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SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVES ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING IN A 9TH-GRADE IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract. *This article looks at how social and cultural differences affect English learning in a 9th-grade class in Bukhara, Uzbekistan. All students speak Uzbek as their first language, but they come from different regions, families, and situations. Some have private tutors, internet access, and support at home, while others rely only on school lessons. These differences influence how confident students feel and how quickly they learn. Gender roles, ethnic background, and social class also shape how students use English in class. The article explains how sociolinguistics—the study of language and society—can help teachers understand these differences. It also shows how ideas about "correct English" can sometimes make students less confident. The paper suggests ways to make teaching and assessment more inclusive, such as allowing students to use their home languages, valuing different varieties of English, and focusing on real communication skills. By looking at language learning through a sociolinguistic lens, teachers can create fairer classrooms where every student feels respected and supported.*

Introduction

Pupils bring more than just textbooks and notebooks in today's language classrooms; they bring their personal histories, languages, cultures, and social experiences. In my English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom in Bukhara, Uzbekistan, all of my pupils speak Uzbek as their home language, but they differ in many other important ways. Some pupils come from urban areas and have access to private tutoring and the internet. Others have moved from rural regions and rely entirely on school for their exposure to English. These differences in social background, region, gender roles, and access to resources can have a big impact on how students learn English and how confident they feel using it.

Sociolinguistics—the study of how language relates to society—gives teachers tools to better understand these differences. It helps us ask important questions: Why do some students speak more in class? Why do others feel left out? How do social beliefs about "good" or "correct" English shape our teaching and testing? In this paper, I use sociolinguistic concepts to describe my classroom and explain how my learners' identities, language practices, and experiences with language variation influence their learning. I also explain how this knowledge shapes my teaching methods, my choice of learning materials, and the way I assess my pupils.

Understanding language through a sociolinguistic perspective helps me move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach. It allows me to see each learner as a whole person, not just a test score or a grammar level. In doing so, I aim to create a classroom that values diversity and builds my pupils' confidence in their own language use. This paper shows that language teaching is not just about learning English—it is about giving every learner the support and respect they need to grow.

Sociolinguistic Profile of a Group of Learners

The group I am describing is a 9th-grade English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class in a public secondary school in Bukhara, Uzbekistan. These students are between 14 and 15 years old and come from a mix of social and regional backgrounds. While they all speak Uzbek as their first language and receive most of their education in Uzbek, their exposure to English and their learning experiences vary widely and this influences how they learn (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2014). English is taught as a foreign language in accordance with a national curriculum that emphasizes grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension, often using materials based on British English standards. However, this one-size-fits-all approach does not take into account the social and linguistic diversity that exists even in a classroom like mine.

As a group, my learners are respectful, hardworking, and eager to improve their language skills.

But they are not all starting from the same place. Some students come from more privileged urban settings and middle-class families. These pupils often have access to additional resources, such as the internet, English-language TV shows and music, and even private English tutors. These pupils tend to be more confident, speak more fluently, and complete assignments more quickly. On the other hand, pupils who come from rural villages or lower-income households may not have any of these advantages. They rely mostly on school lessons for English exposure and may struggle with tasks that require background knowledge or practice that others gain outside of class. This difference in access to resources reflects what Deumert (2011) calls ***unequal access to linguistic resources***, a concept that helps explain why some learners progress faster than others, even when they are equally motivated.

Gender also influences how students participate in classroom activities. In my experience, many of the girls take the lead in group work, complete homework more regularly, and are more willing to speak in English, even if they make mistakes. This may be influenced by cultural ideas that associate English proficiency with academic success and future opportunities, especially for girls. In contrast, some boys show less interest in classroom tasks and may view English as less relevant to their future plans. Schilling (2011) points out that ***gendered expectations*** can influence how students use language, with girls often being encouraged to show more responsibility in schoolwork, while boys may be guided toward other roles or priorities. These social norms affect how learners see English and how seriously they take the subject.

Ethnic background is another important factor in my classroom. While the majority of my learners identify as Uzbek, a few of them come from Tajik-speaking families. These pupils sometimes use different pronunciations, accents, or words, which may affect their English speaking too. However, these language differences are rarely addressed in class. Most teachers, including myself at times, treat the class as if everyone shares the same language practices. As a result, pupils from different ethnic backgrounds may not feel their ways of speaking are recognized or valued. Over time, this can lead to feelings of exclusion or lack of confidence.

One particular subgroup I pay close attention to includes pupils from low-income families. These students often face extra challenges beyond the classroom. They may lack textbooks at home, have no quiet place to study, or be expected to help with household responsibilities after school.

