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EXPLAINING UZBEK VOWELS TO JAPANESE LEARNERS: A COMPARISON OF TEXTBOOK DESCRIPTIONS³¹

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how Uzbek vowels are described in Japanese-language textbooks and what types of explanations are most effective for Japanese learners. Six textbooks currently available in Japan were analyzed, focusing on the vowels and their accompanying descriptions. The analysis revealed that while /a/, /u/, and /e/ can be readily associated with their Japanese counterparts, the vowels /o/ and /o‘/ frequently cause confusion, as Japanese learners are unfamiliar with the distinction between them. Similarly, /i/ often presents difficulties, as it may be realized as a schwa-like vowel or undergo devoicing, features absent in Japanese. Textbook explanations vary considerably, and in some cases provide insufficient information, which risks reinforcing misunderstandings. Based on a comparative analysis of both vowel systems, this paper proposes simplified pedagogical descriptions that align with learners' expectations while avoiding confusion. These include presenting /o/ as a sound between *a* and *o*, and explaining /i/ as a vowel that may sometimes not be pronounced. By offering such learner-oriented explanations, it is possible to facilitate a smoother and more efficient acquisition of Uzbek vowels for beginning Japanese learners of Uzbek.

KEY WORDS

Vowels, Uzbek language textbooks, pronunciation–orthography correspondence, vowel harmony, Japanese native speakers, IPA

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YAPON O‘QUVCHILARIGA O‘ZBEK TILI UNLILARINI IZOHLASH: O‘QUV DARSLIKLARIDAGI TAVSIFLARNI TAQQOSLASH

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ANNOTATSIYA

Ushbu tadqiqot yapon tili darsliklarida o‘zbek tili unli tovushlari qanday tavsiflanganligi va yapon tili o‘rganuvchilari uchun qaysi turdagi izohlar eng samarali ekanligini o‘rganadi. Yaponiyada hozirda mavjud bo‘lgan oltita darslik unli tovushlar va ularning tavsiflariga e‘tibor qaratgan holda tahlil qilindi. Tahlil natijalariga ko‘ra, /a/, /u/ va /e/ unlilarini yapon tilidagi muqobillari bilan osonlik bilan bog‘lash mumkin bo‘lsa-da, /o/ va /o‘/ unlilari ko‘pincha chalkashlikka sabab bo‘ladi, chunki yapon o‘quvchilari ular o‘rtasidagi farqni ajrata olmaydilar. Shuningdek, /i/ ham ko‘pincha qiyinchiliklar tug‘diradi, chunki u “shva-simon” unli sifatida talaffuz qilinishi yoki jarangsizlanishi mumkin, bu xususiyatlar yapon tilida mavjud emas. Darsliklardagi izohlar sezilarli darajada farq qiladi va ba‘zi hollarda yetarli ma‘lumot berilmaydi, bu esa tushunmovchiliklarni yanada kuchaytirish xavfini tug‘diradi. Har ikkala unli tizimni qiyosiy tahlil qilish asosida, ushbu maqolada o‘quvchilarning kutilmalariga mos keladigan va chalkashliklardan xoli bo‘lgan soddalashtirilgan pedagogik tavsiflar taklif etiladi. Bularga /o/ ni a va o tovushlari orasidagi tovush sifatida taqdim etish, /i/ ni esa ba‘zan talaffuz qilinmaydigan unli sifatida tushuntirish kiradi. O‘quvchilarga yo‘naltirilgan bunday izohlarni taqdim etish orqali o‘zbek tilini endigina o‘rganayotgan yaponiyalik talabalar uchun o‘zbek tili unlilarini osonroq va samaraliroq o‘zlashtirishga yordam berish mumkin.

KALIT SO‘ZLAR

Unlilar, o‘zbek tili darsliklari, talaffuz – yozuv muvofiqligi, unli uyg‘unligi, yapon tilini ona tili sifatida so‘zlovchilar, IPA.

