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# PROCEEDINGS

of the

**4<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Education and Linguistics**

**Drivers of learner/student  
success: insights into teaching,  
learning and research**

# Conference Proceedings

Edited by Rozaliya Ziryanova and Khikmatullo Urazbaev

## 4<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Education and Linguistics

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Organised by **the Global Education Department** (School of Law, Technology, and Education) and **the Graduate School** of Westminster International University in Tashkent

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## PREFACE

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It is with great pleasure and enthusiasm that we, the organizing committee of the 4<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Education and Linguistics (ICEL), present the conference proceedings for our 2023 edition. This year's event has successfully brought together researchers, educators, and practitioners from around the world to share their latest findings and insights in the interdisciplinary fields of education and linguistics. The theme of ICEL 2023, "Drivers of Learner/Student Success: Insights into Teaching, Learning and Research," highlights the importance of integrating cutting-edge research and methodologies to foster a more inclusive and effective global educational landscape.

Over the course of the conference, we had the privilege of hosting more than 90 oral presentations, and 4 keynote speeches, featuring an array of topics that span various aspects of education and linguistics. The diverse range of research areas covered in these proceedings includes language acquisition, pedagogical approaches, assessment and evaluation, technology-enhanced learning, bilingualism and multilingualism, sociolinguistics, and corpus linguistics. We believe that the rich compilation of papers presented in this volume will not only contribute to the existing body of knowledge but also inspire further research and collaboration among scholars and practitioners.

The success of ICEL 2023 would not have been possible without the hard work and dedication of numerous individuals and organizations. We would like to express our deepest gratitude to our keynote speakers for their thought-provoking and engaging presentations, as well as all the participants for their valuable contributions to the conference. Additionally, we would like to acknowledge the tireless efforts of our reviewers, who meticulously evaluated each submission to ensure the quality and relevance of the papers included in these proceedings.

**ICEL 2023 Organising Committee**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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<b><i>An Investigation of Stress, Mindfulness, and Self-Efficacy Among English Language Learners at Universities in Uzbekistan</i></b> Laurie A. Wolfe, Ximena Suarez-Sousa, Azizbek Mukhamedov	pp. 4-15
<b><i>Washback Effects of University Entrance Examinations on Curriculum, Teaching and Learning as Perceived by English Teachers in Uzbekistan</i></b> Komil Djalilov	pp. 16-21
<b><i>Impact of University Autonomy on Curriculum and Research</i></b> Alisher Khasanov	pp. 22-26
<b><i>Digital Assessment Tools for Measuring the Effectiveness of Student Self-Study: Benefits and Limitations</i></b> Marufjon Karimov	pp. 27-32
<b><i>Postgraduate Students as Curious Researchers – Case of MA in Learning and Teaching at WIUT</i></b> Lobar Babakhodjaeva	pp. 33-36
<b><i>English Language Proficiency among English Teachers in Uzbekistan: Facts and Findings</i></b> Louis Train	pp. 37-41
<b><i>Mapping the Linguistic Landscape in Kazuo County</i></b> Yuqiao Liu	pp. 42-45
<b><i>Challenges and Solutions for Uzbek Language Education at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (TUFS) Open Academy in the Post-Covid Era</i></b> Hidaka Shinsuke	pp. 46-50
<b><i>The Impact of Digital Education on Different Aspects of Learner Autonomy. A Longitudinal Study</i></b> Krisztina Szócs	pp. 51-55
<b><i>Dynamic Low Attainment in Foreign Language Learning: Challenges, Conflicts and Agency in Learning Activity Systems</i></b> Yanyun Zhou, Yongcan Liu	pp. 56-62
<b><i>Language Education in the BANI World</i></b> Olga Bernikova	pp. 63-67

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# AN INVESTIGATION OF STRESS, MINDFULNESS, AND SELF-EFFICACY AMONG ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS AT UNIVERSITIES IN UZBEKISTAN

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**Keywords:** *mindfulness, stress, self-efficacy, English language learners, Uzbekistan*

**Description:** Mindfulness has been shown to impact an individual's physical and psychological well-being; however, research regarding mindfulness, stress, and learning is limited. This study investigated the relationship between mindfulness, self-efficacy, and stress in English language learners in the Central Asian country of Uzbekistan. A total of 372 Uzbek university students completed an online questionnaire assessing mindful awareness, perceived stress, and their self-efficacy in learning English. Mindfulness was negatively correlated with perceived stress ( $r_s = -.394$ ,  $p < .01$ ), compared to a positive relationship between mindfulness and self-efficacy ( $r_s = .109$ ,  $p < .05$ ). No relationship was found between self-efficacy and stress. Women showed higher self-efficacy compared to men ( $p = .003$ ). Interestingly, Russian speakers reported the least mindfulness ( $p < .001$ ) and the most stress ( $p = .019$ ). The average perceived stress score for Uzbek students was higher than previously established norms for American students. Results suggest Uzbek students have high levels of perceived stress and may benefit from stress reduction techniques. More research into mindfulness and other stress reducing interventions among Uzbek university students is needed.

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## Problem Statement

In February of 2014, the cover of *Time* featured a photo of a woman meditating with the title "The Mindful Revolution." In the issue, journalist Kate Pickard (2014) wrote about how to find peace in a stressed-out world through mindfulness. This *Time* cover story is just one example of the rise in discussion of and popularity of mindfulness in the West over the past few decades. According to a 2018 report released by the Centers for Disease Control, the use of meditation among adults increased threefold between 2012 and 2017 (Clarke et al., 2018), which corresponds to an increase in research related to mindfulness. Between 1966 and 2020 there were over 16,000 studies published related to mindfulness, with the number of publications increasing by an average of 23.5% per year from 2010 to 2020 (Baminiwatta and Solangaarachchi, 2021). Despite exponential growth in the number of publications related to mindfulness in the past twenty years, studies in education have remained flat at only approximately 5% of the total studies published (Baminiwatta and Solangaarachchi, 2021). Additionally, the majority of this research has taken place in Western countries. Few published studies related to mindfulness or stress have been conducted in Central Asia.

Mindfulness is an ancient contemplative practice that dates back approximately 3,000 years to early yogic and Hindu writings such as the Patanjali's Yoga-sutras and the

Bhagavadgita. Both texts describe mental practices to achieve higher levels of consciousness and enlightenment through the control of one's thoughts (Bhagavadgita, 1994; Patanjali Yoga Sutras, 2014). One of the first scientific studies to investigate the effect of mindfulness on subjects' physical well-being was conducted in 1982 by Kabat-Zinn, one of the foremost names in the field. Kabat-Zinn developed an intensive 10-week mindfulness training program for 51 patients experiencing chronic pain that had not responded to any previous treatments. His results showed dramatic improvements in the level of pain the patients experienced and showed significantly fewer symptoms of psychological distress. Since that seminal study was published, thousands of studies have shown the positive physical and psychological effects of mindfulness training (Baminiwatta and Solangaarachchi, 2021).

There is a significant amount of research into the efficacy of mindfulness practices for reducing anxiety among university students. Galante et al. (2018) conducted a Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT) of the effect of mindfulness on student stress during exams. This is one of the largest RCTs conducted to date with 616 participants who were undergraduate students at Cambridge University in the UK. All students were randomly assigned to either the mindfulness training group or to a standard student support group that was already offered at the University. Results indicated that mindfulness was significantly better than the control condition at reducing student distress during examinations. A recent meta-analysis conducted by Bamber and Morpeth (2019) included 25 studies with 1492 participants. The majority of these studies "were conducted in the USA ( $n = 15$ ). The authors found a large overall effect size for Mindfulness Based Interventions (MBIs) of .56 with a SE of .07.

There is additional research to suggest that MBIs can improve academic performance specifically in the area of language learning. Scida and Jones (2017) conducted a quasi-experimental study with 249 Spanish language students at the University of Virginia. The students self-enrolled in a section of Advanced Intermediate Spanish, but sections were randomly assigned to be either a mindfulness or a control group. The mindfulness sections began each class session with 5-10 minutes of guided mindfulness practice which included a variety of approaches such as mindful yoga, breathing, meditation, and body scan. Students in the control group received no treatment at all and class began as usual. Results showed that students in the mindfulness group had significantly higher test scores than the non-contemplative group.

