



SOCIOLINGUISTIC PROFILE OF MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS IN A POST-SOVIET SCHOOL CONTEXT

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INTRODUCTION

Sociolinguistics examines how language and social factors interact and influence each other (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2014). In multilingual, post-Soviet contexts such as Uzbekistan, these interactions critically shape educational experiences. After the Soviet Union's collapse, Uzbekistan declared Uzbek the official state language and moved from the Cyrillic to the Latin script. However, Russian continues to hold prestige and practical value in society, remaining an important medium of instruction in many schools. English has also been introduced into the curriculum, though learners typically encounter it only in the classroom setting. As Phillipson (1992) observes, the global spread of English often reflects historical and political power dynamics, promoting English even where it is not widely used. In Uzbekistan, national surveys show that English plays a very minor role in interethnic communication and media, reinforcing the idea that limited exposure can constrain learners' development of communicative competence (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2014).

The present study examines a seventh-grade class of 16 students (ages 14–15) at a Russian-specialized public school (School No. 2) in the Shavat region of Uzbekistan. In this school, all subjects are taught in Russian. The students are mostly bilingual or trilingual: they typically speak Uzbek or Russian at home and have only basic proficiency in English (CEFR level A1–A2). Because they have few opportunities to use English outside the classroom, their development of communicative competence in English is limited (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2014). Within the class, learners form two sociolinguistic subgroups. For example, Russian-speaking students may derive confidence from the social prestige of Russian, but they often have relatively low English proficiency; differences between the Cyrillic and Latin alphabets can exacerbate their writing difficulties. In contrast, Uzbek-speaking students (who use Russian at school by policy) generally show strong motivation to learn English and often aim for international qualifications. These contrasts underscore the importance of acknowledging students' diverse language identities and needs in the educational context.

The objective of this research is to profile the linguistic and social backgrounds of these multilingual learners and to analyze how their repertoires of Uzbek, Russian, and English influence their English learning. Drawing on established sociolinguistic theory and consideration of Uzbekistan's language policies, the study seeks to identify educational strategies that support such learners. By articulating the students' language experiences and attitudes, this paper contributes to understanding how historical and global forces shape language learning in post-Soviet schools. Recognizing and valuing the students' multilingual identities is crucial for fostering inclusive classrooms in Uzbekistan and similar contexts.

SOCIOLINGUISTIC PROFILE OF GROUP OF LEARNERS

In this target group there are 16 students whose ages are 14 to 15 and there are 7 boys and 9 girls in the class. They are in 7th grade of a public school number 2 which is situated in the center of Shavat region in Uzbekistan. The school is specialized in Russian language and the medium of instruction is also Russian for all subjects. Their current proficiency level is approximately A1 to A2 on the CEFR scale. Most students are individual multilinguals who can speak Uzbek, Russian, and a little English inside the classroom context (Deumart, 2011). They use different home languages: Uzbek or Russian language (Deumart, 2011). Additionally, they are learning English as a foreign language (FL) and have no chance of using English outside the classroom as the social context is situated in non-English-speaking environment (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2014). According to Wardhaugh and Fuller (2014), restricted language exposure in such monolingual settings impacts learners' ability to develop communicative competence, especially in informal contexts. Some learners are studying English because it is part of curriculum while some students are highly-motivated since their goal is taking IELTS certificate to be accepted by local and foreign universities. As for language background, they have basic knowledge of vocabulary and grammar such as tenses, parts of speech, simple prepositions etc. Now their priority is enhancing their receptive (listening, reading) and productive (speaking, writing) skills as well as grammar.

Sub-Group A (Language Background – predominantly Russian-speaking students)

In this sub-group 6 of the learners are Russian speakers. Although, they grew up in Uzbekistan, they use Russian language as a dominant home language because their parents are Russian (Deumert, 2011). The learners understand and could speak Uzbek language a little but their communicative competence is poorer in terms of Uzbek language. As using Russian is prestigious in this country, these learners might feel prestige and confidence especially in this school context (Mesthrie et al., 2009). Their current proficiency level in English is lower (A1) compared to the other sub-group members. Although they have a solid grasp of grammar, they face difficulties with writing. This is mainly due to differences between the Russian alphabet and the English and Uzbek alphabets, leading to frequent spelling errors.

