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CHALLENGES IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO SECONDARY SCHOOL LEARNERS IN UZBEKISTAN

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English language teaching (ELT), grammatical interference, interference, lexical interference, phonological interference, secondary education, teaching methodology.

ABSTRACT

Language interference is a significant challenge in teaching English within multilingual educational settings, such as secondary schools in the Republic of Uzbekistan. This study aims to analyze the most common types of interference experienced by Grade 7–8 learners, focusing specifically on phonological, lexical, and grammatical interference. Through qualitative analysis of students' oral and written language production, the research identifies recurring patterns of negative transfer from the learners' first language(s) into English. The findings indicate that phonological interference primarily affects pronunciation accuracy, lexical interference leads to literal translations and inappropriate word choices, and grammatical interference results in structural errors influenced by the norms of the native language. The study discusses pedagogical implications and proposes methodological strategies to mitigate interference in English language classrooms. Overall, the results enhance our understanding of cross-linguistic influence at the lower secondary level and support the improvement of teaching practices in Uzbekistan.

INTRODUCTION

In the Republic of Uzbekistan, students typically learn three languages: their mother tongue, a second language, and a foreign language. The mother tongue is crucial for cognitive development, as our ability to think is closely tied to verbal expression, with words serving as carriers of concepts. The concepts learned in the mother tongue are later conveyed through the sounds and written forms of words in the second or foreign language, even though the underlying meanings are universal. Thus, while words may vary from language to language, the concepts they express are commonly understood across cultures, whereas their linguistic forms reflect national identities.

The process of acquiring these three languages differs considerably. Cognitive development primarily occurs through the mother tongue; the second language is often learned in a natural setting, and the foreign language is typically taught in a structured, classroom environment under the guidance of a teacher. As a result, teaching a foreign language requires specific pedagogical methods that take into account the learner's prior language experiences.

It is essential to recognize and effectively utilize the integrated language experiences that students have formed through their mother tongue, second language, and foreign language to ensure successful foreign language instruction in the Uzbek educational context.

Learners' language experience is a complex combination of knowledge, skills, and competencies accumulated through these three languages. Addressing issues related to this experience—such as its scope, areas of application, and internal connections—falls within the methodological principle of considering language experience.

One significant linguistic challenge in this context is language interference, which refers to the impact of students' first language (L1), primarily Uzbek or Russian, on their second language (L2) performance in English. Taking language experience into account means recognizing how the knowledge, skills, and abilities acquired in Uzbek, Russian, and a foreign language (such as English, Spanish, German, or French) can influence the learning of the currently studied foreign language, either positively (facilitation) or negatively (interference).

Literature review

A.E. Karlinsky argues that proficiency in foreign languages does not develop independently but occurs through interaction with one's native language, which can influence a multilingual person's speech in either a positive or negative manner.

Krashen S. classifies language transfer into two types: positive interference and negative interference.

Maftuna Avalboyeva notes that the language most often used by a learner becomes the primary means of communication and has the greatest influence on the process of interference.

In her article, Vorontsova, Yu. A discusses several scientists' contributions to preventing language interference:

The study of the issue of language interference dates back to the second half of the 19th century. One of the earliest researchers in this field was the Russian-Polish linguist I.A. Baudouin de Courtenay. He believed that the problem stemmed from linguistic contact. According to his perspective, studying a foreign language involved not only the borrowing of individual linguistic units but also the mutual convergence of languages. At that time, the term "interference" was not widely used nor firmly established in the field of linguistics.

Another influential linguist, Lev Vladimirovich Shcherba, significantly advanced this area of research. In his 1915 work "The Eastern Lusatian Dialect," he expanded upon Baudouin de Courtenay's ideas. He selected the Lusatian dialect as his research material due to his time spent among speakers of the Muzhakovskiy dialect, which was regarded as a transitional dialect between German and Polish. By mastering this dialect, Shcherba was able to gather factual data and conduct analysis. His subsequent works thoroughly examined the impact of language on one another.

In 1935, E.D. Polivanov identified errors characterized by the influence of the native language on the language being studied. He utilized the contact between Uzbek and Russian as the basis for his research, seeking to apply the students' native Uzbek language in teaching Russian. Simultaneously, this work contributed to the theoretical understanding of the phenomenon known as "interference."

A significant milestone in this field occurred in 1953 with the publication of the influential work "Language Contacts" by the renowned American linguist Uriel Weinreich. By this time, the term "linguistic interference" was gaining traction in academic circles. Weinreich defined interference as the deviation from linguistic norms that occurs when a bilingual person speaks, as a result of their knowledge of a foreign language and the simultaneous use of both languages. This phenomenon was also noted in speech interactions among multilingual groups or in educational contexts.

Methodology

In Uzbekistan, where students often learn multiple languages at the same time, language interference significantly affects second language (L2) performance. This interference influences the accuracy, fluency, and appropriateness of English language production.

Uriel Weinreich categorizes first language interference into three types: **phonological, grammatical, and lexical interference**.

Phonological or phonetic interference occurs when students mispronounce English sounds due to differences between their first language (L1) and the second language (L2) sound systems. For example, they might substitute /v/ with /f/ or mispronounce diphthongs.

Tania Syafutri and Andri Saputra state that phonology is the study of analyzing the harmony of sounds in language.

Phonetic interference, as noted by Anieva N.G., is most commonly observed in speech. It occurs when a speaker reproduces the sound units of their native language within the sound environment of a foreign language. This type of interference can also lead to the emergence of a foreign accent.