Another factor that may impact student academic performance is their self-efficacy as it relates to learning. Numerous studies have shown a relationship between self-efficacy and academic performance. Alyami et al. (2017) investigated the effect of both perceived stress and academic self-efficacy on the academic performance of 214 Saudi psychology students. Results showed high levels of perceived stress among the students, as measured by the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10). While there was no significant relationship between perceived and academic performance, there was a small but significant positive correlation between self-efficacy and academic performance. A similar study conducted in Australia investigated the relationship between chemistry lab anxiety and student's self-efficacy (Kurbanoglu and Akin, 2010). Kurbanoglu and Akin used the self-efficacy subscale of the Motivated Learning Strategies Questionnaire (MLSQ) to measure self-efficacy. Results showed that self-efficacy negatively predicted chemistry lab anxiety. That is, lower self-efficacy predicted higher levels of anxiety related to chemistry lab.

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the relationship between mindfulness, stress, and self-efficacy as it relates to English language learning among Uzbek university students. Despite the abundance of research related to the topic of both mindfulness and stress, little is known about how either of these variables relate to learning. The goal of the current survey was to learn more about the perceived stress of university students in Uzbekistan who are studying English as a foreign language and how mindfulness and self-efficacy relate to their stress. The researchers investigated four main research questions. RQ1: What is the difference between levels of stress between men and women? RQ2: What is the difference between levels of self-efficacy between men and women? RQ3: What is the relationship between mindfulness and stress? RQ4: What is the relationship between self-efficacy and stress?

## **Methodology Statement**

### **Setting**

This study was conducted in the Central Asian country of Uzbekistan. Although the native language is Uzbek, under Soviet times most of the population there spoke Russian, as a result Russian is still widely spoken in the country. As noted earlier, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has implemented several reforms to the educational system, including a push to improve the quantity and quality of English language instruction across the country.

Uzbekistan is a developing country whose educational system is just beginning the process of modernization. Most teachers utilize a teacher-centered approach to teaching with little interaction between the teacher and students, as well as among the students themselves. This is slowly changing as teachers receive more training in student-centered methodologies. Classes are offered almost exclusively in person. Most of the English faculty at the universities included in this study have the equivalent of a master's degree in their field. While some of them have spent time in an English-speaking country, none of the English faculty are native English speakers.

### **Participants**

This study included 372 participants recruited from public universities in Uzbekistan where students primarily study to become English language teachers. The majority of participants identified as women (69.4%). The largest number of participants (49.2%) lived in Jizzakh, a small town approximately 90 minutes by train from the capital city. The next largest group (21.8%) was from Tashkent, the capital city. The remaining participants lived across various regions of the country. Nealy all participants (90.6%) reported that their religious affiliation was Muslim. The marital status of subjects was split between single (41.7%) and married (25.5%) or engaged to be married (8.3%). Divorce is uncommon in Uzbekistan, so it is not surprising that only two subjects (.5%) reported that they were divorced. It is interesting to note that 16.7% of participants failed to respond to the question about marital status. While it is impossible to know for sure without additional follow-up, this might be due to the social pressure that young people, especially women, face in Uzbekistan to get married. Unmarried women may have felt uncomfortable acknowledging this, even on an anonymous survey. Full demographic characteristics of the participants can be seen in Table 1.

### **Table 1**

*Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

Participant Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Man	71	19.1
Woman	258	69.4
Prefer Not to Say	16	4.3
Missing	27	7.3
<b>Religious Affiliation</b>		
Muslim	337	90.6
Christian	1	.3
Unaffiliated	2	.5
Prefer Not to Say	5	1.3
Missing	27	7.3
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	155	41.7
Engaged to be Married	31	8.3
Married	95	25.5
Divorced	2	.5
Other	27	7.3
Missing	62	16.7
Participant Characteristic	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age	23.7	5.4
Years of Study of English	5.1	2.7
Years of University Study Completed	2.9	1.3
Fluency in English (on a scale of 1-10)	6.3	1.6
Fluency in Uzbek (on a scale of 1-10)	9.2	1.6
Fluency in Russian (on a scale of 1-10)	4.3	2.8

## Sampling

As previously noted, this study used a convenience sample. Participants were recruited from English classes at several public universities in Uzbekistan. Students enrolled in English courses were invited to participate in the study either by one of the researchers visiting classes and sharing the link to the survey or through a University's Telegram channel. Because participants were not randomly sampled from the broader population of English students across Uzbekistan, the generalizability of the results is limited.

## Instrumentation

The survey used in this study consisted of items taken from established inventories of stress, mindfulness, and self-efficacy with an additional twelve demographic questions. The survey was estimated to take 10-15 minutes to complete, which is slightly longer than recommended. However, given that this was the first survey of its kind to be conducted in Uzbekistan, the researchers felt it was worth risking some degree of attrition to gain a greater depth of information. Further, the survey was conducted online, and participants could respond at any time and from any location they found convenient so that location concerns and instrument decay were minimized.



A possible threat to internal validity is the fact that this study was conducted with non-native English speakers. To obtain responses for students with a lower level of proficiency in English, the survey was translated into both Uzbek and Russian; the two native languages spoken by most Uzbeks. To ensure the integrity of the instrument in both the translated languages, two of the study's authors, fluent in all three languages, and skilled in translation, independently translated the survey and then compared their translations. Any differences were discussed, and a final translated version was agreed upon. The full English version of the questionnaire is included in Online Resource 1. Uzbek and Russian versions can be obtained by contacting the corresponding author.

The survey consisted of 43 closed-ended items, making up four sections in the questionnaire. The questions were taken from three existing psychological or educational measurements with an additional twelve demographic questions. The first section of the questionnaire consisted of the 15-item Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS). The MAAS was developed by Brown and Ryan (2003) to assess a key characteristic of mindfulness, being open to and aware of the present moment. Respondents were presented with 15 statements related to their level of awareness of present moment occurrences and asked to indicate how often each statement reflects their everyday experiences. Respondents answered using a 6-point Likert scale, with 1 Almost Always and 6 being Almost Never. A higher total score is reflective of greater degree of mindful awareness. The MAAS was selected for use in this study because it is brief, consists of only a single factor (mindful awareness), and has been shown to have good reliability and validity across several languages, including Spanish, Dutch, German, Turkish, and Chinese (Barajas and Garra, 2014).

The next section of the survey focused on self-efficacy, which was measured using questions adapted from the Motivated Learning Strategies Questionnaire (MLSQ) self-efficacy subscale. The MLSQ was developed by Pintrich and de Groot (1990) to assess various facets of college students' motivation and learning strategies in college courses. The MLSQ consists of 81 self-report items across two sections: motivation and learning strategies. The MLSQ has good internal reliability and construct validity. (Pintrich, et. al., 1991). The self-efficacy subscale consists of eight items from within the motivation section. According to the MLSQ manual, self-efficacy subscale measures a person's perception of their own ability to master a task. This includes "judgments about one's ability to accomplish a task as well as one's confidence in one's skills to perform that task." (Pintrich, et. al., 1991, p.) Subjects are presented with a statement and asked to rate how true that statement is for them on a 7-point Likert scale (1=not at all true, 7=very true). A higher total score indicates a greater degree of self-efficacy. The self-efficacy subscale has excellent internal reliability ( $\alpha=.93$ ) and moderate predictive validity. Self-efficacy subscale scores have moderate, but statistically significant, predictive validity. Scores successfully predicted student GPA ( $r=.41$ ).

The final section of the questionnaire was made up of the ten items from the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10). This is one of the oldest and most widely used tools for measuring perceived stress in everyday life. It was developed in 1983 by Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein and has been translated into over 30 languages (Baik et al., 2019; Cohen, n.d). The PSS-10 measures respondents' levels of stress in their everyday life, as they perceive it. Subjects were asked to consider how often, in the last month, they have felt a particular way and give their response using a five-point scale ranging from (0) Never to (4) Very Often. A higher total score indicates higher levels of perceived stress. The PSS has good internal reliability with  $\alpha=.84$  and  $\alpha=.85$  across two samples of

colleges students. The scale also has good test-retest reliability coefficients of  $r=.85$  over two days, and  $r=.55$  over six weeks. The six weeks comparison is understandably lower given that the PSS asked students about the amount stress they have experienced “in the last month.” The PSS has moderate concurrent validity with a correlation of  $r=.65$  with the Life Events Scale among the college student samples.

