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THE PHONETIC REALIZATION OF ENGLISH /L/ BY UZBEK-SPEAKING EFL LEARNERS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Muxlisa Shakarboyeva

Abstract: Pronunciation is an important part of foreign language learning because differences between a learner's first language and English can affect the way sounds are produced. One interesting example is the consonant /l/. Both English and Uzbek have this sound, but its phonetic realization is not exactly the same in the two languages. In English, /l/ commonly has clear and dark [ɬ] realizations depending on its phonological position. Uzbek does not generally use the same systematic pattern of /l/ allophony. This difference may influence the pronunciation of English by Uzbek-speaking learners. This article compares the realization of /l/ in English and Uzbek and discusses possible difficulties caused by first-language influence. The study is based on a review and comparison of previous research on English /l/, second-language pronunciation, and Uzbek learners of English. The findings suggest that greater awareness of English /l/ variation and focused pronunciation practice may help Uzbek learners produce the sound more appropriately.

Keywords: English /l/, Uzbek /l/, clear /l/, dark /l/, pronunciation, language transfer, EFL learners.

Introduction

Pronunciation plays an important role in successful communication in a foreign language. Learners may experience difficulties when English contains sounds or pronunciation patterns that are different from those of their first language. However, difficulties can also occur when the two languages have the same sound but use it differently.

The English consonant /l/ is a useful example of this situation. Uzbek also contains /l/, so Uzbek learners do not need to learn the basic articulation of the sound as something completely new. However, English /l/ can have different phonetic realizations depending on its position in a word. In many varieties of English, a clearer [l] occurs in syllable-initial positions, while a darker or velarized [ɬ] is common in syllable-final positions (Sproat & Fujimura, 1993).

The aim of this article is to compare English and Uzbek /l/ and to discuss how differences between the two languages may influence Uzbek-speaking EFL learners. The article also considers some practical implications for pronunciation teaching.

English /l/

English /l/ is a voiced alveolar lateral approximant. It is produced when the tongue makes contact with the alveolar region while air passes around the sides of the tongue. Although /l/ is considered one phoneme in English, its actual pronunciation can vary according to its position and phonetic environment.

The two forms most commonly discussed are clear [l] and dark [ɬ]. Clear [l] is generally associated with syllable-initial positions, as in light, late, and love. The tongue is positioned more toward the front of the mouth.

Dark [ɬ] is commonly found in syllable-final positions, as in feel, milk, and school. In this realization, the back of the tongue is raised toward the velum, which gives the sound its darker quality (Sproat & Fujimura, 1993).

However, the difference should not be understood as two completely fixed pronunciations. Research has shown that /l/ can vary gradually depending on phonological context, speaking style, and dialect (Huffman, 1997; Turton, 2017). Some varieties of English

also show /l/-vocalization, particularly in certain final positions. Therefore, English /l/ should be viewed as a sound with considerable phonetic variation.

English /l/ in Different Positions

The position of /l/ in a word is one of the most important factors affecting its pronunciation. At the beginning of words or syllables, as in leaf, long, and lake, /l/ is normally realized with a clearer quality. In final positions, as in feel, small, and school, it is often produced with greater velarization.

Intervocalic /l/ can also show variation. Huffman (1997) demonstrated that the phonetic characteristics of English /l/ may change even when it occurs between vowels. This shows that pronunciation cannot always be explained by one simple rule.

For learners, however, the clear–dark distinction remains useful because it helps them notice a difference that may not be present in the same way in their first language.

The /l/ Sound in Uzbek

Uzbek also has the voiced lateral consonant /l/. Because the sound exists in Uzbek, learners can usually produce a basic /l/ without the same difficulty they might experience with an entirely unfamiliar English consonant.

The main difference concerns its phonetic behavior. Uzbek does not generally have the same systematic clear–dark /l/ pattern found in many varieties of English. The Uzbek /l/ is normally produced as an alveolar lateral, although its realization can be affected by neighboring sounds.

This difference may be important for Uzbek learners of English. If learners use the pronunciation pattern that is familiar from Uzbek, they may produce English /l/ with a similar quality in different positions. As a result, the final /l/ in a word such as feel may not have the same degree of velarization as it commonly has in English.

First-Language Influence

Differences between the sound systems of a learner's first and second languages can influence second-language pronunciation. Lado (1957) argued that structural differences between languages may create areas of difficulty, while later research has described this process as language transfer or cross-linguistic influence (Odlin, 1989).

