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MULTILINGUALISM, IDENTITY, AND ASSESSMENT FAIRNESS IN AN UZBEK EFL CLASSROOM: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC CASE STUDY OF UZBEK-TAJIK AND UZBEK-RUSSIAN BILINGUAL LEARNERS

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Abstract. *This article examines the sociolinguistic profile of a multilingual English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom in Uzbekistan and discusses its implications for language teaching and assessment. The study focuses on a group of 15 sixth-grade learners at School No. 142 in Yashnobod District, Tashkent. The learners are 12-13 years old and study English in a formal school context where Uzbek is the main language of classroom explanation and everyday communication. However, the group is not linguistically homogeneous: four learners are Uzbek-Tajik bilinguals from Bukhara and Navoi regions, while eleven learners are Uzbek-Russian bilinguals from Tashkent. Drawing on sociolinguistic theories of multilingualism, World Englishes, identity, language attitudes, code-switching, and linguistic profiling, the article argues that students' linguistic repertoires should be treated as educational resources rather than learning problems. The analysis shows that multilingual learners' English development is shaped by language background, regional identity, code-switching, classroom interaction, peer attitudes, and imagined future identities. The article also emphasizes that assessment in multilingual EFL classrooms should focus on intelligibility, communicative effectiveness, task completion, and fairness rather than native-like pronunciation. The findings suggest that sociolinguistically responsive pedagogy can support learners' confidence, reduce accent-based bias, and create more inclusive English classrooms in Uzbekistan.*

Keywords: *multilingualism, EFL, sociolinguistic profile, Uzbek learners, code-switching, identity, assessment fairness, World Englishes.*

1. Introduction

English language learning is not only the acquisition of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and classroom skills. It is also a sociolinguistic process shaped by learners' identities, home languages, regional backgrounds, language attitudes, classroom relationships, and future communicative needs.

In many EFL contexts, learners do not use English as a natural language of everyday communication. Instead, English is mainly encountered through school instruction, textbooks, teacher explanations, exams, and limited digital exposure. For this reason, an effective analysis of English learning should begin with a sociolinguistic profile of learners and their context.

This article focuses on a group of sixth-grade EFL learners at School No. 142 in Yashnobod District, Tashkent. The group includes 15 students aged 12-13. Although all learners

understand Uzbek and use it as the shared classroom language, they have different bilingual backgrounds. Four learners are Uzbek-Tajik bilinguals from Bukhara and Navoi regions, while eleven learners are Uzbek-Russian bilinguals from Tashkent. These differences are pedagogically significant because students' home and community languages may influence their pronunciation, vocabulary recognition, code-switching, peer interaction, confidence, and English learner identity.

The study is grounded in the perspective that Uzbekistan belongs to the Expanding Circle of English use, where English is learned as a foreign language and is mainly acquired through formal instruction. Kachru's (1990) model of World Englishes explains the global spread of English through the Inner Circle, Outer Circle, and Expanding Circle (pp. 3-4). This model is relevant because Uzbek learners of English are not surrounded by English in daily life in the same way as learners in English-dominant societies. Instead, their classroom becomes the main site for English input, interaction, and practice.

Bhatt (2001) further argues that World Englishes should be understood through a pluricentric perspective that recognizes multilingualism, multicultural identities, multiple norms of use, and different contexts of function (pp. 527-528). This position is important for Uzbek EFL classrooms because learners should not be evaluated only according to native-speaker norms. In a multilingual world, English is used by speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, Uzbek learners need to develop intelligible, flexible, and socially appropriate communication rather than simply imitate British or American pronunciation.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the sociolinguistic features of a multilingual Uzbek EFL classroom and to discuss how such a profile can inform pedagogy and assessment. The article argues that instruction should recognize multilingualism as a resource, include purposeful scaffolding, reduce negative language attitudes, support learners' identities, and assess communication fairly. In this way, the teacher can create an inclusive learning environment where Uzbek-Tajik and Uzbek-Russian bilingual learners are treated as capable multilingual students rather than deficient English learners.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Multilingualism and EFL Learning

Multilingualism is a central concept for understanding the learner group analyzed in this article. Deumert (2011) defines multilingualism as the use of more than one language by individuals, societies, or countries (p. 262). This definition is directly relevant to Uzbekistan, where learners may use Uzbek, Russian, Tajik, and English in different domains of life. In the classroom described in this study, Uzbek is the shared language of instruction, Tajik is used by some students in family and regional contexts, Russian is used by many students in urban communication and media exposure, and English is the target language of school learning.

