



PHONETIC INTERFERENCE PROBLEMS IN TEACHING ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION IN THE PRIMARY GRADES OF UZBEK SCHOOLS

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Abstract: This article analyzes the problems of phonetic interference that arise in teaching English pronunciation in the primary grades of Uzbek schools. Drawing on the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, language transfer theory, and the Critical Period Hypothesis, the study identifies systematic differences between the phonological systems of Uzbek and English and systematizes the typical pronunciation errors found among primary school learners, along with methodological tools for addressing them. The relevance of the study is linked to the fact that English has been taught from primary grades in Uzbekistan since 2012, which requires teachers to anticipate and correct L1-induced pronunciation errors from the very first stage of instruction rather than allowing them to become fossilized habits. The article presents a contrastive analysis of segmental features (consonants absent in Uzbek, such as the interdental fricatives, and the /w/–/v/ distinction), vowel length, consonant clusters, and suprasegmental features (word stress and rhythm), and links each type of interference to a corresponding classroom technique. The findings are of practical value for primary school English teachers, methodologists, and textbook authors working within the Uzbek educational context.

Keywords: phonetic interference, contrastive analysis, language transfer, primary school, English pronunciation.

Introduction

Since the adoption of Resolution No. PQ-1875 of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, “On measures to further improve the system of learning foreign languages,” dated December 10, 2012, English has become a compulsory subject taught from the primary grades [11]. This reform has made the correct early formation of English pronunciation skills a pressing methodological concern, since pronunciation habits, once established, are notoriously difficult to correct at later stages of instruction. In this context, the phonetic interference of the learners' native language – Uzbek – constitutes one of the most persistent obstacles to acquiring accurate English pronunciation.

In practice, however, phonetic instruction in Uzbek primary schools is often conducted without a systematic anticipation of L1-induced errors:



pronunciation drills tend to be generic rather than targeted at the specific points of divergence between the Uzbek and English sound systems. As a result, interference errors that could be predicted and pre-empted through contrastive analysis are instead treated reactively, after they have already become entrenched. This gap between theoretical knowledge of contrastive phonology and everyday classroom practice constitutes the central problem addressed in this article.

The purpose of the study is to identify and systematize the phonetic interference problems that Uzbek primary school learners face in acquiring English pronunciation, and to propose methodological solutions grounded in contrastive analysis.

Research objectives:

To outline the theoretical foundations of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis and language transfer theory as applied to phonetic interference;

To examine the phonetic perception and articulation characteristics of primary school learners from the standpoint of the Critical Period Hypothesis;

To conduct a contrastive analysis of the Uzbek and English phonological systems and identify the resulting typical interference errors;

To systematize effective methodological tools for overcoming phonetic interference in the primary English classroom.

The object of the study is the process of teaching English pronunciation in the primary grades of Uzbek schools; the subject is the phonetic interference arising from the learners' Uzbek-language background and the methodological means of addressing it.

Literature Review

The theoretical foundation for studying phonetic interference lies in R. Lado's Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), according to which learners tend to transfer the forms, meanings, and distribution of forms of their native language and culture into the foreign language, so that similarities between the two languages facilitate learning (positive transfer) while differences generate errors (negative transfer, or interference) [1, p. 2]. Building on this foundation, T. Odlin defines transfer as “the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired,” and emphasizes that phonology is one of the linguistic subsystems most susceptible to such influence [2, p. 27].

At the level of speech perception, J. Flege's Speech Learning Model explains why certain English sounds are particularly resistant to correct acquisition: the more phonetically similar an L2 sound is to the closest L1 sound, the harder it is for the learner to perceive it as a distinct category,



whereas sounds that are clearly dissimilar to any L1 sound are more likely to be learned accurately [3, p. 239]. This model helps explain why Uzbek learners often struggle more with English sounds that merely resemble Uzbek phonemes (e.g., /w/ perceived as similar to /v/) than with sounds that are entirely absent from Uzbek.

The necessity of forming phonetic skills at an early age is further substantiated by E. Lenneberg's Critical Period Hypothesis, according to which language – including its phonological component is acquired most effectively within a biologically constrained period linked to brain lateralization, spanning roughly from early childhood to puberty [4, p. 176]. T. Scovel refines this hypothesis with specific reference to L2 phonology, arguing that learners who begin acquiring a second language after approximately age 12 are unlikely to attain native-like pronunciation [5, p. 101]. This indicates that primary school age (7–10 years) constitutes an especially favorable window for forming accurate phonetic habits, and that interference patterns left uncorrected during this period are likely to persist.

P. Roach provides the descriptive-phonetic foundation for analyzing English sounds at the segmental (vowels and consonants) and suprasegmental (stress, rhythm, intonation) levels, both of which are essential to intelligible pronunciation [6, p. 18]. J. Kenworthy, from a practical methodological standpoint, argues that auditory discrimination must precede production in pronunciation teaching, since learners cannot accurately produce a sound they cannot perceptually distinguish [7, p. 7]. J. Brewster, G. Ellis, and D. Girard emphasize those techniques songs, rhymes, movement-based games, and repetition that are particularly effective for shaping the phonetic habits of young learners, given their high capacity for imitation [8, p. 116].