### Data Collection

The survey was created using the online program, Qualtrics, and distributed to 618 Uzbek University students enrolled in English languages classes. The questionnaire was shared with students through an in-class announcement and a link provided via Telegram, an online social media platform commonly used in Uzbekistan. The post included a description of the study and an invitation for all students who were 18 and older to complete the survey. A total of 372 completed surveys were received for a response rate of 60%.

### Ethical Considerations

The questionnaire asked students to report their perceived anxiety with everyday experiences, their level of mindful awareness, and their confidence in their ability to learn English. These questions present minimal risk of harm to the subjects. It is possible that answering questions about their level of stress brought an awareness of their own stress to the forefront of participant’s minds. To mitigate any possible psychological discomfort this may cause, links to several stress reduction exercises were included at the end of the survey. Letters of permission were obtained from the appropriate administration official at the Uzbek universities and permission was received from the first author’s Institutional Review Board. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Respondents were also allowed to skip any question they felt uncomfortable answering. No students were required to take the surveys, nor could it be identified which students completed the survey. Information about the purpose of the study, confidentiality, and the ability to withdraw consent was included on the survey welcome page and the informed consent letter was available to download via a link at the end of the welcome page.

### Results

Before conducting any significance testing, the distribution of scores on the MAAS, MLSQ and PSS were assessed to determine if there were significant outliers and if scores were normally distributed and had homogeneity of variance. A Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality (see Table 2) showed that the average results for the MAAS, the MLSQ, and the PSS were not normally distributed. therefore, non-parametric tests were used to test all hypotheses.

**Table 2**

*Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test of Normality*

	Statistic	df	Sig.
MAAS Score	.057	372	.006
MLSQ Score	.085	372	<.001
PSS Score	.061	372	.002

In order to test the impact of gender on both perceived stress and self-efficacy, Mann-Whitney tests were conducted. While there was no significant difference in scores on the PSS due to gender, there was a statistically significant difference in self-efficacy

between men ( $Mdn = 39$ ) and women ( $Mdn = 43$ ). The Mann-Whitney test showed this to be statistically significant  $U (N_{women}=257, N_{men}=71) = 7059, z = -2.94, p = .003$ . The associative research questions were tested using Spearman's Rho. Results showed that there was no significant relationship between self-efficacy and stress. However, there was a significant negative correlation between mindful awareness and perceived stress,  $r_s (372) = -.394, p < .001$ .

### Additional Questions

Because Uzbekistan is a former Soviet country, many people speak both Russian and Uzbek. As noted earlier in this paper, there has recently been a push by the government for more people to learn English. To ensure the subjects accurately understood the survey questions, the survey was provided in Uzbek, English, and Russian (see supplemental file for the complete survey in all three languages). Subjects were instructed to take the survey in whichever language they felt most comfortable with. Slightly more than half of the participants (54.3%) completed the survey in Uzbek, 30% took the English version, and 15.7% opted for the Russian version. Participants who completed the survey in Russian had the lowest average score for mindfulness and the highest average score for perceived stress while Uzbek speakers showed the highest mindfulness scores. English and Uzbek speakers had equivalent perceived stress scores. Average scores on the self-efficacy scale were similar across all three languages. Table 3 displays the means and standard deviations for the MAAS, MLSQ, and PSS composite scores by language of the survey.

**Table 3**

*Scores by Language*

	Language of Survey	N=372	Mean	SD
MAAS Score (Mindfulness)	Uzbek	$n=202$	63.92	11.74
	English	$n=112$	56.96	14.27
	Russian	$n=58$	53.90	13.88
MLSQ Score (Self-Efficacy)	Uzbek	$n=202$	41.26	7.92
	English	$n=112$	40.36	8.25
	Russian	$n=58$	40.72	7.15
PSS Score (Perceived Stress)	Uzbek	$n=202$	18.39	5.83
	English	$n=112$	18.27	5.34
	Russian	$n=58$	20.34	4.92

A Kruskal-Wallis test of significance showed that the language in which the participants chose to take the survey had a significant impact on their mindfulness scores,  $H(2) = 32.47, p < .001$ . Participants who took the survey in Uzbek had higher mindfulness scores ( $Mdn = 64.00$ ) than those who took it in English ( $Mdn = 57.00$ ) or Russian ( $Mdn = 55.50$ ). Pairwise comparisons showed there to be statistically significant differences between the Uzbek and English speakers and the Uzbek and Russian speakers (See Table 4).

**Table 4**

*Pairwise Comparisons of Language of Survey on Mindful Awareness scores*

Sample 1-Sample 2	Test Statistic	Std. Error	Std. Test Statistic	Sig.	Adj. Sig. <sup>a</sup>
Uzbek - English	-54.169	12.664	-4.277	<.001	.000
Russian -Uzbek	-77.158	16.013	-4.818	<.001	.000
English- Russian	22.989	17.390	1.322	.186	.559

a. Significance values have been adjusted by the Bonferroni correction for multiple tests.

Additional testing showed that language also had a significant effect on participants Perceived Stress scores,  $H(2) = 7.93$ ,  $p = .019$ . Participants who took the survey in Russian had higher Perceived Stress scores ( $Mdn = 21.50$ ) than those who took it in English ( $Mdn = 18.27$ ) or Uzbek ( $Mdn = 18.00$ ). Pairwise comparisons showed there to be statistically significant differences between the Russian and English speakers and the Russian and Uzbek speakers (See Table 5).

**Table 5**

*Pairwise Comparisons of Language of Survey on Perceived Stress scores*

Sample 1-Sample 2	Test Statistic	Std. Error	Std. Test Statistic	Sig.	Adj. Sig. <sup>a</sup>
Uzbek - English	-1.860	12.649	-.147	.883	1.000
Uzbek - Russian	42.487	15.994	2.656	.008	.024
English - Russian	-44.347	17.369	-2.553	.011	.032

a. Significance values have been adjusted by the Bonferroni correction for multiple tests.

Although no significance testing could be done, the average PSS score for all respondents was noticeably higher ( $M = 18.66$ ) than established norms (Cohen et al., 1983) for students in the United States ( $M = 14$ ). The average PSS score on this survey was similar to results the first author obtained with a sample of 123 Uzbek high school students during a 2019 project. At that time, the author also administered the PSS to students in 7<sup>th</sup> through 11<sup>th</sup> grade from four public high schools in the capital city of Tashkent. Results of that survey yielded an average PSS score of 17 of a total possible score of 40. Analysis of the data by other demographic variables such as marital status, years of study of English, and fluency level of English did not show any significant differences in mindfulness, self-efficacy, or stress for any other variable.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationships between mindfulness, self-efficacy, and perceived stress, as well as the impact of gender on these variables, among English students in Uzbekistan. Results of the study showed that a significant negative correlation exists between mindful awareness and perceived stress. Participants with higher mindfulness scores reported lower levels of perceived stress and vice versa. This is consistent with previous studies conducted in other parts of the world, particularly Western countries (Baminiwatta and Solangaarachchi, 2021; Bamber and Morpeth, 2019). This is the first study of its kind conducted in Central Asia, specifically in Uzbekistan, with a predominantly Muslim population. Given the cultural and religious differences it is important that this study demonstrated the relationship between mindfulness and stress exists within this population.

No significant relationship was found between stress and self-efficacy as it related to English language learning, but gender did have a significant effect on self-efficacy scores. Women reported higher self-efficacy than men did. This was surprising given that Uzbek culture is highly patriarchal, and women are often treated as inferior to men in many spheres of society. However, this survey was conducted primarily at pedagogical universities and many of the respondents were training to become English teachers. It is possible that in this context women studying to be English teachers have more confidence than the men.