**ОБЪЯСНЕНИЕ УЗБЕКСКИХ ГЛАСНЫХ ЯПОНСКИМ УЧАЩИМСЯ:
СРАВНЕНИЕ ОПИСАНИЙ В УЧЕБНИКАХ****Ното Куниюки***доктор философии по языку и культуре (PhD), преподаватель**Независимое административное агентство**Японская организация по обслуживанию студентов (JASSO)**Центр обучения японскому языку в Осаке**Осака, Япония**E-mail: notokuniyuki@gmail.com**ORCID ID: 0009-0002-5609-8441***АННОТАЦИЯ**

В данном исследовании рассматривается, как узбекские гласные звуки описываются в учебниках японского языка и какие типы объяснений наиболее эффективны для японцев, изучающих узбекский язык. Были проанализированы шесть учебников, доступных в настоящее время в Японии, с акцентом на гласные и их описание. Анализ показал, что, хотя /a/, /u/ и /e/ легко соотносятся с их японскими аналогами, гласные /o/ и /o'/ часто вызывают путаницу, поскольку японские учащиеся не знакомы с существующими между ними различиями. Аналогично, /i/ часто представляет трудности, так как может реализовываться как нейтральный гласный звук или подвергаться оглушению, чего нет в японском языке. Объяснения в учебниках значительно различаются, а в некоторых случаях предоставляют недостаточную информацию, что может усугубить непонимание. На основе сравнительного анализа обеих систем гласных в данной работе предлагаются упрощенные педагогические описания, которые соответствуют ожиданиям учащихся и позволяют избежать путаницы. К ним относятся представление /o/ как звука между а и о, и объяснение /i/ как гласной, которая иногда не произносится. Предлагая такие ориентированные на обучающихся объяснения, можно способствовать более плавному и эффективному освоению узбекских гласных японскими студентами, начинающими изучать узбекский язык.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА

Гласные, учебники по узбекскому языку, произносительно-орфографическая корреспонденция, сингармонизм, японцы, ИПА.

INTRODUCTION

Due to the limited population of Uzbek language learners is relatively small, it is not easy to access information about Uzbek in Japan. For those who are interested in the language and wish to begin studying it, this lack of resources presents a considerable obstacle. The present study aims to contribute to Japanese learners' understanding of Uzbek by examining how Uzbek vowels are described. In general, language textbooks, regardless of their syllabus, begin by introducing the sounds of the target language. Learners then confirm the written symbols corresponding to these sounds before moving on to grammar and usage. Although spoken language is primary, and writing systems are merely secondary representations rather than an essential component of language, in second-language learning learners rely not only on auditory input but also on visual information for efficient acquisition.

In the field of English education in Japan - by far the most extensively studied foreign language—various problems with phonetic notation have long been pointed out. These include not only the distinction between American and British varieties, but also issues such as the lack of textbooks that accurately represent English pronunciation and teachers' insufficient awareness or knowledge of phonetics (Kochiyama & Arimoto, 2022). As they argue, the provision of clear and systematic information about pronunciation is essential for avoiding confusion and supporting effective learning. To address this, Nogita (2018) emphasizes the importance of presenting learners with a full inventory of phonemes so that they can grasp the overall system. This is especially crucial in English, where the discrepancy between spelling and pronunciation is particularly large.

As is well known, the Uzbek language has undergone several changes in its writing system. While scripts can be modified, the sounds of a language cannot be artificially altered. The key issue is therefore how these sounds are represented in writing. For learners of Uzbek, the first step is to grasp the rules that link sounds with letters. Orthography is not only necessary for practical literacy, but also

contributes to efficiency at the learning stage. This is a crucial difference between the acquisition of a first language by children and the learning of a foreign language by adults. Describing the phonological system of a language is thus the learner's first essential task.

However, Japanese learners of Uzbek often face serious confusion due to insufficient and inaccurate information on the correspondence between sounds and letters. The root of the problem lies in the standardized view that Modern Uzbek has six vowels, which correspond to six graphemes. While the exact number of Uzbek vowels is not the focus of this paper, it should be noted that historically, scholars have debated whether Uzbek - as a Turkic language - should be analyzed as having nine vowels in relation to vowel harmony (Asamura, 2007; Azimov, 2023). In short, discussions have revolved around whether vowels should be counted more narrowly or more broadly, but through various shifts the contemporary standard has settled on six. As a result, learners are introduced to the idea that Uzbek has six vowels, yet in practice the correspondence between sounds and letters is not straightforwardly one-to-one. This discrepancy has become a major source of confusion for learners.

