

MULTILINGUALISM, IDENTITY, AND EDUCATIONAL PRIVILEGE: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF YOUNG EFL LEARNERS IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract. This paper critically examines the sociolinguistic realities of young multilingual EFL learners within a private-school context in Uzbekistan. Drawing on sociolinguistic theories related to multilingualism, identity construction, language ideology, linguistic capital, and educational privilege, the study explores how learners aged 10–12 negotiate Uzbek, Russian, and English across diverse social and academic domains. The paper argues that English in this context functions not only as a foreign language for academic instruction, but also as a socially valued resource associated with globalization, educational mobility, intelligence, and institutional prestige. Particular attention is given to the influence of multilingualism, gendered interactional norms, code-switching practices, standard language ideology, and future-oriented educational expectations on learners' participation and communicative behavior. Furthermore, the paper discusses how these sociolinguistic factors shape pedagogical decisions, classroom interaction, and assessment practices in EFL instruction. The analysis emphasizes the importance of sociolinguistically informed pedagogy that recognizes multilingual learners' linguistic repertoires, promotes inclusive classroom practices, challenges discriminatory language ideologies, and prepares learners for authentic global communication beyond native-speaker norms. Ultimately, the paper highlights the role of TESOL professionals as socially responsive educators and advocates capable of addressing the complex relationship between language, identity, and educational inequality within multilingual learning environments.

Keywords: Multilingualism; sociolinguistics; linguistic identity; educational privilege; language ideology; EFL learners; code-switching; multilingual pedagogy; English language teaching; Uzbekistan; communicative competence; TESOL

Sociolinguistics is the study of the connection between society and language which examines how people use language based on social factors such as age, level, gender, identity, context, and social class/status. Sociolinguistics reflects how the language mirrors social expectations, relations, power, solidarity, and cultural values. Studying sociolinguistics is one of the most essential fields because teaching English as L2 or FL is more than teaching simply grammar. But, it means understanding social factors effecting language acquirement in order to create friendly learning atmosphere, avoid anxiety, reduce bias, support multilingual learners with inclusive classrooms in which diverse language variations and identities are highly respected. TESOL experts understand that the way students, regardless of their age, negotiate meaning, switch between languages depending on the linguistic domains and contexts to express their identity and interact more effectively. Labov (1963) emphasized that “one cannot understand the development of a language change apart from the social life of the community in which it occur[s]” (p. 275). In my case, my young learners' language proficiency and communication style reflects the multilingual and dynamic environment of their society. This idea is also supported by Mather (2012) who explained that “speakers tend to adopt the norms of the communities they live in, irrespective of the linguistic norms of their parents or families” (p. 352). Since at young age, people are very socially responsive,

young multilingual learners between 10-12 easily adapt to the linguistic norms of their society and media.

In Uzbekistan, English is already of academical and social importance owing to globalization in all spheres of life from educational opportunities to economic development, or from technology to job prospects. For FL students and big companies, English symbolizes modernity and intelligence which makes global communication and professional success easy to reach. So, most parents see English as a gatekeeper tool to enter prestigious universities and prosperous job opportunities. For young multilingual learners, who use Uzbek to express national identity and cultural solidarity and Russian for social prestige in some social domains, English is perceived as a promised future. This paper argues the sociolinguistic profile of multilingual learners at Wunderkind in Uzbekistan aged 10-12, teaching methods, language use, future contexts, assessment practices and students' participation during the activities depending on social factors such as gender, multilingualism and identity. Several social inequalities are described in this context. For example, students are from rural areas and have limited exposure to English- only through media and in school environment. Second, hidden gender stereotypes. Although, girls are not forced to behave polite but they learn how to behave observing older people who have strong cultural norms. Finally, which methods are effective with young learners and what kind of assessment should be implemented is explained thoroughly, such as CLT and role play/presentations.

The target group consists of 20 4th grade students, aged between 10-12, studying English as the main subject in an EFL context at Wunderkind international private school in Fergana. The classroom is said to be mixed-gender elite group of students with distinct superior language abilities. According to the achievement tests of the Second term, they demonstrated A2 level language proficiency. Students are from middle and upper-middle class families, whose parents are able to speak, Russian and Uzbek. Despite this, students have limited exposure to English. Since Russian and Uzbek languages are dominant in the very community students live, it is media, TV and Internet, which creates a bridge between local students with Outer and Inner Circles of English due to the globalization of English in wider society. Their common goals are to achieve a native-like proficiency in English, to pass IELTS and to study abroad. Although students collaborate in mixed gender teams during the class activities, the class is sub-grouped based on gender and their superior language abilities. Students live in rural area where strong local Uzbek identity and sociocultural norms are strongly influential. The way students use English reflects both "power and solidarity" (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015, p.9) That means, girls are unconsciously taught to be calm, polite and attentive users of the target language, while boys tend to prioritize expressing their diverse identity without hesitation. For example, girls hesitate a lot for the sake of perfection, when boys prefer fluency showing a willingness to take linguistic risks even.