While most demographic variables were found to have no significant effect on mindfulness, stress, or self-efficacy, the language in which the participants took the

survey did impact perceived stress scores. As noted in the Results section, participants who chose to take the survey in Russian had significantly higher perceived stress scores than participants who responded in Uzbek or English. It is the opinion of the authors, two of which are Uzbek who are experts in translation, that this does not appear to be a result of the translation itself but rather related to cultural differences among Uzbeks who are native Russian speakers versus native Uzbek speakers. One possible explanation for this finding is that due to cultural differences between native Russian and native Uzbek speakers, participants who chose to take the survey in Russian may have a better understanding of what stress is and were therefore more able to report their own symptoms of stress. Additionally, Russian speakers are more likely to have close personal and cultural ties with Russia than are Uzbeks who opted to complete the survey in Uzbek or English. Given that this survey was conducted in the Spring of 2022, during the height of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and intense pressure being exerted against Russia via sanctions from the West, it is possible that the cultural Russians living in Uzbekistan were experiencing a greater degree of stress at that time than other Uzbeks. A follow-up study should be conducted in the future to see if this is a long-term difference or simply a byproduct of world events occurring while the survey was being conducted.

Regardless of language of the survey, participants had higher average PSS-10 scores than their American peers. Cohen et al. (1994) conducted a large-scale study of 2,387 respondents in the U.S. and found the average score on the PSS-10 to be 14.2 for respondents ages 18-29. The average score for Uzbek students on the current survey was 18.66. When disaggregated by language, the average PSS-10 scores were 18.27 for English speakers, 18.39 for Uzbek speakers, and 20.34 for Russian speakers. The highest possible score on the PSS-10 is 40. These results are consistent with previous research conducted by the author that found the average PSS-10 score of Uzbek high school students to be 17. This suggests that Uzbek students are experiencing higher levels of stress than their American peers. Stress is generally not recognized as a significant issue within Uzbek culture and as a result, little information is available to Uzbeks about how to recognize the signs of stress and students are not taught techniques for stress management. Given the negative physical, psychological, and educational effects of chronic stress (Bamber and Morpeth, 2019), it is imperative that students be given tools to manage their stress. This study suggests that not only do Uzbek students experience higher levels of stress but also that mindfulness training may be an effective way to lower the perceived stress levels of Uzbek students. Future studies should investigate the effectiveness of mindfulness training in reducing stress of Uzbek students. Additional studies are needed to determine the impact of stress on the academic performance of Uzbek students and if mindfulness training can improve learning outcomes.

It is important to note that there are a number of limitations of this study. The study made use of convenience sampling, mainly from two large pedagogical universities, so the findings may not be generalizable to the broader population of students. A nationwide study of the levels of stress and mindfulness of all students, regardless of which university they attend or their program of study, would be helpful in determining the validity of the results of the current study. Additionally, the respondents of this study were predominantly women. Future studies are needed to determine the levels of stress and mindfulness of Uzbek students who identify as men. Finally, there may have been an issue with instrumentation in this study. The survey was accessed 618 times, but only 372 respondents submitted complete responses. While this was a good response rate (60%), approximately 20% of the total respondents consented to completing the survey but then

exited out of the survey before answering any questions. The first question block presented was the 15-item MAAS, formatted as a large matrix question. Most Uzbeks access the internet via a smartphone, rather than a computer. It may have been that matrix formatting did not display well on their phones, discouraging them from completing the survey. Any follow-up studies using a survey should consider using a more mobile friendly format.

Despite these limitations, the current study adds valuable information about the role those underlying variables, such as gender or language spoken, may play in students' experiences of mindfulness, stress, and their own self-efficacy. Furthermore, while several meta-analytic studies have shown a beneficial effect of mindfulness on stress (Borquist-Conlon et al., 2019; Halladay et al., 2019; Zarate and Passmore, 2019) this study extends the scope of the research to investigate the relationship between self-efficacy and stress. Finally, there is a lack of research in non-western countries there is an absence of studies conducted in Central Asia and Africa (Baminiwatta and Solangaarachchi, 2021). The current study was conducted in Central Asia, specifically Uzbekistan, with predominantly Muslim participants. This is a significant contribution to the field as there are no currently published studies that have been conducted in Uzbekistan and only a one study that looked at the effect of mindfulness on reducing stress specifically among participants who identify as Muslim (Albatnuni and Koszycki, 2020).

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# WASHBACK EFFECTS OF UNIVERSITY ENTRANCE EXAMINATIONS ON CURRICULUM, TEACHING AND LEARNING AS PERCEIVED BY ENGLISH TEACHERS IN UZBEKISTAN

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**Keywords:** assessment, high stakes testing, washback, teaching English as a foreign language

**Description:** The study looks at how English teachers in Uzbekistan perceive washback effects of university entrance examinations on their own teaching practices and their students' learning behaviours, and reveals that some of these effects, like exam-driven motivation of students and curriculum narrowing, are in line with findings of washback studies from other settings, while some others, like the emergence of "parallel curricula" and additional burden placed on teachers, can be seen as context-specific and peculiar to Uzbekistan.

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## Problem Statement

Assessment, along with curriculum and pedagogy, is one of the key message systems of education that link schools to broader culture and society (Bernstein, 2005). The power of assessment to affect curriculum and pedagogy has been of interest to researchers for quite some time (Madaus, 1988; Nickerson, 1989; Alderson and Wall, 1993; Messick, 1996; Rea-Dickins and Scott, 2007; Green, 2013; Barnes, 2017). This power can be clearly observed in high-stakes examinations, the results of which are used to make important decisions about students, teachers and/or institutions, leading to serious rewards or sanctions for them, like, for example, admission to or denial from the next level of education (Madaus, 1988; Andrews, 2004; Plake, 2011).

The current study focuses on how English as a Foreign Language teachers in Uzbekistan perceive the washback effects of highly competitive (World Bank, 2014) university entrance examinations on their students' learning and their own teaching practices.

The overarching research question is 'How do teachers perceive the situation that university entrance examinations define the "received curriculum" for students and affect teachers' and students' classroom behaviour?' The received curriculum is defined here as what students learn (Kelly, 2009:11). Thus, the study focuses on "micro washback effects" – effects that work directly on the persons rather than on institutions and systems (Scott, 2011).

Due to recent developments in English language teaching and assessment in Uzbekistan, which led to the co-existence of two different examinations that can be taken by university applicants – the University Entrance Test (UET) which tests grammar knowledge and reading comprehension, and the National System of Assessment of Foreign Language Proficiency (NSFLA), which covers all four language skills, the study compares the washback effects of both examinations as perceived by English teachers.

## **Methods and Data**

Washback is a social phenomenon that affects people, so an interpretivist, qualitative research approach is more suitable for washback studies (Gray, 2014).

In the research, two data collection methods were used, divided into two stages and employed consecutively. During the first stage, an online Likert-scale survey was used to collect information about participants' attitudes towards the phenomenon under study, which returned around 70 responses. The results of the survey were further discussed with ten interviewees, who helped to form a deeper understanding of these results by sharing their observations and experiences.

Since the focus of my study is washback effects, which, as studies by Green (2013) show, are likely to be highest with the examination date approaching, this requires applying a certain restrictive sampling frame, i.e., defining the members of the population who are eligible to be included in the study (Morgan, 2008). In the context of my research, teachers in high school are most likely to observe washback effects of university entrance examinations on their students and experience such effects on themselves. So, the sampling frame was limited to teachers who work with such a student population.

For the interviews, a combination of snowball sampling and convenience sampling techniques was used, in which, as Cohen, Manion and Marrison (2007) explain, the researcher attempts to target a particular group, in the full knowledge that it does not represent the wider population but simply represents itself; however, these techniques can prove perfectly adequate where the intention is not to generalise findings beyond the sample in question.

## **Findings Statement**

The questions in the survey focused on teachers' perceptions regarding the impact of university entrance examinations on students' motivation, attitudes, and learning. As the survey revealed, many teachers see the university entrance examinations as the main motivation factor for their students to learn English with the power to affect their students' attitudes towards the activities used in the classroom.

The interviews yielded the following key findings:

- students' examinations-driven motivation in their final years of schooling affects their learning.
- there are noticeable differences in terms of the overall English proficiency between students taking different examination systems.
- the current university selection system leads to the emergence of "parallel curricula" for different students within the same classroom.
- the co-existence of two incompatible assessment systems is placing additional burden on teachers.