This study therefore considers what kind of explanations about Uzbek vowels are most appropriate for Japanese learners. Specifically, it analyzes how vowels are introduced in currently available Uzbek textbooks published for Japanese learners. While previous studies (e.g., Kurbanbaev & Joldasbaeva, 2024; Ulgbeknova, 2024) have often discussed Uzbek vowels in comparison with English, no study has yet examined them in relation to Japanese vowels.

As Zhumabayeva and colleagues (2024) demonstrate in their study of vowel changes in Kazakh, the treatment of vowels in Turkic languages is complex. Multiple factors - such as vowel harmony, historical developments, regional variation, and loanword influence - interact to complicate the system. Unlike consonants, vowels are not strictly sequential but categorical, and their distinctions are particularly challenging for non-native learners. For speakers of a language such as Japanese, which has a relatively small vowel inventory, this presents a significant

difficulty. By surveying how different textbooks attempt to explain Uzbek vowels to learners, this study ultimately aims to propose which explanations are most conducive to efficient learning, based on the realities of Standard Uzbek.

METHODS

This study examines six Uzbek language textbooks currently available in Japan, focusing on how they describe vowels and comparing the approaches taken. Because the number of Uzbek textbooks written in Japanese is quite limited, these six volumes can be considered to cover most of the learning resources accessible to Japanese learners. The analyzed textbooks are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Uzbek Language Textbooks and Their Descriptions of Vowels

Textbook	Order of Vowel Presentation and Notes
A. Hidaka(2024)	<i>/a/ /i/ /u/ /e/ /o/ /oʻ/</i> Describes Uzbek as a language without vowel harmony, claiming that long contact with Iranian languages has weakened or eliminated the phenomenon.
B. Miyazaki&Elmurodov (2018)	<i>/a/ /i/ /u/ /e/ /o/ /oʻ/</i> Notes that pronunciation differs by region. Provides a simple explanation by comparison with Japanese vowels.
C. Turapova(2015)	<i>/a/ /o/ /i/ /e/ /u/ /oʻ/</i> Includes an explanation of diphthongs.
D. Nakashima(2015)	<i>/a/ /e/ /i/ /o/ /oʻ/ /u/</i> Acknowledges the existence of long vowels. While orthography does not mark them, the book explains that in loanwords from Arabic, for example, they are pronounced as long vowels. IPA symbols are also provided.

<p>E. Date(2008)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>/a/ /e/ /i/ /o/ /u/ /oʻ/</i></p> <p>In contrast to D, states that vowels are never pronounced long and may even be elided. In contrast to C, emphasizes that vowels are not diphthongs and instructs learners not to change mouth shape during articulation.</p>
<p>F. Shimada (2019)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>/a/ /e/ /i/ /o/ /u/ /oʻ/</i></p> <p>States that there is no phonemic distinction between long and short vowels. However, vowels of Persian and Arabic origin, particularly o, tend to be pronounced relatively long. It also notes that, depending on the word, vowels other than a may likewise be pronounced slightly longer.</p>

Textbook A is a recently published beginner's textbook, covering conversational Uzbek as well as basic grammar. Textbook B is coauthored by a Japanese and an Uzbek scholar and contains expressions useful for fieldwork. Textbook C, distinct in being authored by an Uzbek writer, provides situational phrases. While it discusses six vowels and also mentions diphthongs, the treatment of Uzbek vowels as diphthongs is not common; this is likely intended to explain consecutive vowels or how vowels are pronounced when appearing in sequence (i.e., alphabetic reading). Textbook D situates Uzbek within a broader linguistic context, considering the influence of loanwords and its relation to neighboring Turkic languages. Notably, it also uses IPA transcription for vowel descriptions. Textbook E is characterized by its reliance on Cyrillic script and its explanation of Uzbek vowels with reference to English pronunciation.

The study compares how each textbook describes and presents vowels to Japanese learners, in order to evaluate which explanations are most comprehensible and which most closely reflect the actual phonetic system. To support this

comparison, vowel descriptions were supplemented with reference to official materials issued by the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan (1995).

RESULTS

The order of vowel presentation varied among the textbooks. This is because, unlike Japanese, Uzbek does not have a fixed order for vowels, and even in Uzbek-language school textbooks differences are observed. Here, based on the order indicated in the Cabinet resolution, the explanations given in each textbook are presented for the six vowels.

