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## Mother Tongue Interference on Students' Acquiring English Pronunciation

## Інтерференція рідної мови при опануванні учнями англійської вимови

**Анотація.** У запропонованій статті розглядаються труднощі, з якими стикаються українські студенти при опануванні правильної англійської вимо-

ви з урахуванням впливу інтерференції рідної мови. Вивчення мови нерідко супроводжується складнощами у вимові, що стає особливо актуальним у зв'язку з наявністю фонетичних відмінностей між рідною мовою та мовою, що вивчається. Метою цієї статті є дослідження ступеня впливу зазначеної інтерференції на процес засвоєння англійської вимови українськими студентами.

Дослідження проводилося за допомогою комбінованого підходу, що включав анкетування, інтерв'ю та тестування вимови. У дослідженні взяли участь 43 українські студенти, що вивчають англійську як іноземну. Результати вивчення доводять, що інтерференція рідної мови є важливим фактором у засвоєнні англійської вимови українськими студентами. Зокрема, інтерференція впливає на вимову певних англійських звуків, таких як /ð/та /д/, які відсутні в українській мові.

Отримані результати дозволяють стверджувати, що вчителі англійської мови повинні враховувати вплив інтерференції рідної мови на засвоєння вимови та розробляти відповідні стратегії для її подолання. Викладачі повинні надавати чіткі інструкції щодо вимови складних англійських звуків і заохочувати студентів використовувати коригувальний фідбек. Крім того, доступ до автентичної англійської мови, наприклад, аудіо- та відеоматеріалів, може сприяти формуванню правильної англійської вимови.

Таким чином, ця стаття висвітлює виклики, з якими стикаються українські студенти при опануванні правильної англійської вимови. Результати показують, що інтерференція рідної мови є важливим фактором у засвоєнні вимови, особливо при відтворенні специфічних англійських звуків. Аналіз пропонує корисну інформацію для вчителів англійської мови щодо вирішення цих проблем та покращення вимовних навичок їхніх учнів.

**Ключові слова:** інтерференція рідної мови, вимова, опанування вимови, україномовні студенти, англійська як іноземна мова.

Abstract. This study examines the challenges faced by Ukrainian students in acquiring accurate English pronunciation, particularly in relation to mother tongue interference. Language learners often struggle with pronunciation, and the issue is compounded by the presence of phonetic differences between the mother tongue and the target language. The aim of this article is to investigate the extent of this interference on Ukrainian students' English pronunciation acquisition.

A mixed-methods research approach was used, involving a questionnaire survey, an interview, and a pronunciation test. The participants were 43 Ukrainian students enrolled in an English language program. The results of the investigation show that mother tongue interference is a significant factor in Ukrainian students' English pronunciation acquisition. Specifically, the interference affects the production of certain English sounds, such as  $\delta$  and  $\theta$ , which are not present in the Ukrainian language.

The findings suggest that English language teachers need to be aware of the impact of mother tongue interference on pronunciation acquisition and develop appropriate strategies to address it. Teachers should provide explicit instruction on the production of challenging English sounds and encourage students to use corrective feedback. Furthermore, exposure to authentic English input, such as audio and video resources, can facilitate the acquisition of accurate English pronunciation.

Thus, this study sheds light on the challenges faced by Ukrainian students in acquiring accurate English pronunciation. The findings indicate that

mother tongue interference is a significant factor in pronunciation acquisition, particularly in the production of specific English sounds. The analysis provides useful insights for English language teachers in addressing these issues and improving their students' pronunciation skills.

Key words: mother tongue interference, pronunciation, pronunciation acquisition, Ukrainian-speaking students, English as a foreign language.

**Introduction.** The importance of English as a global language highlights the necessity of acquiring language skills for international competitiveness, communication, and accreditation for both universities and their students in educational contexts, as well as in the labor market, research, and scientific communities. "Education can also be ... seen in the more dynamically developing cooperative scientific projects and exchange in the research practices" [17, p.235]. Moreover, "the education system does not stand still, and despite all this, year after year, new pedagogical technologies appear, new approaches in educational practice are revealed, the need for education, new learning models, flexible educational systems is recognized" [8, p. 156].