In the interviews, teachers agreed that for most students in a high school, university entrance examinations become the main motivation factor, and they direct all their efforts towards success in examinations. Some teachers compared students' attitudes towards learning to "demand – supply" rule of the market system - the demand from students is to teach them to the test, and they expect teachers to supply for this demand.

The official curriculum requires that all school leavers should reach the level of English language proficiency comparable to B1 (Threshold) level of Common European

Reference of Framework for Languages (CEFR). However, the teachers observed that there are noticeable differences in terms of the overall language proficiency between students planning to take different examination systems. Those students who are preparing for the NSFLA tend to be more proficient in English and have better developed communicative skills than those who are planning to take UET, whose knowledge of English is mainly restricted to reading comprehension and the ability to recognise grammar patterns.

The interviews revealed two contrasting patterns in teachers' teaching practices. One pattern is to disregard the students' expectations and teach the same curriculum to the whole class. This may be the official curriculum and/or the skills the teacher believes to be important for the current cohort of students. The contrasting pattern, followed by most of the teachers interviewed, is to accommodate to students' needs, adjusting teaching methods and materials accordingly. Thus, many teachers take into consideration the examinations the students are planning to take as well as their levels of English proficiency and provide differentiated instructions to different students depending on their needs, which leads the emergence of "parallel curricula" within the same classroom.

For those students who are planning to take the NSFLA, the curriculum they receive is closest to the official curriculum. This is because the NSFLA, introduced after the current official curriculum was adopted, is specifically designed to assess the skills to be developed in students according to the curriculum. Those students who are going to take the UET receive considerably more grammar instruction: grammar rules are explained in more details, usually in their native language to achieve better understanding, and exercises and tests focusing on different areas of grammar are provided to practise the recognition of the grammar patterns. These students are also taught reading, with a particular focus on strategies that help them identify the correct answer in multiple-choice test formats. Thus, the curriculum the students receive matches the official curriculum only in the parts assessed by the UET, i.e., reading and grammar.

For students who are not preparing for any English examination, the received curriculum is mainly restricted to "survival English" – the ability to recognise and reproduce basic words and phrases students might need to survive in an English-speaking environment.

There may be some extreme cases when students totally reject to learn English. In such situations, teachers tend to prefer to "leave these students alone". Although these students come to English classes, they spend time in English classes doing other subjects that they need for university entry, which means that although formally they are attending English classes, in fact they receive no English curriculum at all.

Many teachers noted that the co-existence of the two incompatible assessment systems is placing additional burden on them. Teachers find it time-consuming to plan, select and/or develop differentiated activities for different students within the same classroom. Some of the teachers reported spending up to four hours every day on this.

### **Key Conclusions and Contributions**

The research revealed that the university selection system in Uzbekistan changes the perceptions of participants (teachers and students) regarding their educational goals. The most important change teachers see is to their students' values as they progress to the final years of schooling: many students adopt a "means-end" approach to learning and direct all their efforts towards success in the university entrance examination. Motivation

to learn a language becomes extrinsic and fuelled by the examination, not by strong drives to communicate and learn from communication, which is one of the key characteristics of a successful language learner (Rubin, cited in Dörnyei, 2014). Students' obsession with the university entrance examination intensifies as the exam approaches and manifests itself in rejecting everything that is not seen contributing to the exam success. This finding is in line with one of the washback hypotheses formulated by Alderson and Wall (1993) that "tests that have important consequences will have washback" (p.120) and a principle formulated earlier by Madaus (1988) that the power of a test to affect the individuals and institutions within the system is perceptual, depending on how much importance they attach to the results of the test. This trend for learning to become more exam-oriented at high school seems true for many educational systems where access to higher education is limited and based on selection tests, as studies of high school students' motivations in China (Zhang and Kim, 2013) and South Korea (Haggerty and Fox, 2015) have revealed.

Along with students, teachers as one of the key participants of the education process are also affected by examinations. What teachers come to believe about their roles as teachers under the existing testing regime may influence what they teach and how they teach (Alderson and Wall, 1993). So, tests influence teachers "to do things they would not otherwise do" (Messick, 1996:241). Several washback studies with a specific focus on teachers conducted in other parts of the world, including Israel (Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt and Ferman, 1996), Thailand (Apichatrojanakul, 2011), Greece (Tsagari, 2011) and Vietnam (Barnes, 2017) have found high-stakes examinations affecting teachers' attitudes towards their role as well as their choice of teaching methods and materials. Findings of my research also suggest that many of those English teachers in Uzbekistan who teach students in the final years of compulsory schooling see their mission in satisfying students' demands imposed by entrance examinations and adjust their teaching accordingly.

Thus, the key characteristics of the existing situation in Uzbekistan are:

- most students in a high school are narrowly focused on success in university entrance examinations.
- students who need English for a university entry choose one of the two examinations (the NSFLA or the UET), which assess the language in different ways, and expect to be taught to the chosen test.
- most teachers see their goal in helping students to succeed in university entrance examinations and teach to the test, adjusting teaching methods and materials to the requirements of the examinations their students choose, thus allowing different curricula to emerge.
- learning is differentiated based on students' needs not in terms of differences in learning styles and aptitudes, but in terms of requirements that arise from different formats of their chosen examinations.
- some students may not learn English, even though they must attend English classes.

A search of research indices shows that little scholarly research has been undertaken so far to investigate the effects of high-stakes examinations on teaching and learning specifically in the context of Uzbekistan. I hope this research will contribute to filling the gap and invite further research in the field.

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# IMPACT OF UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY ON CURRICULUM AND RESEARCH

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**Key words:** University Autonomy, Curriculum, Research, Higher Education

**Description:** This research observes the impact of university autonomy on curriculum and research in the Republic of Uzbekistan, focusing on the benefits and challenges of increased autonomy and providing recommendations for further enhancing universities autonomy in the country.

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## Problem Statement

The centralized and government-controlled higher education system in Uzbekistan has limited the ability of universities to develop their own curriculum and research agenda, leading to a narrow range of educational opportunities and a lack of innovation (Abdukadirova, 2019; Ergashev and Rakhimov, 2018). The higher education system in Uzbekistan has historically been centralized and subject to government control, with limited autonomy for universities to develop their own curriculum and research agenda. Historical and cultural factors have influenced the transition to university autonomy in Uzbekistan, including the legacy of Soviet-era centralized control over education and the importance of traditional values within Uzbek society (Khasanov 2023b). This has led to a narrow range of educational opportunities and a lack of innovation in the country's universities. Many universities in Uzbekistan have traditionally focused on providing education in traditional disciplines such as engineering, natural sciences, and economics, with little room for experimentation or innovation.

The lack of autonomy in Uzbekistan's higher education system has also limited collaboration with international partners and hindered the development of a knowledge-based economy (UNESCO, 2016). The country's universities have struggled to keep up with global trends and have been unable to provide students with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in an increasingly competitive global marketplace.

Furthermore, the lack of autonomy has led to a brain drain, with many talented students and researchers leaving the country in search of better opportunities abroad (Ganieva and Kuchmaev, 2020). This has further hampered the development of a vibrant and dynamic higher education sector in Uzbekistan.

In recent years, the Uzbekistan government has recognized the need to reform its higher education system and has introduced greater autonomy for universities through the adoption of the sufficient number of reforms aiming reforms in higher education since 2017 (O'zbekiston Respublikasi Vazirlar Mahkamasining qarori (2017), Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan, (2020)). However, the implementation of autonomy has been uneven, and universities still face challenges in fully realizing their potential for independent decision making (Kuchmaev and Abdugarimova, 2021). The challenges and opportunities of the transition to decentralized governance of public universities in Uzbekistan, emphasized the need for a comprehensive legal framework and financial support to ensure the successful implementation of autonomy (Khasanov, 2023a). Therefore, the problem statement for this research is to examine the impact of university

autonomy on curriculum and research activities in Uzbekistan and to identify the remaining challenges that universities face in implementing autonomy. By addressing these challenges, Uzbekistan can create a more dynamic and innovative higher education sector that contributes to the country's long-term development.