- /a/, [æ]~[a], front open unrounded vowel

Textbook	Notes
A.	[a]. Pronounced with the tongue positioned slightly more forward than the Japanese <i>a</i> . <i>ka</i> and <i>ga</i> are pronounced even more fronted, approaching <i>kya</i> and <i>gya</i> . However, in Russian, <i>ka</i> and <i>ga</i> are pronounced as [ka] and [ga].
B.	Close to the Japanese <i>a</i> .
C.	Almost the same pronunciation as the Japanese <i>a</i> .
D.	[a]. The same as the Japanese <i>a</i> . The open vowel [a] and the front open vowel [æ] in other Turkic dialects have merged. Examples: <i>a</i> , <i>æ</i> , <i>a</i> :
E.	Pronounced like the <i>a</i> in English <i>man</i> , i.e., somewhere between <i>a</i> and <i>e</i> . When following <i>x</i> , <i>q</i> , <i>g'</i> , it is pronounced like the <i>a</i> in <i>party</i> .
F.	Pronounced more toward the front of the mouth than the Japanese <i>a</i> , with the mouth opened horizontally. In the case of <i>ka</i> and <i>ga</i> , the pronunciation approaches <i>kya</i> and <i>gya</i> .

Except for Textbook E, the explanations describe this vowel as corresponding to the Japanese /a/. Textbook E, on the other hand, treats [æ] as the basic sound, with [a] also possible. In practice, pronouncing it slightly more fronted than the Japanese /a/ helps learners achieve a more authentic pronunciation, and also aids in

distinguishing it from the Uzbek /o/. For learners, an explanation that it corresponds to /a/ is sufficient.

- /o/, [ɔ], back open vowel

Textbook	Notes
A.	[ɔ]. A sound between the Japanese <i>a</i> and <i>o</i> . Very different from the Japanese <i>o</i> .
B.	The Japanese <i>o</i> pronounced with the mouth opened wide.
C.	The Japanese <i>o</i> produced with the mouth opened wide.
D.	[ɔ]. The rounded counterpart of [a]. A more open <i>o</i> . Since it corresponds to <i>a</i> in other dialects, it can sometimes be heard as [a]. In Arabic loanwords it corresponds to [a:], and often sounds like a long vowel. Examples: <i>ɔ</i> , <i>ɔ:</i>
E.	Pronounced somewhere between the <i>a</i> in English <i>arch</i> and the <i>ou</i> in <i>sought</i> , i.e., between the Japanese <i>a</i> and <i>o</i> .
F.	A vowel not found in Japanese, located between <i>a</i> and <i>o</i> . It is pronounced in the back of the mouth with the mouth opened wide and unrounded. Learners tend to pronounce it like the Japanese <i>o</i> based on the written form, but this sound is completely different and therefore requires special attention.

Because this vowel does not exist in Japanese, it is difficult for learners to acquire. As described in textbook A, it tends to be characterized merely as an intermediate sound between Japanese vowels. The most accurate description is found in textbook E, which explains it as lying between [a] and [ɔ]. This explanation is consistent with the findings of Ido (2025). While the vowel is fundamentally rounded, it may also appear in an unrounded variant as an allophone. The descriptions given in textbooks B and D are valid, but explanations that clearly

highlight the difference from the Japanese /o/ are more accessible for learners. In other words, it is helpful to explain that the vowel is produced with the mouth opened wider than for Japanese /o/, or by pronouncing /o/ with the mouth opened as much as when saying /a/. Among the explanations, the description provided in textbook F, which explicitly cautions Japanese learners about this distinction, appears to be the most accurate and pedagogically effective.

- /i/, realized as [i], with contextual variants [ɪ] or centralized [ɨ]; front close unrounded vowel

