WHO ARE LOW-ACHIEVING EFL LEARNERS? A CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

(the case of primary and Grade 5–6 classes of general secondary schools in Uzbekistan)

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ANNOTATSIYA

Maqolada o‘zbek tilida ta’lim beriladigan umumta’lim maktablarining boshlang‘ich (1–4) va 5–6-sinflarida ingliz tilini past o‘zlashtirayotgan o‘quvchilar (“low-achieving EFL learners”) tushunchasining mazmuni, ularni aniqlash mezonlari va tadqiqot metodologiyasi tahlil qilinadi. Integrativ adabiyotlar sharhi va me’yoriy hujjatlar tahliliga tayangan holda past o‘zlashtirishni belgilashning to‘rt yondashuvi qiyosiy tavsiflanadi, uning omillari ko‘p darajali model shaklida umumlashtiriladi. O‘zbek tilida ta’lim oluvchi bolalarga xos omillar – ona tilida savodxonlik darajasi, o‘zbek lotin yozuvi va ingliz orfografiyasi o‘rtasidagi interferensiya, tipologik farqlar hamda 4-sinfdan 5-sinfga o‘tish bosqichining ta’siri alohida ko‘rsatiladi. Yakunda past o‘zlashtiruvchi o‘quvchini aniqlashning ko‘p bosqichli protokoli taklif etiladi.

Kalit so‘zlar: past o‘zlashtiruvchi o‘quvchi, ingliz tili chet tili sifatida, boshlang‘ich ta’lim, o‘zbek tilida ta’lim, CEFR, motivatsiya, xavotir, ona tilida savodxonlik, diagnostika.

ABSTRACT

The article examines how the notion of the low-achieving learner of English as a foreign language (EFL) can be defined, identified and researched in Uzbek-medium

general secondary schools, focusing on the primary stage (Grades 1–4) and Grades 5–6. Drawing on an integrative literature review and an analysis of national policy documents, the study compares four approaches to defining low achievement – norm-referenced, criterion-referenced, growth-based and teacher-judgement-based – and synthesises the associated factors into a multilevel model. Factors specific to Uzbek-medium learners are highlighted: first-language literacy, interference between the Uzbek Latin script and English spelling, typological distance between the two languages, and the transition from Grade 4 to Grade 5. The article proposes a multi-gate identification protocol that separates persistent difficulty from insufficient opportunity to learn.

Keywords: low-achieving learners, English as a foreign language, young learners, Uzbek-medium schools, CEFR, motivation, anxiety, first-language literacy, identification.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, English has moved from the periphery to the centre of school education in Uzbekistan. Presidential Resolution PQ-1875 of 10 December 2012 introduced the teaching of foreign languages from the first grade, and the State Educational Standard for foreign languages approved in 2013 aligned school outcomes with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), setting A1 as the target level at the end of primary school [Cabinet of Ministers, 2013]. Presidential Resolution PQ-5117 of 19 May 2021 further raised the status of foreign language learning. As a result, nearly every child in an Uzbek-medium school now begins learning English at the age of six or seven.

Early and universal provision, however, makes differences in outcomes more visible. In every primary and Grade 5–6 classroom, teachers report pupils who “do not keep up”: they cannot read simple English words by the end of Grade 4, avoid speaking or receive persistently low marks. Such pupils are labelled “weak”, “passive” or “low-achieving”, yet the label is rarely defined. It may refer to a child who has had too little exposure to English, a child with a specific learning difficulty, a child who has lost motivation, or a child whose

low marks reflect the assessment procedure rather than ability. Without a clear construct, research findings cannot be compared and support cannot be targeted.

International research offers partial answers. An early start does not by itself guarantee higher attainment, and the rate of learning depends heavily on the amount and quality of input [Muñoz, 2006]. Low achievement has been linked to first-language skills, anxiety and motivation [Sparks & Ganschow, 1991; Horwitz et al., 1986; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015]. However, this literature has developed mainly in Western Europe, North America and East Asia and seldom addresses children who learn English through a Turkic first language written in a recently adopted Latin script. In Uzbekistan, the learner who fails to progress has received little systematic attention, while the PIRLS 2021 study, in which the country obtained an average reading score of 437 against the scale centrepoint of 500 [Mullis et al., 2023], suggests that first-language reading difficulties may be part of the picture.