In pronunciation learning, transfer does not mean that every learner will make the same mistake. Learners' experience, proficiency, exposure to English, and the pronunciation model they use can all influence their production. Nevertheless, first-language patterns may provide a starting point for understanding why certain sounds are difficult.

Research on second-language speech learning also emphasizes the importance of learners' ability to perceive phonetic differences in the target language (Flege, 1995). If Uzbek learners do not clearly notice the difference between clear and dark English /l/, they may have less reason to reproduce this difference in their own speech.

Recent research on Uzbek learners has also discussed phonetic interference and pronunciation difficulties when producing English sounds (Yuldasheva, 2026). Such research supports the importance of considering Uzbek–English phonetic differences in pronunciation teaching.

Comparison of English and Uzbek /l/

The main similarities and differences can be summarized briefly:

Possible Difficulties for Uzbek Learners

Uzbek-speaking learners may experience several difficulties with English /l/. First, they may pronounce initial and final /l/ in almost the same way. For example, the /l/ in light and feel may have very similar articulatory characteristics.

Second, learners may not notice the acoustic difference between [l] and [ɬ]. Since the distinction is not used in the same systematic way in Uzbek, it may not receive much attention during listening or speaking.

Third, learners may produce final /l/ with less velarization than speakers of varieties of English in which dark /l/ is strongly realized. This does not necessarily prevent understanding, but it can contribute to a noticeable foreign accent.

At the same time, English has many accents, and the realization of /l/ differs between them. Therefore, the aim of pronunciation teaching should not be to force learners to copy one particular accent. The more practical goal is to help them understand common English pronunciation patterns and communicate clearly.

Pedagogical Implications

The English–Uzbek difference in /l/ can be addressed through simple pronunciation activities. Teachers can first explain the difference between clear [l] and dark [ɬ] using tongue position. Students can then listen to examples and identify whether /l/ occurs in an initial or final position.

Repetition activities can be used with words such as light–feel, late–school, and leaf–small. Students can also practise the sound in short sentences rather than only isolated words.

Recording is another useful technique. Learners can record themselves producing words with initial and final /l/ and compare their pronunciation with an English model. This can help them notice differences that may be difficult to recognize while speaking.

Pronunciation teaching should focus on intelligibility and awareness rather than perfect imitation of a particular native accent. This approach is consistent with current pronunciation teaching perspectives, which emphasize communication and realistic learner goals (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Derwing & Munro, 2015).

Discussion

The comparison demonstrates that English and Uzbek share the /l/ phoneme, but they do not use it in exactly the same phonetic way. English commonly shows clear and dark realizations, especially according to syllable position, while Uzbek does not generally have the same systematic pattern.

This creates an interesting situation for Uzbek learners. Because /l/ already exists in their first language, they may not initially consider it difficult. However, they may transfer the familiar Uzbek realization to English contexts where English speakers commonly use a darker /l/.

The issue also demonstrates that phonetic similarity between two languages does not necessarily mean complete equivalence. Learners need to notice not only whether a sound exists in both languages, but also how it behaves in different contexts.

It is important to note that the exact pronunciation of /l/ varies among English accents and individual speakers. Therefore, future research with Uzbek-speaking learners could investigate their actual production through recordings and acoustic or articulatory analysis.

Conclusion

English and Uzbek both contain the /l/ consonant, but its phonetic realization differs between the two languages. English commonly has clear [l] and dark [ɬ] realizations, particularly in different syllable positions. Uzbek does not generally use the same systematic pattern of /l/ allophony.

For Uzbek-speaking EFL learners, the main difficulty is therefore not producing /l/ as a basic consonant but recognizing and reproducing its different English realizations. First-language influence may encourage learners to use a similar pronunciation of /l/ in different positions.

Pronunciation instruction can help by raising learners' awareness of clear and dark /l/, providing listening and repetition practice, and encouraging learners to record and evaluate their own pronunciation. Further experimental research involving Uzbek-speaking learners would be useful for determining how frequently these differences occur and which teaching methods are most effective.

Feature	**English /l/**	**Uzbek /l/**
Basic type	Voiced lateral consonant	Voiced lateral consonant
Main place	Alveolar	Alveolar
Clear [l]	Common, especially initially	Common realization
Dark [ɫ]	Common in many varieties in final position	Not systematically used in the same way
Positional variation	Relatively noticeable	Less systematic
Possible learner difficulty	Producing appropriate allophonic variation	Transferring familiar Uzbek realization into English

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