

## An Analysis of the Sociolinguistic and Individual Profiles of Young English Learners in the Uzbek EFL Context

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### ANNOTATION

For this article two Uzbek middle school students were chosen in order to be analyzed according to their sociolinguistic profile.

**Keywords:** Sociolinguistics, Uzbek EFL learners, bilingualism, monolingualism, socioeconomic status, educational background, learner identity, young learners.

### Introduction

Learning language does not happen in isolation. It is mostly influenced by learners' cultural identities, educational background, access to resources and of course their experiences. As a language teacher working with middle school students in Uzbekistan, I understood that effective English instruction is not just about completing grammar exercises and vocabulary lists. Good English Instruction must include deep awareness of sociolinguistic and individual learners' context, as well as commitment to designing instruction and assessments that reflects all those realities. This paper draws on TESOL Standard to explore how contextual, cultural and individual factors shape language learning and teaching process. Throughout my students' profile of Sofia who is bilingual and has a particular strength, such as creativity and confidence and Hojiakbar who has limited access to different educational resources and other tools but only high motivation to reunite with his family, I show how differentiated instruction, responsive assessment and teacher advocacy can work together to meet learners from where they are. By course readings of English as a global language, assessments and language learners' identity, here my work demonstrates the importance of the teacher's role, not just as a teacher, but as a fair person who takes

equity and inclusion in the language classroom the way more serious.

### Materials and methods

Sociolinguistic Profile of a Group of Learners. Chosen target group includes eight pre-intermediate English learners with the age of 10-12, studying three times in a week at Language Center located in Andijan, Uzbekistan. Most of these learners share Uzbek cultural background. They also attend to primary and early middle public school (some of them are in native Uzbek classes, some are in Russian speaking classes). These learners' proficiency level is B1 that can be equal to IELTS band 4.5-5, showing that they have basic understanding of English and can talk in familiar situations or topics. Since we are living in Uzbekistan and it is not English-speaking country, they face limited English exposure as EFL learners. Even though they are young, they have already set goals and moving towards them. One of their main goals is taking higher band of IELTS and continue their education at foreign universities. This group includes bilinguals and monolinguals at the same time and mostly Uzbek as their First language and Russian as L2. Gender norms in our cultural context tend to influence the behavior of the classroom and the learners' confidence, especially with female students often showing higher motivation. Most of these learners are from working middle-class families. However their access to digital

learning tools and English-language input at home widely differs. According to their goals and needs, in this classroom, we are focusing on General English while integrating all four skills: listening, reading, writing and speaking. Our Language Center requires us teaching by using approaches like CLT and TBLT since it works best for integrating and learning naturally while using real-world tasks like role-playing to practice the language. As their teacher, I try to keep “Only English” atmosphere by minimizing the usage of their L1 and L2 even if they do not understand some words or concepts. In this case, I try to simplify it by using gestures, facial expressions, synonyms or just simplified definition of those words. The most relevant subpopulation in this class includes learners who are bilingual and from middle-to-high SES households versus who are monolinguals and from lower SES households. Below I also try to mention other smaller social factors while describing learners individually:

1. Sofia – A Bilingual Learner from Middle-to-High SES Background she is 10 years old student who was enrolled with English at the beginning of her critical period which includes ages 7 to 9. As mentioned above, she is being raised in a bilingual house, where her father and his relative speak in Russian and her mother speaks in Uzbek. Even though English is her third language, she is pretty confident and fluent in it. When she was 6 years old, she started practicing English with her mom whose level was Elementary. She taught her some basic words and numbers. After going to primary school, she also started extra English classes in private language schools. She also says that her motivation was influenced by watching American movies with her father. I consider it as intrinsic motivation which comes from her without any parental effects which is the biggest investment to the language. Being

in financially stable family gave her opportunities not to be limited with her Elementary leveled mom’s knowledge and go to extra private English classes. The other factor that influenced the ability of learning language easily was the way she was raised as a bilingual by comparing her prior languages knowledge made some grammar or phonetics easier to learn. According to Wardhaugh and Fuller high SES gives students access to cultural capital while contributing for classroom performance and confidence [10,p.34]. On top of that Deumert emphasizes the importance of bilingualism saying that it enhances the metalinguistic awareness, cognitive flexibility by building bridge between different cultures [4,p.263]. In some cases, when one gender members outnumber the other ones in class, the smaller amount tend to stay quite due to the cultural norms. As Schilling emphasizes that gender can influence classroom interaction, for example who speaks more often or who has a tendency to take the leadership in the class, just like the amount of one gender members [9,p.222]. But in my class, especially with bilingual students it is not like that they tend to express themselves doesn’t matter who they are arguing with. I think it is underrated social factor while analyzing the influences of the process of the learning language. Another social factor which tends to be one of the most vital one is the birth order of the learner. For example, Sofia has the First Born status, which gives her the opportunities of increased parental interaction allowing her to spend more time with her parents before having siblings and receive more focus on her knowledge and talents, more responsibilities – great input also requires great output since she was invested a lot of time and money and she is expected to show good results rather than her siblings, increased independence – after having siblings, she takes care of not

only herself, but also her siblings while mentoring them too. This seems too much for 10 years old, but by these factors she built her confidence, which affects her language learning process.

