

An Era of Progress**Rod Bolitho**

Academic Director at Norwich Institute for Language Education

The first visa for Uzbekistan in my old passport is dated April 2005. It is a reminder that I have been visiting the country regularly for more than 14 years now. Back then, I could never have imagined that the initial visit would lead to such a long and productive relationship. Over that entire period, I have worked as a consultant for the British Council to different aspects of the English Reform project which was originally launched to address the need for improved standards of English in the country, starting with training for teachers of English in universities. Since then, the products and initiatives launched by the project have included a new curriculum for the Pre-Service Training of Teachers of English (PRESETT), methodology and trainer training programmes for University Teachers of English (DUET and TTT), English for Teachers (Eft) and English for Academics (Efa), both targeted at language improvement, the ENSPIRE programme targeted at improving standards in the Teaching of English for Specific Purposes in universities, a regional programme to encourage the development of autonomy in learners (ELA), and most recently a drive to improve standards of English language and methodology among teachers in public sector schools and colleges as well as a strengthened focus on the development of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) at university level. The impact and outcomes of these programmes, in particular the capacity that has been built through them, have made it possible for the British Council to launch their Higher Education for Employability Programme which is aimed at strengthening partnerships with the university sector, thus increasing the internationalisation of Higher Education in support of wider national education reforms.

Simply naming all these programmes does scant justice to the effort that has gone into them, to the outcomes that have been achieved and to the wealth of material that has been produced. All these achievements are in many respects attributable to the long-term partnerships that have been established between the British Council and the Ministry of Higher and Specialised Secondary Education on the one hand and the State University of World Languages (UWL) on the other. More recently, a potentially productive partnership with the Ministry of Public Education has been agreed. I have worked as a project consultant in a number of former Soviet Union countries and beyond, but it is only in Uzbekistan that such partnerships, based on trust and mutual respect, have been so influential in working towards improvements in the teaching and learning of English. This has enabled Uzbekistan to be seen as a model for other countries in the wider region as they embark on reform initiatives. The status and importance of English to Uzbekistan was given a significant boost by the President's decree in 2012, which also led directly to the firm establishment of the PRESETT programme in 17 universities across the country.

For me, as a consultant, it has been important to work consistently with teams of people on each of the initiatives that have been undertaken. Small groups of excellent teachers, mainly but not only from UWL and Westminster International University in Tashkent, have provided the continuity of commitment that is so important to success in a project, and in doing so, they have themselves developed professionally and contributed significantly to development in their own institutions. In other universities, key professionals have been identified and have taken project initiatives forward, sometimes in difficult circumstances. It

Bolitho R. **An Era of Progress**

has taken a huge effort to disseminate innovative initiatives and ideas from the 'epicentre' of the project in Tashkent to institutions concerned with the training of English teachers and the teaching of English nationwide. This effort still goes on, but in almost every case the pay-off has been institutional capacity-building and resource enhancement, for example through the establishment of 27 'hubs' across the regions for in-service training and language teaching. These hubs will play a very significant part in the next phases of project activity, notably in the area of EMI. Visiting partner institutions in Bukhara and Namangan as well as in Tashkent, has enabled me, as a consultant, to see the effects of these improvements and to understand, through engaging directly with teachers and students, the degree to which they are valued.

In all of this, the British Council has promoted synergy and practical links between each of their project initiatives, working from an understanding that successful educational reform requires attention to a number of key building blocks. From an initial focus on language improvement and methodological updating for English teachers, project managers moved on to curriculum development, materials development and, very importantly, to training in testing and assessment. It has not always been easy to plot a course through all the different national bodies with responsibilities in these areas, and there has sometimes been resistance to new ideas, but with patience and long-term strategic thinking, most difficulties and obstacles have been overcome, with resultant benefits for all stakeholders in the reform process.

But what has really been achieved over the 14 years that I have been returning to Uzbekistan? Firstly, far from being 'just another subject of study' as it was in the Soviet era, English is now seen as a key means of communicating and as a real asset for young people in the employment market. English classes now play a role in opening windows on to a wider world, which young Uzbeks see as within reach for them in ways which earlier generations never experienced. Thanks to support from El-Yurt Umidi, more and more teachers and academics are able to apply for courses and programmes overseas. It has been wonderful to be able to welcome large cohorts of Uzbek teachers to Norwich over the last few years. Teaching English is increasingly seen as a worthwhile profession for university students to aspire to, and the shortage of English teachers in schools is gradually being addressed. Looking just a little further into the future, doors are now opening for Uzbek academics, to contribute through the medium of English to international conferences, to publish their research in international journals and to take part in international exchanges.

