

CHALLENGES IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO ESL STUDENTS

Liliya Baxtiyarovna Iskandarova

*Senior Professor, Department of English Language Theory
Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages (SamSIFL), Uzbekistan*

Abstract: Teaching English to speakers of other languages (ESL) presents a multifaceted set of challenges that educators encounter at every level of instruction. This article examines the principal difficulties that arise in ESL classrooms, including linguistic barriers, methodological constraints, assessment challenges, and the growing influence of technology and artificial intelligence on pedagogical practice. Drawing on a range of scholarly perspectives and current research, the article argues that effective ESL instruction requires an integrated approach that combines innovative methods, criterion-based assessment, and a deep understanding of learners' sociocultural and cognitive backgrounds. Implications for teacher training and curriculum design at Central Asian institutions, with particular reference to Uzbekistan, are also discussed.

Keywords: ESL, English language teaching, challenges, methodology, assessment, Uzbekistan.

Introduction

The global spread of English as a medium of academic, professional, and intercultural communication has made English language teaching one of the most demanding and consequential fields in modern education. In countries such as Uzbekistan, where English functions as a foreign or second language, the challenges are particularly pronounced. Teachers must bridge substantial gaps between learners' native linguistic structures and the complex morphosyntactic and phonological systems of English, while simultaneously managing diverse classroom needs, evolving assessment frameworks, and a rapidly changing technological landscape.

The distinction between ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) environments is itself a source of pedagogical complexity. As Tursunov, Nematov, and Mamayqubova (2021) observe, the roles of ESL and EFL in the contemporary world are shaped by specific sociolinguistic contexts that demand tailored instructional strategies. This observation resonates strongly in Central Asian educational settings, where English is taught primarily within formal school and university environments rather than through immersive daily exposure. Understanding these contextual distinctions is a prerequisite for designing effective teaching programmes.

The present article surveys the main challenges encountered in ESL teaching and offers a synthesis of research-based insights relevant to practitioners and curriculum designers working in higher education in Uzbekistan and comparable contexts.

Linguistic and Cognitive Challenges

One of the most persistent challenges in ESL instruction concerns the linguistic distance between learners' mother tongues and the target language. Uzbek, like other Turkic languages, differs substantially from English in its agglutinative morphology, verb-final syntax, and system of grammatical relations. These structural differences give rise to persistent errors in the use of English relative pronouns, tense, and aspect. Nematov (2020) provides a detailed analysis of the lexical and grammatical features of English relative pronouns, noting that their acquisition poses specific difficulties for Uzbek-speaking learners

whose native language encodes relativisation through participial constructions rather than relative clauses. Nematov (2026a) further identifies the syntactic functions of relative pronouns as a major area of interlanguage difficulty, while his analysis of their historical development (Nematov, 2026b) offers useful context for understanding why these forms can be opaque to learners.

Aspectual distinctions present a further challenge. Axmedova (2022) demonstrates that the lexical semantics and aspectual classification of semelfactive verbs in English and Uzbek reflect fundamentally different conceptual systems, a finding that has direct implications for teaching verb classes and aspect in ESL classrooms. Saloxiddinov (2020) similarly addresses the translation of syntactic units encoding temporal states between English and Uzbek, pointing to the conceptual mismatches that learners must resolve when internalising the English tense-aspect system. Such research underlines the need for contrastive analysis to be integrated into both teacher training and lesson design.

Vocabulary development is another major area of difficulty. Khujakulov (2024, 2025) explores the rich and culturally specific terminology of folk medicine in English, demonstrating that lexical items frequently carry culture-bound connotations that are not transparent to ESL learners. This opacity extends to phraseological units. Nasirova (2024) examines the contextual analysis of phraseostylistic meaning in fixed English expressions, showing that phraseological competence requires learners to grasp not merely denotative meaning but the pragmatic and stylistic dimensions of conventional formulae. Nosirova and Kurbanova (2020) add a further layer of complexity by documenting systematic lexical differences between American and British English, which creates inconsistencies in the input that learners receive.

The listening dimension of language acquisition is frequently underestimated in ESL programmes. Nematov (2020b) argues that listening plays an indispensable role in English language learning, as it provides learners with the phonological and prosodic data they require to internalise natural speech patterns. When instruction is insufficient, learners may develop reading proficiency while remaining unable to process spoken English at natural rates, producing asymmetric competence profiles that hinder communicative effectiveness.