Deumert (2011) also emphasizes that multilingualism should be understood as a continuum rather than a single fixed ability. Learners may have different levels of competence in listening, speaking, reading, writing, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and stylistic use (p. 265). This is important because bilingual students do not necessarily have equal competence in all their languages. For example, an Uzbek-Tajik learner may speak Tajik fluently at home but use Uzbek

for schooling, while an Uzbek-Russian learner may understand Russian through media and peer communication but use Uzbek for formal school tasks. Thus, multilingualism should be treated as a varied repertoire of linguistic resources.

2.2 World Englishes and the Expanding Circle

The concept of World Englishes helps explain the broader context of English learning in Uzbekistan. Kachru (1990) describes English as a global language that exists across different sociocultural contexts and serves different functions in different societies (p. 5). His three-circle model is especially useful for EFL contexts because it shows that English is not used in the same way everywhere. In Inner Circle countries, English is a native language; in Outer Circle countries, it may have institutional functions; and in Expanding Circle countries, it is generally learned as a foreign language (Kachru, 1990, pp. 3-4).

Uzbekistan can be understood as an Expanding Circle context. English is important for education, international communication, digital learning, travel, and future employment, but it is not the main language of everyday social life. Therefore, Uzbek EFL classrooms should provide opportunities for meaningful English communication that students may not receive outside school.

Bhatt (2001) notes that the Expanding Circle includes countries where English is used primarily as a foreign language and where the number of users and functional domains continues to increase (p. 530). This is relevant to Uzbek learners because English is increasingly associated with academic success, global communication, and professional mobility.

2.3 Language, Identity, and Ethnicity

Language is strongly connected to identity. Fought (2011) argues that language plays a crucial role in the construction and maintenance of ethnic identity (p. 238). This idea is important for Uzbek-Tajik and Uzbek-Russian bilingual learners because their language backgrounds are linked to region, family, community, and peer relationships. Tajik may represent family and regional belonging for students from Bukhara and Navoi, while Russian may represent urban communication, media exposure, and social networks for many Tashkent learners.

Fought (2011) also explains that ethnicity is socially constructed and cannot be understood separately from other social factors such as gender, class, and community ideology (p. 240).

Therefore, the aim is not to label students in a fixed way, but to understand how their language repertoires shape classroom participation and English learning. Code-switching is one expression of this multilingual identity. Fought (2011) notes that code-switching can signal multiple identities and connect speakers both to heritage communities and wider communities (p. 241).

Bucholtz and Hall (2005) define identity as "the social positioning of self and other" (p. 586).

Their approach is useful for classroom analysis because identity is not only a private characteristic; it is created through interaction. Students position themselves and are positioned by others through accent, language choice, speaking confidence, peer response, and teacher feedback.

Bucholtz and Hall (2005) argue that identity is produced through linguistic interaction rather than existing only as a fixed internal feature (pp. 585-586). This means that classroom practices can either strengthen or weaken students' English learner identities.

2.4 Language Attitudes, Accent, and Linguistic Profiling

Language attitudes can strongly affect classroom participation and assessment. Bayley and Villarreal (2018) define language attitudes as affective, behavioral, or cognitive reactions that listeners have toward language varieties and linguistic features (p. 1). They also explain that attitudes toward language varieties often reflect attitudes toward the people who speak them (p. 1).

In a multilingual classroom, students may judge classmates based on accent, language choice, or perceived fluency. Such judgments can influence confidence and willingness to speak.

Bayley and Villarreal (2018) emphasize that all languages and varieties are systematic and equal in complexity and expressive power (p. 2). This principle is important for teachers because learners' Uzbek-, Tajik-, or Russian-influenced pronunciation should not automatically be treated as a problem. The main goal of pronunciation instruction should be intelligibility, not native-like accent.

