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The Impact of National Independence and Globalization on the Status of English Language Instruction within Uzbekistan

Abstract

Uzbekistan is a multinational country where the Uzbek language remains the only official language within the country. While historically the Russian language has served the function of a *lingua franca* for ethnic minorities, and was often viewed as a second “mother tongue” within Uzbekistan, its status appears to be declining with ascent of the English language since independence in 1991. Clearly, the English language has been viewed as a more desirable alternative to the more repressive Russian language, and was viewed as a basic opportunity to obtain an internationally based education. It is often seen as the route to better employment within a competitive global marketplace. The importance of English language instruction was underscored by the first President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, and the role of English was also emphasized in both education and the media. The emphasis on continuous English language training was also included in the presidential decree. Today, English language instruction begins in the 1st grade, rather than in the 5th grade of primary school. However, with this emphasis on continuous English language instruction, have teacher education programs in Uzbekistan kept pace? Has there been financial support for the development of quality English language instruction throughout Uzbekistan’s schools? Moreover, has this emphasis on quality English language instruction been universal across all populations within Uzbekistan? These issues will be examined in detail within the paper.

Keywords: English language instruction, global marketplace, teacher preparation, Uzbekistan

Introduction

Since the Republic of Uzbekistan’s *Declaration of Independence* in 1991, it has begun to establish close relationships with other countries worldwide in various fields, with the role of language remaining a priority. Nevertheless, while the Uzbek language was officially declared the national language of Uzbekistan on 21 October 1989, the Russian language remained the *lingua franca* in the early 1990s, as it continued to be used in official documents and within many facets of urban communication. English, however, has now become the preferred language at this stage of development within Uzbekistan, and its use has helped to establish the country’s international linkages. Of course, over time, the government has continued to make several changes in language policy according to national development plans.

The English language, its role and challenges in 1990s

Referring to the official linguistic policy of the Karimov government, Uzbek is the official language, and Russian is the second language (National Database of

Legislation of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2012). Residents of Uzbekistan are required to study Uzbek to be eligible for citizenship, with similar additional language adaptations as those taken in Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. In September 1993 Uzbekistan changed its alphabet from Cyrillic, which had been in use for more than fifty years, to a script based on a modified Latin alphabet similar to that used in Turkey. According to government plans the transition should have been completed by the year 2000. The primary reason for the urgent need was to communicate with the outside world using a more universally understood alphabet. Moreover, a major project was underway to eradicate Russian words from the language and to replace these words with “pure” Turkic words that were borrowed from what is believed to be the ancient Turkic language of Inner Asia. At the same time, Uzbekistan’s linguistic policies were moving toward the West and this helped to attract foreign investors from various business spheres (Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress, 1996). In the early 1990s, studying English became increasingly common, but at the same time, there were some difficulties, such as few English resources for learners. Moreover, many English language textbooks were in Russian due to the influence of the former Soviet Union. In late 1990s, the Ministry of Education adopted the *Standards of State Education*, which were called the Uzbek model, and paid more attention to foreign languages other than Russian. Study-hours devoted to the Russian language were also reduced at Uzbek schools as English became more popular among learners. Rod Bolitho (Hasanova, 2007), a language specialist, has observed that a strong interest in the English language was caused by two factors: the intention of studying and working abroad, and the idealisation of the UK and US. These are the two strongest motivations for the Uzbek people to learn English. Hasanova (2007) posted that the continuously increasing interest in learning English is due to the international significance of the language.

Today, Uzbekistan has been actively developing cooperative linkages with international organizations such as the Future Leaders Exchange Program (FLEX), the former American Council for Collaboration in Education and Language Study (ACCELS), the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX), the Consortium of American Colleges, the Peace Corps, Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD), the Conrad Adenauer Fund, the British Council, the Saud Al-Baltin Fund, and other nongovernmental organizations.

On 10 December 2012, Decree #1875 *On Measures to Further Improve Foreign Language Learning Systems* was adopted (National Database of Legislation of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2012). The decree emphasized language proficiency improvement in the sphere of education. Due to this decree, the Ministry of Public Education and the Ministry of Higher Education adopted the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) standard and developed the National Retraining Program for foreign teachers. This program was focused on a comprehensive foreign language teaching system, and aimed at creating harmoniously developed, highly educated, and a modern-thinking young generation capable of integrating the country within a globalized community. Formerly, many English teachers had simply utilized grammar based approaches in secondary schools.

The implementation of the CEFR standard began gradually with the spread of foreign languages, especially English, throughout the country, beginning with

primary schools, secondary schools, and higher educational institutions. It was also envisaged that university modules, especially in technical and international areas, were to be offered in English and other foreign languages. In order to increase English language proficiency in distant rural areas, higher education institutions started a special program to increase the involvement of English teachers in rural areas where schools did not have a sufficient number of English teachers. In that case, applicants who are from rural areas had a special admission opportunity to study at universities, though they were then obliged to work in the acquired specialty within their area of residence for at least five years after graduation. Since the enforcement of the decree, all English language teachers have a chance to receive a monthly salary bonus of 15% for urban areas and 30% for rural areas. The aim of this policy was to encourage teachers to upgrade their language proficiency which, in essence, is the principal obligation of a language teacher.