### **Goal Statement**

The goal of this research is to analyze the impact of university autonomy on curriculum and research activities in Uzbekistan and to identify strategies for promoting academic excellence and innovation in higher education. The research will examine the benefits and challenges of increased university autonomy in Uzbekistan, as well as the potential for universities to play a key role in addressing major societal challenges and contributing to the country's economic development (UNESCO, 2016).

Specifically, the research aims to achieve the following goals:

- To provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of university autonomy in Uzbekistan, including an analysis of the legal and regulatory framework, as well as an overview of the major universities in the country (Khasanov, 2023a).
- To examine the impact of increased university autonomy on curriculum and research activities in Uzbekistan, exploring the extent to which universities have been able to diversify their curriculum, engage in interdisciplinary research, and collaborate with international partners.
- To identify the remaining challenges that universities face in implementing autonomy, including limited funding and infrastructure, resistance from conservative elements within society, and a lack of capacity and expertise among university staff.
- To provide recommendations for further enhancing university autonomy in Uzbekistan, including strategies for increasing funding and infrastructure support, promoting greater collaboration between universities and the private sector, and engaging in a dialogue with stakeholders to overcome resistance to change.

The research aims to provide new insights into the impact of university autonomy on curriculum and research activities in Uzbekistan, as well as to identify strategies for promoting academic excellence and innovation in higher education. The research outcomes will contribute to the existing literature on university autonomy and its role in promoting economic development, as well as provide guidance for policymakers and other stakeholders in Uzbekistan seeking to reform the country's higher education system. Ultimately, the outcomes seek to support the development of a more dynamic and innovative higher education sector in Uzbekistan that can help to address major societal challenges and contribute to the country's long-term development.

### **Methodology Statement**

This research is based on a literature review of relevant scholarly articles, reports, and government documents on the topic of university autonomy in Uzbekistan, as well as a case study of the National University of Uzbekistan and Tashkent State Agrarian University. The literature review was conducted using a comprehensive search strategy that included academic databases such as Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar. The search terms included "university autonomy," "higher education reform," "curriculum development," "research activities," and "Uzbekistan."

The literature review focused on articles and reports published in the past decade that provided insights into the current state of university autonomy in Uzbekistan, as well as recommendations for reform. We also reviewed relevant government documents,



including the Decrees of the President and Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Law on Education, and the National Program for Personnel Training.

In addition to the literature review, this research includes a case study of the National University of Uzbekistan and Tashkent State Agrarian University which are the largest and oldest universities in the country. The case study involved interviews with faculty members, university administrators, and students, as well as a review of the university's academic programs, research activities, and governance structure. The case study focused on the university's experience in implementing autonomy and identifying the remaining challenges that the university faces in fully realizing its potential.

The findings from the literature review and the case study were analyzed using a qualitative approach that involved identifying themes and patterns in the data. The analysis focused on the benefits and challenges of increased university autonomy in Uzbekistan, as well as the strategies that universities are using to overcome these challenges.

Limitations of this study include the limited availability of data on university autonomy in Uzbekistan, as well as the focus on a couple cases study. However, we believe that the findings from this study provide valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities facing universities in Uzbekistan as they seek to implement autonomy and promote academic excellence and innovation.

As an outcome, in the process of data collection, employs a mixed-methods approach that combines a literature review with a case study to examine the impact of university autonomy on curriculum and research activities in Uzbekistan. By using this approach, research outcomes provide a comprehensive analysis of the benefits and challenges of increased university autonomy in Uzbekistan and identifies strategies for promoting academic excellence and innovation in higher education.

### **Key Conclusions and Contributions Statement**

The findings of the research suggest that increased university autonomy in Uzbekistan has led to a more diverse curriculum, greater collaboration with international partners, and a greater emphasis on interdisciplinary research. Universities in Uzbekistan have been able to introduce new programs in areas such as entrepreneurship, social sciences, and humanities, and have also been able to partner with international universities to establish joint programs and exchange opportunities.

The case study of the National University of Uzbekistan and Tashkent State Agrarian University revealed that increased autonomy has also led to greater flexibility in academic programs, allowing students to choose from a wider range of courses and to customize their degree programs to fit their individual interests and career goals.

However, universities in Uzbekistan still face challenges in implementing autonomy. One major challenge is limited funding and infrastructure, which has hindered the development of new programs and research initiatives. Despite the introduction of a competitive grant system for research funding, many universities still struggle to secure funding for their projects, and there is a lack of investment in research infrastructure such as laboratories and equipment.

Another challenge is resistance from conservative elements within society, who view increased autonomy as a threat to traditional values and educational practices.

Furthermore, there is a lack of capacity and expertise among university staff, particularly in areas such as research management and project development. Many universities in Uzbekistan still rely heavily on traditional teaching methods and have yet to

fully embrace new pedagogical approaches such as project-based learning and experiential education.

Despite these challenges, the research outcomes suggest that increased university autonomy has the potential to play a key role in promoting economic development and addressing major societal challenges in Uzbekistan. Universities can contribute to the development of a knowledge-based economy by producing highly skilled graduates who can contribute to innovation and entrepreneurship, as well as by conducting cutting-edge research in areas such as renewable energy, healthcare, and agriculture.

In addition, universities can play a key role in addressing major societal challenges such as poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation through their research and outreach activities. For example, university researchers can work with communities to develop sustainable agriculture practices or to identify innovative solutions to water scarcity. Universities can also work with government and civil society organizations to develop policies and programs that promote social inclusion and address the needs of marginalized groups.

The research outcomes revealed recommendations for addressing the challenges that universities face in implementing autonomy and promoting academic excellence and innovation in higher education. One of the suggestions indicates greater public awareness and engagement in the transition to university autonomy is necessary to overcome resistance to change and ensure the success of the reform (Khasanov, 2023b).

These recommendations include increasing funding and infrastructure support for universities, promoting greater collaboration between universities and the private sector, and engaging in a dialogue with stakeholders to overcome resistance to change. According to Khasanov (2023a), the lack of funding and infrastructure support remains a major challenge for universities in Uzbekistan to fully realize their potential under autonomy.

In conclusion, this research highlights the importance of increased university autonomy in promoting academic excellence and innovation in higher education in Uzbekistan. While there are challenges that universities face in implementing autonomy, the findings of this research suggest that the benefits of increased autonomy outweigh the challenges, and that universities can play a key role in promoting economic development and addressing major societal challenges in the country. The research outcomes provide valuable insights into the current state of university autonomy in Uzbekistan and identifies strategies for further enhancing autonomy and promoting academic excellence and innovation in the country's higher education sector.

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# DIGITAL ASSESSMENT TOOLS FOR MEASURING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF STUDENT SELF-STUDY: BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS

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**Keywords:** self-directed learning, digital assessment, online quizzes

**Description:** In this article, we look at how digital tools can be used to assess students' self-learning skills. This article describes a variety of digital tools available to assess self-study, such as learning management systems, online quizzes, and self-reflective journals. Meanwhile, this study also discusses the strengths and limitations of these tools and provides guidance to educators on how to use them effectively to assess students' self-study.

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## Problem Statement

Self-learning is an essential component of effective learning and can help students develop critical thinking, self-motivation, and self-regulation skills. With the increasing prevalence of digital tools in education, students have access to a plethora of online resources to support their self-directed learning efforts. However, evaluating the effectiveness of self-learning can be challenging for educators. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in using digital tools to assess self-learning. The increasing availability of online resources and learning platforms has made it easier for students to engage in independent learning. However, measuring the effectiveness of this type of training can be difficult. According to a study by Hossain et al. (2021), digital tools can provide a more objective and accurate assessment of student self-learning skills compared to traditional methods. In this article, we review the use of digital self-learning assessment tools and their advantages and limitations. Boud and Falchikov (2006) stated that traditionally, educators have relied on subjective measures such as self-reporting and peer evaluation to assess students' self-study. However, these methods are often unreliable and can be biased because of individual perceptions and personal biases. Digital assessment tools, on the other hand, offer a more objective and accurate assessment of students' self-learning skills. By tracking students' online learning activities, such as time spent on different resources, engagement with learning materials, and completion of online assessments, digital tools can provide a more comprehensive picture of students' self-study efforts. To be precise, by tracking students' online learning activities, such as time spent on various resources, interacting with learning materials, and completing online assessments, digital tools can provide a more complete picture of students' self-directed learning efforts. Digital tools can enable educators to provide personalized feedback and support to individual students, which can further enhance their learning outcomes. (Pellegrino, 2019). In addition, digital tools can enable teachers to provide personalized feedback and support to individual students, which can further improve their learning outcomes. Despite the potential benefits, the use of digital self-learning assessment tools also has limitations, including concerns about data privacy,

technology barriers, and the need for proper training and support for both educators and students. It is important to explore the strengths and limitations of digital assessment tools and to develop effective strategies for using them to assess students' independent work.