2. Hojiakbar – A monolingual student with Lower SES Background  
He is also 10 years old student studying in the 4th grade at primary public school. Unlike Sofia he is monolingual learner with Lower SES background. He has been learning English with breaks for 1-2 years as his L2 but EFL content. His current level is slightly below than B1. Due to their Lower SES Background, his parents flew to United Kingdom to work and he has been living with his grandparents for two years. Unlike Sofia, when he first started learning English, he used to struggle as he has no enough language background to compare. Especially with structures, which don't exist in his native language, such as, Perfect tenses and sounds /θ/ and /w/. Deumert also mentions about learners with narrow linguistic knowledge may have less confidence in communicative tasks and reduces the usage of the language [4,p.266]. Also, these learners tend to compare themselves with more advanced bilingual peers and may feel discouraged. Slower learning process was influenced Firstly by his Lower SES background which did not allowed him to be enrolled with English earlier. Secondly, because of SES background, he has to live away from his parents, which resulted in emotional distance and reduced support for his studies because his grandparents may not have enough knowledge to lead him, especially with English. As Another factor I once again wanted to mention, Birth order social factors. He was born as the 3rd child in the family, being the youngest one. He almost has no any strict adults around him and always treated gently since he is away from his parents. Unlike Sofia, who benefits from being a first-born with increased

responsibilities and focused parentel attention, Hojiakbar's learning environment lack academic pressure and a help at home. His identity position includes being a "monolingual, struggling learner, youngest child, shy student with parental absence" and also plays a vital role in shaping his learning process. When I have talked to his grandfather, he said that his goal was to send Hojiakbar to the UK where his parents had been living for high-quality education, but he was worried about his grandson's English knowledge. When I asked Hojiakbar about his goal it was almost similar to his grandfather's. However, he does not want to study at foreign universities, instead, Hojiakbar wills to reconnect with his parents as soon as possible and open his travel blog on YouTube and run it in English. Hojiakbar may struggle with investment, as he is living with a monolingual family and does not have and effort enough English environments. His grammar is better than his speech. He also likes reading. For him creating "Safe classroom" without any criticism would help a lot.

#### **Data analysis and discussions.**

**Sociolinguistic Profile of the Learning Context.** The learning context for the group of learners is a private Language Center in Andijan, Uzbekistan, a multilingual city in the Fergana Valley near the border with Kyrgyzstan. In Andijan, although Uzbek is the official language and the majority of learners speak Uzbek as a first language (L1), Russian is still used as a language of education in some schools and media. In fact, particularly in urban centers like Andijan, there are many settings where learners are truly multilingual, and Uzbek and Russian are each used as dominant language, while English is a foreign language (EFL) used with limited purpose outside of the classroom. Within this context, learners experience a diglossic space as mentioned Wardhaugh and Fuller,

in which standard and nonstandard varieties of Uzbek are used side by side [10,p.38]. For instance, learners may speak in a regional dialect of Uzbek at home, but the written language is a more formal Uzbek in the school textbook. Russian, since it is related to science, higher education and upward mobility, affords a particular prestige to many speakers and for bilingual learners like Sofia, Russian increases their chances at success. These sociolinguistic factors will impact how learners experience language, depending on their L1, the language of schooling (Uzbek or Russian), and the resources to which they have access. In Uzbekistan, the educational system mostly uses a grammar-translation method across all public schools, resulting in students developing a strong passive knowledge (e.g. grammar, reading) but a weaker communicative capability. Also at school, mixed level students study in the same class and not always teachers use differentiation in different English tasks and activities due to short period of the lesson which is only 45 minute. Nowadays The Language Center focuses on both Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) approaches, which allow students to engage in real life, interactive English tasks. This pedagogical shift is crucial in an EFL setting where English exposure is scarce, and classroom interaction is the only source of input [4,p.274]. Teachers who work at educational centers will be able to use different methods and approaches, since they have well-equipped classrooms and extended period of lesson which is usually 90 minutes. Furthermore, socioeconomic status creates disparities in language learning environments. Learners like Sofia, from a middle-to-high SES family, commonly afford extra tutoring or have stable internet access, and may also convert English exposure through English movies or private lessons. In contrast, lower

SES learners like Hojiakbar do not benefit from such supports; instead, the classroom, the shared experience, becomes an unequal environment while the teacher has to manage those distinct differences and levels of investment [3,p.48]. Gender norms and cultural beliefs shape classroom and learning interactions [5,p.120]. In Uzbekistan, girls often demonstrate more motivation in learning English particularly in settings where they are mixed with the boys who might be concerned a lot especially when asked to speak a second language. Schilling also suggests that gender is a factor in patterns of participation, leadership roles, and modes of speaking to which, as teachers, we must address these issues to provide a barrier-free, inclusive and equitable experience for students [9,p.231]. Even though we don't talk about this theme in class, teacher always takes this into consideration, especially preparing seats for them, in pair-works and group works. Lastly, regional geography in Andijan and the digital divide (Andijan is not one of the top digitally connected cities in Uzbekistan), likely means that many learners get English input solely from school, and even those who have smartphones or internet access very likely do not use them for educational uses. The Language Center is clearly the main place for input and practice in English which means considerable responsibility falls on the instructor to create a supportive, immersive, and culturally responsive classroom.

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