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SETTING PRONUNCIATION PRIORITIES FOR UZBEK-SPEAKING LEARNERS OF ENGLISH: A LINGUA FRANCA CORE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. Pronunciation teaching in Uzbek universities often aims at a full native-speaker model and spends equal time on every sound, including features that rarely cause misunderstanding. Research on English as an international language points to a different goal: being understood by international listeners. Jenkins's Lingua Franca Core identifies the features that matter most for mutual understanding, while research by Munro and Derwing separates accent from intelligibility and comprehensibility. This article compares the sound systems of Uzbek and English, identifies the main pronunciation difficulties of Uzbek-speaking learners, and classifies them into core features that threaten intelligibility and non-core features that mainly affect accent. Core priorities include consonant clusters, the contrast between long and short vowels, aspiration of initial voiceless plosives, and nuclear stress; non-core features include the dental fricatives and vowel reduction in weak forms. The article ends with a priority list and classroom procedures for pronunciation and integrated skills courses.
Keywords: pronunciation, intelligibility, Lingua Franca Core, phonology, Uzbek, English as an international language, teaching priorities

O‘ZBEK TILIDA SO‘ZLASHUVCHI TALABALARGA INGLIZ TILI TALAFFUZINI O‘RGATISHDA USTUVORLIKLARNI BELGILASH: LINGUA FRANCA CORE NUQTAYI NAZARI

Annotatsiya. Maqolada o‘zbek tilida so‘zlashuvchi talabalarga ingliz tili talaffuzini o‘rgatishda ustuvor yo‘nalishlarni belgilash masalasi ko‘rib chiqiladi. O‘zbek va ingliz tillarining tovush tizimlari qiyoslanib, talabalar duch keladigan asosiy qiyinchiliklar tushunarlilikka ta’sir qiluvchi asosiy (core) va faqat aksentga ta’sir qiluvchi ikkinchi darajali xususiyatlarga ajratiladi. Ustuvorliklar ro‘yxati va mashg‘ulot usullari taklif etiladi.
Kalit so‘zlar: talaffuz, tushunarlilik, Lingua Franca Core, fonologiya, o‘zbek tili, ingliz tili

ОПРЕДЕЛЕНИЕ ПРИОРИТЕТОВ В ОБУЧЕНИИ АНГЛИЙСКОМУ ПРОИЗНОШЕНИЮ УЗБЕКОЯЗЫЧНЫХ СТУДЕНТОВ: С ПОЗИЦИИ LINGUA FRANCA CORE

Аннотация. В статье рассматривается определение приоритетов в обучении английскому произношению узбекоязычных студентов. На основе сопоставления звуковых систем двух

языков трудности учащихся разделены на ключевые, влияющие на понятность речи, и второстепенные, влияющие лишь на акцент. Предложены список приоритетов и приёмы обучения.

Ключевые слова: произношение, понятность, Lingua Franca Core, фонология, узбекский язык, английский язык

INTRODUCTION

Many English teachers in Uzbekistan were trained to treat British Received Pronunciation as the model their students should aim for. Pronunciation lessons follow the order of the phonetic chart, and students practise every vowel and consonant, often with great attention to th sounds. Yet when graduates of Uzbek universities use English, they most often speak with other non-native speakers: tourists, business partners, colleagues at international conferences and teachers from other countries. In these conversations nobody checks whether a speaker sounds British; what counts is whether they are understood.

Over the past three decades, research has put this distinction at the centre of pronunciation teaching. Munro and Derwing [1] showed that a strong foreign accent does not necessarily make speech hard to understand, and that intelligibility and accent are partly independent. Jenkins [2] analysed communication breakdowns among non-native speakers and proposed the Lingua Franca Core (LFC): a set of pronunciation features that are essential for international intelligibility. Features outside the core can vary without causing serious problems.