Sub-Group B (Language Background – predominantly Uzbek-speaking students)

This social group consists of 10 Uzbek students whose first and primary home language is Uzbek (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2014). However, accordance to school policy, they are required to use Russian during school hours (Deumert, 2011). Additionally, they often engage in code-switching with peers from other sub-groups and in contexts outside the classroom (Nuessel, 2010). Code-switching is common among multilinguals and is often used not just for practical communication, but also to mark group identity and manage social relationships (Myers-Scotton, 1993, cited in Deumert, 2011). Their English proficiency is relatively higher (A2) than that of their Russian-speaking classmates, and they show greater motivation, driven by both local and international opportunities supported by the government. Despite their stronger performance in skills such as reading, they continue to face challenges in speaking.

SOCIOLINGUISTIC PROFILE OF THE LEARNING CONTEXT

The number 2 school in Shavat, Uzbekistan is a public school specialized in Russian language. It is equipped with modern technologies such as computers smart televisions and interactive boards in each classroom. Despite these opportunities, the teachers use the textbooks provided by government that focuses on written literacy with little focus on communicative competence. The textbooks used are provided by the government and align with a standardized educational model, which reflects centralized language instruction and dominant linguistic norms (Cornips & de Rooij, 2018). The medium of instruction for all subjects is Russian, which offers greater

participation opportunities to Russian-speaking students while placing Uzbek-dominant students at a linguistic disadvantage. English is taught as a foreign language (FL) and the classes are held twice a week. The students have no chance of using the target language outside the classroom since they live in non-English-speaking country. This shows **linguistic marginalization**, where English is seen as important but is not used much in daily life because students have few chances to practice it (Cornips & de Rooij, 2018). Also, teachers can only change the lessons if students want to, which shows decisions mostly come from higher authorities, not from the classroom.

In this learning context, we can talk about gender even though it's not included in the textbooks. This is important because studies on language, gender, and sexuality are becoming more common worldwide (Calder, 2020, p. 429). Female students usually do better in writing and reading tasks, while male students excel in speaking tasks. However, male learners often feel less motivated to learn English, even though they are more confident. As Mesthrie et al. (2009) noted, girls tend to be more engaged in academics than boys. Unfortunately, we are not allowed to discuss sexuality in my teaching environment.

Ethnicity is an important topic in my teaching context. In this classroom, Russian and Uzbek students often form different groups based on their cultural and language backgrounds. The dominant group here is the Russian learners because the school focuses on the Russian language (Fought, 2011). These groupings can affect how students learn a new language, as language plays a key role in shaping ethnic identity (Fought, 2011). Additionally, ethnicity impacts students' understanding of speech, their ability to participate, and their sense of belonging in the classroom (Rosa & Flores, 2017).

SOCIOLINGUISTIC PROFILE OF THE CONTEXT WHERE ENGLISH WILL BE USED

The context in which English will be used for this group of learners is shaped by their current educational setting and their aspirations for the future. These 16 students, aged 14 to 15, are in 7th grade at a public school in the Shavat region of Uzbekistan, where Russian is the medium of instruction. Understanding the dynamics of their learning environment and potential transitions is important for helping them prepare to use English effectively.

Many students are motivated to learn English because they want to go to universities abroad or get jobs in international fields. This shows how important English has become in education and work worldwide (Bolton, 2008). In many countries like Uzbekistan, English is not used in daily life, but it is still seen as a necessary tool for success. This kind of motivation is common in what Kachru (1990) calls the “Expanding Circle,” where countries do not use English as an official language, but see it as a global resource.