### **Benefits of Digital Tools**

Digital assessment tools are becoming increasingly popular in education, bringing many benefits to both students and educators. A significant benefit is the objective and accurate assessment of students' self-study skills that digital tools provide. Traditional self-assessment methods, as well as self-report and peer assessment, can be subjective and unreliable due to individual perceptions and personal biases. In contrast, digital tools track students' online learning activities, such as time spent on various resources, interaction with learning materials, and completion of online assessments online, providing a more complete picture and goal of students' self-study efforts. Digital assessment tools can also identify student strengths and weaknesses in real time, allowing educators to provide targeted support and interventions to improve learning outcomes.

The successful use of digital assessment tools for assessing self-study requires proper training and support for both educators and students. This includes providing guidance on how to use the tools effectively, how to interpret the results, and how to provide feedback to students. (Gikandi et al., 2011). Digital assessment tools can provide immediate feedback to students, which can enhance their motivation and engagement in self-study. Likewise, by providing feedback on their progress, students can adjust learning strategies and focus on areas for improvement. Commonly, this personalized feedback can also help students identify their strengths and build on them to achieve their learning goals. So, digital assessment tools can provide a more effective way to assess self-directed learning, freeing up time for educators to focus on other areas of teaching and learning. Digital assessment tools offer numerous benefits for assessing student self-study, including objective evaluation, personalized feedback, and efficient assessment but it is essential to use these tools in an ethical and responsible manner, addressing concerns around data privacy and ensuring proper training and support for educators and students. Digital tools for self-regulated learning (SRL) support students' development of metacognition, providing feedback on their learning, and enhancing their self-awareness of the learning process (Papamitsiou and Economides, 2014, p. 207). Meanwhile, there is another benefit of digital assessment tools in assessing student self-study is their ability to promote metacognition and self-regulated learning. Supportably, by providing students with access to their learning data, digital tools can help them to become more aware of their learning processes and to develop strategies for monitoring and regulating their learning. If a student is spending a disproportionate amount of time on one type of learning activity, such as reading, but not on another, such as practising problems, the digital tool can provide feedback and encourage the student to adjust their study habits and this can lead to more effective self-study, as students become more adept at monitoring their own learning and adjusting their strategies as needed.

Digital assessment tools also offer opportunities for collaboration and peer learning. Digital tools provide opportunities for students to share and learn from one another. Through collaboration, they can share their learning, provide feedback, and scaffold one another's learning" (Yoon and Istance, 2013, p. 49). By sharing learning data with peers, students can compare their study strategies and learning outcomes, providing opportunities for discussion and collaboration. This can enhance students' understanding of the material and their ability to apply it in different contexts. Accordingly, digital

assessment tools can provide a more accurate and detailed picture of students' self-study efforts, enabling educators to make more informed decisions about teaching and learning. Besides by analyzing student data, educators can identify areas of the curriculum that require more attention, adjust their teaching methods, and provide targeted support to individual students. This can lead to more effective teaching and learning and better outcomes for students.

### **Limitations of Digital Tools**

Despite the advantages of digital assessment tools in assessing student self-learning, there are also some limitations that should be considered. For example, digital assessment tools may not capture all aspects of self-study, such as offline reading or note-taking. (Jia and Lin, 2021). In addition, the accuracy of digital tools can be affected by technical problems or errors in data collection. Nevertheless, when used responsibly and in conjunction with other assessment methods, digital tools can provide valuable insights into students' self-directed learning efforts and help improve learning outcomes. Another limitation of digital assessment tools is that they cannot capture qualitative aspects of self-learning that are difficult to measure objectively, such as motivation, curiosity, and creativity. Additionally, students may be tempted to engage in game strategies such as quickly clicking on resources or opening multiple tabs at once to increase their scores without engaging in deep learning. Therefore, it is important that teachers carefully interpret data generated by digital tools and use their professional judgment to assess the quality and validity of students' self-directed learning efforts.

Ethical issues must also be considered when using digital assessment tools. Hence, the protection of student privacy and data must be respected, and teachers must ensure that all data collected is used for educational purposes only. Besides teachers must provide clear instructions to students on how their data will be collected and used and obtain their consent where necessary. Anyway, some students may feel uncomfortable using digital tools to track their learning, as it may be perceived as intrusive or overly controlling. This can negatively impact their motivation and engagement and even lead to dishonesty or cheating behavior. By providing students with clear explanations of how the tools work, what information they collect, and how this information will be used to support their learning, educators can increase students' motivation and engagement with the tools. (McLeod, 2019).

Teachers can use a variety of strategies to mitigate the limitations of digital assessment tools, such as integrating multiple data sources, providing opportunities for self-reflection, and emphasizing the process rather than the outcome of learning. For example, by combining data from digital tools with self-report data and observations, teachers can gain a more holistic view of student learning and tailor instruction accordingly. Furthermore, by encouraging students to reflect on their own learning and set personal goals, teachers can foster metacognition and self-regulated learning, which in turn leads to self-efficacy and can improve the quality and effectiveness of learning activities. To overcome this limitation, teachers can involve students in the assessment process and emphasize the benefits of using digital tools for independent learning. By providing clear explanations to students about how the tools work, what data they collect, and how that data is used to support their learning, teachers can foster student enthusiasm and engagement with the tools.

### **Some Types of Digital Assessment Tools**

There are several types of digital assessment tools that can be used to assess student self-learning. One common type is Learning Management Systems (LMS), which allow teachers to create online quizzes and assignments, track student progress, and provide feedback. Another type is online learning platforms that offer a variety of resources, such as videos, simulations, and interactive activities, and collect data on how students engage with the material. Social media and discussion forums can also be used as digital assessment tools to encourage student collaboration and peer feedback. In addition, digital tracking tools can provide valuable information about students' online learning activities, such as time spent on various resources, clicks and mouse movements, which can be analyzed to identify patterns and inform instructional strategies. Finally, personalized learning systems that use algorithms to personalize the learning experience based on student performance and preferences can also be used as digital assessment tools to assess self-directed learning efforts. Overall, the combination of these digital assessment tools can provide educators with a more complete understanding of students' self-learning efforts and help improve learning outcomes. Types of digital assessment tools can be used to assess student self-study:

- Learning Management Systems (LMS)
- Online educational platforms
- Social media and discussion forums
- Digital tracking tools
- Adaptive learning systems

There are several online quizzes that can be used to assess student self-study. Here are some examples:

The first and most popular is Kahoot. It is a game-based learning platform that allows teachers to create interactive quizzes and surveys. Students can take the test using their smartphone, tablet, or laptop.

Another one is Quizlet. It is an online learning tool that allows teachers and students to create flashcards, quizzes, and other learning aids. The platform uses a variety of learning techniques, such as spaced repetition and gamification, to help students remember information.

Google Forms can also be used as a survey tool that allows teachers to create quizzes and assessments with multiple choice, short answer, and other question types. This tool integrates with Google Classroom and allows for automatic grading and feedback.

Who knows Socrative? It is a cloud-based assessment tool that allows teachers to create quizzes, surveys, and other assessments. The tool provides real-time data and analytics, allowing educators to monitor student progress and adjust instruction accordingly.

Good for visual learners is Edmodo. It is a social learning platform that allows teachers to create quizzes and assignments, manage discussions, and track student progress. The platform is designed to promote collaboration and peer learning and offers a variety of assessment options to support self-learning efforts.