P.-M. Caleffi's analysis of primary-school English coursebooks used in an ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) context reveals that pronunciation activities are frequently under-represented and rarely informed by a systematic contrastive analysis of learners' first languages, which points to a gap that context-specific research — such as a Uzbek-English contrastive study can help to fill [9, p. 45]. In the local context, Sh. Ernazarova examines the role of Computer-Assisted Pronunciation Training (CAPT) software in improving learners' pronunciation accuracy through sound recognition and visual phonetic feedback, pointing to a productive avenue for supplementing traditional interference-focused instruction with digital tools [10, p. 9].

Research Methodology

The study employed contrastive phonological analysis, comparative analysis, and content analysis. The theoretical review drew on international scholarship concerning the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, language transfer,



the Critical Period Hypothesis, and articulatory phonetics, as well as local research on teaching English pronunciation in Uzbekistan. Through a systematic comparison of the Uzbek and English phonological inventories – encompassing segmental and suprasegmental levels the study identified the interference errors most frequently reported in the literature and in primary-classroom practice, and organized corresponding methodological solutions.

Results And Discussion

Phonetic perception characteristics of primary school learners

In accordance with the Critical Period Hypothesis, learners aged 7–10 possess a heightened capacity for perceiving and reproducing unfamiliar phonemes, owing to the continuing plasticity of both the articulatory apparatus and auditory perception [4, p. 176; 5, p. 101]. At the same time, learners at this age have not yet developed a strong capacity for conscious phonetic analysis (for instance, understanding phonetic transcription), which means that phonetic skills at this stage must be formed primarily through unconscious imitation, repetition, and playful, music-based activity rather than through explicit rule explanation [8, p. 116].

Contrastive analysis of the Uzbek and English phonological systems

A contrastive analysis of the two phonological systems shows that most pronunciation errors made by Uzbek primary school learners are the direct product of negative transfer, that is, phonetic interference from their native language [1, p. 2; 2, p. 27]. This occurs because the Uzbek phonemic inventory lacks several sounds that are phonemic in English (most notably the interdental fricatives), and because the two languages' stress and rhythm systems are fundamentally different: English is a stress-timed language, whereas Uzbek is syllable-timed. The most typical interference errors, together with corresponding methodological solutions, are systematized in the table below:

Phonetic feature	Typical interference error	Methodological solution
Interdental consonants /θ/, /ð/	Substituted with /s/, /z/ or /t/, /d/, since Uzbek has no equivalent phoneme [6, p. 47]	Articulatory demonstration, mirror practice, minimal pairs
/w/ vs. /v/ distinction	Both merged into a single phoneme close to /v/, as Uzbek does not distinguish them [6, p. 52]	Visual demonstration of lip position, contrastive-pair drills

Vowel length (bit/beat)	Vowels pronounced identically, since Uzbek does not phonologically contrast vowel length	Rhythmic drills, gestural marking of vowel length
Word stress and rhythm	Equal stress given to every syllable, since English is stress-timed while Uzbek is syllable-timed [6, p. 60]	Rhymes, songs, and clapping games to internalize stress patterns
Consonant clusters (e.g., “spring”)	Epenthetic vowels inserted between consonants due to Uzbek's simpler syllable structure	Gradual cluster-building drills, syllable-blending exercises

The table indicates that most interference errors can be effectively addressed through explicit articulatory explanation combined with targeted auditory-visual drills; however, this requires a systematic and sustained approach rather than isolated corrective episodes.

Methodological tools for overcoming phonetic interference

Based on the analysis conducted, the following methodological tools prove most effective in overcoming phonetic interference among primary school learners: first, auditory discrimination exercises, which train learners to perceive sound contrasts before attempting production [7, p. 7]; second, minimal-pair drills (e.g., ship–sheep, bat–bad), which highlight the meaning-distinguishing function of the phonemes involved; third, songs, rhymes, and rhythmic games, which allow suprasegmental features such as stress and intonation to be internalized within a natural, meaningful context [8, p. 118]; and fourth, articulatory demonstration and visual aids (diagrams of mouth position, mirror practice), which are especially valuable for teaching sounds that have no counterpart in Uzbek. In addition, as Sh. Ernazarova notes, modern CAPT software – which allows learners to record their own pronunciation and compare it against a native-speaker model – can further develop learners' capacity for phonetic self-monitoring [10, p. 10].

Conclusion And Recommendations

The analysis demonstrates that phonetic interference in teaching English pronunciation to Uzbek primary school learners is not incidental but systematic, arising predictably from specific, identifiable differences between the Uzbek and English phonological systems. Addressing it effectively requires an approach grounded in contrastive analysis rather than generic pronunciation drills. The following recommendations are proposed for primary school practice:



Conduct a systematic contrastive analysis of the Uzbek and English sound systems before designing pronunciation curricula, in order to anticipate interference errors rather than merely correcting them after they occur;

Prioritize auditory discrimination activities before production drills, following the principle that learners cannot accurately produce sounds they cannot perceptually distinguish;

Integrate songs, rhymes, and movement-based games as the primary vehicle for internalizing suprasegmental features such as stress and rhythm;

Incorporate CAPT and other digital pronunciation-feedback tools to complement traditional classroom instruction and support learner self-monitoring.

Empirically evaluating, through classroom-based pedagogical experiments, the extent to which the proposed contrastive-analysis-informed methodology reduces interference errors among Uzbek primary school learners remains a relevant direction for future research.

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