The aim of this article is to clarify who low-achieving EFL learners are in Uzbek-medium primary and Grade 5–6 classes and how they can be identified and studied in a methodologically sound way. Three research questions are addressed:

RQ1. How is low achievement in EFL defined in the literature, and what are the consequences of each definition?

RQ2. Which factors are associated with low EFL achievement among young learners, and which of them are specific to Uzbek-medium classes?

RQ3. What methodological principles should guide the identification of low-achieving young EFL learners in the Uzbek school context?

2. METHODS

The study is a conceptual and methodological analysis rather than an empirical survey. It combines an integrative literature review with qualitative document analysis. An integrative design was chosen because the topic lies at the intersection of second language acquisition, educational psychology, special educational needs and young learner pedagogy, which use different terminology and methods.

Three groups of sources were analysed. The first comprised research publications on low achievement, individual differences and young foreign language learners, retrieved from Google Scholar, ERIC and Scopus with combinations of the terms “low-achieving”, “underachievement”, “struggling learners”, “foreign language learning difficulties”, “young learners” and “demotivation” and supplemented through citation tracking. Sources were included if they defined or operationalised low achievement, examined factors of achievement among learners aged roughly 6–13, or proposed identification procedures. The second group comprised the normative documents regulating foreign language education in Uzbekistan (PQ-1875, the 2013 State Educational Standard and PQ-5117), and the third – published national data, in particular the PIRLS 2021 results.

The analysis followed the stages of thematic synthesis. Definitions of low achievement were coded according to their reference point; explanatory factors were coded and grouped into levels of influence; the Uzbek documents were analysed for expected outcomes and features of Uzbek-medium classes; finally, the results were integrated into methodological principles and an identification protocol. Each factor included in the model had to be supported by at least two independent sources. The main limitation of the design is that it provides no new empirical data: the model and protocol are intended as a framework for subsequent empirical studies.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Four ways of defining low achievement

The analysis revealed four families of definitions that differ in their reference point (Table 1).

Table 1. Approaches to defining low achievement in EFL

Approach	Reference point	Typical operationalisation	Main risk
Norm-referenced	Performance of peers	Lowest 20–25% of a class or sample on a test	The group is "low" by definition; depends on the sample
Criterion-referenced	External standard (e.g., CEFR A1 at the end of Grade 4)	Not reaching the expected level or descriptor	Standards may be unrealistic for the actual conditions of learning
Growth-based (responsiveness)	The learner's own progress	Little or no gain after adequate, targeted instruction	Requires repeated measurement and a period of support
Teacher-judgement-based	Teacher's assessment, school marks	Persistent marks of "2" or "3", teacher nomination	Mixes achievement with behaviour, effort and attendance

Norm-referenced definitions are convenient for comparing "high" and "low" groups, but they guarantee that every class contains low achievers regardless of how much has been learned, and the cut-off is arbitrary. Criterion-referenced definitions are closer to the logic of the Uzbek State Standard, which links the end of primary school with CEFR level A1 [Cabinet of Ministers, 2013]; their limitation is that a child who has not reached A1 may simply have had too little exposure for the standard to be realistic. The growth-based approach originates in the response-to-intervention model, where a learner is considered to have a persistent difficulty only if he or she does not respond to good-quality instruction

and additional support [Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006]. It is the only approach that distinguishes lack of opportunity from a difficulty located in the learner, yet it is rarely used in EFL research. Teacher judgement and school marks dominate everyday practice in Uzbekistan, but on the five-point scale marks also reflect homework, behaviour and attendance, which makes them a weak basis for research classification.

The comparison shows that "low achievement" is not one phenomenon: a child may be low-achieving under a norm-referenced definition but not under a growth-based one, and vice versa. Research and practice should therefore state explicitly which definition is used and combine at least two reference points.

3.2. A multilevel model of factors associated with low achievement

The factors identified in the literature form four interacting levels: cognitive-linguistic, affective-motivational, instructional and socio-contextual.

At the *cognitive-linguistic level*, the most consistent finding concerns first-language skills. The linguistic interdependence hypothesis [Cummins, 1979] and the linguistic coding differences hypothesis [Sparks & Ganschow, 1991] both predict that children with weak phonological, orthographic and reading skills in their first language will find foreign language learning harder. Working memory and language learning aptitude also matter, and a small proportion of low achievers have specific learning differences such as dyslexia, which require different support from that needed by learners who simply lack exposure.