Methodological Challenges

The diversity of learners within any single ESL classroom constitutes a formidable methodological challenge. Teachers encounter students who differ widely in their prior linguistic knowledge, learning styles, motivational profiles, and cognitive strategies. As Iskandarova (2026a) notes, coping with different types of learners in the same classroom requires teachers to develop flexible instructional repertoires and to make rapid pedagogical decisions in response to emerging learning needs. This demand is intensified when class sizes are large and contact hours are limited, as is common in Uzbek universities.

Interactive methods have been widely advocated as a means of addressing learner diversity and increasing engagement. Iskandarova (2022) demonstrates that interactive teaching of English produces superior outcomes in comparison with traditional transmissive approaches, particularly with regard to communicative competence and learner motivation. Hasanova, Abduazizov, and Khujakulov (2021) provide a nuanced taxonomy of teaching approaches, methods, procedures, techniques, styles, and strategies, arguing that a clear conceptual understanding of these distinctions is essential if teachers are to make theoretically informed decisions about their practice.

The role of games and task-based activities in vocabulary and grammar instruction has also attracted scholarly attention. Kudratova and Ochilova (2022) demonstrate that games provide motivating, low-anxiety contexts in which learners can rehearse linguistic forms and

receive implicit feedback. Anorboyeva and Azzamova (2022) extend this argument to primary school contexts, showing that innovative approaches to teaching English in early education can establish strong affective and cognitive foundations for subsequent learning. Absalamov and Khujakulov (2024) likewise demonstrate that innovative writing activities can significantly enhance writing skills at the school level, a finding of direct relevance given that writing remains one of the most challenging productive skills for ESL learners.

Typological awareness offers another valuable methodological resource. Manuchehr (2022) and Saloxiddinov (2023) both argue that an understanding of linguistic typology and its applications across disciplines can enrich ESL pedagogy by sensitising teachers to the systematic differences and similarities between English and the learners' native languages. When teachers understand typological contrasts, they are better placed to anticipate where learners will experience difficulty and to design instructional scaffolding accordingly.

Phraseological competence constitutes a further methodological priority. Azzamova (2020) examines the multi-dimensional nature of terminology, and Nasirova (2024b) discusses methodological approaches to the use of phraseological units in English lessons, both emphasizing that the acquisition of fixed expressions requires explicit instruction, extensive exposure, and contextualized practice. Ochilova (2014) and Ochilova and Nasrullaev (2018) examine the semantic structures of English phraseological units and proverbs, showing that learners must acquire not only lexical meaning but also cultural and historical dimensions of idiomatic usage.

4. Assessment Challenges

Assessment in ESL contexts raises issues that go beyond the technical design of tests and rubrics. The influence of high-stakes examinations such as the IELTS on the academic trajectories of ESL learners is well documented. Fayziev et al. (2020) examine the impact of IELTS on the academic performance of Asian students at English-medium universities, concluding that the test exerts significant washback effects on both teaching and learning, often narrowing the curriculum towards test-preparation activities at the expense of broader communicative development.

Criterion-based assessment (CBA) has been increasingly advocated as a more pedagogically valid alternative to norm-referenced testing, particularly in higher education. Khodjiev (2022) identifies key difficulties in the implementation of criteria-based assessment, noting that teachers frequently lack adequate training in the design of transparent and consistent rubrics. Khodjiev (2023) further analyses the principles of criterion-based assessment for critical thinking in Uzbek higher education, arguing that the integration of CBA with the development of higher-order thinking skills represents both a challenge and an opportunity for educational reform.

The assessment of writing in EFL contexts has also been examined through a bibliometric lens. Khodjiev, Ardiana, and Rum (2025) map the thematic evolution of EFL writing assessment research from 2014 to 2024, tracing the field's movement from traditional feedback-based models towards AI-assisted assessment tools. This trajectory reflects broader changes in the educational technology landscape and raises important questions about the future of writing pedagogy. Ardiana, Hamid, and Khodjiev (2026) further investigate interactional metadiscourse in research articles produced by Indonesian and Uzbek EFL students, illuminating the genre-specific challenges that ESL writers face when producing academic texts.

