

## “Challenges for Uzbek learners in acquiring the English verb ‘to be’ in present tense”

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the challenges Uzbek learners face in acquiring the English verb ‘to be’, focusing on structural differences between Uzbek and English copula expression. In Uzbek, the copula is consistently marked through suffixes in first and second person forms, a long dash in third-person nouns, and morphological integration in adjectives, while negative and interrogative sentences use suffixes -mas and -mi. In contrast, English requires a separate, inflected verb that changes according to person and number. These differences often lead to errors in subject-verb agreement, omission or misuse of forms, and difficulties with negative and interrogative constructions. The study analyzes these patterns through comparative linguistic analysis and proposes targeted teaching strategies, including explicit contrastive instruction, structured drills, and contextualized communicative practice, to improve learners’ grammatical accuracy and confidence in using ‘to be’ in English.  
**Key terms:** English copula, Uzbek learners, second language acquisition, cross-linguistic influence, grammatical errors, to be, negative and interrogative forms, pedagogical strategies.

### Introduction

The English verb ‘to be’ is one of the most basic building blocks of the language. At the same time, it becomes particularly difficult for Uzbek learners due to the disparity between the two languages’ structures. In contrast to English, where ‘to be’ in present tense is always represented by a distinct verb that undergoes personal, number, and temporal changes, the copula in Uzbek is always visible, being either a morphologically attached part of the noun or adjective or a separate marker. Differences like these lead to mistakes in the form of either falling short of using the correct forms or using them incorrectly, subject-verb agreement problems, and hurdles with negation and interrogation. These challenges can slow down learners’ ability to communicate accurately and fluently in general. Thus, recognizing the reasons for these issues is an important prerequisite for successful language teaching. The current research intends to identify the precise difficulties that Uzbek students face when learning ‘to be’, conduct a linguistic root cause analysis, and suggest specific teaching methods that would enhance students’ ability and willingness to use this vital English verb.

### **Research methods**

A comparative linguistic method was applied in this research to study the usage of the English verb ‘to be’ in present tense by Uzbek-speaking learners. First, the principal differences between the two languages concerning the copula in present tense and its inflectional patterns were identified through the analysis of the grammatical structures of Uzbek and English. The marking of the copula in various persons and contexts in Uzbek and the requirement in English for separate inflected forms were explained in detail. From this, common learner errors were identified, such as mistakes in subject-verb agreement, omission or wrong use of forms, and problems in negatives and questions. As evidence, learner output, textbooks, and authentic usage were reviewed. The comparative analysis gave rise to the formulation of pedagogical recommendations with careful consideration of characteristics of the learners, thereby ensuring that the suggested teaching strategies would not only be effective but also tailored to the specific structural difficulties Uzbek learners encounter at the time of ‘to be’ in English acquisition.

### **Discussion**

The acquisition of the English verb ‘to be’ in present tense by Uzbek learners reflects significant structural challenges rooted in the differences between the two languages. In Uzbek, the copula can commonly be expressed as a suffix attached to nouns for first and second persons or a long dash in third person. For example, affirmative forms in present tense include “Men professorman” (I am a professor), “Sen professorsan” (You are a professor), “Biz professormiz” (We are professors), “Siz professorsiz (You are professors), and “U – professor” (He/She is a professor), “Ular – professor” (They are professors) in the third person. These forms provide clear grammatical markers for the copula, which contrast sharply with English, where am, is, and are must be inserted as separate verbs. These constructions are often used as alternative structure of copula in Uzbek to that of English, however the may vary. For example, for characteristics that are expresses using adjective, or statements of location of the subject in third person, the aforementioned dash can be not placed (“Akamning uyi Toshkentda” – My brother’s house is in Tashkent; “Saidaning ko‘zlari nihoyatda go‘zal” – Saida’s eyes are very beautiful).

Negative constructions in present tense in Uzbek are usually marked with the intermediate suffix “-mas”: “Men professor-mas-man” (I am not a professor). For instance, one may say “Sen professormassan” (You are not a professor), Biz professormasmiz (We are not professors), “U – professormas” (He/She is not a professor). However, some other forms in other linguistic styles also exist.