Despite being hardworking and eager to learn, they often fall behind—not because they are less capable, but because they are given fewer opportunities. Baugh (2005) explains the concept of ***linguistic profiling***, where students are judged based on their accent or way of speaking, instead of their true knowledge or skills. This is a concern in my classroom too, where students who speak more fluently are often assumed to be smarter or more capable.

Rosa and Flores (2017) go even further by introducing the concept of ***raciolinguistic ideologies***, which describes how students are sometimes judged not only by their language, but also by how others see them in terms of race or social background. Even when students speak clearly and use correct grammar, they may be seen as "less proficient" simply because of their accent or cultural background. This helps me understand why it is so important to check my own teaching practices and make sure I am treating all my pupils fairly. Instead of focusing only on Standard English or fluency, I try to recognize the efforts and experiences that each learner brings to class.

In short, my classroom may seem uniform at first glance, everyone learning the same subject, in the same language, in the same school, but when viewed through a ***sociolinguistic perspective***, it is full of meaningful differences. These differences do not need to be problems. When we understand them, they can help us build a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for every student.

Sociolinguistic Profile of the Learning Context

The learners are studying English in a public secondary school located in Bukhara, a culturally and historically significant region in Uzbekistan. This area is mostly Uzbek-speaking, and Uzbek is the main language used in everyday life, both at school and at home. At school, nearly all subjects are taught in Uzbek, while English is introduced as a foreign language starting from the lower grades. English teaching follows a national curriculum that mainly reflects British English standards and prioritizes formal aspects of the language such as grammar rules, reading comprehension, and writing structure. While this structured curriculum provides a clear framework, it often fails to reflect the actual language use or lived experiences of the learners.

Though most pupils in the school speak Uzbek as their first language, the classroom is still linguistically diverse. Some learners speak Tajik or other regional dialects at home, and others may be influenced by Russian through media or family networks. This hidden multilingualism, as Deumert (2011) discusses, is often overlooked in schools, especially when it is not officially acknowledged. In reality, many pupils move between languages and dialects depending on the context, but this fluid language use is rarely supported or encouraged in the classroom.

The learning environment also differs across the region. In urban schools like the one where I teach, we may have more resources such as digital tools, libraries, and internet access. These resources can help pupils get more exposure to English through videos, songs, or online practice. In contrast, students who have come from rural areas often have less access to such tools. They may only hear English during class time and have limited opportunities to practice the language outside of school. These differences affect students' confidence and progress, as those with more exposure often become more fluent and comfortable using English.

One of the biggest challenges in the current system is the influence of ***standard language ideology***, which promotes the idea that only one variety of English, usually British English, is correct and acceptable. As Lippi-Green (2004) explains, this belief can make students who use different accents or informal language feel like their way of speaking is wrong. In a classroom where only one kind of English is rewarded, students who come from different language backgrounds or who speak differently may feel less motivated to speak up or take risks in using English. This can limit their learning and participation.

As a teacher, I believe it is important to recognize and address these differences. By using a ***sociolinguistic perspective,*** I try to better understand my students not only as language learners but as individuals shaped by social, cultural, and linguistic experiences. I aim to create a classroom where students feel comfortable using language in ways that reflect who they are. This includes allowing discussions in both Uzbek and English when necessary, valuing different types of English, and encouraging learners to share how they use language outside of school. When teachers are aware of these factors, they can create more inclusive learning spaces where every student feels seen and supported.

Sociolinguistic Profile of the Context where English will be used

The students in this class are not only learning English for their schoolwork, but also for future opportunities where English may be important. As they grow older, many of them will move into new spaces where English will play a bigger role, such as applying to universities, taking national exams, or even in future jobs. For many, English will not stay only inside the classroom; it will be part of their lives when they move on to higher grades or think about studying abroad. Some may even need it to talk to people from other countries, whether in business, tourism, or online communication.

Because of these possibilities, students are often taught a formal, standardized type of English like British or American English that follows grammar rules and pronunciation models found in textbooks. This can be challenging because real communication often includes different accents, styles, and mixed language use. The English used in a classroom is often different from the English used in emails, job interviews, phone calls, or friendly conversations. Pupils will need to be flexible and know how to shift their language depending on the situation and the people they are speaking with. For example, someone may speak English with an Indian or Uzbek accent and still be fully understood. Knowing how to understand and respect different ways of speaking English is an important skill.

This is why the idea of ***interactional competence*** is so important. According to Van Booven (2018), learning English should not only be about understanding grammar or vocabulary, but also about knowing how to use language in real-life situations. Interactional competence means knowing how to start and end conversations, how to respond to others, how to speak differently depending on your relationship with the listener, and how to work with others in group tasks or discussions. These skills are not always included in traditional English lessons, but they are necessary for success in the real world.