Phonetic interference is most common in speech, which is a reproduction of the sound unit of the primary language in a foreign sound environment of the secondary language. Also, phonetic interference creates the possibility of a foreign accent appearing.

The problem of phonetic interference concerns the manner in which a speaker perceives and reproduces the sounds of one language, which might be designated secondary, in terms of another, to be called primary. Interference arises when a bilingual identifies a phoneme of the secondary system with one in the primary system and, in reproducing it, subjects it to the phonetic rules of the primary language.

Uzbek does not include the English interdental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/. Therefore, Uzbek-speaking learners often substitute these unfamiliar English sounds with the closest phonemes from their native language, such as /s/, /z/, or /t/. As a result, the word "think" may be pronounced as "sink" or "tink," and "this" may be pronounced as "zis." This illustrates a systematic case of phonemic substitution, where English phonemes are produced according to the phonetic rules of Uzbek.

Additionally, Uzbek does not distinguish between long and short vowels. Consequently, Uzbek learners may not clearly perceive the difference between English minimal pairs like "ship" (/ɪ/) and "sheep" (/i:/), often pronouncing them similarly.

On the other hand, while Russian has a more complex phonetic system than Uzbek, it also lacks the English phonemes /θ/ and /ð/. Russian-speaking learners typically replace these sounds with /s/ or /z/, resulting in pronunciations such as "sink" for "think" and "zis" for "this."

Lexical interference occurs when words or idiomatic expressions from a learner's first language (L1) are literally translated into English, potentially leading to misunderstandings or unnatural expressions.

According to Syafutri, T., and Saputra. A, lexical interference refers to the influence of one language's vocabulary on another, as noted by Uriel Weinreich. This means that the vocabulary from a learner's first language can interfere when they are speaking English as a foreign language.

After examining lexical interference, we concluded that lexical interference is frequently observed among Uzbek and Russian

learners of English, especially in speaking, when learners transfer words, idioms, or lexical patterns directly from their first language into English. This often results in unnatural or misleading expressions, even when grammatical accuracy is maintained.

Such interference commonly appears in literal word-for-word translation (e.g., “I am cold” instead of “I feel cold”), incorrect use of idiomatic expressions (“It reached my ear” instead of “I heard about it”), and reliance on circumlocution due to limited vocabulary (“Give me your pen for a while” instead of “borrow”).

Lexical interference is also influenced by social factors, including prestige and style, which lead to code-mixing, as well as disloyalty to the target language, where first-language lexical and structural patterns are imposed on English (“I very like this book”).

Grammatical interference occurs when students apply their L1 sentence structures or morphological patterns to English. This often leads to errors in word order, tense usage, and article selection.

According to Kambarova L.R., grammatical interference occurs when learners lack knowledge of the grammatical rules of the language they are trying to learn. Kambarova highlights that U. Weinrich identifies three types of grammatical interference:

- The transfer of morphemes from the source language to the target language (for example, the use of the “s” ending in English third-person singular forms).
- Grammatical relations that depend on a particular word order.
- The functions or meanings of grammatical forms, such as singular-plural agreement.

Research has shown that English speakers often use the verb “have” to describe certain places, while Russian learners tend to use the construction “there is/there are” when forming complete sentences in English. For example:

- The country has 12 regions - В стране есть 12 регионов.
- The building has 55 floors - В здании есть 55 этажей.

However, in the Russian language, this construction is not always the most appropriate choice. Russians typically do not refer to a country or a building as an animated entity. Instead, they prefer to use the preposition “в” (in), which makes their speech sound more natural:

- В городе много хороших ресторанов. (There are many good restaurants in the city.)
- В музее есть 12 комнат. (There are 12 rooms in the museum.)

This tendency explains why Russian learners of English are more inclined to use constructions like “there is/there are.” This structure aligns well with many Russian sentences, as it requires a preposition indicating location and closely mimics English sentence structure. As a result, a common mistake among Russian students learning English is incorrect word order in sentences. Such grammatical interferences can affect the overall grammar structure of a language.

In Uzbekistan, many students are bilingual or even trilingual, leading to highly variable and persistent patterns of language interference. While positive transfer can enhance learning—when the structures of the first language (L1) align with the rules of the second language (L2)—negative transfer often results in systematic errors that impede the development of communicative competence.

During our research involving 7th and 8th graders, we identified several challenges affecting learners’ progress in language acquisition, independent thinking, and communicative competence. Although the “Prepare” textbooks for these grades offer modern materials, issues in classroom implementation arise due to language interference.

One significant challenge is the interference between students’ mother tongue, Uzbek, and English. To mitigate interference, we have determined that a Project-Based Learning approach, combined with Case Study methodologies, would be the most effective strategy moving forward.

Conclusion

This study has examined the problem of language interference in English language teaching among Grade 7–8 learners in secondary schools of the Republic of Uzbekistan, with particular attention to phonological, lexical, and grammatical interference. The findings confirm that interference remains a persistent factor influencing learners’ accuracy and overall language performance due to negative transfer from their first language(s). Phonological interference was found to affect pronunciation and intelligibility, while lexical interference resulted in literal translation and inappropriate vocabulary use. Grammatical interference, in turn, led to structural errors reflecting native language patterns. The study highlights the importance of teachers’ awareness of interference types and their underlying causes. Addressing interference through targeted pedagogical strategies, contrastive analysis, and context-appropriate teaching methodologies can significantly improve learning outcomes. Future research may extend this work by employing quantitative methods or exploring interference across different grade levels to further enhance English language teaching practices in multilingual educational settings.

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