Textbook	Notes
A.	[i], [ə]. Basically similar to the Japanese <i>i</i> , but often realized as a sound close to an unclear <i>u</i> . Special care is needed when it appears adjacent to <i>q</i> , <i>g'</i> , <i>x</i> or in word-final position.
B.	Pronounced as <i>i</i> or <i>we</i> .
C.	Pronounced as <i>i</i> or <i>we</i> .
D.	[ɪ]. Same as Japanese <i>i</i> . However, in short vowels it is often realized as [ə] or [ɨ]. Examples: <i>i</i> , <i>ə</i> , <i>i</i> :
E.	Pronounced like the <i>i</i> in English <i>hit</i> . When following <i>x</i> , <i>q</i> , <i>g'</i> , pronounced like the <i>e</i> in <i>roses</i> . Often pronounced weakly, and in polysyllabic words without stress, it may almost disappear.
F.	<p>(1) A sound close to the Japanese <i>i</i>.</p> <p>(2) A sound that resembles a weakly articulated <i>u</i> produced in the back of the mouth.</p> <p>These two pronunciations exist, and which one occurs depends on the word. Therefore, learners must memorize them individually. In general, the following tendencies can be observed:</p> <p>When adjacent to <i>k</i>, <i>g</i>, or <i>ng</i>, pronunciation type (1) occurs; when adjacent to <i>q</i>, <i>g'</i>, or <i>x</i>, or in word-final position, pronunciation type (2) occurs.</p>

This vowel causes the greatest difficulty for learners. As Ido (2025) argues, it is effective to posit seven vowels and explain that this grapheme represents two distinct sounds. Whether the seventh vowel is treated as an allophone is a matter for phonetics, but what matters for learners is to understand that this grapheme does not always correspond to [i]. Many textbooks note that it may be realized as a sound closer to /u/, but for beginners there is no clue as to when to use which realization. Since the schwa-like vowel does not exist in Japanese, it is difficult to represent it in *kana*. Explanations such as that in Textbook E—that it often weakens or disappears—are easier to grasp, although E does not clearly distinguish between the two realizations. Simply saying that both an /i/-like and a /u/-like sound occur is not sufficient for learners. Detailed explanation is required to avoid confusion. The description in textbook F is simple, specific, and easy to understand, and it most accurately reflects actual pronunciation.

- /u/, realized as [u], with variants [ɯ] or fronted [u̠]; back close rounded vowel

Textbook	Notes
A.	[u]. Pronounced with lips protruded more than in the Japanese <i>u</i> .
B.	Close to the Japanese <i>u</i> .
C.	Almost the same as the Japanese <i>u</i> .
D.	[u]. A strongly rounded <i>u</i> . Examples: <i>u</i> , <i>u:</i>
E.	Pronounced like the <i>oo</i> in English <i>shoot</i> , but shorter and with stronger articulation. In Japanese terms, it is between <i>u</i> and <i>o</i> . Before <i>v</i> , it is sometimes lengthened slightly.
F.	Pronounced by rounding and protruding the lips more than for the Japanese <i>u</i> .

In Japanese, /u/ is produced without lip rounding, making it different from the Uzbek sound. However, this also occurs when Japanese learners study English, and thus does not cause major confusion. Since in Uzbek, depending on context, /u/ can also be realized closer to central, it also shares some similarity with Japanese /u/. Textbooks B and C state that the vowel can be substituted with the Japanese *u*, while the others explain how it differs from the Japanese *u*.

- /e/, [e], front half-open unrounded vowel

Textbook	Notes
A.	[e]. Close to the Japanese <i>e</i> .
B.	Pronounced as <i>e</i> or <i>ye</i> .
C.	Pronounced as <i>e</i> or <i>ye</i> .
D.	[e]. Narrower than Japanese <i>e</i> . Examples: <i>e</i> , <i>e</i> :
E.	Pronounced somewhere between the <i>e</i> in English <i>pet</i> and the <i>i</i> in <i>little</i> . In non-initial position, pronounced as <i>ye</i> .
F.	Close to the Japanese <i>e</i> .

As with /i/, it is sometimes realized closer to /i/. Textbook E explains it as being between [e] and [ɪ], but since these two sounds are already very close, this is not very helpful. Moreover, the claim that “e is pronounced as ye except at word-initial position” is misleading, because in the Latin alphabet such cases are explicitly written with “y.” In reality, /e/ is simply narrower than the Japanese /e/. For learners, an explanation that it corresponds to /e/ is sufficient.