When pupils move from school to college or from school to work, they will face situations where using English effectively will matter. If they only know how to pass tests but not how to speak naturally, they may feel less prepared.

These transitions often come with pressure to speak more formally or write in a more academic style. Pupils who have only practiced classroom English might need more help to feel confident in these new spaces. That is why, as a teacher, I try to support students in developing both the academic and the social parts of language. I want them to feel ready to use English not only in exams, but also in real-life communication where they need to express ideas, solve problems, and build relationships.

That way, they can feel ready and proud to use their English wherever they go.

Pedagogical Implications

The sociolinguistic profile of my learners has a major impact on how I plan and deliver instruction. Since my pupils in Bukhara come from a mix of rural and urban backgrounds, and some have very limited exposure to English outside of school, I understand that a one-size-fits-all method will not meet everyone's needs. This means I must be thoughtful about the types of language skills I teach. It's not enough to focus only on grammar and vocabulary. My pupils need to learn how to use English in everyday situations—like how to start and end conversations, how to politely disagree, how to adjust their language depending on who they're speaking to, or how to ask for clarification. These real-life skills are part of what Van Booven (2018) describes as ***interactional competence***, the ability to use language effectively in social settings, not just in written exercises or exams.

Because many students, especially those from rural or lower-income families, have little chance to hear or practice English outside of school, I make sure to include a variety of texts and examples in my lessons. I don't just rely on the British English materials provided in the national curriculum. I also bring in examples of English as it is used in different parts of the world. This includes accents, phrases, and communication styles from other countries where English is spoken in different ways. Kachru's (1990) concept of ***World Englishes*** supports this choice by explaining that English is no longer controlled by just one or two countries. Instead, English belongs to everyone who uses it around the world. When students see this diversity, they are more likely to feel that their way of speaking is acceptable and meaningful.

This is important because many learners feel pressure to "speak correctly" or sound like a native speaker. Lippi-Green (2004) and others have shown that this pressure comes from ***standard language ideologies***—the belief that only one kind of English is correct. I want to push back against this idea in my classroom.

Another important part of my teaching approach is creating a positive attitude toward language variation. Bayley and Villarreal (2018) explain that learners' beliefs about their own language can influence their motivation and how they participate in class. If students are ashamed of their accents or their home languages, they may hesitate to speak at all. That's why I try to build a classroom culture where language differences are welcomed. I use ***translanguaging*** strategies that allow students to use Uzbek or Tajik when working through difficult ideas or explaining something to a classmate. This helps them feel more comfortable, and it also shows that their full language background is a strength, not a weakness. As Rosa and Flores (2017) explain, allowing students to draw from all their linguistic resources challenges the narrow view that only standard English matters.

I also try to arrange students into mixed-ability groups so that those who have more exposure to English can help others. This makes the classroom feel more supportive and less competitive. These choices are not just teaching techniques—they are part of a larger commitment to ***inclusive pedagogy***, which means making space for all learners to succeed, no matter their background.

My awareness of these social and linguistic differences also affects how I assess students.

Traditional language assessments often give higher scores to students who use standard grammar and pronunciation, and lower scores to students who speak differently because of their regional or social background. This is unfair, especially when those students are clearly able to communicate their ideas. That's why I try to design more flexible assessments that focus on what students can do with the language. I look at whether they can make themselves understood, adjust their language to different situations, and participate in real conversations—not just whether they follow strict grammar rules or imitate native speakers.

Selvi (2012) reminds teachers like me that we need to think more deeply about what kind of English we are teaching. Instead of treating British or American English as the only goal, we should also teach about other kinds of English that are used around the world. This helps students become more confident and prepared for real-world communication. By following this advice, I make careful decisions about which materials to use, how to structure lessons, and how to assess students. My goal is not just to prepare them for standardized tests, but to help them use English successfully in their everyday lives—in school, at work, and in their communities.

Assessment Implications

In my 9th-grade English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom in Bukhara, Uzbekistan, assessment must take into account the social and linguistic diversity of my learners. As I mentioned above, these pupils come from different backgrounds, some from urban, middle-class families with access to tutoring and technology, and others from rural or low-income families with limited exposure to English outside the classroom. Given this, using only standardized assessments that prioritize British English norms and grammar-based accuracy can create unfair disadvantages for some of my learners. These kinds of tests can benefit the students who already have more practice and support outside of class and make others feel like they are not good enough, even when they can communicate well.

This raises some ethical concerns. It is important to ensure that assessments do not punish students for using different English varieties or for learning English under unequal conditions. If a pupil speaks English in a different way, maybe using words or grammar influenced by Uzbek or another language, they could still explain their ideas clearly. But on many tests, they could lose points. As Baugh (2005) highlights through the concept of ***linguistic profiling***, judgments about language can be shaped by how students sound rather than what they are actually saying. Similarly, Labov (1972) explains that a student's background and social class can shape how their language is seen. So, students might be treated unfairly just because they don't speak like someone from a wealthier or more educated background.