These students will face challenges when moving from a Russian-language school to environments where English is used more often. This includes understanding academic English, writing essays, and using English in real communication. At the same time, this gives them the chance to grow in both language and cultural understanding. According to Kachru (1990), the goal is not to sound like a native speaker, but to use English successfully in international settings.

To reach their goals, many learners aim to pass exams like IELTS. This requires them to learn academic vocabulary and practice skills like listening, reading, speaking, and writing. In summary, their use of English in the future depends on their multilingual skills, the language policies in their school, and their own goals. Teachers need to support them by focusing on both language skills and helping them understand how English is used in different cultural and

academic situations (Bolton, 2008; Kachru, 1990).

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Sub-group A (Russian-speaking students)

These 6 students learn better when using methods that help them communicate, both in speaking and writing, like Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Because they have different backgrounds and lower language skills, they need extra support through tailored instruction and various teaching techniques. Differentiated instruction is very helpful for them because it allows teachers to meet students' individual language needs (Baecher, 2011). For example, Russian-speaking students might benefit from phonetics training to avoid spelling errors. This can help reduce the influence of their first language, especially because Russian and English use different alphabets. To support their development, I can use glossaries with phonetic transcriptions and provide vocabulary lists with Russian translations.

Using culturally relevant materials is important too. These students may feel more connected if we use stories or topics that match their background (Baecher, 2011). Pairing them with higher-level Uzbek students can also help them build confidence and improve their speaking skills. Creating a supportive classroom where they feel comfortable making mistakes is also important. According to Kachru (1990), English learners from Expanding Circle countries need learning environments that support their identity and multilingual background rather than just focusing on native speaker norms.

Sub-group B (Uzbek-speaking students)

For these Uzbek-speaking learners, using communicative methods like CLT is important since they live in a non-English-speaking environment. Taking into account their cultural and language backgrounds, as well as their strengths and weaknesses, using differentiated and sheltered instruction would help them (Baecher, 2011). For example, I could focus on grammar, vocabulary, and speaking skills to support their growth. Baecher (2011) suggests that strategies like providing subtitles, sentence starters, visual aids, and simplified texts can make lessons more understandable for English learners.

They might also benefit from vocabulary glossaries in both Russian and Uzbek to help them bridge the school language and their home language. This aligns with the idea of scaffolding, where the teacher supports learning step-by-step (Baecher, 2011). I would adapt the materials to fit their cultural context and use texts or examples they can relate to. This helps students connect their real-life experiences with classroom learning.

Additionally, pairing them with Russian-speaking students who have good communication skills could enhance their speaking abilities. Through peer interaction, they can learn new expressions and build confidence in using English. According to Kachru (1990), the goal in Expanding Circle countries is not native-like fluency but effective communication, and language teaching should reflect that.

ASSESSMENT IMPLICATIONS

Sub-group A (Russian-speaking students)

While Russian-speaking students may do well in speaking tests, they often struggle with writing because of the differences between Russian and English. The different alphabets make spelling difficult for them. Also, since English sounds are different from Russian, pronunciation can be a problem. According to Baecher (2011), when students come from a language with a different alphabet, they may have extra difficulties in connecting sound to written symbols, which makes

writing and reading harder. To help, I can give them more writing practice before exams and allow them to write multiple drafts, which supports language development. As Lenski et al. (2006) point out, allowing students to revise their work and use scaffolds helps them show what they know in a fairer way.

They can also take oral exams, but their pronunciation may not be perfect. In those cases, I shouldn't be too strict about mispronunciations, especially when the meaning is still clear. It is important to keep in mind that the goal of assessment is not perfection, but communication and growth (Lenski et al., 2006). Also, when students have to focus too much on pronunciation, they may lose confidence, so feedback should be encouraging.

Sub-group B (Uzbek-speaking students)
Uzbek students are used to traditional teaching that emphasizes grammar and doesn't focus much on speaking. Because of this, they may find it hard to perform well in speaking assessments. Additionally, since they don't use English outside the classroom, their vocabulary and fluency may suffer. Baecher (2011) explains that learners who are not exposed to spoken English outside school often need extra support to develop speaking and listening skills.

