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CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract. This article examines the principal difficulties encountered in the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) within the educational system of Uzbekistan and proposes a set of practical measures to address them. Drawing on the socio-linguistic situation of the country, the study identifies several interrelated obstacles: the limited presence of English beyond the classroom, uneven professional preparation of teachers, the persistence of grammar-oriented instruction, examination formats that reward memorisation rather than communication, insufficient learning materials adapted to local needs, and fluctuating learner motivation. In response, the article outlines a coordinated strategy that combines sustained teacher development, a shift towards communicative and task-based instruction, the reasonable integration of digital tools, reform of assessment practices, and the cultivation of an environment in which learners regularly use the language for authentic purposes. The discussion is intended to inform teachers, curriculum designers, and educational administrators seeking to raise the quality of English instruction across the republic.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, EFL, language teaching, Uzbekistan, communicative approach, teacher development, assessment reform, language policy, motivation.

1. Introduction

Over the past three decades Uzbekistan has moved steadily towards integration with the wider international community, and command of foreign languages has come to be regarded as an indispensable element of this process. Among these languages, English occupies a position of particular importance, since it functions as the principal medium of science, technology, commerce, and cross-border communication. The government has repeatedly affirmed the strategic value of English proficiency, most visibly through the 2012 presidential resolution on measures to improve foreign-language instruction and through subsequent national programmes that place language competence at the centre of educational modernisation.

Despite this political commitment and the considerable resources directed towards it, the actual outcomes of English instruction in schools and higher educational institutions frequently fall short of expectations. A substantial number of learners complete many years of formal study yet remain unable to hold a straightforward conversation or to read professional literature with confidence. This discrepancy between effort and result points to a cluster of structural and pedagogical difficulties that deserve careful analysis rather than superficial criticism.

The present article pursues two connected aims. First, it seeks to describe, in a systematic manner, the most significant problems that hinder effective English teaching in the Uzbek context. Second, it proposes realistic and locally appropriate solutions, avoiding the temptation to transplant foreign models without adaptation. The argument rests on the conviction that lasting improvement depends not on isolated interventions but on the coordinated reform of teacher preparation, classroom methodology, assessment, and the broader linguistic environment in which learning takes place.

2. The Status of English in the Uzbek Educational System

To understand the difficulties of English teaching in Uzbekistan, one must first consider the sociolinguistic setting in which it occurs. Uzbek is the state language and the dominant means of daily communication, while Russian continues to serve as a language of interethnic contact and, for many families, of access to higher education and professional life. English, by contrast, is for the overwhelming majority of the population a genuinely foreign language rather than a second one: outside the classroom, learners rarely encounter it in a natural, functional form. This distinction is not merely terminological, for it shapes the amount and quality of exposure available to students and, consequently, the methods that can realistically succeed.

English is formally introduced in the early years of general secondary education and continues through the completion of schooling, after which it remains a compulsory subject in most higher educational programmes. In principle, therefore, a graduate has been exposed to the language for well over a decade. The difficulty lies not in the quantity of instructional hours but in their pedagogical character and in the environment surrounding them. A learner who studies English for several hours a week but never uses it purposefully outside a graded exercise accumulates knowledge about the language without developing the ability to use it.

Recent policy has attempted to narrow this gap. Measures introduced in the 2010s expanded the training of language teachers, encouraged the use of international textbooks and examinations, and offered salary incentives to educators holding recognised certificates of proficiency. These initiatives have produced visible progress in certain schools and regions, particularly in the capital and in specialised institutions. Nevertheless, the benefits remain unevenly distributed, and rural districts in particular continue to struggle with shortages of qualified staff and teaching materials. The reforms have thus reshaped the landscape without yet resolving its underlying imbalances.

3. Principal Problems in Teaching English

The obstacles described below rarely operate in isolation; more often they reinforce one another, so that weakness in one area aggravates deficiencies in another. For the sake of clarity, however, it is useful to examine them separately before considering how they might be addressed together.

3.1. The scarcity of a natural language environment

The single most influential factor is the near-total absence of English from everyday life. In countries where the language circulates through media, workplaces, and public signage, learners absorb a great deal informally. In Uzbekistan such incidental exposure is minimal for most students, and the classroom becomes the only site where English is heard or used. As a result, the burden placed on formal instruction is unusually heavy, and any inefficiency in teaching methods is felt acutely because there is no compensating input from outside.

3.2. Uneven professional preparation of teachers

The quality of instruction is inseparable from the competence of those who deliver it. While the country possesses many dedicated and highly capable English teachers, the profession as a whole displays considerable variation in linguistic proficiency and methodological training. Some teachers, particularly outside major cities, have limited opportunities to use English actively themselves and consequently teach it as an abstract system of rules rather than as a living means of communication. Insufficient access to continuous professional development perpetuates outdated practices and leaves teachers ill-equipped to adopt newer approaches with confidence.

3.3. The dominance of grammar-translation methodology

Historically, foreign-language teaching in the region has relied heavily on the grammar-translation tradition, in which learners analyse structures, memorise vocabulary lists, and translate isolated sentences. This method produces measurable knowledge that is easy to test, but it develops neither fluency nor communicative confidence. Although communicative and task-based approaches are increasingly promoted in official guidance, their implementation is frequently partial: teachers

may adopt new textbooks while retaining the assumptions and routines of the older method, so that genuine communication remains rare in the classroom.

