MORPHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES FOR UZBEK LEARNERS OF ENGLISH: A COMPARATIVE LINGUISTIC STUDY

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Introduction

Morphology, the study of word formation, is essential for language learners as it helps them understand how different morphemes (the smallest units of meaning) combine to create words. Morphological awareness plays a significant role in building vocabulary and constructing sentences, particularly in English, a language with complex morphemes and frequent exceptions. For Uzbek learners of English, morphology presents unique challenges due to structural differences between Uzbek and English. This article examines key areas of morphological difficulty for Uzbek learners and explores strategies for addressing these challenges in the classroom.

Understanding Morphemes in Language Learning

Learners' understanding of morphemes is largely influenced by the vocabulary they are exposed to and the specific language needs in their environment. For example, medical students encounter Latin-based medical terms, while professionals in business settings engage with economic terminology. As Barry (2008) noted, "The same vocabulary of the same language is not shared by all speakers of that language, but the same rules of word construction are shared to modify the roots" (p.41). This distinction between vocabulary and structural rules is critical for Uzbek learners, as English word formation rules often contrast with those in Uzbek.

In English, many words consist of a root morpheme combined with prefixes or suffixes (bound morphemes). For example, in "unavoidable," "avoid" is the root or free morpheme, while "un-" and "-able" are bound morphemes that alter the meaning. In Uzbek, similar constructions exist, but they differ in form and usage. The Uzbek language generally has regular rules for morpheme attachment, and it lacks some of the irregularities present in English, making the learning process a challenge.

Pluralization and Irregular Forms

A primary area of difficulty for Uzbek learners of English lies in pluralization. In Uzbek, the plural suffix "-lar" applies consistently to nouns:

- gul (flower) becomes gullar (flowers)
- uy (house) becomes uylar (houses)
- qiz (girl) becomes qizlar (girls)

This simplicity stands in contrast to English, where nouns can be regular (adding "-s") or irregular, as with "children," "geese," and "mice." Uzbek learners, accustomed to consistent pluralization, may find it difficult to understand why certain English nouns do not follow a standard rule. Early learners often overgeneralize by adding "-s" to all nouns, leading to errors like "gooses" and "mouses." Educators need to spend additional time teaching these irregular forms and explaining why exceptions exist in English.

Verb Conjugation: Regular vs. Irregular Patterns

English verbs present another area of complexity for Uzbek learners. Uzbek has regular verb conjugations, which simplify learning for native speakers. However, in English, irregular verbs like "run" (ran), "drive" (drove), and "bring" (brought) deviate from expected patterns. Uzbek learners may overgeneralize, applying regular past tense forms to all verbs, leading to errors such as "runned" and "drived." This challenge highlights the importance of providing ample exposure to both regular and irregular verbs through practice and memorization.

Comparative Forms: Different Suffixes and Rules

The formation of comparative and superlative forms also differs between Uzbek and English. In English, the comparative form often adds "-er" (e.g., "taller"), but multi-syllable words use "more" (e.g., "more beautiful"). Phonological rules further complicate matters, as vowel changes occur in words like "happy" (happier). Uzbek employs a single suffix, "-roq," for comparative forms:

- uzun (tall) becomes uzunroq (taller)
- katta (big) becomes kattaroq (bigger)

This uniformity can lead to errors among Uzbek learners, such as "beautifuller" and "boringer," as they may attempt to apply the Uzbek comparative structure directly to English. Teachers must emphasize the difference in comparative formation rules and provide targeted practice with adjectives that require "more" instead of "-er."

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Negation: Prefix Changes and Assimilation Rules

Negation is another area where Uzbek and English diverge. In English, negative prefixes like "in-" alter form based on the root word, changing to "im-" before "p" (e.g., "impossible"), "ir-" before "r" (e.g., "irrelevant"), and "il-" before "l" (e.g., "illegal"). Uzbek learners may struggle with this variability, as Uzbek has a more straightforward approach to negation. For example, in Uzbek, the word "tussiz" (meaning "unsalted") is derived by adding "-siz" (negative suffix) to "tuz" (salt). The phonological assimilation in Uzbek follows consistent rules, creating challenges for learners when adapting to English.

Phonological Constraints: Cluster Complexity

English phonology includes constraints that do not exist in Uzbek, especially with consonant clusters in pluralized forms. In words like "masses" and "brushes," a vowel is inserted to ease pronunciation. Uzbek learners, whose native language lacks complex consonant clusters, may find it hard to adjust to these rules. Additionally, certain English plurals, like "criteria" from "criterion" and "data" from "datum," are derived from Latin and Greek, adding to learners' confusion.

Vocabulary Building Through Morpheme Awareness

Barry (2008) suggests that a strong understanding of morphemes allows learners to deduce the meanings of unfamiliar words and construct new terms using prefixes and suffixes (p.40). By learning root words and common morphemes, Uzbek learners can expand their vocabulary and grasp complex terminology faster. For instance, understanding that the prefix "un-" denotes negation allows learners to understand terms like "unacceptable" or "unfriendly." However, due to the phonological adjustments often required, this process can still be challenging for Uzbek speakers, who may find it difficult to adapt to the nuances of English morphological structures.

Educational Strategies for Teaching Morphology

To address these challenges, teachers should incorporate explicit morphology instruction into lessons. Focusing on morpheme recognition and understanding differences in pluralization, verb conjugation, and comparative forms can help bridge the gap between Uzbek and English structures. Interactive activities, such as morpheme matching exercises and prefix/suffix building games, can reinforce these concepts and make learning engaging.

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In addition, incorporating visual aids and mnemonic devices can assist learners in retaining irregular forms. Teachers should also encourage learners to engage in extensive reading, as this exposes them to varied vocabulary and morphological structures. By contextualizing morphemes within meaningful content, students are better able to understand and remember complex morphological rules.

Conclusion

While English morphology offers some structural similarities to Uzbek, significant differences challenge Uzbek learners. Issues with pluralization, verb conjugation, comparative forms, and negation complicate the acquisition process, requiring educators to focus on explicit instruction and practice. By emphasizing morphological awareness and addressing exceptions directly, teachers can guide Uzbek learners through the intricacies of English morphology and prepare them for successful language use.

References

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