5. Technology, Language Policy, and Emerging Challenges

The integration of technology into ESL classrooms presents both opportunities and new pedagogical challenges. Akhmedova (2024) explores the organisation of word search in

Uzbek texts using the Boyer-Moore-Horspool algorithm, a contribution that, while primarily computational, highlights the potential of corpus-based and computational tools for language learning applications. The rapid growth of artificial intelligence in educational settings raises questions about the appropriate use of these tools and their implications for learner autonomy, integrity, and skill development.

Teacher training remains a central concern. Iskandarova (2026b) identifies new methods of teaching English as a second language, while Iskandarova (2023a) underscores the importance of teaching grammar and building vocabulary in primary school through fairy tales, an approach that exploits narrative engagement and the natural inclination of young learners. Iskandarova (2023b) also stresses the importance of developing critical thinking skills among students, a goal that aligns with broader educational reform priorities in Uzbekistan and the region.

Language policy constitutes a structural dimension of the ESL challenge that must not be overlooked. Khodjiev (2021) outlines the goals and objectives of language planning and policy, arguing that effective ESL provision requires coherent institutional frameworks that articulate clear aims, allocate adequate resources, and provide mechanisms for ongoing evaluation. Without such frameworks, even well-trained teachers and well-designed curricula may fail to achieve their potential.

The sociolinguistic context of English use in Central Asia also deserves attention. Hazaymeh (2021) provides insights into the sociolinguistic dimensions of phraseological expression in spoken Arabic, a study whose methodological approach combining qualitative and quantitative analysis of authentic data offers a model for similar research in Uzbek English-learning contexts. Azzamova (2020b) discusses the role of extracurricular activities in the educational process, noting that out-of-class engagement with the target language can significantly supplement formal instruction, particularly where classroom contact hours are limited.

Literary and cultural literacy present further dimensions of the challenge. Akhmedova (2023) and Haydarova and Azzamova (2026) examine the concept of nature in literature and figurative language as a poetic system in the works of Mark Twain and Uzbek authors, demonstrating that the appreciation of literary English requires cultural knowledge and aesthetic sensitivity that go well beyond linguistic competence. Sitara and Azzamova (2026) extend this analysis to the representation of childhood psychology in the works of Twain and Khudoyberdi Tokhtaboev, illustrating the comparative and intercultural dimensions of literary literacy that advanced ESL learners are expected to develop.

Implications and Recommendations

The foregoing analysis points to several practical implications for ESL practitioners and educational administrators in Uzbekistan and similar contexts. First, teacher training programmes must equip future teachers with a thorough grounding in contrastive linguistics, enabling them to anticipate and address the specific difficulties that Uzbek-speaking learners face when acquiring English morphosyntax, aspect, and phraseology. Second, assessment practices should move towards criterion-based models that explicitly target communicative competence, critical thinking, and genre literacy, rather than relying exclusively on discrete-item tests that measure decontextualized knowledge.

Third, interactive and technology-enhanced methodologies should be integrated into mainstream instruction, with due attention to the risk that technological novelty may distract from the development of foundational skills. Fourth, language policy at the institutional and national level must be designed to create coherent and well-resourced environments in which both teachers and learners can thrive. Finally, connections between language teaching and

broader literary and cultural education should be cultivated, as these connections enrich learners' affective engagement with English and deepen their understanding of its expressive possibilities. Ziyodullayeva, Saidabrora, and Akhmedova (2023) demonstrate the value of integrated approaches to English language development in preschool and primary education, a finding that has implications for the continuity of English language provision across all educational levels.

Conclusion

Teaching English to ESL learners is a complex enterprise that operates at the intersection of linguistics, pedagogy, assessment, technology, and cultural education. The challenges identified in this article, ranging from the acquisition of English morphosyntactic and aspectual knowledge to the implementation of criterion-based assessment and the management of linguistically diverse classrooms, are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Addressing them requires a commitment to ongoing professional development, evidence-based practice, and institutional support. The body of research produced by scholars at SamSIFL and partner institutions provides a valuable foundation for this work, illustrating both the depth of the challenges involved and the sophistication of the responses that dedicated educators are developing. As the role of English in Uzbekistan continues to expand, the importance of meeting these challenges with rigor and creativity will only increase.

