



**Understanding learners through a Sociolinguistic lens:**

**A Profile of ESL students in Uzbekistan**

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**Abstract:** This paper presents a sociolinguistic profile of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners at a vocational college in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, with a focus on how language learning is shaped by learners' identities, multilingual backgrounds, and socio-economic realities. Drawing on theories of sociolinguistics and language ideology, the study explores how students navigate English learning in a context influenced by limited resources, linguistic diversity, and global language expectations. The analysis reveals how classroom practices that validate local English varieties and emphasize communicative competence over native-like proficiency can empower learners. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Content-Based Instruction (CBI) are employed to address learners' goals and sociolinguistic realities. The paper also discusses ethical and practical implications for assessment, emphasizing fairness, intelligibility, and learner identity. It argues for pedagogical approaches that affirm students' voices and prepare them for real-world English use, challenging the dominance of standard language ideologies in language teaching.



**Keywords:** Sociolinguistics, English as a Second Language (ESL), Global Englishes, Multilingualism, Language Ideology, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Content-Based Instruction (CBI), Language Assessment, Linguistic Identity and Uzbek English.

## Introduction

Sociolinguistics explores how language shapes and reflects our daily lives how we speak in everyday conversations, how language appears in the media, and how social norms, policies, and laws influence the way language is used. Some scholars use the terms *sociolinguistics* and *sociology of language* to describe the study of language in relation to society, although a distinction is sometimes made: the sociology of language focuses on how language influences society, while sociolinguistics examines how society influences language (Nuessel, 2010, p. 120). These perspectives help us understand how language varies across regions, age groups, genders, and professions, and how this variation is tied to social meaning and identity. By examining patterns in language use, sociolinguistics enables researchers and educators to uncover the implicit rules that govern communication within specific communities.

The role of society in shaping language is crucial because language does not develop in isolation as it develops with social institutions such as education, government, media, and religion, all of which play a part in regulating what kinds of language are seen as acceptable or prestigious. As Nuessel (2010) notes, sociolinguistics in the U.S. has grown in part as a response to social inequalities that manifest through language discrimination and marginalization. Understanding society's influence helps educators identify power dynamics behind language ideologies such as the belief that only "standard" English is correct and to design teaching practices that are more inclusive. Therefore, analysing



language in relation to society is not only an academic endeavour but also a tool for social awareness and equity in education.

This paper presents sociolinguistic profile of my learners and individual learners, and it examines the context in which they are learning including future settings where they use English whether in higher education or professional development. Based on this analysis, the paper explores pedagogical and assessment implications for supporting these learners.

### **Description of learners**

Sociolinguistics teaches us that language use is deeply shaped by who we are, where we come from, and the identities we perform. Language is not learned in a vacuum it is learned in society, through relationships, routines, and roles. Nuessel (2010) reminds us that language variation is tied to larger social structures, including class, ethnicity, and regional background. This becomes especially important when teaching English as a foreign language, where social factors affect not only how students speak, but how they feel about their language use. The group that I am teaching nowadays consists of 15 students between the ages of sixteen and seventeen studying in a Banking specialization at a vocational college in the Sergeli district of Tashkent. Their English proficiency ranges from IELTS 4.5 to 5.5 (CEFR B1–B2), based on official IELTS score reports and college placement tests. They are multilingual, motivated in different ways, and each brings a unique set of social experiences that influence how they learn English.

### **Age and identity development**

Language learning in adolescence is not just vocabulary and grammar, it is about identity. Teenagers are highly sensitive to peer opinions and often fear embarrassment or correction. This affects their willingness to take risks with language. All my learners are between sixteen and seventeen years old. While this is a strong age for cognitive learning, their emotional readiness to speak publicly in English varies. Some students hesitate to



speak even when they know the correct answer. Their stage of development shapes their classroom behaviour and response to language tasks. Muslima, for example, understands most of the material and often writes very well, but she rarely volunteers to speak in class. When I asked her privately, she admitted that she's afraid her pronunciation will sound wrong and that others might laugh. This kind of hesitation is common at this age and needs to be handled with care.

### **Linguistic background and multilingualism**

Deumert (2011) describe multilingualism as a dynamic and flexible practice not just a matter of knowing several languages but switching and adapting between them depending on social context. My students are excellent examples of this. All speak Uzbek as a home language and use Russian frequently in public or academic settings. A few also speak Tajik or regional Uzbek dialects. In class, they often translate for each other, moving between English, Uzbek, and Russian depending on who they are speaking to. These translanguaging moments are not distractions they show how students use their full linguistic resources to understand and express meaning. One student, for example, explained new grammar to a classmate in Uzbek after I had introduced it in English. This is what Deumert (2011) would call sociolinguistic competence in action.