Besides, for affirmative and negative construction suffix of “-dir” can be added for extra remark. For example:

“Yodingdan chiqarma! Sen buyuklarning avlodidirsan” – Do not forget. You are descendant of the greats.

“Hamma bilsin. Dunyoning markazi Samarqanddir” – May everyone know. The center of the world is Samarkand. (The dash used for third form is omitted if suffix “-dir” is being used).

Interrogative sentences in present tense use the suffix “-mi”. This suffix is commonly, but not always and not in all linguistic styles, added after the affirmative copula suffix for first persons: “Men professormanmi?” (“Am I a professor?”), “Biz professormizmi?” (“Are we professors?”); and before the affirmative copula suffix for second person: “Sen professormisan?” (Are you a professor?), “Siz professormisizlar?” (Are you professors?). For third person, the dash is omitted even for non-adjective copulas, and the “-mi” suffix is directly incorporated: “U professormi?” (Is s/he a professor?), “Ular professormi?” (Are they professors?). These systematic markers provide native speakers with clear cues for person, number, and sentence type, but the morphological integration differs fundamentally from English, which separates the copula and relies on inversion and auxiliary forms for negatives and questions.

As a result, Uzbek learners often produce English errors such as He not happy, They is professors, or You are teacher? These errors are not due to a lack of understanding of the concept of being, but rather to direct transfer of Uzbek grammatical patterns. Learners rely on the morphological cues they know, expecting that a single suffix or marker can encode person, number, and sentence type, whereas English requires distinct syntactic processes.

The difficulties are particularly pronounced in third-person forms, where Uzbek uses the dash for noun copulas (“U – professor” (S/he is a doctor), “Namangan – gullar shahri” (Namangan is the city of flowers)), but native speaker commonly omit it for adjectives (“Mening singlim go‘zal” – “My sister is beautiful”). Learners may generalize patterns inconsistently, leading to omission or misuse of is in English. Similarly, plural subjects present challenges because Uzbek clearly marks the copula across all persons, but English demands agreement with are. Understanding these patterns highlights that errors are systematic and predictable, reflecting learners’ interlanguage development. They are not random mistakes but attempts to reconcile English forms with Uzbek cognitive and grammatical frameworks. Pedagogically, this suggests that teaching should focus on explicit comparison between Uzbek and English structures, targeted drills for all persons, and communicative exercises emphasizing correct use in affirmative, negative, and interrogative sentences. These structural differences between Uzbek and English copula expression create recurring challenges for learners. Errors in English ‘to be’ usage reflect transfer from Uzbek suffixes and markers, highlighting the need for explicit instruction, practice, and awareness-raising

exercises that help learners internalize the separate, inflected English forms while respecting their native linguistic knowledge.

### **Methods for combatting challenges**

In helping out the Uzbek students with the English verb ‘to be’ university teachers should apply a plan which integrates explicit explanation, structured practice, and meaningful communication. The first technique is imperative comparative instruction which methodically contrasts English copulative forms with their Uzbek counterparts. The teachers can point out how the copula is morphologically represented in Uzbek for instance Men doktorman (‘I am a doctor’) and U – inson (‘He/She is a person’), and also the difference in English where the verb is separate and changes according to the person and number. This method makes students aware of the insertion of am, is, or are in English and eliminates the direct transfer of the Uzbek patterns into English sentences.

The second technique is controlled practice by means of structured drills. by means of these exercises the correct usage is reinforced because the learners have to complete gap-fill activities, transform sentences, and produce negative and interrogative forms of ‘to be’. For instance, students can practice converting Men doktorman into I am a doctor, or U – insonmas into He/She is not a person. The repeated exposure of all forms in different contexts strengthens the learners’ understanding of the subject-verb agreement and reduces the errors caused by cross-linguistic interference.

The third method is contextualized communicative activities which give learners a chance to use their grammatical knowledge in a meaningful and real-life situation. The role plays, interviews, picture descriptions, and storytelling activities not only urge the students to use am, is, and are naturally but also provide instant feedback from the teachers. Such a mix of guidance and practice not only helps the students to internalize the correct forms but also increases their confidence and promotes fluency. By integrating these three approaches—comparative explanation, structured drills, and communicative practice—university teachers can effectively address the structural challenges Uzbek learners face, ensuring accurate and confident use of the English verb ‘to be’.

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