English is utilized in scientific, technological, and cultural contexts, as well as for economic, political, and strategic collaboration, with its influence extending to mass media, communications, and multinational corporations. It is "an important condition for establishing and maintaining international business contacts, intensification of professional interaction with foreign colleagues" [9, p. 76]. As such, English has increasingly become a critical competency for individuals seeking employment in global and international companies, as well as "a necessary basis for the mobility of students, teachers and researchers for access to education, research, teaching and internships" [9, p. 76].

The significance of incorporating pronunciation instruction in English language pedagogy is widely acknowledged. Evidently, pronunciation is deemed as the foremost and fundamental aspect of communication. Inaccurate pronunciation can significantly impede a speaker's ability to effectively communicate in English, thus rendering pronunciation as the primary culprit in impeding language intelligibility. As such, a proficient and effective pronunciation curriculum endows learners with the ability to effectively express themselves and derive a sense of pleasure in exchanging ideas.

The importance of pronunciation in the development of oral proficiency in a second language cannot be overstated, and has long been recognized as an essential component of language acquisition. Exposure to high-quality models of pronunciation early in the learning process is essential, as it provides a foundation for effective English language instruction. Tailored approaches to teaching pronunciation, customized for both learners and teachers, are key to cultivating English language skills that are easily understood by listeners, and to developing effective

communication strategies that meet learners' needs. Moreover, such approaches have the potential to enhance the self-confidence of educators, by providing them with sound pedagogical techniques based on research, thereby enhancing the overall quality of language instruction.

**Literature review.** Pronunciation is a crucial aspect of language learning, and it involves the production and perception of sounds in a language [5]. The correct pronunciation of a language is essential for effective communication. The acquisition of English pronunciation involves mastering the production and perception of English sounds. Non-native speakers of English often face challenges in mastering the pronunciation of English sounds due to the influence of their mother tongue [7]. Mother tongue interference refers to the influence of the learner's first language on the acquisition of the target language [18]. The mother tongue can influence the acquisition of English pronunciation in various ways, such as the articulation of sounds, stress patterns, and intonation [13].

English pronunciation is a complex process that involves different aspects, such as the production of individual sounds, the stress patterns of words, and the intonation of sentences. The English language has specific sounds that do not exist in the Ukrainian language, such as the dental fricatives  $|\delta|$  and  $|\theta|$ . Ukrainian speakers may find it challenging to produce these sounds correctly because they do not exist in their mother tongue. The differences in stress patterns between English and Ukrainian can also cause difficulties in English pronunciation. For example, in English, stress can change the meaning of words, while in Ukrainian, stress plays a less significant role in distinguishing word meanings.

Previous studies have investigated the impact of mother tongue interference on the acquisition of English pronunciation for speakers of different languages, such as Arabic [19], Chinese [14], Japanese [11], Spanish [16], Italian [10] etc. These studies have identified specific sound segments that are challenging for non-native speakers to produce and have provided some pedagogical implications that can help English language teachers to address these issues. However, there is limited research on the impact of mother tongue interference on Ukrainian students' English pronunciation acquisition.

This study **aims** to investigate the following research questions:

- 1. What are the specific English sounds that Ukrainian students find challenging to produce due to mother tongue interference?
- 2. How does mother tongue interference affect Ukrainian students' stress patterns and intonation in English?
- 3. What are the pedagogical implications for English language teachers to address these challenges in Ukrainian students' English pronunciation acquisition?

**Methodology**. To investigate the impact of mother tongue interference on Ukrainian students' English pronunciation acquisition, a

mixed-methods approach was used. The study involved a questionnaire survey, an interview, and a pronunciation test.