### **Individual examples: strengths and struggles**

Rosa and Flores (2017) argue that students are often judged not just by how they speak, but by how they are heard through social lenses. In my classroom, this is visible. Muxlisa is my strongest English learner. She reads confidently, writes with clarity, and engages with English content online. She does not hesitate to participate, likely because she has internalized a positive identity as a successful English user. Yasmina, however, struggles. She speaks a rural Uzbek dialect and has been corrected by peers for her pronunciation. As a result, she avoids speaking, even when she understands the material. Her case shows how classroom dynamics can silence learners whose language varieties are



perceived as "wrong" not because they are incorrect, but because of bias in listening.

Another student, Abdulaziz, comes from a low-income family. He often misses class to help his family and has less internet access at home. Still, he is enthusiastic in class. He speaks English with Uzbek grammar patterns and limited vocabulary and sometimes gets labeled by classmates as speaking "broken English." Selvi (2019) challenges this label, arguing that these forms should be seen as part of Global Englishes, shaped by real-life usage, not as failures. Abdulaziz's English is functional and creative. What he lacks in correctness, he makes up for in communication effort and intent. Things will change if he starts to come regularly

### **Socioeconomic status and access**

Lippi-Green (2004) explains that access to "standard" language forms is often tied to privilege. Students with money, stable homes, and digital access are more likely to succeed in traditional academic environments. In my class, the gap is visible. Muxlisa, who has a computer and English access at home, excels. Abdulaziz, who has none of these resources, falls behind despite his motivation. This shows that English learning is not just about effort, it is also about opportunity.

### **Gender and classroom talk**

Language is one of the ways we perform gender, not just reflect it. According to Butler (1988), gender is enacted through behavior, including how we speak. In the classroom, I notice that boys often dominate casual discussions using humor or informal phrases, while girls like Muxlisa and Yasmina focus more on correctness and formal structures. Schilling (2011) explains that these patterns are not just individual differences, but performances shaped by expectations. Girls may be trying to meet the role of the "good student," while boys assert leadership in more relaxed group settings. Understanding this helps me create more balanced speaking tasks. Nuessel (2010) notes that language variation often reveals deeper social divisions. In my class, regional and ethnic background affects



how confident students are when speaking English. Daler, who speaks Tajik at home, is usually quiet in class. He once mentioned being unsure whether his English accent sounded “acceptable.” While no one has ever corrected him openly, the fact that he worries shows how social messages can impact learning. He is not just learning English, he is trying to protect his identity.

### **Learning context**

Language teaching and learning mainly happen in an institutional setting. And these settings are not only places to teach, but they are also places where social values and identities are shaped. Sociolinguistics helps us understand how schools reflect wider social dynamics, related to language ideologies, geography, and class. For this reason, understanding the learning context is just as important as understanding the learners themselves (Nussel, 2010).

As mentioned, my learners are studying at a vocational college at the Sergeli district of Tashkent. This part of the city is mainly industrial and working class comparing to other parts of my country and the college serves students from modest backgrounds. The classrooms are not modern enough to support the teaching and learning, no access to internet and very limited access to authentic English materials. As Lippi-Green (2004) mentions, access to language development is shaped by access to resources, students studying unfunded schools often have fewer opportunities to learn and practise language in meaningful ways.

Although we have these limitations, students' motivations and environment are rich. Most students and teachers are bilingual or multilingual, using Uzbek, Russian, Kazakh and sometimes Tajik. Uzbek is the default for informal communication, while Russian is often used for subject-specific terms, especially in science and technical subjects. English is taught as a foreign language and treated as a formal, academic subject. This supports



Deumert's (2011) view of multilingualism as a fluid, functional practice shaped by real communicative needs.

Although, TESOL Encyclopedia (2018) calls a "standard language ideology," where only one version of English is seen as acceptable, and all others are considered mistakes. These beliefs can create insecurity among learners who speak Uzbek English or mix languages during communication, this situation does not happen in my class due to specific characteristics of my learners and my teaching approach. Furthermore, most of my students are Uzbek and come from similar backgrounds, so they feel comfortable using their own way of speaking English, like Uzbek English, without worrying about judgement. During the lesson I also try to focus more on communication rather than being perfect with grammar or pronunciation. I do not correct every little mistake, especially if it stops them from speaking freely. I try to make it clear that there is not just one "right" way to speak English, and what matters is voice, even if their English does not sound like a textbook. Because of that, my students feel more confident and are not afraid of taking risks while speaking.

As discussed, geography plays a big role. Students from the outer areas of Tashkent like mine or from rural backgrounds sometimes speak in dialects or have limited exposure to English media. They may feel demotivated compared to peers who live closer to the city or have better digital access. These regional divides are subtle but real, influencing who feels confident and who stays silent. Nuessel (2010) reminds us that these variations are not only linguistic they reflect broader questions of belonging, identity, and status within one community.