At the *affective-motivational level*, foreign language classroom anxiety [Horwitz et al., 1986] and low self-efficacy are associated with avoidance of speaking and lower performance. Repeated failure attributed to stable, uncontrollable causes ("I have no ability for languages") leads to learned helplessness, and the high initial enthusiasm of young learners tends to decline with age and negative classroom experiences [Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015].

At the *instructional level*, the key variable for young learners is the amount and intensity of meaningful input: an early start brings advantages only when exposure is sufficient and teaching is adapted to children's cognitive development [Muñoz, 2006].

Large classes, limited contact time, teachers' uneven proficiency, test-focused teaching and the labelling of pupils as "weak" further reduce learning opportunities.

At the *socio-contextual level*, children differ in access to English outside school – television, the internet, private tutoring – and in the support their families can provide. A child with little exposure at home depends entirely on school lessons, so weaknesses in instruction affect such children most strongly.

The levels are not independent. Weak first-language reading leads to failure in English reading tasks; failure produces anxiety and negative attributions; the child is then seated at the back or ignored; and the family, lacking resources, cannot compensate. Low achievement is therefore best understood as a trajectory produced by interacting factors rather than as a fixed trait.

3.3. Factors specific to Uzbek-medium primary and Grade 5–6 classes

The document analysis and the comparison of the Uzbek and English language systems revealed several features that moderate the general factors in Uzbek-medium classes (Table 2).

Table 2. Context-specific factors in Uzbek-medium classes

Factor	Description	Possible effect on achievement
First-language literacy	National reading results (PIRLS 2021: 437 points) indicate that many Grade 4 pupils are still developing basic reading comprehension in Uzbek	Weak L1 reading limits transfer of decoding and comprehension strategies to English

Factor	Description	Possible effect on achievement
Cross-orthographic interference	Uzbek Latin script is largely phonemic, whereas English spelling is opaque; several letters have different values (e.g., <j>, <x>, <q>, <i>, <e>)	Children apply Uzbek letter–sound rules to English words; such errors are misinterpreted as low ability
Typological distance	Uzbek is an agglutinative SOV language without articles; English is analytic SVO with articles and auxiliary verbs	Systematic errors in word order, articles and the verb "to be" persist and may be over-penalised
Family background	Many parents were schooled in the Cyrillic script and in Russian or Uzbek, not in English	Limited ability of parents to support reading and homework in English
Transition from Grade 4 to Grade 5	Change from a class teacher to subject teachers; more written and grammar-based tasks	Learners who relied on oral, game-based activities may fall behind quickly
Rural–urban differences	Unequal access to qualified teachers, private courses and digital resources	Low achievement may be concentrated in particular schools rather than in particular children

Two of these factors deserve particular attention. The first is the relation between the two Latin-based writing systems. Because Uzbek children learn to read in a transparent

orthography, they approach English with a strong expectation that each letter has one stable sound. This helps with letter recognition but becomes a source of systematic errors when English letters and letter combinations represent different sounds. Such errors should not be equated with a reading disability unless first-language reading has also been assessed [Sparks & Ganschow, 1991].

The second factor is the transition to Grade 5. In primary school, English lessons focus on listening, songs, games and oral vocabulary; in Grades 5–6, written work, grammar and reading texts become more prominent, while the standard expects progression from A1 towards A2. Children whose gaps in decoding and vocabulary were hidden by oral activities become visible as low achievers at this stage, which makes Grades 5–6 a critical period for identification and support.

3.4. Methodological pitfalls in identifying low achievers

The review identified five recurrent methodological problems:

1. **Single-measure classification:** learners are classified on the basis of one test or one term mark, ignoring measurement error.

2. **Confounding opportunity with ability:** differences in exposure, attendance and teaching quality are not controlled, so “low achievement” in fact reflects low opportunity to learn.

3. **Inappropriate instruments:** tests designed for older learners are used with young children, or instructions are given in English, so the test measures comprehension of the task rather than the target skill.

4. **Ignoring the first language:** L1 literacy and phonological skills are not assessed, making it impossible to distinguish general literacy problems from difficulties specific to English.

5. **Static, deficit-oriented labelling:** learners are labelled once and the label is not revisited, although achievement and motivation change over time [Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015].

3.5. A multi-gate identification protocol

On the basis of the analysis, a four-stage protocol for identifying low-achieving young EFL learners in Uzbek-medium classes is proposed (Table 3). It combines criterion-referenced and growth-based reference points and treats learner, classroom and context factors as part of the diagnosis.

