CHALLENGES FACED BY UZBEK STUDENTS IN LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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Abstract This study investigates the challenges encountered by Uzbek students in learning English as a second language (ESL). Despite various educational reforms aimed at improving English proficiency, many students still face significant difficulties, including linguistic barriers, psychological challenges, and limitations within the institutional framework. This research uses a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys and semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students from Tashkent universities to understand the primary obstacles to ESL learning. The findings highlight issues such as grammar and vocabulary limitations, anxiety, low motivation, and the lack of real-life language exposure. Recommendations are provided for both educators and students to enhance the learning process, emphasizing more communicative teaching strategies, increased use of digital tools, and practical language practice.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition (SLA), ESL (English as a Second Language), Uzbek learners, linguistic challenges, vocabulary acquisition,

pronunciation difficulties, psychological barriers, language learning anxiety, motivation in language learning, teacher-centered approach, communicative language teaching (CLT), educational reforms in Uzbekistan, student-centered learning, English proficiency, language exposure, institutional barriers, task-based learning, Affective Filter Hypothesis

Introduction In today's interconnected world, English has emerged as the dominant global language, serving as a lingua franca across diverse domains such as education, business, science, and technology. As a result, the acquisition of English as a second language (ESL) has become a key priority in non-English speaking nations. In Uzbekistan, where Uzbek is the state language and Russian still maintains a strong presence, English is considered a critical skill for academic advancement, international mobility, and career development.

In response to globalization, the government of Uzbekistan has launched several reforms in recent years aimed at enhancing foreign language education. The "Presidential Decree on Improving the System of Teaching Foreign Languages" (2021) highlights the importance of communicative competence, modern teaching materials, and teacher training. English has been introduced from primary school levels, and digital platforms have been integrated into national curricula. Despite these commendable efforts, a substantial number of students continue to struggle with English proficiency. National assessments and university placement tests frequently reveal that even after years of instruction, learners possess only basic communicative skills. Learning English as a second language in Uzbekistan involves a complex interplay of cognitive, emotional, institutional, and sociocultural factors. Studies in second language acquisition (SLA) have shown that effective learning depends not only on exposure and instruction but also on learners' motivation, self-confidence, and opportunities for authentic communication (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Uzbek students often experience challenges such as poor vocabulary retention, fear of

speaking, limited practice, and lack of immersion — all of which impede their ability to become fluent users of the language.

Previous research (Karimova et al., 2021; Muradova, 2020) has outlined some of these problems, but many studies remain theoretical or limited in scope. There is a need for more student-centered research that captures learners' perspectives on the challenges they face and the factors contributing to them. This study aims to address that gap by surveying university students from different majors and English proficiency levels in Tashkent. The purpose of this study is to investigate the major difficulties Uzbek undergraduate students encounter while learning English as a second language and to understand the emotional and institutional factors that underlie these challenges coming them.

Methods Participant The study was conducted with a purposive sample of 60 undergraduate students enrolled in various faculties at three major universities in Tashkent: Uzbekistan State World Languages University, Tashkent State Pedagogical University, and the University of Journalism and Mass Communication. The sample included 35 English philology majors and 25 non-English majors (e.g., law, economics, journalism). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 23 and represented diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. All participants had received formal English instruction for at least five years, with self-reported proficiency ranging from pre-intermediate to upper-intermediate (A2–B2 CEFR levels).

Instrumentation To gather comprehensive data, a mixed-methods approach was adopted. A modified version of a survey used by Karimova et al. (2021) was employed. The survey included:

15 multiple-choice questions assessing language learning challenges

5 Likert-scale items on motivation, confidence, and classroom practices

3 open-ended questions about personal learning experiences and suggestions for improvement

In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sub-sample of 12 students to gain deeper insight into their emotional and cognitive struggles. Interview questions addressed classroom practices, psychological barriers, and real-life use of English.

Data Collection Data were collected over a three-week period in March 2025. The survey was distributed electronically via university mailing lists and student Telegram groups. In-person interviews were conducted in quiet rooms at university libraries, each lasting approximately 20–30 minutes. Participants provided informed consent, and anonymity was ensured.

Data Analysis Quantitative data from the surveys were analyzed using SPSS software, focusing on descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and means. Open-ended responses and interview transcripts were analyzed thematically using Braun & Clarke's (2006) approach. Coding focused on linguistic issues, emotional factors, and classroom experiences. Data triangulation ensured the reliability and validity of findings.

Results Linguistic Challenges

Students reported persistent issues with key components of the English language:

Grammar and Syntax: 76% of respondents found English verb tenses and conditional sentences difficult. Many expressed confusion about word order differences between Uzbek (SOV) and English (SVO) structures.

Vocabulary Limitations: 61% struggled with recalling or using appropriate vocabulary during speaking and writing. Passive vocabulary recognition was higher than active production.