To support them, I can give them more time to prepare for speaking tasks and provide topic-related vocabulary lists. These supports are also mentioned in Lenski et al. (2006) as ways to make assessments more accessible and meaningful. Also, offering both oral and written test options allows students to choose how they best show their knowledge, which is especially important for ELLs with different strengths (Lenski et al., 2006). When possible, I can allow them to practice with partners or in small groups before individual tests. This reduces pressure and builds confidence.

Finally, for both groups, it is important to be aware of the ethical implications of assessment. Using only one kind of test may not give a full picture of what a student can do. Lenski et al. (2006) recommend using multiple assessment types and formats to make sure tests are fair and inclusive. Teachers must avoid using assessments that are biased toward native speakers and instead focus on progress and effort.

CONCLUSION

In this sociolinguistic profile of the 7th-grade learners at Public School Number 2 in Shavat, Uzbekistan, we have explored the complexities of their language backgrounds, learning contexts, and aspirations. The class consists of 16 students, predominantly multilingual, with unique challenges and motivations influenced by their sociocultural environment.

The learners' sociolinguistic profile reveals a rich tapestry of linguistic diversity. With 7 boys and 9 girls, their ages range from 14 to 15, and they navigate between Uzbek, Russian, and English within their educational setting. This multilingualism reflects not only their home environments but also the broader sociolinguistic landscape of Uzbekistan, where Russian holds prestige and serves as the medium of instruction. However, this creates a linguistic hierarchy that can disadvantage Uzbek-speaking students, who must adapt to a language that is not their primary mode of communication.

The students' proficiency levels in English, ranging from A1 to A2 on the CEFR scale, highlight the need for targeted support in developing their language skills. The distinction between Sub-group A (Russian-speaking students) and Sub-group B (Uzbek-speaking students) reveals varied challenges and strengths. Russian-speaking students may struggle with writing due to the

differences in alphabets, while Uzbek-speaking students often find speaking assessments particularly difficult due to limited exposure outside the classroom.

Motivation plays a crucial role in their English learning journey. Many students aspire to achieve international qualifications such as the IELTS to pursue higher education opportunities. This ambition underscores the importance of English as a global lingua franca and reflects a broader societal trend where English proficiency is increasingly viewed as essential for success.

The learning context, characterized by a focus on written literacy and limited communicative practice, further complicates their language acquisition. The reliance on government-provided textbooks emphasizes grammar over real-life communication, which can hinder the development of their speaking and listening skills. This disconnect between the curriculum and the students' linguistic realities calls for a pedagogical shift towards more interactive and communicative teaching methods.

To effectively support these learners, educators must adopt differentiated instruction strategies tailored to the unique needs of each subgroup. For Russian-speaking students, emphasizing phonetics and culturally relevant materials can foster a more inclusive learning environment. Meanwhile, Uzbek-speaking students benefit from scaffolding techniques that connect their native language to English, enhancing their understanding and confidence.

Assessment practices should also be re-evaluated to ensure they are fair and reflective of each student's capabilities. By utilizing a variety of assessment formats, teachers can provide a more comprehensive picture of student progress, moving beyond traditional metrics that may not capture the full extent of their language skills.

In conclusion, addressing the sociolinguistic needs of this diverse group of learners requires a multifaceted approach that recognizes their unique backgrounds, motivations, and challenges. The language instructor plays a crucial role in advocating for these specific learners, particularly by fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment. By actively promoting tailored instructional strategies, educators can empower both Russian-speaking and Uzbek-speaking students to improve their English proficiency and achieve their academic and personal goals.

This advocacy is essential in cultivating their identities as multilingual individuals, preparing them for success in an increasingly interconnected world. As educators, we should reflect on our practices and strive to meet the diverse needs of all learners, inspiring others to do the same in their classrooms.

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