Baugh (2005) introduces the concept of linguistic profiling, which he describes as the auditory equivalent of racial profiling (p. 155). He argues that people may face unfair treatment when they are perceived to speak with an undesirable accent or dialect (p. 155). Although Baugh's examples are mainly from the United States, the concept is relevant to language assessment in any context where accent-based judgment can affect learners. In an Uzbek EFL classroom, students should not be assessed unfairly because their English reflects Tajik, Russian, or Uzbek phonological influence.

2.5 Code-Switching and Inclusive Pedagogy

Code-switching is common in multilingual EFL classrooms. Khan, Ahmed, and Gul (2023) define code-switching as switching back and forth between two languages, dialects, or styles within a single conversation (p. 187). They explain that code-switching affects cognition, communication, and students' language learning in multilingual classrooms (p. 188). Their study shows that students may benefit from code-switching when it helps clarify difficult concepts and supports comprehension.

However, Khan et al. (2023) also warn that code-switching can create unequal learning conditions if the teacher switches to a language that not all students understand (pp. 201-203).

This point is especially important for multilingual classrooms with different subgroups. In the present case, Uzbek can function as the shared support language because all students understand it. However, Russian or Tajik should not become the main language of instruction unless translation is provided. Otherwise, one subgroup may benefit while another feels excluded.

2.6 Investment and Imagined Identities

Language learning is also connected to students' future identities. Harbon and Fielding (2025) argue that language learning continuity is shaped by learners' investment and identity development (pp. 252-254). They show that students are more likely to continue language learning

when they receive individual and community support and when they see the language as meaningful for future goals (pp. 254-255).

Yoshida (2025) also emphasizes that L2 learning is connected to imagined identities and social factors such as language, gender, race, and age (pp. 1158-1160).

Although Yoshida's study focuses on Japanese language learners, the concept is relevant to Uzbek learners of English. Students may imagine themselves as future university students, travelers, doctors, teachers, or international professionals. These imagined identities can increase motivation, but they can also create pressure if learners believe that successful English learning requires native-like pronunciation. For this reason, English instruction should help learners develop realistic and positive identities as multilingual English users.

3. Methodology

This article uses a qualitative descriptive case-study approach. The case is one sixth-grade EFL classroom at School No. 142 in Yashnobod District, Tashkent. The learner group consists of 15 students aged 12-13: 5 male students and 10 female students. The classroom was selected because it represents a common multilingual EFL context in Uzbekistan, where English is learned formally at school while students use other languages in family, community, and peer interaction.

The analysis is based on a sociolinguistic profile of the learner group. The profile focuses on learners' language backgrounds, subgroup differences, classroom language use, identity, and potential implications for pedagogy and assessment. The learners are divided into two main subgroups: four Uzbek-Tajik bilingual learners from Bukhara and Navoi, and eleven Uzbek-Russian bilingual learners from Tashkent. The study does not aim to generalize to all Uzbek EFL classrooms. Instead, it provides an in-depth discussion of one classroom context and shows how sociolinguistic theory can inform English teaching and assessment.

The analysis is guided by selected sociolinguistic concepts: multilingualism, World Englishes, language and ethnicity, identity construction, language attitudes, code-switching, linguistic profiling, learner investment, and imagined identities. These concepts are used to interpret the classroom context and develop pedagogical and assessment recommendations.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Learners as a Multilingual Group

The target learners share a common school context, age group, and classroom language.

However, they should not be described as a homogeneous group. All students understand Uzbek, but their wider linguistic repertoires differ. Four students use Tajik with family members and relatives, while eleven students use Russian in peer communication, media exposure, or everyday urban contexts. Therefore, the classroom is multilingual rather than monolingual.

This multilingualism can influence English learning in several ways. Students may transfer pronunciation patterns from Uzbek, Tajik, or Russian into English. They may recognize some English vocabulary more easily if they have Russian exposure, especially where international or borrowed vocabulary overlaps. Uzbek-Tajik learners may bring different phonological or pragmatic patterns into classroom interaction. These differences should not be treated as deficiencies. Following Deumert's (2011) view of multilingualism as a continuum (p. 265), the

learners' language backgrounds should be understood as varied resources that can support English learning.