Pronunciation Difficulties: 58% cited problems with pronouncing sounds not present in Uzbek phonology, particularly /θ/, /ð/, and /r/, leading to self-censorship in speaking tasks.

Psychological Barriers Several emotional and cognitive barriers were highlighted:

1.Fear of Making Mistakes: Nearly half (48%) felt anxious about speaking due to fear of being corrected or ridiculed.

2.Low Motivation: 43% indicated they were demotivated due to repetitive, grammar-focused lessons that lacked real-world relevance.

3.Lack of Confidence: Students compared themselves unfavorably with native speakers on social media platforms like TikTok or YouTube, affecting self-esteem.

Institutional and Environmental Factors Students pointed out systemic issues in the educational infrastructure:

Teacher-Centered Instruction: 54% of participants reported minimal student interaction in classrooms. Lessons were heavily focused on grammar translation methods.

Limited English Exposure: 66% of students had few opportunities to use English outside the classroom, with minimal access to conversation clubs, native speakers, or exchange programs.

Outdated Learning Materials: Many textbooks used were published more than a decade ago and lacked integration of digital tools or modern vocabulary.

Additional Findings. Interviews revealed a disconnect between what students perceive as useful (e.g., films, games, travel) and what is taught in class (e.g., fill-in-the-blank grammar exercises). Some students suggested the integration of mobile apps like Duolingo or Memrise, yet noted these are often discouraged by instructors.

Discussion The findings of this study reflect a persistent gap between the theoretical foundations of second language acquisition and the practical realities faced by students in Uzbekistan. While structural reforms have aimed to promote

communicative competence, traditional methodologies remain dominant in most classrooms. This contradiction reduces the effectiveness of ESL education and reinforces learner passivity. The linguistic issues identified align with cross-linguistic influence theories (Odlin, 1989), as students tend to transfer rules from Uzbek or Russian into English, causing interference errors. Similarly, pronunciation struggles stem from phonological differences and lack of focused training in pronunciation drills or phonetics.

Psychological factors such as anxiety and low self-confidence corroborate Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that emotional states like fear and stress block language input from becoming comprehensible intake. In Uzbekistan's exam-driven culture, students often prioritize accuracy over fluency, resulting in reduced risk-taking and limited speaking practice. Institutionally, the dominance of teacher-centered approaches reveals a mismatch between pedagogical intention and implementation. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) emphasizes the importance of social interaction in cognitive development, yet such interactions are often absent in English classes. Students learn about English rather than learning to use it.

To improve ESL learning in Uzbekistan, several strategies can be proposed:

1. Curriculum Reform: Task-Based and Content-Based Learning

Shift from grammar-focused instruction to real-world, communicative tasks that involve problem-solving, storytelling, and collaboration.

Expected Results:

Increased student engagement and motivation.

Improved speaking fluency and vocabulary retention.

Development of critical thinking and communication skills.

2. Professional Development for Teachers

Conducting regular workshops and training in modern language teaching approaches (e.g., CLT, flipped classroom, differentiated instruction) could lead to the results that teachers will be more confident in using learner-centered strategies, English will be used more during classroom instruction, traditional rote-learning approaches will be reduced.

3. Technology Integration

Incorporating digital tools like Duolingo, BBC Learning English, podcasts, YouTube ESL channels, and virtual exchange platforms (eTwinning, PenPal Schools) will trigger that students will increase out-of-class learning exposure, enhance their pronunciation and listening comprehension, win higher learner autonomy and personalized learning paths.

4. Public Engagement and Awareness

Sharing success stories and learning achievements publicly through university websites, education forums, and social media could make the student motivate and educators to adopt modern methods. Moreover, public recognition of progress and institutional support could be gained and national commitment will take stronger actions to improve English education.

Conclusion This study sheds light on the significant and interrelated linguistic, psychological, and institutional challenges faced by Uzbek university students in their journey to master English as a second language. The findings underscore the limitations of grammar-focused, teacher-centered instruction and highlight the emotional toll language learning can take on students when confidence, exposure, and engagement are lacking. Despite governmental initiatives to enhance English education, the practical realities inside classrooms often lag behind policy goals. These insights contribute meaningfully to the broader field of second language acquisition in post-Soviet contexts, where traditional educational structures and cultural expectations

intersect with modern demands for global communication skills. By focusing specifically on the Uzbek educational environment, this research helps fill a gap in regional studies and offers concrete, evidence-based recommendations for curriculum designers, language instructors, and education reformers.

To ensure long-term improvement, it is essential to view language learning not just as a school subject, but as a holistic, socially driven, and emotionally nuanced process. Future research should further explore the role of digital tools, student identities, and informal learning environments in fostering language acquisition. By adopting a more learner-centered, supportive, and innovation-driven approach, Uzbekistan has the potential to equip its students with the linguistic competence needed to thrive on the global stage.

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