Standardized exams such as national English tests or international assessments like IELTS may unintentionally reflect these biases. They often expect learners to reproduce a narrow, idealized form of English, which may be more accessible to those with more resources.

This can be hard for many learners who speak other types of English. Labov (1972) reminds us that language use is deeply connected to socioeconomic status, meaning that some pupils may be perceived as less proficient because of their background, not their abilities. That's why I believe classroom assessments should not only test grammar or pronunciation. I also want to know if my pupils can share their ideas, understand others, and use language in different situations.

To create a more inclusive assessment system, I include both formal and informal tasks, such as group discussions, presentations, and reflective writing, that allow pupils to show what they know in ways that connect to their lived experiences. Inspired by Canagarajah's (1999) call to resist ***linguistic imperialism***, I also aim to validate local Englishes and encourage pupils to take pride in how they use language, not just how closely they follow a "native" model. This not only honors their full **linguistic repertoires** but also helps them build confidence in their own voice. By doing this, I can better support my students in navigating both local and global English demands while promoting fairness and confidence in their language learning journey.

In the end, inclusive assessment practices are not just about fairness, they are about empowering learners. When assessments reflect real communication, value diverse Englishes, and give all my pupils the chance to succeed, we are not just testing language; we are helping learners grow into confident, capable communicators ready for the world beyond the classroom.

Conclusion

To conclude, the role of the language teacher is not only about helping learners learn grammar rules, memorize vocabulary, or prepare for exams. In classrooms where students come from many different backgrounds, the teacher also takes on the important role of an advocate.

This means recognizing that each learner has a different experience with language, depending on their family, social class, region, and personal history. In my own classroom, I teach pupils from both urban and rural areas, from families with different levels of income and support. Some pupils have the advantage of private lessons, internet access, and help at home, while others rely entirely on what happens at school. It is my responsibility to make sure that all of them feel seen, respected, and supported, no matter what resources they bring with them.

One of the most important parts of this work is challenging the idea that there is only one "correct" way to speak English. Many students believe that only British or American English is acceptable, and when their own English does not match these models, they feel less confident or worry that they are "wrong." This belief is shaped by what Lippi-Green (2004) calls the ***standard language ideology***, the idea that one form of a language is more valuable than others.

But English today is spoken all over the world, in many different ways. As Kachru (1990) and Selvi (2012) explain, English is not just one thing, it is a global language that takes on new forms in every country where it is used. When pupils understand that their own way of using English is valid and meaningful, they become more willing to speak and participate.

In my teaching, I try to connect language learning to the real lives of my students. This means paying attention to the kinds of English they hear outside of school, the ways they use language with friends or family, and the goals they have for using English in the future. Bayley and Villarreal (2018) point out that students' attitudes about language shape how they learn, and

I have seen this in my own classroom. If a student has been laughed at or corrected too harshly, they may stop trying altogether.

That's why I use teaching methods that allow students to build on what they already know. I include activities like ***translanguaging***, where my learners can move between English and their home language, and group work that lets students support each other. I also choose texts and listening materials that reflect how English is actually spoken—not just formal textbook language, but real, everyday communication.

Finally, it is essential for teachers to be aware of the bigger social issues that influence how students learn. Race, ethnicity, gender, and economic status can all affect how students are treated, both in and outside the classroom. As Rosa and Flores (2017) explain, students are often judged not only by how they speak, but also by who they are. These kinds of unfair judgments, which they call ***raciolinguistic ideologies***, can create barriers to learning for students who come from marginalized or underrepresented communities. Teachers have the power to break down these barriers by being aware of them, by challenging stereotypes, and by creating a safe and supportive classroom environment. I try to do this by listening to my pupils' stories, allowing space for different voices and experiences, and showing them that every way of speaking can be powerful, meaningful, and worth celebrating.

In the end, when we look at language teaching through a sociolinguistic lens, we are doing more than just teaching students how to speak English. We are also helping to create a more fair and respectful learning environment where all students feel accepted. This approach supports values like fairness, equality, and inclusion. It means that our classrooms are not only about learning grammar or vocabulary, but also about helping students feel proud of who they are and how they use language.

When teachers recognize the different ways students speak and the different experiences they bring with them, they can create lessons that connect to students' real lives. In this kind of classroom, learning English becomes a way for students to express themselves and share their ideas, not just a subject they need to pass. This helps students feel more confident, more motivated, and more prepared to use English in the real world whether that is in school, at work, or in daily life. As teachers, we have a special role in supporting our students' voices and making sure they know that the way they speak is important and valuable.

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