The study involved a group of 43 university students learning English as a foreign language. The selection of participants was based on specific criteria, including their status as native Ukrainian speakers, a minimum of four years of English language instruction.

The data collection involved three stages. First, a questionnaire survey was administered to the participants to collect data on their perception of English pronunciation, their level of English proficiency, and their attitudes towards English language learning. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions and Likert-scale items.

Second, an interview was conducted with a subset of 10 participants to gain more in-depth insights into their experiences in learning English pronunciation. The interview questions focused on the participants' perception of the difficulties they encountered in learning English pronunciation, their strategies for overcoming these difficulties, and their attitudes towards English language learning.

Third, a pronunciation test was administered to all the participants to assess their ability to produce English sounds. The test consisted of a list of 30 English words that contained challenging sounds for Ukrainian speakers, such as  $/\theta/$  and  $/\delta/$ . The participants were asked to read the words aloud, and their pronunciation was recorded.

The data collected from the questionnaire survey were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine the participants' attitudes towards English language learning and their level of English proficiency. The interview data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify the main themes that emerged from the participants' responses. The pronunciation test data were analyzed using a phonetic transcription system to assess the participants' ability to produce English sounds accurately.

# Presentation of the main research findings

Aspects of Pronunciation. Pronunciation refers to a set of learned behaviors for producing sounds. These behaviors are acquired through repeated practice and correction, which serve to reinforce the correct pronunciation of sounds. The process of learning to pronounce a second language involves the development of new pronunciation habits, which may require overcoming the influence of the first language (L1) on the learner's speech. Thus, the acquisition of a second language requires a significant effort to build new pronunciation habits that are distinct from those formed in the L1. This entails not only repetition and correction, but also a heightened awareness of the differences between the two languages and a willingness to adapt to new pronunciation norms.

Pronunciation in English language teaching encompasses both suprasegmental and segmental features. Rather than focusing on sounding like a native speaker or adhering to a preferred pronunciation model, the goal of English language instruction should be to cultivate intelligible pronunciation. In this context, the most critical aspect of pronunciation is to speak in a way that most listeners can comprehend without undue effort or confusion. This emphasis on intelligibility is of paramount importance, as it ensures that learners are equipped with the skills necessary to effectively communicate in the language, even if their accent or pronunciation differs from that of a native speaker. By prioritizing intelligibility over accent, English language instruction can equip learners with the tools they need to succeed in a globalized world.

According to D. Crystal, spoken language consists of three distinct levels: subsegmental, segmental, and suprasegmental [6]. The subsegmental level is concerned with the features and properties of individual speech sounds or phones, such as voicing. The segmental level, on the other hand, encompasses individual speech sounds or phonemes, which form the basic building blocks of language. Finally, the suprasegmental level pertains to prosody, which includes aspects of rhythm and intonation that go beyond the level of individual phonemes. By understanding these three levels of spoken language, language learners and instructors can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the intricacies of speech production and communication, which in turn can inform effective language instruction and learning strategies.

Pronunciation is the act of producing sounds that are used to convey meaning in language. It encompasses a range of factors, including the specific sounds used in a language (segments), as well as suprasegmental aspects of speech such as intonation, stress, phrasing, timing, and rhythm. Additionally, aspects such as voice quality and the use of gestures, expressions, and body language can all contribute to effective pronunciation in communication. By focusing on these various elements, language learners and instructors can work to improve overall pronunciation skills, resulting in clearer and more effective communication in the target language.

The Influence of Mother Tongue. Mother tongue interference, also known as cross-linguistic interference or transfer, is the effect of the speaker's native language on the acquisition and use of a second language, particularly in pronunciation. This phenomenon has been a subject of interest in the field of language acquisition, as it has significant implications for second language learning and teaching.

The effect of mother tongue interference on second language pronunciation has significant implications for language learners and teachers. Learners may find it challenging to acquire proper pronunciation in their second language, as the interference from their first language can be deeply ingrained. This can lead to frustration and difficulty in communicating effectively in the second language.

