

## CHALLENGES OF VOWELS WITH THEIR PRONUNCIATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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**Abstract.** This study investigates the challenges faced by learners of English as a Second Language (L2) in mastering vowel pronunciation, focusing on the effects of native language (L1) interference and pedagogical factors. English vowels are complex due to variations in length, tension, and quality, which often cause confusion among learners whose L1 has fewer or structurally different vowel sounds. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the study analyzes international and Uzbek research to identify common pronunciation difficulties, cross-linguistic influences, and effective instructional methods. Findings reveal that vowels such as /ɪ/, /æ/, /ʊ/, and /ə/ are among the most problematic for learners across linguistic backgrounds, while R-colored vowels and the schwa sound also pose significant challenges. The study highlights the importance of explicit pronunciation instruction, contrastive analysis between L1 and English vowel systems, and the use of technology-assisted pronunciation tools. It concludes that developing phonetic awareness and integrating innovative, practice-oriented methods can greatly improve learners' vowel pronunciation and overall communicative competence in English.

**Keywords:** English vowels, pronunciation difficulties, L1 interference, ESL learners, phonetics, pedagogy, contrastive analysis, computer-assisted pronunciation (CAP).

## INGLIZ TILIDA UNLI TOVUSHLARNING TALAFFUZI BILAN BOG‘LIQ MUAMMOLAR.

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**Annotatsiya.** Ushbu tadqiqot ingliz tili ikkinchi til (L2) sifatida o'rganuvchilarining unli tovushlarni o'zlashtirishda duch keladigan qiyinchiliklarini o'rganadi. Asosiy e'tibor ona tili (L1) ta'siri va pedagogik omillarga qaratilgan. Ingliz unlilari uzunlik, taranglik va sifat jihatidan murakkab bo'lib, unlilar soni kamroq yoki tuzilishi jihatdan farqli tillarda so'zlashuvchi o'quvchilarda chalkashliklar keltirib chiqaradi. Tadqiqot sifat jihatdan tavsifiy yondashuv asosida olib borilgan bo'lib, xalqaro va o'zbek tadqiqotlarini tahlil qilish orqali talaffuzdagi umumiy qiyinchiliklar, tillararo ta'sirlar va samarali o'qitish usullari aniqlangan. Natijalar shuni ko'rsatadiki, /ɪ/, /æ/, /ʊ/ va /ə/ unlilari ko'plab o'quvchilar uchun eng murakkab tovushlardir; shuningdek, R-lik unlilar va schwa tovushi ham sezilarli darajada muammo tug'diradi. Tadqiqotda aniq talaffuz mashg'ulotlari, L1 va ingliz tili unlilar tizimini qiyosiy tahlil qilish hamda texnologiyaga asoslangan talaffuz vositalaridan foydalanish zarurligi ta'kidlanadi. Xulosa qilib aytganda, fonetik ongni rivojlantirish va innovatsion, amaliy mashg'ulotlarga asoslangan yondashuvlarni qo'llash o'quvchilarning inglizcha unli tovushlarni to'g'ri talaffuz qilishini hamda ularning umumiy kommunikativ kompetensiyasini sezilarli darajada yaxshilaydi.

**Kalit so'zlar:** ingliz unlilari, talaffuzdagi qiyinchiliklar, L1 ta'siri, ESL o'quvchilari, fonetika, pedagogika, qiyosiy tahlil, kompyuter yordamida talaffuz (CAP).

**Introduction.** English vowels can be challenging for learners to master due to their varying lengths and tensions. Pronunciation is crucial for clear communication in English, and difficulties with it can lead to misunderstandings. Many non-native speakers face specific pronunciation challenges, including those related to English vowels. Pronunciation is a fundamental component of second language (L2) learning, as it directly influences a learner's intelligibility, fluency, and overall communicative competence.

Among the various aspects of English phonology, **vowel pronunciation** has proven to be one of the most challenging elements for learners across different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The complexity of the English vowel system, which includes distinctions of **length, tension, and quality**, often causes difficulties for learners whose native languages possess fewer or structurally different vowel sounds. As a result, many learners find it hard to accurately perceive and produce English vowel contrasts, such as those between /ɪ/ and /i:/ or /ʌ/ and /ɑ:/, leading to misunderstandings in oral communication.