In the UK, I am sometimes asked what it means to be a 'consultant', and there is sometimes an element of suspicion in the question, based on the experience that some consultants receive fat fees for doing very little. It is a legitimate question, but in my experience in Uzbekistan, nothing could be further from the truth. For every visit (almost 40 of them by now!), my programme has been packed with activity of one sort or another, including:

- helping teams to conceptualise and develop initiatives
- reviewing progress with different project teams
- training sessions in materials design, test development, teaching and training methods
- giving feedback, including both content and language, on materials and curriculum documents
- observing training sessions and giving feedback
- working with stakeholders in the project, including university authorities, heads of department teachers and Istedod/El-Yurt Umidi
- interviewing and selecting candidates for UK training
- holding webinars and video conferences with institutions across the country
- visiting institutions
- contributing to conferences and round table discussions

Bolitho R.
An Era of Progress

- meeting and advising project managers.

In short, never a dull moment and not much time to catch my breath! But in all of this I have been guided by some key principles. Firstly, that my task is to support the professional development of those people I'm lucky enough to work with, and to do this I have had to understand where they are when I first encounter them. In my early visits, I found teachers who lacked confidence in their own language proficiency, had never been outside the country and were locked into grammar-translation methodology, but who at the same time were so eager to learn that they were ready to take whatever time and effort was needed to improve professionally. I spent a long time familiarising myself with their career stories, their workplace contexts and their aspirations in order to be able to tune my own training efforts to their needs and priorities. A second principle for me has always been to subordinate my own missionary zeal to 'teach' my project teams to their needs as professional learners. Far too many native speaker trainers have mistakenly believed that they have a message about teaching and learning to transmit to all teachers in all contexts. For me good training practice starts with sensitivity to each new context that I work in. That has always been the case for me in Uzbekistan. A third guiding principle is that change takes time, and that it is sometimes influenced by factors beyond our control. All professional people, teachers very much included, need time to understand and digest new ideas, and they will not accept them unquestioningly. That applies to the 'macro' levels of national and institutional decision-making as well as to individuals. As a consultant, I have learned to work *with* resistance and reluctance in the face of innovation, and to allow time for my participants to formulate and express their concerns and doubts. It is much easier to work with resistance when it is openly articulated than when it remains unexpressed and allowed to 'brew' below the surface. Finally, I believe in evaluating my own contribution in terms of what I leave behind after each visit. Have I made a difference, however small, in people's professional lives, and have I contributed to the building of local capacity in key areas? As I move towards the final stages of my involvement as a consultant in Uzbekistan, what I would like to hear from the people I have worked with is that they are ready to take everything forward themselves and that my input is no longer needed.

A few issues inevitably remain to be addressed over the years ahead. There is still a need for a practically oriented Masters programme in English Language Teaching, one which really qualifies teachers to operate at university level, either in PRESETT or ESP contexts. Such a programme would include strong components in methodology, in testing and assessment, in materials design and in discourse studies/language analysis for pedagogical purposes. Another area of concern centres on the academic expectations which English teachers have to contend with in universities. Some are still expected to produce '*metodichkas*', annually. This is a relic of the old Soviet system and it definitely needs to be reconsidered or abolished altogether as these 'products' merely fulfil a requirement and often have very little practical value. I also believe that university language teachers should not be expected to register for PhD studies. Language teaching is a 'doing' profession, rooted in principled practice rather than in abstract theory, and studying for a doctorate may give them status but it will not improve them as teachers; indeed, it may result in them perpetuating a system which at the moment simply supports itself rather than contributing to educational improvement. Related to this is a need to spread awareness of the value of classroom-based research and qualitative research methods at undergraduate and Masters' levels. Too many fourth-year students are still expected to write their qualification papers on linguistic or literary topics chosen by their supervisors rather than on investigations into teaching and learning. It would be very encouraging to hear of progress in these areas in a few years' time.

I am very proud to have been asked to contribute to the development of English language teaching in Uzbekistan. I have loved engaging with teachers, often wondering at

Bolitho R.
An Era of Progress

their ability to code-switch between three (and in some cases even four!) languages during discussions. I have taken great pleasure in observing how so many of them have grown professionally since our early encounters, years ago. It has been a privilege to work with so many well-motivated and committed professionals, and also to have had the opportunity to get to know a country and its people which few British people have visited or even heard of.

Rod Bolitho

September 2019