The LFC has been widely discussed, but hardly ever applied to Uzbek learners. Local publications on pronunciation tend to list the difficulties of Uzbek learners without ranking them. This article takes up the question of priority: which pronunciation difficulties of Uzbek-speaking learners deserve most classroom time, and which can be given less?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Accent, intelligibility and comprehensibility

Munro and Derwing [1] defined three related dimensions: accentedness (how different speech sounds from a reference variety), intelligibility (how much of the message a listener actually understands) and comprehensibility (how easy the listener finds it to understand). Their experiments showed that listeners could transcribe accented speech accurately even when they rated it as heavily accented. Derwing and Munro [3] argued that pronunciation teaching should therefore focus on features that affect intelligibility and comprehensibility, not on eliminating accent. Levis [4] described this as a shift from the “nativeness principle” to the “intelligibility principle”.

The Lingua Franca Core

Jenkins [2] proposed that the core for international intelligibility includes most consonant sounds, with some exceptions; the preservation of initial consonant clusters and the avoidance of deletion in medial and final clusters; the contrast between long and short vowels; aspiration of /p, t, k/ at the beginning of stressed syllables; and nuclear (tonic) stress, which signals the most important information in an utterance. Features she placed outside the core include the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/, which can be replaced by /t, d/ or /f, v/ without much loss; exact vowel quality, as long as

length and consistency are maintained; weak forms and vowel reduction; and most features of intonation other than nuclear stress.

Teaching implications

Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin and Griner [5] describe a communicative framework for pronunciation that moves from description and analysis to listening discrimination, controlled practice and communicative practice. Combined with an intelligibility-based priority list, the framework lets teachers spend their limited class time on the features that matter most.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study pairs contrastive phonological analysis with an intelligibility-based classification. The sound systems of literary Uzbek and English were compared using descriptive sources [6, 7] and standard accounts of English phonology. Predicted difficulties were compiled from the comparison and from the author's teaching experience. Each difficulty was then classified as core or non-core using Jenkins's [2] criteria. The resulting list is presented as a set of teaching priorities; its predictions about intelligibility should be tested with listeners in future research.

RESULTS

Key differences between the two sound systems

Vowels. Literary Uzbek has six vowel phonemes (i, u, e, o, o', a) and no phonemic vowel length. English has about twelve monophthongs, with length and quality differences (/iː/ vs /ɪ/, /uː/ vs /ʊ/, /ɑː/ vs /æ/ vs /ʌ/), plus diphthongs. Uzbek learners therefore tend to merge pairs such as ship/sheep, full/fool and cart/cut.

Consonants. Uzbek lacks /θ/, /ð/ and a separate /w/ phoneme; v is often pronounced with lip rounding close to [w] in some positions, which causes confusion between v and w in English (west/vest, wine/vine). Uzbek has /q/, /χ/ and /ʁ/, which do not occur in English and do not usually cause interference. English initial /p, t, k/ are aspirated in stressed syllables; Uzbek voiceless plosives are generally less aspirated, so English listeners may hear pin as bin.

Consonant clusters. Uzbek generally avoids complex initial clusters. In colloquial speech, borrowed words with initial clusters may receive a prothetic vowel (stol pronounced with an initial i-like vowel), and final clusters may be simplified. Learners may transfer this to English, producing [i]school, [i]sport or dropping final consonants in asked or texts.

Word stress. Uzbek stress normally falls on the last syllable of the word, with some exceptions. English stress is variable and lexically determined. Learners may stress English words on the final syllable (deveLOP, comforTABLE) or give equal weight to all syllables.

Sentence stress. In Uzbek, focus is often expressed by word order and particles; in English, it is expressed mainly by nuclear stress. Learners may therefore place the main stress on the last word by default rather than on the new or contrastive information (I said the RED one, not the blue one).