**Literature Review.** Numerous studies have explored vowel pronunciation challenges among learners from different linguistic backgrounds. In **Pakistan**, research in Multan indicated that **Saraiki-speaking learners** face persistent problems in identifying and producing English vowel sounds. These challenges are attributed not only to differences in phonological systems but also to insufficient teacher training and lack of pronunciation-focused instruction. The study highlights the need for better pedagogical methods to strengthen pronunciation accuracy (Ali et al., 2023). The influence of a learner's **mother tongue** plays a critical role in determining pronunciation outcomes. For instance, **Spanish speakers**, whose language includes only five pure vowels, struggle to perceive and articulate English vowels such as /ɪ/, /æ/, and /ʊ/, which are absent in Spanish. As Jackson (2025) reports, these learners tend to substitute unfamiliar English sounds with familiar ones from their native language. Similarly, **Sudanese Arabic** and **Kipchak dialect** speakers apply native vowel harmony rules to English, which leads to consistent pronunciation errors. In Uzbekistan, several local scholars have also studied the **impact of the Uzbek phonetic system** on English pronunciation. According to **A.N. Kasimova (2023)**, Uzbek learners often face challenges distinguishing between **short and long vowels**, particularly sounds like /ɪ/ vs. /i:/ and /ʌ/ vs. /ɑ:/, as Uzbek lacks such contrasts. **S. T. Ismailov (2021)** emphasizes that Uzbek learners tend to pronounce English words based on **Uzbek orthography**, causing mispronunciations of vowel sounds. Furthermore, **A. Rasulova (2020)** highlights that the **absence of tense-lax distinction** in Uzbek vowels leads to difficulty mastering English vowel pairs such as /e/–/æ/ and /u/–/ʊ/. These findings confirm that **interference from the native language** significantly shapes learners' pronunciation accuracy in Uzbekistan as well.

**Methodology.** This study employed a **qualitative descriptive research design**, which aims to explore and analyze the challenges faced by learners of English as a second language (L2) in mastering vowel pronunciation. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for a deeper understanding of learners' pronunciation difficulties, the influence of their native languages, and the pedagogical factors affecting pronunciation instruction. The descriptive nature of the study made it possible to identify patterns, compare contexts, and summarize existing findings from previous research. The data for this study were obtained primarily through **document analysis** and **review of existing literature**. Scholarly articles, research papers, and institutional reports from both international and Uzbek researchers were examined to gather information about:

- Common English vowel pronunciation difficulties;
- The influence of first language (L1) on L2 vowel production;
- Teaching methods and technological tools used to improve pronunciation;
- Pedagogical challenges faced by teachers in inclusive language classrooms.

The reviewed sources included studies conducted in Pakistan (Ali et al., 2023), China (Shi, 2024), Austria and Kosovo (University Isa Boletini in Mitrovica et al., 2025; Lama, 2019), Canada (Jackson, 2025), as well as local research by Uzbek scholars (A Kasimova, 2023; Rasulova, 2020; Ismailov, 2021; Abdullayeva, 2023; Mamatov, 2021; Yusupova, 2022).

In summary, the study's methodology is based on a qualitative descriptive approach supported by document and content analysis. By synthesizing findings from both international and Uzbek scholars, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing English vowel pronunciation among L2 learners. This methodological approach enables the identification of effective teaching practices, highlights areas for further empirical research, and supports the development of improved pronunciation pedagogy in ESL and EFL contexts.

**Discussion.** General challenges in English vowel pronunciation. One of the primary challenges for learners is distinguishing between different English vowel sounds. The subtle differences between long and short vowels, as well as lax and tense vowels, are particularly difficult to master. Long vowels are pronounced for a longer duration than

short vowels. Tense and lax vowels are differentiated by the level of muscular tension in the mouth, which can be felt when pronouncing words like "cake" (tense) versus "cut" (lax). Each English vowel having multiple pronunciations also contributes to learners' difficulties. Additionally, silent letters can puzzle learners, as seen in words like "knife" or "write". Understanding the patterns and origins of these silent letters can make them easier to remember.

**Influence of Native Language on Vowel Pronunciation.** The influence of a learner's mother tongue significantly impacts their ability to pronounce English vowels. Often, the most challenging vowels are those that do not exist in the learner's native language. Conversely, phonemes that share the same pronunciation in both English and the native language are easier to master. Problems arise when native speakers apply their own vowel harmonization rules to English, leading to mispronunciations and difficulty distinguishing similar vowel sounds. The phenomenon of "transfer" explains how phonological elements from the first language are used in the second language, which can be an obstacle or a strategy depending on the situation.

#### **Specific Examples of Native Language Interference.**

**Sudanese Speakers:** Students with Sudanese Spoken Arabic backgrounds have difficulties pronouncing English vowels.

**Kipchak Dialect Speakers:** The distinct vowel synharmony patterns in the Kipchak dialect negatively affect English pronunciation, as speakers often apply these native rules, causing errors.

**Saraiki Speakers:** Pakistani students, especially Saraiki speakers, experience significant difficulties in producing and recognizing English vowel sounds, partly due to the influence of their mother tongue and insufficient guidance from teachers.