### **Context where English will be used**

My students are learning English with different purposes. Many of them hope to use it in the future to study abroad, pursue international careers, or work in English-related jobs. For example, Muslima dreams of becoming a flight attendant, another wants to be a



translator, and a third plans to become an English teacher. These goals reflect both **geographic moves** such as leaving Uzbekistan to get better education or work and **social transitions**, like entering university or the workforce. Each brings different expectations for how English is used, judged, and valued. In academic settings, especially at international universities, English is often linked to high expectations of correctness, and native-like performance. Students are expected to write essays, understand lectures or communicate professionally in English. However, Rosa and Flores (2017) point out that even when learners speak clearly and effectively, they may still be judged unfairly based on their accent, race, or background. They introduce the idea of "raciolinguistic ideologies," which suggests that people are not only assessed for how they speak but for how they are *accepted* by others. Even if all nationalities communicate the same English, a student from Uzbekistan who speaks English with an Uzbek accent might face more scrutiny. This, in turn, will create pressure and insecurity in future professional environment.

For students like Muslima who want to work in aviation or tourism, English will be a bridge between cultures. She will need to speak clearly and confidently with people from all over the world and passengers with different accents and backgrounds. In this kind of setting, there is no single "correct" English. As Selvi (2019) explains, English today is a **global language**, used in many different forms across the world. The English Muslima uses on a flight between Tashkent and Dubai may sound different from the English used in a textbook but that does not make it any less valid. Students like her need to know that being understood, being respectful, and being confident is more important than sounding like a native speaker.

Another student, Abdulaziz who is applying for the El-Yurt Umidi government scholarship, the expectations will be different. University lectures, academic writing, and formal presentations will likely require what is seen as "standard" English often modeled after British or American norms. But this will create pressure for sure. Rosa and Flores



(2017) remind us that even when students speak effectively, they may be judged by their accent, skin color, or background. In these new academic environments, Abdulaziz may find that people listen to him not just for what he says, but how they perceive him. That's why it is important that he sees his Uzbek English identity as an asset, not a weakness.

Students like Durdona, who want to become English teachers or translators, will also encounter specific language expectations. In classrooms, students often assume their teacher should speak like a native speaker. This can create pressure to "erase" one's natural accent or way of speaking. But Lippi-Green (2004) and the TESOL Encyclopedia (2018) both explain that these ideas come from **standard language ideologies**, the belief that only one version of English is correct. Durdona needs to know that her own English, shaped by her experience and culture, is not a limitation. Instead, she can be a powerful model of multilingual competence for her future students.

For these learners, using English in the future will mean entering spaces where language and **identity** are closely connected. Cornips and de Rooij (2018) gives information about how language connects to feelings of belonging. Whether it's on a university campus, a plane, or in a classroom, students may sometimes feel out of place, especially when the way they speak does not match with others. That's why, in classroom now, we practice not just English grammar, but also building confidence, and learning how to respond when someone misunderstands or underestimates us. Students may pursue diverse trajectories, with many encountering contexts where English functions both as a gateway to opportunity and a site of challenge. Preparing them for such realities involves affirming that their unique varieties of English are valid forms of expression, and that their linguistic identities and lived experiences should be recognized as assets rather than concealed.



## Pedagogical implications

Teaching English in multilingual classrooms often presents a dilemma: whether to adopt British or American English as the "standard," or to allow learners to express themselves freely, even when their English is influenced by local languages such as Uzbek or Russian. This tension is well-documented in scholarly literature, with the *TESOL Encyclopedia* (2018) describing how educators often feel "caught in the middle." However, it also emphasizes that teachers are not obligated to internalize negative language ideologies; instead, they can challenge these attitudes within the classroom while still equipping students for linguistic realities beyond it. One crucial pedagogical principle is the acceptance of variation. As Selvi (2019) and Lippi-Green (2004) argue, the notion of a single "correct" form of English reinforces linguistic hierarchies and marginalizes the diverse ways English is spoken globally. Validating local varieties such as "Uzbek English" promotes linguistic confidence and affirms students' identities. In line with this, clarity and effective communication are emphasized over adherence to native-like norms.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is frequently employed to prioritize meaningful communication over grammatical perfection. This approach involves designing activities that simulate real-world scenarios students are likely to encounter such as giving flight instructions to international passengers or composing academic emails. TBLT thus connects language use with learners' personal aspirations and sociolinguistic contexts, which is essential for global preparedness. For aspiring English teachers, such as those studying to become educators themselves, Content-Based Instruction (CBI) is used to integrate language development with relevant content areas. Topics such as English accents and code-switching are explored through accessible readings and guided discussions. As Selvi (2019) suggests, English instruction should extend beyond proficiency to include critical awareness of the linguistic diversity learners will navigate.