- /oː/, realized close to [o] or [ɔ]; back half-open vowel

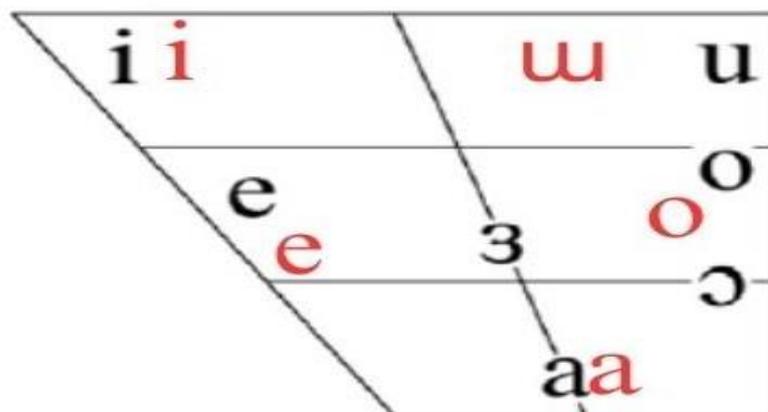
Textbook	Notes
A.	[o]. Close to the Japanese <i>o</i> .

B.	Round the lips tightly and pronounce <i>e</i> with the mouth in the shape for <i>o</i> .
C.	With stretched lips, produced deep in the throat, close to the Japanese <i>o</i> .
D.	[o]. A narrower <i>o</i> , with lips tightly rounded, compared to [ɔ]. In words containing <i>k</i> or <i>g</i> , may become centralized, sounding like [ó] with a hint of <i>u</i> . In other dialects, [ɔ], [ø], and [ə] have merged here. Examples: <i>o</i> , <i>o</i> :
E.	Pronounced like the <i>o</i> in English <i>soy</i> . It feels like pronouncing <i>u</i> while shaping the lips for <i>o</i> . When following <i>x</i> , <i>q</i> , <i>g</i> ‘, it is pronounced like the <i>oa</i> in <i>coat</i> .
F.	A sound close to the Japanese <i>o</i> . This vowel generally appears only in the first syllable of a word. In Persian-origin words, it may be pronounced as a sound between the Japanese <i>o</i> and <i>u</i> , tending closer to <i>u</i> . In such cases, this vowel can also occur outside the first syllable.

Since Japanese speakers perceive that there are two distinct /o/ vowels, particular attention is required. Among them, the vowel closer to the Japanese /o/ is this one. Textbook E explains that in addition to [ɔ], it may also appear as the allophone [əʊ]. Similar to /e/, it may in fact be realized somewhat narrower than the Japanese /o/. However, for pedagogical purposes, it is most effective to explain this vowel as corresponding to the Japanese /o/. This approach is further supported by the fact that Uzbek learners of Japanese also tend to associate the Japanese /o/ with /o‘/, indicating that substituting the Japanese /o/ does not present a problem. Only textbook F notes that this vowel can sometimes be pronounced as a sound closer to the Japanese *u*. When listening to native Uzbek speech, it indeed often sounds similar to *u*, and such information is highly valuable for preventing confusion among learners. It is also noteworthy that F mentions the vowel’s phonetic environments,

which suggests its low frequency of occurrence—another piece of information that is particularly helpful for learners.

Figure 1. Vowel quadrilateral showing the distribution of vowels in Uzbek



and Japanese

Accordingly, the vowel systems of Uzbek and Japanese can be arranged as shown in Figure 1 below. Black symbols represent Uzbek vowels, while red symbols denote Japanese vowels. For /i/, which is described in some textbooks as having the allophone [ə], I follow Ido (2025) in adopting the broader [ɜ]. Nonetheless, in practice, the sound appears to be realized even closer to [ə], which is narrower than [ə].

Among the six textbooks examined, the description in textbook F can be regarded as the most balanced in terms of both accuracy and clarity. The fact that F was designed for use in university courses has resulted in phonologically faithful yet straightforward explanations. It is also excellent in that it identifies pronunciation points that Japanese university students are particularly likely to find challenging.

DISCUSSION

For native speakers of Japanese, the vowels /a/, /u/, and /e/ present relatively few difficulties. Although /a/ is often described as slightly more fronted than the Japanese *a*, it can be reasonably equated with it without causing misunderstanding. The vowel /u/ is more back and rounded than Japanese *u*, but this mismatch is not

unique to Uzbek; it also occurs in other foreign languages such as English. Thus, while it may pose some difficulty in acquisition, it does not create confusion. With regard to /e/, although it can sometimes be realized as a closer vowel in Uzbek, textbooks B and C note that it may sound close to *i*. As long as learners are aware of this tendency, no major confusion should arise.