**Spanish Speakers:** The Spanish vowel system is simpler than English, with only five pure vowels compared to English's fourteen. This difference makes it hard for Spanish speakers to perceive and pronounce new English phonemes. Spanish speakers often substitute unknown English sounds with similar sounds from their native language.

**Specific Vowel Challenges for Spanish Speakers:** The English /ɪ/, /æ/, and /ʊ/ are particularly difficult for Spanish speakers. These are lax vowels located in "intermediate"

positions in the vowel chart, which are between Spanish vowel sounds. The English /iy/ is often pronounced as the Spanish /i/, but the English sound is slightly higher and longer. The English /ɪ/ is pronounced as the Spanish /i/, but the English version is more relaxed and is perceived as an "intermediate vowel". The English /uw/ is similar to the Spanish /u/, but less tense. The English /ʊ/ is troublesome because it is more relaxed than the Spanish /u/ and is in an intermediate position between /u/ and /o/. The sounds /ɑ/ and /ʌ/ are new to Spanish speakers, who tend to substitute them with other sounds like /o/ or diphthongs like /ou/ or /au/. The English /æ/ is often replaced by /ʌ/ or /ɑ/. The tense/lax dimension of vowels is not a distinctive feature in the Spanish vowel system, making it challenging for Spanish speakers to perceive or produce.

**Common Difficult English Vowel Sounds.** Research consistently identifies certain English vowel sounds as particularly difficult for learners: The vowels /ɪ/, /æ/, and /ʊ/. These three vowels were found to be the most challenging for students in a longitudinal study of English teaching students at the University of Costa Rica. These vowels are typically lax vowels, meaning the muscles involved in their articulation are relaxed. They are also often situated in intermediate positions in the vowel chart, making their perception and production troublesome.

**Short-i (/ɪ/):** This is frequently cited as one of the most difficult English vowels to master, requiring time to adjust tongue placement.

**Long and Short Vowels:** Many Arab learners find it difficult to master short and long vowel sounds without consistent practice.

**The Schwa (/ə/):** The schwa sound, which appears in many unstressed syllables regardless of its written form and sounds like "uh," can be perplexing because it makes the pronunciation of many English words counterintuitive to their spelling.

**R-colored Vowels:** In many American English dialects, the presence of an 'r' after a vowel alters its pronunciation, creating r-colored vowels (e.g., "bird," "car," "nurse"), which are challenging for learners because they don't exist in many other languages.

**Addressing Pronunciation Challenges.** Improving pronunciation requires a combination of practice, awareness, and effective strategies. Explicit pronunciation teaching can lead to more native-like production of L2 vowel qualities, even for advanced



learners. Contrastive analysis, which compares the native and target languages, helps teachers anticipate and address potential difficulties. Instructors should prioritize problematic vowel sounds based on these analyses and provide adequate training. Recording one's speech and comparing it to native speakers provides valuable insight into areas needing improvement and allows for targeted adjustments. Active listening and mimicking, through exposure to native English speakers via various media, can help learners familiarize themselves with natural speech patterns. Speech shadowing, which involves speaking along with audio clips of native speakers in real-time, enhances speech rhythm, intonation, and pronunciation. Engaging with native speakers or tutors offers direct feedback and helps address specific pronunciation issues in real-world conversations. Computer-assisted pronunciation (CAP) has been shown to significantly enhance students' pronunciation of English vowel sounds, particularly for those vowels not present in their native language.

**Conclusion.** This study examines the difficulties faced by English as a Second Language (L2) learners in mastering vowel pronunciation, mainly due to native language (L1) interference and insufficient teaching methods. English vowels are complex because of differences in length, tension, and quality, making contrasts like /ɪ/–/i:/ and /ʌ/–/ɑ:/ hard to distinguish. Research from different countries, including Uzbekistan, shows similar issues. Learners of Saraiki, Spanish, Arabic, Kipchak dialects, and Uzbek often confuse short and long vowels, rely on their native spelling systems, and struggle with tense–lax distinctions not found in their L1. Using a qualitative descriptive method, the study analyzed previous research to identify common pronunciation problems and effective teaching strategies. The most difficult vowels were /ɪ/, /æ/, /ʊ/, and /ə/, while R-colored vowels (as in *bird* and *car*) also caused challenges. To improve pronunciation, the study recommends explicit instruction, contrastive analysis between L1 and English vowels, recording and listening practice, and the use of computer-assisted pronunciation (CAP) tools. Techniques like shadowing, active listening, and interaction with native speakers are also helpful. Mastering English vowels requires both phonetic awareness and innovative teaching approaches. With focused pronunciation training and technology-based support, learners can significantly enhance their vowel accuracy and overall communication skills.

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