3.4. Assessment that rewards memorisation

Examinations exert a powerful influence over what is actually taught, since teachers and learners alike direct their energies towards whatever the tests reward. Where assessment concentrates on grammar recognition, translation, and the reproduction of memorised material, speaking and listening skills are inevitably neglected. This 'washback' effect distorts the whole learning process: even a teacher who values communication may feel compelled to prioritise test preparation, and learners come to equate success in English with the ability to pass an examination rather than to use the language.

3.5. Limited and poorly adapted learning materials

Adequate teaching depends on suitable materials, yet many schools continue to work with textbooks that are outdated, culturally distant, or insufficiently graded for the learners who use them. Imported international coursebooks, while methodologically sound, are not always affordable or adapted to local realities, whereas some locally produced texts lag behind current pedagogical thinking. Supplementary resources such as audio recordings, graded readers, and reliable digital tools are frequently unavailable, especially in schools with weak infrastructure, which restricts learners' exposure to authentic and varied input.

3.6. Fluctuating learner motivation and class size

Finally, motivation among learners is often uncertain and unevenly sustained. Many students recognise that English may benefit their future careers, yet this distant instrumental goal does not always translate into consistent daily effort, particularly when lessons feel abstract or disconnected from their interests. Large class sizes compound the problem by reducing the opportunity for individual speaking practice and personal feedback, so that quieter or weaker students can pass through years of instruction with very little active participation.

4. Proposed Solutions and Recommendations

Because the problems outlined above are interconnected, the responses to them must also form a coherent whole. Isolated measures, however well intentioned, tend to be absorbed by the surrounding system without altering it. The recommendations that follow are therefore presented as mutually reinforcing components of a single strategy.

4.1. Sustained and practical teacher development

Improvement in the classroom begins with the teacher, and so investment in continuous professional development should be regarded as the foundation of reform. Rather than occasional formal courses, teachers benefit from regular, practice-oriented training that models communicative techniques, provides opportunities to use English actively, and includes mentoring and peer observation. Establishing professional learning communities, in which teachers share materials and reflect together on their lessons, helps to embed new practices durably and to reduce the isolation felt by educators in remote areas.

4.2. A genuine shift towards communicative and task-based teaching

The methodological centre of gravity should move decisively from the analysis of the language towards its use. Communicative and task-based instruction, which organises lessons around meaningful activities such as solving problems, exchanging information, and expressing opinions, gives learners repeated occasions to speak and listen for a purpose. Grammar is not abandoned but is treated as a resource in the service of communication rather than as an end in itself. Achieving this shift requires not only new materials but a change in the underlying beliefs of teachers, which is why it must be supported by the training described above.

4.3. Reform of assessment to reward communication

Since assessment steers instruction so forcefully, aligning it with communicative goals is among the most effective interventions available. Introducing speaking and listening components into examinations, and rewarding the ability to convey meaning rather than merely to recognise correct forms, redirects the efforts of teachers and learners towards genuine competence. Formative assessment, which provides ongoing feedback during learning rather than a single verdict at its end, further encourages steady progress and reduces the distorting pressure of high-stakes tests.

4.4. Reasonable integration of digital tools and authentic input

Technology cannot replace good teaching, but it can substantially enlarge the linguistic environment that learners inhabit. Carefully chosen digital resources, video and audio materials, and interactive applications expose students to authentic English and allow practice beyond the limited hours of formal instruction. Where infrastructure permits, blended approaches that combine classroom work with guided independent study can partly compensate for the scarcity of natural exposure. The guiding principle should be pedagogical value rather than novelty, so that technology serves clearly defined learning aims.

4.5. Development of locally appropriate materials

Teaching materials should be both methodologically current and sensitive to the realities of Uzbek learners. This argues for the creation and continual revision of coursebooks that combine communicative principles with content relevant to students' lives and interests, supplemented by graded readers and reliable audio resources. Collaboration between local specialists and experienced international practitioners can help to produce texts that are neither culturally remote nor pedagogically outdated, while remaining affordable for widespread use.

4.6. Cultivating motivation and authentic language use

Finally, learners are far more likely to persevere when they experience English as useful and rewarding rather than as an examination hurdle. Connecting lessons to students' interests and future aspirations, creating opportunities for authentic use through clubs, projects, and correspondence, and celebrating communicative achievement all help to strengthen motivation. Reducing effective class sizes for speaking practice, where feasible through group work and pair activities, ensures that even quieter learners take an active part and receive meaningful feedback.

5. Conclusion

The teaching of English as a foreign language in Uzbekistan stands at a point of considerable promise and equally considerable difficulty. Political will and public interest are strong, and a decade of reform has begun to raise standards in parts of the system. Yet the persistent gap between years of study and modest communicative outcomes reveals problems that are structural rather than incidental: an environment offering little natural exposure, uneven teacher preparation, an enduring grammar-centred methodology, assessment that rewards memorisation, inadequate materials, and uncertain motivation.

These difficulties are real, but none of them is insurmountable. The analysis presented here suggests that meaningful progress depends less on any single reform than on the coordinated pursuit of several complementary ones. Strengthening teacher development, embracing communicative and task-based instruction, reforming assessment, integrating technology judiciously, producing suitable materials, and nurturing motivation together form a coherent path towards more effective language education.

Ultimately, the aim of teaching English is not to enable learners to describe the language but to empower them to use it. Reorienting the entire system around that simple purpose, and sustaining the effort patiently over time, offers the most credible route to raising the quality of English instruction throughout Uzbekistan. Future research and practice would do well to document local experiments in this direction, so that successful models can be refined and shared across the republic.

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