4.2 Language Background and Identity

The two learner subgroups also show how language background is connected to regional and social identity. For Uzbek-Tajik bilingual learners, Tajik may represent family, relatives, and regional belonging. For Uzbek-Russian bilingual learners, Russian may be connected to Tashkent urban life, media, social networks, and wider communication. These language backgrounds influence how students see themselves and how they may be seen by others.

Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) definition of identity as social positioning (p. 586) helps explain classroom dynamics. Students may position themselves as strong or weak English learners depending on how others respond to their accent or speaking ability. Teacher feedback and peer reactions are especially important. If students are mocked for pronunciation, they may become silent. If their multilingual background is respected, they may become more willing to participate.

4.3 Code-Switching as Classroom Practice

Code-switching is likely to occur in this classroom because learners use several languages in different domains. Students may use Uzbek to ask questions, Russian to discuss media or technology, Tajik with peers from similar regional backgrounds, and English during lesson tasks.

Such movement between languages should not automatically be interpreted as confusion. As Khan et al. (2023) explain, code-switching can support cognition, communication, and language learning in multilingual contexts (p. 188).

However, code-switching should be purposeful and inclusive. Uzbek can be used for short explanations, grammar clarification, or task instructions because it is shared by all learners. Russian and Tajik can be acknowledged as part of learners' identities, but they should not become the main language of teacher explanation unless the meaning is translated. This is important because code-switching may create unequal learning conditions if some students do not understand the language used (Khan et al., 2023, pp. 201-203).

4.4 Language Attitudes and Classroom Confidence

Language attitudes are an important part of the learning environment. Some students may believe that Russian-influenced pronunciation is more prestigious, or that native-like English is the only correct model. Others may feel insecure about regional or home-language influence. Bayley and Villarreal (2018) note that attitudes toward language varieties often reflect attitudes toward speakers (p. 1). Thus, classroom language attitudes can shape student confidence.

The teacher should create a classroom culture where students understand that accent variation is normal. Bayley and Villarreal (2018) argue that all language varieties are systematic and equal in expressive power (p. 2). This does not mean that pronunciation instruction is unnecessary. Rather, pronunciation should be taught for intelligibility and communicative clarity, not for erasing students' linguistic backgrounds.

4.5 Future English Use and Learner Investment

The learners' target context extends beyond the present classroom. They may need English for school exams, digital communication, travel, university study, international interaction, and future careers.

Harbon and Fielding (2025) argue that investment and identity development influence whether students continue language learning (pp. 252-254). Therefore, lessons should help students connect English to meaningful future goals.

Students should also develop positive imagined identities as English users. Yoshida (2025) shows that imagined identities can shape learners' engagement with language learning (pp. 1158-1160). In this classroom, learners may imagine themselves as future students, professionals, travelers, or online communicators. Instruction should support these identities by showing that multilingual speakers can be legitimate English users even when they do not sound like native speakers.

5. Pedagogical Implications

The sociolinguistic profile of this classroom suggests several pedagogical implications.

First, instruction should recognize multilingualism as a resource. Students' Uzbek, Tajik, and Russian backgrounds should be acknowledged in classroom examples, discussions, and tasks.

Teachers can invite students to compare words, discuss language use, or reflect on the languages in their lives. Such activities help learners see English as an additional language in their repertoire rather than a replacement for their home languages.

Second, the teacher should use communicative and task-based activities. Since students have limited natural exposure to English outside school, the classroom must provide meaningful practice. Pair work, role plays, information-gap tasks, short interviews, presentations, and group discussions can help students use English for real communication. These activities are especially useful because they allow students to negotiate meaning and develop confidence.

Third, scaffolding should be used strategically. Uzbek can support comprehension, especially for difficult grammar, vocabulary, or instructions. However, English should remain the main target language for task completion. For example, students may brainstorm ideas in Uzbek but present them in English. This approach respects students' current abilities while gradually increasing English use.

Fourth, the teacher should address language attitudes directly. Students should learn that different accents are normal in global English communication. The teacher can introduce examples of different English speakers from different countries and explain that intelligibility is more important than sounding native-like. This is consistent with the World Englishes perspective of Kachru (1990) and Bhatt (2001).