Table 3. Proposed protocol for identifying low-achieving EFL learners (Grades 2–6)

Stage	Purpose	Instruments	Decision rule
1. Screening	Identify learners below curriculum expectations	Short curriculum-based measures of listening, vocabulary and (from Grade 3) word reading, aligned with CEFR Pre-A1/A1; instructions in Uzbek	Learners below the expected level on two or more measures proceed to Stage 2
2. Opportunity check	Exclude low opportunity to learn	Attendance records, lesson frequency, teacher continuity, short interview with the teacher	If opportunity was insufficient, provide regular instruction first; do not classify
3. Learner profile	Describe cognitive and affective needs	Uzbek reading and phonological awareness tasks; child-friendly anxiety and self-efficacy questionnaire in Uzbek	Profile shows the dominant area of need (L1 literacy, orthographic transfer, affective, mixed)

Stage	Purpose	Instruments	Decision rule
4. Response to support	Distinguish temporary lag from persistent difficulty	Targeted support for 6–8 weeks (systematic phonics, vocabulary recycling, low-anxiety speaking) with repeated measures	Learners with little progress despite support are referred for further assessment

The protocol reduces the risk of labelling children whose difficulties are caused by lack of instruction, separates first-language literacy problems from difficulties specific to English, treats affective factors as part of the diagnosis, and produces a profile that can guide teaching rather than a single label.

4. DISCUSSION

Regarding the first research question, the analysis shows that “low achievement” is a family of constructs rather than a single category: definitions based on peer comparison, standards, growth and teacher judgement identify overlapping but different groups of learners. This is consistent with the shift in special education from discrepancy-based to response-based identification [Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006] and with the view that learner characteristics are dynamic and context-dependent [Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015]. For EFL research in Uzbekistan, studies should report which definition they use and, where possible, combine CEFR-aligned expectations with evidence of learners’ progress.

Regarding the second question, the multilevel model confirms that low achievement results from the interaction of cognitive-linguistic, affective, instructional and contextual factors, in line with findings that first-language literacy is a strong predictor of foreign language attainment [Cummins, 1979; Sparks & Ganschow, 1991] and that the benefits of an early start depend on the quantity and quality of input [Muñoz, 2006]. The Uzbek context adds factors rarely discussed internationally: interference between a transparent

Latin-based orthography and opaque English spelling, typological distance, and the transition to Grade 5. These can make ordinary developmental errors look like low ability. The PIRLS 2021 results do not measure English, but they indicate that a substantial share of children complete primary school with developing rather than secure reading skills in Uzbek [Mullis et al., 2023]. Cooperation between native-language and English teachers is therefore an important and so far underused resource.

Regarding the third question, the proposed protocol operationalises five principles: (1) use more than one measure and reference point; (2) check the opportunity to learn before classifying a learner; (3) use age-appropriate instruments with instructions in the first language; (4) assess first-language literacy and affective variables as part of the diagnosis; and (5) treat classification as provisional and revisit it after targeted support. For teaching, this implies that early support in Grades 2–4 – systematic work on English letter–sound relationships contrasted with Uzbek, and low-anxiety oral practice – may prevent the sharp rise in low achievers observed in Grades 5–6, while labelling pupils as "weak" and grouping them separately should be avoided.

The study has limitations. As a conceptual analysis, it provides no empirical evidence on the prevalence of low achievement or on the validity of the protocol, and research in Uzbek and Russian on this topic is scarce. Future research should develop and validate CEFR-aligned curriculum-based measures for Grades 2–6, examine longitudinally the relationship between Uzbek and English reading, adapt anxiety and motivation scales for Uzbek-speaking children, and test targeted support programmes using the response-based approach.

5. CONCLUSION

Low-achieving EFL learners in Uzbek-medium primary and Grade 5–6 classes are not a homogeneous group of "weak" pupils. They include children with insufficient opportunity to learn, children whose first-language literacy is still developing, children who transfer Uzbek letter–sound rules to English, children whose anxiety and repeated

failure have reduced their motivation, and a smaller number with specific learning differences. Each group requires a different response.

The article has shown that the definition of low achievement determines who is identified, that the associated factors operate at several interacting levels, and that some of them are specific to the Uzbek-medium context. A multi-gate protocol combining curriculum-based screening, an opportunity check, a cognitive-affective profile and response to targeted support is proposed as a methodologically sound basis for research and school practice. Its empirical validation is the next step towards ensuring that the early introduction of English in Uzbekistan benefits every child, not only those who already succeed.

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