The vowels /o/ and /o'/ present particular difficulties for Japanese learners, who tend to perceive them both as “o,” leading to confusion. Some textbooks describe /o'/ as close to the Japanese /o/, while others provide explanations that evoke the vowel /e/. Indeed, compared with the Japanese /o/, the tongue position for /o'/ appears to be slightly more fronted; however, associating this vowel with the Japanese /o/ offers a pedagogically effective way to prevent misunderstanding. In contrast, /o/ is not equivalent to the Japanese /o/. It should be presented not as a spelling-based variant but as a vowel that does not exist in Japanese. In this regard, textbook F provides the most considerate and learner-friendly explanation. From the standpoint of Japanese vowels, this sound lies between /o/ and /a/, and some textbooks describe it as being produced by opening the mouth widely while pronouncing /o/. Although the IPA symbol [ɔ] is often used, it is too close to [o], making the distinction difficult for learners. It would be clearer to adopt [ɒ] and explain the sound as “pronouncing /o/ with the mouth opened as when saying /a/.” Textbooks A and F explicitly note that this sound is entirely different from the Japanese /o/, yet in actual communication, substituting the Japanese /o/ is still generally understood. Therefore, at least during the early stages of learning, it is advisable not to be overly strict about the distinction.

The next section examines /i/, which causes the greatest confusion for learners. As mentioned earlier, during the process of establishing the standard language, Uzbek came to be described as having a six-vowel system without vowel harmony. The impact of this standardization is most evident in the case of /i/. Many textbooks explain that this vowel may be realized as a schwa-like sound, or that depending on the phonetic environment, it can become centralized or even be

omitted (likely devoiced). For Japanese speakers, who do not have a schwa vowel, such pronunciations are inherently difficult to produce, and consequently, they tend to pronounce all instances of /i/ literally as [i]. However, because this diverges considerably from actual pronunciation, learners often fail to understand how this vowel should properly be realized. As a result, /i/ becomes the first major obstacle in pronunciation learning, and mispronunciation as [i] frequently becomes fixed over time. None of the textbooks offer a sufficiently effective explanation to prevent this misunderstanding; most provide only brief descriptions with limited information. Among them, however, textbook F gives the most practical and accurate account, offering a minimal yet effective explanation of this vowel.

In general, Japanese learners tend to memorize foreign words not primarily by ear, but through visual information such as spelling. Thus, information on the relationship between orthography and pronunciation is crucial for accurate pronunciation. For example, in the case of Chinese, Luo (2020) discusses how pinyin often diverges from actual pronunciation, confusing learners. He notes that *bo*, *mo*, *fo* in pinyin are actually shortened forms of *buo*, *muo*, *fu*o, a fact that is poorly understood even among native speakers and teachers. The lack of explicit explanation when pinyin was first introduced more than 50 years ago continues to affect learners today. Orthographies are rarely purely phonemic, and while this may not be problematic for native speakers, learners of a foreign language are easily confused when implicit rules are not clearly taught. Although Uzbek's current orthography is relatively new and was designed to closely match pronunciation, certain discrepancies remain unaddressed, and learners struggle when they encounter them unconsciously. It is therefore essential to provide clearer explanations of such rules so that Japanese learners can learn Uzbek more efficiently.

Implicit rules like these pose no problem for native speakers, but they can easily confuse learners. The fact that one grapheme may represent more than one sound is obvious from English orthography, but learners of a new language require

well-organized information about such cases. On the other hand, if vowel harmony has already disappeared, introducing it in instruction may unnecessarily complicate matters for Japanese learners. Compared to other Turkic languages, the lack of vowel harmony in Uzbek actually lowers the learning burden for Japanese speakers. From the perspective of teaching, the most important task is to determine how the differences between the vowel systems of Japanese and Uzbek can be explained as simply as possible.

Figure 2 shows the correspondences between the two vowel systems. The blue areas indicate regions of the vowel space that are not independently recognized in Japanese. Because the allophonic variants of Uzbek /i/ and the vowel /o/ are unfamiliar to Japanese learners, it may be advisable to explain them in terms of minimal articulatory effort—for example, as devoiced /i/ (i.e., unpronounced), or as an *a*-like sound articulated further back in the throat. For other vowels, straightforward correspondences can be drawn with Japanese vowels. If learners are provided with this information about the relationship between the Uzbek and Japanese vowel systems, they will be able to begin their studies more smoothly.