Fifth, materials should be identity-sensitive and locally meaningful. Students can work with topics such as school life, family, hometowns, hobbies, technology, travel, future professions, and languages in their lives. A task such as "My Languages and My Future" can help learners connect English with personal identity and future aspirations.

Sixth, instruction should support individual needs. A student with a slight stutter should receive preparation time, pair rehearsal, or the option to record speaking tasks. A student who wears glasses should receive clear handouts, large board writing, and appropriate seating. These adjustments are not separate from pedagogy; they are part of inclusive instruction.

6. Assessment Implications

Assessment in this classroom should be sociolinguistically fair. It should not penalize students simply because their English pronunciation reflects Uzbek, Tajik, or Russian influence.

Baugh (2005) warns that linguistic profiling can lead to unfair treatment based on accent or dialect (p. 155). In classroom assessment, this means teachers must distinguish between pronunciation that prevents communication and pronunciation that is merely different from native-speaker norms.

Speaking assessment should focus on communicative effectiveness, task completion, intelligibility, interaction, vocabulary use, and grammar control. Rubrics should avoid vague criteria such as "native-like pronunciation." Instead, pronunciation should be evaluated in terms of whether the listener can understand the message. This approach protects students from accent-based bias and supports confidence.

Assessment should also include both formative and summative methods. Formative assessment may include teacher observation, peer interaction, short speaking tasks, vocabulary checks, exit tickets, and feedback during group work. Summative assessment may include presentations, writing tasks, reading tests, and oral interviews. A combination of methods gives a more accurate picture of students' language development.

Code-switching may be allowed during preparation stages, especially in formative assessment. Students can use Uzbek to clarify ideas before producing English. However, the final product should demonstrate English ability. The teacher should ensure that instructions are accessible to all students. Since all learners understand Uzbek, it can be used for clarification. Russian or Tajik should be translated if used, so that no subgroup is excluded.

Assessment should also accommodate individual needs. The student with a stutter should not be assessed primarily on speaking speed. The rubric should focus on language content, clarity, vocabulary, and task completion. The student with visual needs should receive clear print, readable font, and accessible test formatting. These accommodations make assessment fair without lowering academic expectations.

Finally, assessment should support positive learner identity. If students feel that only native-like English is valued, they may become silent or anxious. If assessment values communication, intelligibility, progress, and effort, students are more likely to participate actively.

In this sense, assessment is not only a measurement tool; it is also part of identity formation in the classroom.

7. Conclusion

This article has analyzed the sociolinguistic profile of a multilingual sixth-grade EFL classroom in Tashkent. The learner group includes Uzbek-Tajik bilingual students and Uzbek-Russian bilingual students who bring different linguistic resources into English learning. Their

language backgrounds influence pronunciation, code-switching, vocabulary recognition, classroom confidence, identity, and future investment in English.

The analysis shows that English instruction in Uzbekistan should be informed by multilingual realities.

Kachru's and Bhatt's World Englishes perspectives help explain why English should not be taught only as native-speaker imitation. Deumert's view of multilingualism as a continuum helps teachers understand students' varied language repertoires. Fought, Bucholtz and Hall, and Yoshida show that language learning is connected to identity, ethnicity, age, gender, and imagined futures.

Bayley and Villarreal and Baugh show that accent and language attitudes can create unfair judgments. Khan et al. demonstrate that code-switching can be useful when it is strategic and inclusive. For teachers, the main implication is that multilingualism should be treated as a strength. Instruction should include meaningful communication, purposeful scaffolding, inclusive language attitudes, identity-based materials, and differentiated support. Assessment should focus on intelligibility, communicative effectiveness, and fairness rather than native-like accent. The teacher's role is therefore not only to teach English, but also to advocate for multilingual learners whose linguistic backgrounds may be undervalued in traditional classrooms.

For Uzbek-Tajik and Uzbek-Russian bilingual learners, English should be presented as an additional communicative resource that expands their opportunities while respecting the languages they already use. A sociolinguistically responsive classroom can help students become confident English users and support more equitable language education in Uzbekistan.

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