Classification into core and non-core

Table 1. Pronunciation difficulties of Uzbek learners classified by intelligibility

Difficulty	Example of problem	Core or non-core	Priority
Long vs short vowels	ship/sheep, full/fool	Core	High
Consonant clusters (prothesis, deletion)	[i]school, ask(ed)	Core	High
Aspiration of initial	pin heard as bin	Core	High

Difficulty	Example of problem	Core or non-core	Priority
/p, t, k/			
Nuclear (sentence) stress	stress on last word instead of new information	Core	High
/v/–/w/ contrast	vest/west, vine/wine	Core (consonant contrast)	Medium
Word stress	deveLOP	Outside Jenkins's core, but can affect word recognition	Medium
Exact vowel quality	/æ/ vs /ʌ/ quality	Non-core if length is kept	Low
Dental fricatives /θ, ð/	think as tink or sink	Non-core	Low
Weak forms and vowel reduction	to, of, can always in full form	Non-core for production	Low (but teach for listening)

Two points in the table deserve emphasis. First, the dental fricatives, which receive the most attention in many Uzbek classrooms, are of low priority for international intelligibility, provided that learners use a consistent substitute. Second, weak forms are non-core for learners' own production, but they remain essential for listening comprehension, since native speakers use them constantly.

A priority sequence for a pronunciation course

Based on the classification, the following sequence is proposed for a one-semester pronunciation component:

1. **Weeks 1–3:** vowel length (minimal pairs, listening discrimination, then production in phrases).
2. **Weeks 4–6:** consonant clusters at the start and end of words (back-chaining: -ks, -kst, texts; avoiding prothetic vowels).
3. **Weeks 7–8:** aspiration of initial voiceless plosives (the "paper test": a strip of paper moves with aspirated p).
4. **Weeks 9–11:** nuclear stress and contrastive stress in dialogues.
5. **Weeks 12–13:** word stress patterns of frequent academic and everyday words.
6. **Weeks 14–15:** weak forms and connected speech for listening; /θ, ð/ as an optional refinement.

Classroom procedures

Minimal-pair bingo and dictation. Students mark the word they hear (ship or sheep) and then dictate pairs to a partner, who must identify the intended word. Because success depends on the listener understanding, the activity trains intelligibility directly.

Back-chaining. Difficult clusters are built from the end: -sts → -ists → lists. Building from the end stops learners from adding a vowel at the start.

Contrastive stress dialogues. Pairs read short exchanges in which only stress placement changes the meaning (I didn't take YOUR book vs I didn't take your BOOK), then create their own.

Peer intelligibility checks. In integrated speaking tasks, listeners note any word they could not understand. Teachers focus feedback on these words rather than on general accent.

DISCUSSION

Uzbek pronunciation teaching, it seems, may be investing heavily in low-priority features while neglecting high-priority ones. Learners who pronounce think as tink are usually understood; learners who say [i]school, who do not distinguish live and leave, or who stress the wrong word in a sentence may not be. Reordering priorities according to intelligibility would make better use of limited class time.

This does not mean that the native model should be abandoned. For future English teachers, who will serve as models for their own students, a fuller command of English phonology remains valuable, and non-core features can be taught after the core is secure. The intelligibility principle sets the order of teaching, not the limit of learning.

The proposal has its limits. The classification of difficulties is based on phonological description and Jenkins's [2] criteria, not on intelligibility testing with Uzbek speakers. Dialectal variation within Uzbekistan, and the influence of Russian among bilingual learners, also affect which features are difficult. A study in which international listeners transcribe recordings of Uzbek learners would show which features actually cause misunderstanding and would refine the priority list.

CONCLUSION

Uzbek and English differ in vowel length, consonant inventory, cluster structure and stress, and these differences produce predictable pronunciation difficulties. An intelligibility-based approach, informed by the Lingua Franca Core, ranks these difficulties by their effect on understanding. Vowel length, consonant clusters, aspiration and nuclear stress emerge as high priorities, while the dental fricatives and exact vowel quality are of lower priority. Building pronunciation courses around this ranking would help Uzbek learners become clearly intelligible speakers of English as an international language.

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