As a result, this policy has shown a positive impact on the quality of education staff, and has become the main criterion of employment in the country, not only in education but in other spheres as well. This approach helped the Uzbek to understand what language level must be acquired to meet an employer's demand. In addition, after adopting Decree #1875, highly skilled English teachers were prepared to become regional teacher trainers to requalify regional English teachers through in-service institutions to enhance their teaching skills and techniques. This also prepared teachers for tests, which were developed and conducted by the National Testing Center. Moreover, to assist teachers and to obtain the English Proficiency Certificate B2, payment for training courses and preparation was fully covered by the government. Moreover, from 2014 to 2017, the Ministry of Public Education cooperated with the British Council and held an exchange program to motivate English teachers. About 50 teachers from different areas participated in this exchange program, which was held at various secondary schools in the United Kingdom.

Reforms and new approaches

In 2016, Sh. Mirziyoyev was elected as President of Uzbekistan, and signed a decree *The Development Strategy of Uzbekistan* (The Tashkent Times, 2017). The document contains Uzbekistan's Five-Area Development Strategy for 2017-2021, which was followed by a public discussion regarding a comprehensive study of topical issues, analysis of the current legislation, law enforcement practices, and best international practices. The decree created a National Commission responsible for implementation of the development strategy, which is headed by the President and other governmental members. In order to implement the strategy, several reforms have been made in the sphere of Education. In 2017, the Cabinet of Ministers adopted a decree. It stated that science teachers who have received the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) from British Council or a Certificate of language proficiency from the National Testing Center, as well as other certificates that indicate an approved level of English language proficiency, will be able to obtain a salary bonus of 100%. Moreover, applicants who have the above mentioned certificates will have an opportunity to obtain pass marks for English exams given by national universities or institutes.

Moreover, the Ministry of Public Education established close relationship with the Swedish company “Education First (EF)” which intends to implement the English language usage in Uzbekistan by investing about US \$60 million in joint project and its priority tasks will be carried out by the Innovation, Technology and Strategy Center. The parties have planned to cooperate in order to assess the knowledge of students and teachers. The project conducts free testing of English teachers throughout Uzbekistan and determines their level of knowledge which includes exchange programs in European and American Universities. They have also planned to conduct a series of training courses to increase knowledge and skills related to the development of the English language in Uzbekistan (Ministry of Public Education, 2019).

In addition, another project was launched in 2019 by the Ministry of Public Education and the English Speaking Nation (ESN), which is still in process, with the objective of developing the English language skills of secondary school teachers in Uzbekistan (American Councils for International Education English Speaking Nation Program, 2020). The Innovation, Technology and Strategy Center has been selected to implement this project, which works together with stakeholders such as the American Council, the Research Triangle Institute (RTI), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The project focuses on helping secondary school English teachers identify their level of English, and then supporting teachers as they upgrade their language proficiency. It assists teachers in improving their student-centered pedagogical skills, facilitates capacity building of trainers and mentors, encourages Continuous Professional Development, revises English language teaching standards, curriculum and training materials, and assists with the design and development of assessment capacity systems.

This four-year project includes about 33,000 English teachers who will benefit from direct and indirect participation in training and professional development activities, which subsequently will lead to improved English language competencies for six million school children. The project will also strengthen the positive perception of Uzbekistan secondary school English teachers, as exemplified by the English Speaking Nation: Secondary Teacher Training (ESN:STT) program, a joint project of the Ministry of Public Education and the Public Affairs Section of the US Embassy. This program is implemented by the American Council for International Education and offers an integrated professional development opportunity for English language teacher trainers and secondary school English language teachers in Uzbekistan. Moreover, ESN:STT improves students’ English language skills and knowledge by preparing more than 15,000 secondary school English teachers and over 1,000 teacher trainers to use teaching and in-service training practices that improve student language learning. Programs include a cascading model that involves training of trainers, professional development activities for secondary school English teachers, and a mentoring program to build peer support among educators. The best 300 Regional Peer Mentor-Teachers will be invited to be trained by ESN:STT Master Trainers, and will have the opportunity to earn the TESOL Core Certificate. As a culminating event, the Core Trainers and Regional Peer Mentor-Teachers will have the opportunity to participate in the regional TESOL conference to be held in Uzbekistan in 2022. However, due to the current pandemic, the period of this project has been extended.

During this quarantine period, the Ministry of Public Education, various government establishments, and other organizations continue to work together through the leading online educational platform, Coursera. For example, they launched a significant program for those who were currently out of work, with all expenses covered by the government. In the author's opinion, Coursera is a global online educational platform with many fine instructors from some of the best universities and companies in the world. Through this program, participants receive a free education of the highest quality. Upon completing this course, as well as additional programs, participants are also awarded special prizes from the Ministry of Public Education.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there has been a great deal of change within various educational fields, and the government has established a priority with regard to the necessity of learning English within multiple spheres. This vision will not only assist in the advancement and development of Uzbekistan, but will also enhance the country's role as a major and influential participant in a globalized world.

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