For language teachers, understanding native language interference is essential in designing effective language teaching strategies. Teachers need

to identify the specific features of their students' mother tongue that may interfere with their pronunciation and develop targeted exercises to address them. This may involve explicit instruction in the differences between the sound systems of the two languages, as well as practice in producing and distinguishing sounds that do not exist in the mother tongue.

N. Kulchytska investigation into foreign language communication has revealed that pronunciation errors are prevalent among non-native speakers, possibly due to the difficulty in distinguishing between phonemes and accurately reproducing L2 sounds that are not present in the speaker's L1 system. The retention of phonetic categories acquired through targeted phonetic training remains uncertain, as non-native speakers often employ corresponding L1 sounds in their L2 speech performance [3, p. 243]. In light of this, N. Lukashchuk argues that the ability to manage interference between language sound systems in foreign language competence is a crucial criterion for adapting to a language system and being sensitive to communication context [4].

Factors Affecting Students' Pronunciation. The mispronunciation of words by non-native speakers can be attributed to several factors including differences in pronunciation and lack of exposure to certain sounds [2, p. 280]. There are several main reasons for mispronunciation, including substituting second language sounds with corresponding sounds in the first language due to the lack of the sound in the first language, misunderstanding second language sounds due to their being allophones in the first language, and applying the wrong language stress patterns and intonation when pronouncing the second language, resulting in a foreign accent.

In the realm of pronunciation instruction, there are various strategies that can be employed to address mispronunciation issues. These strategies include utilizing contrastive information, exercising sensitivity in correction, considering the frequency, precision, and intensity of correction, promoting exact imitation, implementing a balanced approach to correction, providing simplified explanations, emphasizing sound-to-letter correspondence, placing pronunciation in a communicative context, and employing a learner-centered approach [1]. For long-lasting effects, teaching pronunciation demands continuous attention and integration into daily classroom activities. Regularly addressing pronunciation concerns during feedback or group correction sessions in lessons can help learners to recognize the importance of pronunciation.

Incorporating supportive materials, such as charts, textbooks, and e-learning resources, can provide fundamental knowledge of speech perception, production, acoustics, phonetics, and basic skills in speech recording, acoustic analysis, phonetic transcription, and articulation. Furthermore, knowledge of the phonology of both the L1 and L2 can aid in the planning of pronunciation instruction in a more efficient manner.

**Research Findings**. The findings of the study are presented below, organized according to the research questions.

Research Question 1: What are the specific English sounds that Ukrainian students find challenging to produce due to mother tongue interference?

The results of the pronunciation test showed that the most challenging sounds for Ukrainian students were the dental fricatives  $/\theta$ / and  $/\delta$ /. A total of 38% of the participants were unable to produce these sounds accurately. Students often substituted the sounds for the Ukrainian /c/,  $/\tau$ /,  $/\varphi$ / (e.g., through  $-[\theta ru:] *[sru:]$ , three  $[\theta ri:] *[tri:]$ , everything  $['evri\theta rn] *['evrif rn]$  and /3/,  $/\pi$ / respectively (e.g., these  $[\delta i:z] *[di:z]$ , father  $['fa:\delta a] *['fa:za]$ ).

Other challenging sounds were the English /r/ and the English /w/. The participants had difficulty distinguishing between the English /r/ and the Ukrainian /p/ sound, and some of them substituted the English /w/ with the Ukrainian /b/ sound.

Research Question 2: How does mother tongue interference affect Ukrainian students' stress patterns and intonation in English?

The interview data showed that 47% of Ukrainian students had difficulty mastering the stress patterns of English words. They tended to apply Ukrainian stress patterns to English words, which resulted in incorrect word stress and incorrect meaning. For example, some participants stressed the wrong syllable in the words "refuse" (v.) and "refuse" (v.), which changed the meaning of the word from the waste material that has been discarded to saying firmly that you will not do something that someone has requested.

