua franca has reshaped educational and professional landscapes across the world. In Uzbekistan, increasing numbers of students aspire to study in foreign universities, participate in international programs, and join multinational workplaces, all of which require strong oral communication skills. Pronunciation lies at the heart of spoken proficiency because it contributes directly to intelligibility, communicative clarity, and overall listener comprehension (Derwing & Munro, 2015) [3]. Yet many Uzbek high school students struggle with specific phonetic and prosodic features of English, often leading to miscommunication or reduced confidence in speaking.

These challenges arise from fundamental typological differences between Uzbek, which belongs to the Turkic language family, and English, which is part of the Germanic branch. Furthermore, the traditional emphasis on grammar and vocabulary in Uzbek EFL classrooms has often overshadowed pronunciation instruction. At the same time, the recent rise of artificial intelligence in education has introduced new opportunities to support learners through automated speech recognition, immediate feedback systems, and adaptive pronunciation guidance (Li, 2022) [8]. This article explores the causes of pronunciation difficulties among Uzbek high school learners and evaluates the potential of both traditional and AI-supported instructional methods.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative review of scholarly literature in second language phonology, pronunciation pedagogy, and educational technology. Widely cited theoretical frameworks, including

the works of Celce-Murcia et al. (2010), Derwing and Munro (2015) [3], and Hancock (2003) [6], provide the basis for analyzing linguistic and instructional factors that influence pronunciation development. The article also draws upon comparative analyses between English and Uzbek phonological systems as described in linguistic literature and documented in local classroom cases. In addition, recent studies on AI-assisted language learning and speech evaluation tools are reviewed to identify their relevance in the Uzbek educational context. This article does not produce new empirical data; rather, it synthesizes existing research to interpret the challenges and propose informed pedagogical approaches.

Results

Uzbek high school students face several recurring difficulties when learning English pronunciation. One of the most prominent challenges is interference from English orthography. Unlike Uzbek, English has an inconsistent relationship between spelling and sound, and learners who rely on written forms often mispronounce words such as “through,” “though,” and “thought.” This pattern reflects what Cook (2010) [2] describes as spelling-based interference in second language production.

Another significant challenge stems from phonemic differences between the two languages. English contains many sounds absent in Uzbek, such as the fricatives /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/, and /ʒ/. Learners often substitute these unfamiliar sounds with phonetically similar ones from their native language, which leads to reduced intelligibility. This observation is consistent with the predictions of Lado’s (1957) [7] Contrastive analysis hypothesis.

Stress and prosody also present persistent difficulties. Uzbek typically places stress on the final syllable, while English uses variable stress that may alter both meaning and grammatical category, as demonstrated in pairs like REcord and reCORD. Incorrect stress placement can disrupt the rhythm and clarity of speech, echoing Hahn’s (2004) [5] findings on the importance of primary stress for listener comprehension.

Learners also have limited exposure to authentic English input. Flege’s (1995) Speech Learning Model emphasizes the importance of rich auditory input for developing new phonetic categories. In Uzbekistan, classroom instruction often remains the primary source of exposure, which limits opportunities for natural phonological acquisition.

Finally, pronunciation remains underrepresented in many school curricula. Derwing and Munro (2015) [3] note that without explicit, systematic instruction, learners may fossilize inaccurate sound patterns, making later correction more difficult.

Discussion

Pronunciation is fundamental to oral communication, intelligibility, and perceptions of proficiency. High-stakes assessments such as IELTS and TOEFL explicitly assess pronunciation, emphasizing its relevance for academic and professional mobility. Research also suggests that improved pronunciation enhances learners’ confidence, participation, and willingness to communicate (Saito, 2019) [9].

Several pedagogical approaches have been shown to enhance pronunciation development. Explicit phonetic instruction, involving the articulation of sounds, stress patterns, and intonation, enables learners to understand and reproduce features that differ from their native language. Celce-Murcia et al. (2010) [1] argue that explicit instruction combined with communicative practice produces optimal results.

Authentic auditory input, such as films, podcasts, and structured listening activities, also plays a critical role. Hancock (2003) [6] emphasizes the benefits of materials that incorporate both controlled and natural pronunciation practice. Shadowing exercises, minimal pair drills, and extensive listening can support phonetic awareness and production accuracy.

Artificial intelligence has recently become a powerful tool in pronunciation learning. AI-driven applications use speech recognition to evaluate learners’ production, highlight inaccuracies, and offer personalized feedback. Research indicates that AI-assisted pronunciation training can lead to significant improvement in segmental accuracy and prosodic control (Li, 2022) [8]. These tools are especially valuable in regions where access to native-speaker input and specialized phonetics instructors is limited.

Communicative interaction remains essential. Conversation clubs, online exchanges, and real-time speaking practice provide learners with meaningful contexts in which to apply newly learned pronunciation features. Such practice supports long-term retention and natural speech development.

For Uzbekistan, these findings imply that a more balanced approach to English instruction is needed one that prioritizes explicit phonetic training, increases access to authentic input, and integrates innovative technologies. AI tools can expand opportunities for personalized learning, particularly in under-resourced schools.

Conclusion

Pronunciation plays a vital role in enabling Uzbek high school students to participate effectively in global academic and professional contexts. Although learners face substantial challenges due to linguistic differences, limited exposure, and insufficient phonetic training, research-based instructional strategies can significantly improve pronunciation outcomes. Explicit phonetic instruction, extensive listening to authentic English, and communicative practice form the foundation of effective pronunciation development. AI-supported tools enhance this foundation by providing immediate, individualized feedback and accessible practice opportunities. By adopting a comprehensive and modern approach, educators in Uzbekistan can help students develop more accurate and confident spoken English skills, thereby expanding their opportunities for global engagement.

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