As grown up in mostly bilingual homes and society, most students developed a good linguistic repertoire, switching between Uzbek and Russian. Deumert (2011) defined the domains as a context in which "languages are said to occupy" (p.273). Students in my target group use languages strategically in diverse social domains. English is for academic performance. Uzbek is dominant as the home language, used with family members and older people to maintain Uzbek and cultural identity through showing respect. But Russian functions as covert prestige language associated with peer interaction in a wider society and developed through schooling from the very young age. This situation reflects the idea of Deumert that "the multilingual child has continued

opportunities to use more than one language outside of the home environment” (2011, p.268). Standard American and British English carries the highest prestige compared to other variations of the language in educational context. Although students are being introduced with as many dialects and variations of English as possible, at the end, they are expected to use “standard” English to demonstrate “legitimacy, grammaticality and the expressive power of “real” English spoken in the inner-circle” (Bayley & Villarreal, 2018, p.3). Observing the society, students encounter people using foreign languages in different contexts, let it be at work to gain promotion, in society to gain reputation. Naturally, this leads youths to perceive speaking fluent English/Russian or Korean means being “modern and intelligent”. Multilingualism supports the classroom participation because, students have a golden opportunity to use their full linguistic repertoires to negotiate meaning, avoid confusion and support each other. During the complex tasks, students are free to use their L1 or L2 to avoid misunderstandings and meet the learning expectations. This will help to raise awareness of the language structures, meaning, students learn to compare and contrast second and foreign languages to communicate effectively.

According to Identity views of Bucholtz & Hall (2005) defined identity as “the social positioning of self and others” based on the Emergence Principle (p. 586). It means, it is constructed “in discourse through the temporary roles and orientations assumed by participants” (p.591). According to the Positionality Principle proposed by Bucholtz & Hall (2005), learners position themselves at macro-level, in which, they consider their gender, age or social status. For example, speakers choose the language element in order to build a solidarity or distance from any group, like girls use more standard language to sound polite and soft in my class, unlike boys who prefer straight language choice (Mesthrie et al., 2009, p.223). At local level, learners express themselves as smart/simple/leader or funny identities depending on their interactional competence. Finally, at temporary level, students adopt to a situation playing a temporary role during communication. For example, during the role-plays, one students can be “customer” or “smart” unlike their real characteristics. Learners construct Global English-speaking identity during formal instruction at school. They attempt to use the language to show their identity in academic sphere, while during out-of-class activities, students naturally use slightly informal English with personal variation in pronunciation or code-switching to show a sense of group belonging. This clearly shows that the identity of multilingual learners- people who know more than one language and communicate effectively- have no fixed identity and shift their identity depending on the situation and the context.

The gender of the students’ shows the societal expectations which means, girls are more friendly and sensitive, while boys are very straightforward in speaking. But, they have different identities which emerge in accordance with the situation and their aim on interaction. For example, girls fighting or competing with boys use strict “boys language” while nerd girl use “smart words” to show their intelligence (Mesthrie et al., 2009, 223-224). Girls can be frank at times when they switch roles in role plays or the ones from powerful families behave more confidently than boys. This shows that gender is fixed for our community but the gender identity can be negotiated and context-dependent according to 5 principles of Bucholtz & Hall (2005) this is supported by the Positionality principle of Bucholtz & Hall (2005, 591). The girls’ preference for using accurate, standard and prestigious form of the language shows “power in considering language, social relationships, and the construction of social identities” (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015, p.9). They are good at all core language skills: listening, reading, grammar, speaking, writing., but they

have a high affective filter which makes them anxious and shy about possible mistakes (Krashen, 1985). They hesitate a lot in speaking even though they are 100% correct. In contrast, the boys are far more confident and active in speaking with low affective filter. According to the sociolinguistic theory defined by Wardhaugh & Fuller, their frequent use of code-switching and covert prestige reflects the solidarity, when they prioritize “group identity” over correctness (p.9). And also, as Bucholtz & Hall described this case as “disparate indexical processes of labeling, implicature, stance taking, style marking and code choice work to construct identities” (p.598). They are fond of learning through games and interesting activities, while girls want concise explanation first. Boys make more mistakes because they do not focus that much on accuracy or correctness but fluency. In our lessons, interestingly, boys use code-switching between English, Uzbek and Russian, but girls try to use only English without mixing languages.