Ukrainian students also had difficulty acquiring the proper intonation patterns of English. They tended to use rising intonation at the end of sentences, which is common in Ukrainian but can convey a different meaning in English.

Research Question 3: What are the pedagogical implications for English language teachers to address these challenges in Ukrainian students' English pronunciation acquisition?

The study provides some pedagogical implications for English language teachers to address the challenges that Ukrainian students face in English pronunciation acquisition. First, teachers should be aware of the specific sounds that are challenging for Ukrainian speakers, such as /θ/ and /ð/. They can provide explicit instruction on how to produce these sounds and give feedback on the students' pronunciation. Second, teachers should pay attention to the stress patterns and intonation of English, which differ from Ukrainian. They can provide models of correct stress and intonation patterns and encourage students to imitate them. Third, teachers should use audio and video materials that feature native English speakers to expose students to natural English pronunciation and intonation. Finally, teachers can incorporate activities that focus on

pronunciation and intonation in their lesson plans, such as tongue twisters, reading aloud, and role-play exercises.

The findings of this study suggest that mother tongue interference is a significant challenge for Ukrainian students in English pronunciation acquisition. The results showed that the dental fricatives  $/\theta/$  and  $/\delta/$  were the most challenging sounds for Ukrainian speakers due to the absence of these sounds in Ukrainian. This finding is consistent with previous studies that have identified these sounds as challenging for non-native English speakers [12; 15]. The study also found that Ukrainian students had difficulty mastering the stress and intonation patterns of English, which can lead to miscommunication.

The findings have important pedagogical implications for English language teachers who work with Ukrainian students. Teachers need to be aware of the specific challenges that Ukrainian students face in English pronunciation and develop appropriate teaching strategies to address them. One approach is to provide explicit instruction on the sounds that are challenging for Ukrainian speakers and give feedback on the students' pronunciation. Another approach is to use audio and video materials that feature native English speakers to expose students to natural English pronunciation and intonation. Finally, teachers can incorporate activities that focus on pronunciation and intonation in their lesson plans to help students develop these skills.

This study has some limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study only focused on Ukrainian students, and the findings may not be applicable to other non-native English speakers. Future research could include a larger and more diverse sample of non-native English speakers to investigate the impact of mother tongue interference on English pronunciation acquisition. Additionally, future research could investigate the effectiveness of different teaching strategies in addressing the challenges of mother tongue interference.

Conclusions. Effective communication relies heavily on accurate pronunciation as even slight errors can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations of intended meaning. Mispronunciation can alter the intended message of a sentence or word, creating confusion and hindering communication. Despite having studied a language for a significant amount of time, there is always room for improvement in one's pronunciation and reduction of accent. Research has demonstrated that second-language acquisition differs from native language acquisition, and pronunciation in a second language can be particularly challenging to improve. It is uncommon for a second-language speaker to completely eliminate their accent.

This study investigated the impact of mother tongue interference on Ukrainian students' English pronunciation acquisition. The findings suggest that Ukrainian students face challenges in producing specific English sounds, mastering stress and intonation patterns, and avoiding mother tongue

interference. The study provides pedagogical implications for English language teachers to help Ukrainian students overcome these challenges. English language teachers need to be aware of the specific challenges that Ukrainian students face and develop appropriate teaching strategies to address them. By doing so, they can help Ukrainian students improve their English pronunciation and communicate more effectively in English.

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# Використання білінгвальних стратегій під час навчання іноземної мови студентів університету

# The use of bilingual strategies in teaching a foreign language to university students

Анотація. У статті проаналізовано потенціал та можливості рідної мови в іншомовній підготовці студентів вишу, запропоновано нові білінгвальні стратегії в умовах цифрового середовища навчання в університеті. Простежується зародження ідеї використання виключно іноземної мови під час її навчання, викладено критичні погляди на такий підхід. Пси-