REFERENCES

1. Absalamov K., Khujakulov R. Enhancing writing skills in school: innovative activities for success // Conference proceedings: Fostering your research spirit. 2024. Vol. 5. P. 192–194.
2. Akhmedova H. Organization of word search in Uzbek texts based on Boyer-Moore-Horspool algorithm // Al-Farg'oni avlodlari. 2024. Vol. 1. P. 196–201.
3. Akhmedova H. The peculiarities of the concept of nature in literature // Центральноазиатский журнал образования и инноваций. 2023. Т. 2, № 6 (Part 6). С. 131–135.
4. Anorboyeva G., Azzamova N. Modern approaches and innovations in teaching English in primary schools // Scientific progress. 2022. Vol. 3, no. 2. P. 656–658.
5. Ardiana, Hamid S., Khodjiev Z. Indonesian and Uzbekistan EFL Students' Research Articles: Interactional Metadiscourse // Twist International Multidisciplinary Journal. 2026. Vol. 20, no. 1. P. 84–93.
6. Axmedova X. Ingliz va O'zbek tillarida semelfaktiv fe'llarning leksik semantika va aspektual turkumlanishi // Анализ актуальных проблем, инноваций, традиций, решений и художественной литературы. 2022. № 3.
7. Azzamova N. R. The multi-dimensional character of terminology // Colloquium-journal. 2020. P. 47–48.
8. Azzamova N. R. The role of extracurricular activities in an educational process // Science and Education. 2020. Vol. 1, no. 9. P. 352–356.
9. Fayziev H., Nematov B. S., Yakubov F. J. [et al.]. A Critical Review of the IELTS Impact on Academic Performance, the Case of Asian Students at English Speaking Universities // JournalNX. 2020. Vol. 6, no. 6. P. 752–756.
10. Hasanova N., Abduazizov B., Khujakulov R. The Main Differences Between Teaching Approaches, Methods, Procedures, Techniques, Styles, and Strategies // JournalNX: A Multidisciplinary Peer Reviewed Journal. 2021. Vol. 7, no. 02. P. 371–375.

11. Haydarova N., Azzamova N. Figurative language as a poetic system in the works of Mark Twain and Khudoyberdi Tokhtaboev: a comparative and functional analysis // Asian journal of scientific research and innovations. 2026. Vol. 1, no. 1. P. 94–96.
12. Hazaymeh O. A sociolinguistic study of the use of cardinal and ordinal numbers in rhetorical, phraseological expressions in Jordanian spoken Arabic // SKASE Journal of Theoretical Linguistics. 2021. Vol. 18, no. 2.
13. Iskandarova L. B. Challenges teachers face while coping with different types of learners in a classroom // International Journal of Artificial Intelligence. 2026. Vol. 6, no. 02. P. 250–253.
14. Iskandarova L. B. New methods of teaching English as a second language (ESL) // International Journal of Artificial Intelligence. 2026. Vol. 6, no. 02. P. 250–253.
15. Iskandarova L. B. Obuchenie angliyskomu yazyku interaktivnymi metodami // Central Asian Journal of Literature, Philosophy and Culture. 2022. Vol. 3, no. 12. P. 114–118.
16. Iskandarova L. B. Vazhnost' obucheniya grammatike i popolneniya slovarnogo zapasa uchenikov nachal'noy shkoly posredstvom skazok // International Journal of advanced research in Education, Technology and Management. 2023. № 3.
17. Iskandarova L. B. Vazhnost' formirovaniya kriticheskogo myshleniya u studentov // International Journal of advanced research in Education, Technology and Management. 2025. № 2.
18. Khodjieva Z. M. Language planning and policy proposal, goals and objectives // Emergent: Journal of Educational Discoveries and Lifelong Learning (EJEDL). 2021. Vol. 2.
19. Khodjieva Z., Ardiana A., Rum E. P. From Feedback to Artificial Intelligence: A Bibliometric Mapping Analysis of the Thematic Evolution of English as a Foreign Language Writing Assessment Research Trends (2014–2024) // International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research. 2025. Vol. 24, no. 9.
20. Khodjieva Z. M. Difficulties in criteria-based assessment // Ijtimoiy fanlarda innovasiya onlayn ilmiy jurnali. 2022. Vol. 2, no. 6. P. 28–31.