Ideology of language eliminates the researchers concluded that there is no one correct English, English belongs to everyone, so it is plural now. It is important to note that all variations of the language regardless of the differences in pronunciation, word choice or grammar, is correct. In reality, in classroom context, “good English” is associated with native-like English proficiency due to the fact that standard American/British English is comprehensible for English speakers from all over the world. The main reason why certain accents or variation is idealized is that these so-called prestigious forms of English are repeatedly presented through media and textbooks. Lippi-Green (1997) emphasized that the cartoons and films are “the only view they have of people of other races or national origin”. My target learners sometimes assign social values: literate - illiterate, rich or poor to other people depending on their accents or race. But teachers take action accordingly to eliminate this issue, from using textbooks which showcases a range of races to film/song/videos. Undoubtedly, humans tend to judge the speaker through “perceptions about language, or specific dialects and accents within a particular language” (Baugh 2005, p. 155). That’s why in my classroom, I always try to introduce my students with people from diverse walks of life, backgrounds and ethnicity to prevent from misinterpreting the people on the media: black people are shown as gangsters, poor or illiterate in discriminatory linguistic profiling of Baugh (2005) while white people are shown as of superior race who use British accents to get more linguistic adoration. The presentation of multiple English variations encourages learners to understand intelligibility in communication as more important than “native-like” pronunciation. Therefore, socially Standard English is internalized through institutional context, while discriminatory linguistic profiling is challenged critically regarding race/background/ accent or class activities.

The sociolinguistic profile of my students plays a vital role for pedagogical implication. They are 10-12 years old young learners with 1-2 formal language instruction. They are multilingual of Uzbek, Russian and English who mostly use code-switching and translanguaging during their speech. They have all equal access to educational materials because textbooks and other academic sources are provided by private school. Since the class is mixed-ability, the instruction is also flexible, inclusive and academically focused.

Based on the future contexts in which speakers use English, the instruction mostly focuses on the most relevant language features. Students should develop their academic proficiency in all 4 core language skills with grammar/vocabulary and also, gain general sociolinguistic competence.

I conduct the lessons and then reflect on my teaching all the time. Afterwards, with "the sense of plausibility" I use "eclectic blending methods" to meet the learning expectations (Phabu, 1990, p.

172 and p.167). Most of the time, taking the age of students, I use gamification to engage my students. This is because; boys can easily be distracted or just miss important parts of the lesson. With the help of leaderboards and quests, I grab their attention for a longer period.

I make the most of TBLT and CLT because of the "real-world language use" in the former (Moore, 2018, p. 2) and the opportunity to enhance "communicative competence" Through meaningful tasks (Savignon, 1991, p.264). These methods help my students reach autonomy and active negotiation of the meaning with real- world application. Here, girls tend to show strong results in group activities and meaning negotiation tasks.

The "stress-free, enjoyable and rewarding" method, TPR is very effective to internalize the target language better with young learners (Bui, 2018, p.3). Whenever I have to introduce verbs or other words which can be understandable with body movement, I just use my body to provide input for the longer memory. This method is helpful for both groups, because boys are full of adrenaline to channel their physical energy into learning through movement. And, girls comprehend and consolidate the target language better on their memory.

Finally, I also connect English words to L1 based on the similarity in pronunciation or script to make meaning as memorable as possible. Apart from these methods, I adapt materials to my learners' level to using i+1 hypothesis, meaning, I introduce new concept in English with a familiar context. Regarding scaffolding and differentiation, I most of the time help lower level students and encourage them most through easier questions in speaking and scaffolding in other skills. Scaffolding is the key element of effective teaching for me. During the lesson, to reduce a high teacher talk, "I do-we do-you do" model is used (Beacher, 2011, p.65). for example, I activate students' background knowledge in " stimulation part or warm up" then provide a model of the language through explaining then do some tasks together, and finally, it would be their turn to complete the task on their own. The process goes from easier to more complexes, and from receptive to productive. Regardless of their gender, race or beliefs, students benefit most from these latter techniques when I strategically simplify the input and guide them all over the activities step-by-step ensuring gradual independence. But, I must admit that, girls prone to show a smooth transition to the last stage, while boys require a little more time with their humor before achieving the same outcome.