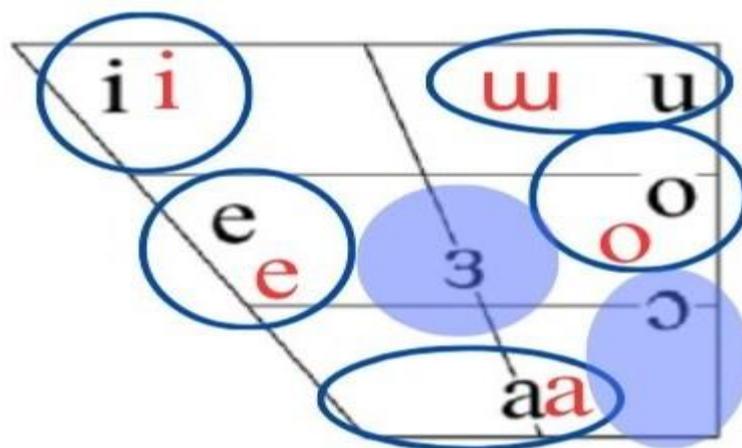


Figure 2. Correspondence between the vowel systems of Japanese and Uzbek.

CONCLUSION

This study examined what type of information is most useful for Japanese speakers to learn the Uzbek vowel system efficiently and without misunderstanding. While Uzbek historically possessed more than six vowels, modern Standard Uzbek

was codified with six vowels, a process that has also influenced orthographic representation. As a result, descriptions of vowels differ across textbooks. Since learners generally do not compare multiple textbooks, such inconsistencies often make vowel explanations confusing and potentially misleading. Because textbook descriptions are not intended for phoneticians, it is necessary to avoid technical terminology and instead present explanations in a concise and accessible manner.

By comparing the vowel systems of the two languages and reconsidering textbook descriptions, the following explanations appear to be the most suitable for learners, minimizing confusion.

/a/, */e/*, and */oʷ/* correspond to Japanese *a*, *e*, and *o*. */u/* corresponds to Japanese *u*, though - similar to English - it should preferably be articulated with protruded lips. */o/* does not exist in Japanese; it represents an intermediate sound between *a* and *o*, that is, an *o* pronounced with a wider mouth opening. */i/* corresponds to Japanese *i*, but it may also be realized as a central vowel in certain contexts. Since this variant does not exist in Japanese, it often undergoes devoicing or even deletion. Given that Japanese is an open-syllable language, native speakers tend to insert *i* or *u* vowels to avoid consonant clusters. Thus, it is sufficient for learners to understand that */i/* may not always be pronounced as *i*. In other words, even if */i/* is represented orthographically, it may not always correspond to the actual pronunciation.

In summary, the comparison can be organized as shown in the following table 2.

Table 2. Comparative explanations of Uzbek vowels with reference to Japanese vowels

Vowel	Description in comparison with Japanese vowels	Practical explanation for learners
<i>/a/</i>	Slightly more fronted than Japanese <i>a</i>	Japanese <i>a</i>
<i>/o/</i>	Intermediate between <i>a</i> and <i>o</i> in Japanese; either rounded <i>a</i> or <i>o</i> with wider opening	Substituted with Japanese <i>o</i> ; preferably pronounced with wider mouth opening

Vowel	Description in comparison with Japanese vowels	Practical explanation for learners
/i/	1. Identical to Japanese <i>i</i> , sometimes [i̥] 2. Realized as central vowels [ə]–[ɜ], often devoiced or elided	1. Japanese <i>i</i> 2. English-like schwa, or not pronounced
/u/	Japanese <i>u</i> with lip rounding	Substituted with Japanese <i>u</i> ; preferably with lip protrusion
/e/	Slightly closer than Japanese <i>e</i>	Japanese <i>e</i>
/o˘/	Slightly closer than Japanese <i>o</i>	Japanese <i>o</i>

As noted above, actual realizations of vowels differ between Japanese and Uzbek, but such variation also occurs among Uzbek speakers themselves depending on regional background. Demanding high phonetic accuracy in description should be the task of specialized reference works, not of textbooks designed for beginners. The present study has therefore focused on providing a framework that allows absolute beginners of Uzbek to begin their studies more effectively. Future research will need to address these issues in greater depth and, in addition, provide similarly useful information about consonants, which were beyond the scope of this paper.

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