Understanding students' future linguistic environments is essential. Some will use English across diverse accents and registers, while others may engage with rapid academic discourse or confront rigid notions of correctness in teaching contexts. To address these realities, learners are encouraged to compare different Englishes, reflect on their language experiences, and examine the sociopolitical factors that determine what is considered "good" English. These critical activities foster linguistic agency and self-assurance.

Ultimately, the goal of instruction is not limited to exam success or fluency. It is to empower learners to use English confidently and authentically in their future roles whether as flight attendants, translators, university students, or educators. By centering learners' voices and validating their linguistic identities, English education becomes a transformative tool for both communication and empowerment. As Selvi (2019) reminds us, English no longer belongs to just a few, it belongs to all of us.

### **Assessment implications**

Assessment practices in multilingual classrooms must strike a balance between recognizing learners' identities and voices and equipping them with tools to succeed within formal systems. This balance must be achieved without compromising learners' confidence or cultural backgrounds. As Selvi (2019) emphasizes, the aim is not to shape students into native speakers, but to empower them as competent global users of English. Given that many learners come from multilingual backgrounds and have limited access to authentic English materials, assessment must be thoughtfully designed to highlight their strengths while also supporting their ongoing development.

In such contexts, informal conversations and reflective journals serve as key assessment tools. These approaches allow for a broader evaluation of learners' abilities—not only in grammar or vocabulary, but in their willingness to learn, communicate meaningfully, and draw on their multilingual repertoires. For instance, when a student explains flight safety in English while integrating Uzbek phrases for clarity, this is not



viewed as a deficiency but as an effective communicative strategy. Deumert (2011) argues that multilingualism is a natural and powerful aspect of communication, and ignoring it during assessment may inadvertently silence students. Formal assessments are not yet a common experience for many learners, as they have not taken standardized exams such as IELTS or CEFR. However, they are preparing for these external evaluations, which often align with standard language ideologies that prioritize native-like pronunciation, grammar, and writing norms. Rosa and Flores (2017) caution that students are frequently evaluated not on their actual communicative competence, but on how closely they conform to socially constructed expectations of “good English.” This raises ethical concerns. For example, students preparing for competitive programs such as El-Yurt Umidi may feel pressure to perform a version of English that diminishes their linguistic identity, potentially leading to anxiety and self-doubt. To address these challenges, test preparation is approached in a way that resists reinforcing harmful language ideologies. Writing instruction incorporates exam rubrics to help students identify areas for improvement while also encouraging them to write about personal topics using their own voices. Mock speaking tests are used to build familiarity with exam formats, yet students are not penalized for accents unless intelligibility is compromised. Echoing Lippi-Green (2004), intelligibility is prioritized over imitation, and learners are reminded that their way of speaking English is valid within the global English landscape.

Assessment is also informed by ethical considerations of fairness and access. Not all students have equal resources; for example, some may lack access to computers or opportunities to use English outside the classroom. To accommodate diverse needs, a variety of assessment formats are used, including oral tasks, group projects, and real-world communicative activities that reflect different student strengths. Additionally, the conventions of academic English are explicitly taught—not as absolute norms, but as one set of practices that may be required in certain formal contexts. Through this approach,



students are better prepared to navigate both academic and everyday English with confidence and integrity.

### Conclusion

Language learning is not just learning grammar or vocabulary, it is more about identity, values and belonging. This paper explores how my learners bring rich multilingual backgrounds, real-world goals, and unique social experiences into the classroom. From their home languages and regional identities to their intentions of becoming flight attendants, teachers, and university students, each learner is navigating not only English, but the social meanings attached to it. As a teacher, I came into conclusion that I am not only helping my students develop language skills, I am also shaping how they see and accept themselves as English users. My role includes challenging narrow ideas about what “correct” English is, affirming students’ voices, and preparing them to confidently use English in academic and professional spaces that may not always welcome linguistic diversity. I do this by choosing methods that support communication over perfection, by designing assessments that reflects multilingualism, and by helping students understand the linguistic worlds they are coming into. Choosing what to teach and how to teach fundamentally depends on teachers themselves and the responsibility they have because this kind of teaching is not always easy. It requires balancing classroom goals with the realities students will face outside. As Selvi (2019) and others remind us, English belongs to everyone, not just to native speakers. By embracing this view, teachers can become advocates who create more equitable, inclusive spaces for all learners. I hope this profile encourages other educators to see sociolinguistic awareness not as an extra task, but as the foundation for truly meaningful English language teaching in their classroom.



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