Sociolinguistic factors such as gender, race, and ethnicity helped me see the uniqueness of an individual one more time. I understood that students need to be exposed to the non-standard forms of the target language to prevent expected misunderstandings and misinterpretation of people based on their accents and gender. To avoid discriminatory profiling and show linguistic adoration to all dialects and languages are one of the main content objectives. At the same time, I decided to change the assessment structure from testing in accordance with validity and reliability, testing the vernacular speech at most. I design several tasks and activities to reduce bias on feasible and unacceptable topics. My decisions are shaped by my knowledge regarding sociolinguistic factors that influence learning and teaching. Since students are 10-12 years old, I use explicit awareness-raising tasks with guided practice and feedback. Girls are encouraged to participate and play a role during the role-plays. Van Booven (2018) also suggested putting input through exposing students to real usage of the target language, and then analyzing the context to understand the word choice and

other linguistic features. Next, students should produce output with the help of teacher through manipulated conversation or ready-made reconstruction exercises in “follow-up activities” (p.5). He concludes that successful communication requires more than grammar accuracy, but the ability to adopt social and interactional norms. Being appropriate in both form and meaning matters during social participation. The explicit teaching with guided conversational tasks prepares the young learners for the future English context with natural interactional, sociolinguistic and communicative competence. Taking the profile of my learners into consideration, the overall knowledge on grammar and ability to use English in meaningful context should be assessed. My students’ proficiency range from A2 to B2 and they are 10-12 years old. They can complete shorter exercises and show a good speaking ability under more independent tasks such as role-plays or free speech. There are 4 main age-related characteristics which should be focused when “defining constructs, designing constructs and implementing assessments and using the assessments” (Butler, 2016, p. 360). He explains that young learners are still developing their cognitive, socio-cognitive and linguistic skills which results in having shorter attention span. Naturally, each learner has individual differences in developmental characteristics. So they should be assessed critically according to the centrality of the learning. Finally, children are so sensitive to the results of the assessment. That said, they can be easily motivated seeing themselves in the high rank or perceive themselves as insufficient and demotivated because of low scores. Therefore, Butler (2016) strongly suggests considering the age, level, test appropriateness and the aim of the assessment to have a positive washback at the end. Take those factors into account; I use internal assessment in the form of short quizzes, role-play activities and free speech or presentations to assess my student’s grammar, vocabulary, and other 4 core linguistic skills based on concrete analytic rubric. For example after one unit, which consists of listening (listening for directions), reading (travel topic) writing (invitation letter for a weekend trip), speaking (famous places) grammar (prepositions and present in the future) and vocabulary (travel), students can complete several communicative tasks in which they should use the target language in real-life activities such as role-play: family on a trip or detective case on travel. The assessment materials or procedure should match the interests and level of the learners. Creating long grammar exercise is not valid while having one-to-one interviews is not practical. The tasks which encourage students to apply the target grammar and vocabulary are practical and valid for young learner.

Regarding standardized external assessments, especially, IELTS, students practice writing tasks and debate in the form of part 2 and 3 speaking section. Major adaptations are needed to apply these standard testing systems with young learner due to their vulnerability. Instead, the questions and the proficiency descriptors can be modified and simplified to fit in educational context. For example, instead of asking them directly to write about problem-solution essay on the topic “pollution”, teacher should display the process of how, why, when the pollution happens and the results or possible solutions with pictures. The image can help students brainstorm better and connect ideas smoothly during both speaking and writing. This will not only help teacher to assess critically but also students get familiar with test formats and expectations.

In conclusion, the sociolinguistic profile of young learners aged between 10-12 at Wunderkind shapes my teaching and assessment decisions. Overall, the learners are multilingual speaker of Uzbek (native), Russian (A2-B2), English (A2-B2) and have different identities

depending on the society and the context. Their language/learning backgrounds, gender, age, motivation, language ideology, and identities influence their participation during the lesson. Their learning instruction is not only based on the classroom language, but their context is academic, professional, personal, general which reflects the real-life English.

The analysis showed that all teaching methods from GTM to modern CLT, TBLT, and techniques like differentiation, scaffolding, and translanguaging help support mixed-ability students in mixed-gender class through using the target language in meaningful contexts. Guided support together with $i+1$ input gradually lead students to progress toward being independent and confident users of English. Another important point is that the way teacher raises sociolinguistic awareness about social factors and language variations explains students to understand the plurality of the English language. Exposing learners to multiple English varieties and accents can reduce discriminatory attitudes linked to “standard” English ideology. Learners should value intelligibility, respect, and successful communication more than trying to sound completely native-like. The assessments also assess the real-use of the language, constructed based on the developmental characteristics of the learners. The effective tasks for this group of learners are short tasks which encourage independent speaking and scaffolded writing; role-plays, debates, visual tasks for writing or speaking. Finally, understanding the sociolinguistic factor which effect acquiring L2 and FL allows teachers to analyze learners individually and critically to make fair and effective instructional decisions, supporting individuals’ backgrounds, identities, gender and motivation in TESOL.

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