## **Conclusion**

As technology continues to advance, we will likely see more sophisticated digital assessment tools designed specifically to measure the effectiveness of student

independent learning (Chen et al., 2021). These tools may include advanced algorithms that can analyze student data in real-time. With the increasing popularity of online education and distance learning, digital assessment tools are becoming an important part of the teaching and learning process. Digital assessment tools offer many advantages for assessing students' self-directed learning efforts, but there are also limitations that should be considered. Teachers should use these tools responsibly and in conjunction with other assessment methods to better understand student learning outcomes. By overcoming the limitations of digital tools and engaging students in the assessment process, educators can increase the accuracy and usefulness of assessment results and support student learning outcomes. Digital assessment tools have the potential to revolutionize the way we assess students' self-research efforts and improve teaching and learning outcomes. It is important to use them responsibly, overcome their limitations, and provide appropriate guidance and support to students. Digital assessment tools offer numerous benefits in assessing student self-study efforts. Hence, they provide objective and accurate evaluations, promote metacognition and self-regulated learning, and enable collaboration and peer learning but it is important to consider their limitations, use a combination of assessment methods, address ethical issues, and select and use the tools appropriately based on the learning objectives. By doing so, educators can harness the power of digital tools to improve teaching and learning outcomes. While there are advantages and limitations to using digital assessment tools to measure student self-efficacy, the potential benefits are clear. Cui et al., (2019) mentions that digital assessment tools have the potential to play a significant role in helping educators to understand and improve the self-study skills of their students. By using these tools and using them responsibly and knowingly, teachers can gain a more detailed and accurate understanding of student learning, which leads to better outcomes and more fun and leading to an effective learning experience.

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## POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS AS CURIOUS RESEARCHERS – CASE OF MA IN LEARNING AND TEACHING AT WIUT

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**Key words:** research skills, curiosity-driven research, research capacity, autonomy

**Description:** The article presents the author's observations as a researcher and module leader on the notion of curiosity driven research. This concept was applied in teaching of the module and providing facilitative approach during supervision of Postgraduate students. Developing Educational Research Practices is the pre-requisite module for the Dissertation in Master of Art in Learning and Teaching including pathway in TESOL course at WIUT. The course is designed to support in-service teachers and academics to develop their scholarship and understanding of contemporary teaching and learning approaches they use in their professional practice. Postgraduate supervisors expect a sufficient level of autonomy in their students, there is a clear need to scaffold the process so students can become autonomous researchers, and by evoking curiosity as a primary reason for research students may be motivated to develop research skills by doing and exploring topics which are interesting for them in the first place and as a result this can support them to be more autonomous.

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**Problem Statement:** How to support students research skills development through employing a curiosity-driven approach in teaching and learning.

**Goal Statement:** The goal of this paper is to present ideas and thoughts on how research skills development should be approached for Postgraduate students.

### **Methodology Statement**

We at MA in Learning and Teaching course have one of the main graduate attributes which addresses development of research and scholarship to facilitate critical thinking of our students. Dissertation is a core component of student's studies. To support students, we have a Developing Educational Research Practices module, where students are introduced/reminded of research methods and navigated through the research process. The Dissertation Module has been running for 2 years now every semester for a different cohort of students. The population of students is diverse, coming from different backgrounds, usually without any exposure to research methods as a separate discipline. A flipped approach was applied for every session, through giving students research papers to read before the session, with the aim to engage them in debates and discussions as critical researchers. My aim as a facilitator of the session was for students to look at other people's research not as readers or users but rather peer researchers. I had a challenge as facilitator to bring students' attention to observe the process authors went through and "truth" they investigated as a result of their studies for every paper they had to read. We would usually use the following questions to facilitate our discussions with students:

- How do authors see the knowledge?
- What are authors' conceptual frameworks?
- What is authors' worldview?
- How are they using theories?
- How can knowledge be revealed according to authors?
- Did this paper make you so curious that you want to read more?

Students coming from local educational institutions were challenged in their beliefs as they were used to accept words of senior academics as one truth, which cannot be challenged. This was also my challenge to make students trust and free themselves to question other people's research outcomes and views. To understand how their perceptions changed I asked them to present a metaphor "I and research" after the first session and the same metaphor at the last session of the module.

### **Key conclusions and Contributions**

I have been working for Westminster International University in Tashkent for 20 years, and supervising students at undergraduate and postgraduate level for the last ten years, but no formal training by my institution was provided for me during my professional practice. We have sessions and programs on teaching and learning, pedagogy, e-pedagogy but supervision seems to be ignored or overlooked by institutions. There is a clear need for formal institutional support to supervisors, as indicated well in literature (Pearson and Cryer, 2001; Pearson and Brew, 2002; Kayrooz and Kiley, 2002) with a focus on educating on how to support research students, engage and structure informal conversations and so on.

It is important to facilitate students to navigate towards the research idea which is the core of their interest. That idea usually drives research and can be a factor for success and motivation of students. From our discussions with my peer colleagues, I know that some of them try to interest students in their research rather than focusing on students', arguing that they are not able to clearly formulate the focus of their research.

Research being an important part of not only academia, but industry, society and simply life around us always has a purpose. We all can say that the reasons why we do research are to solve the problem, to fill the research gap, to respond to industry/business (Creswell, 2012; Punch, 2014). At the same time, we should be motivated by our research topic, and the above-mentioned reasons are mainly external. Thus, what internal reasons do we have to perform research? What drives us and many other researchers to investigate and discover, present ideas and look for other interpretations of events. The inner desire and motivation to perform research is driven by curiosity. Industrial revolution, rankings and financially driven research outputs sometimes diminish the role of curiosity driven research,

There are many definitions of curiosity, Arnone, Small, Chauncey, and McKenna (2011) offer one in the context of research - "Curiosity can be a powerful motivator of behaviour, initiating actions directed at exploring immediate environment to resolve uncertainty and make the novel known. (p.181)". I found this definition close to what I was trying to evoke in my students, challenge them to explore the environment around them –

their institution, students, themselves and resolve uncertainties they might have because of their professional practice.

The metaphoric representation of the vision of research worked in a very interesting way in our sessions. It made students look at the process and their role as observers. If at the beginning they presented the research process and themselves as cooks cooking by recipe in the kitchen, at the end of the module that became a beautiful forest they are entering to explore. One student saw it as a globe, but if at the beginning it was uncolored very bland globe, by the end she wanted to color it and explore what it is offering too. Another student at the end presented just wide opened eyes. One of the interesting ones was presented in the form of the following small essay. "When thinking about research, I see an ocean of ideas and unexpected thoughts. There are many islands and continents within the sea, but they only represent how little we know. It was hypothesized by Albert Einstein that Black Holes exist - theoretically. Only recently have we discovered that indeed he was right. The ocean, the sea, the unexplored waters are vast and unforgiving, but it is clear to me that with a boat and a paddle, one can overcome the largest of distances and fins yet unexplored lands. In the analogy of the boat, the paddle and supplies, research methods and theories make up the boat and most of its parts. Whether this is a journey that one can handle alone or needs help from other sailors with boats that are more developed, only depends on the course set by the sailor. Remember, sailors are not greedy, just a little grumpy from the ride and care a little too much about their boats." (WIUT, MALT student, 2022) So, the student sees research as a journey with the intention to explore unexplored.

The process of research is simple yet complex by added pressure from the external environment and expectations of academic society, requirements by institutions and state. The process starts with finding a topic, followed by exploring literature, designing methodology and finding and analyzing outcomes, if we add "devise curiosity" before finalizing the research question and "satisfying researchers curiosity" at the end of the process we are to lead the research process with curiosity. By adding this element in the process, we might have more interesting research outcomes, moreover, motivated students and researchers doing research and inquiry to find novelty rather than satisfying requirements suggested by institutions.

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# ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AMONG ENGLISH TEACHERS IN UZBEKISTAN: FACTS AND FINDINGS

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**Keywords:** NNEST, proficiency, efficacy, policy, Uzbekistan

**Description:** The article presents the findings of survey- and interview-based study conducted among English teachers of Uzbekistan to explore their English proficiency.

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## Problem Statement

The educational landscape in Uzbekistan is rapidly evolving, particularly in the English Language Teaching (ELT) space. In recent years, the federal government has placed significant emphasis on foreign language learning and teaching, with a particular focus on English language instruction. This emphasis has led to a surge in the number of universities offering English-Medium Instruction (EMI) programmes, which in turn has created a strong incentive for both prospective students and faculty members to improve their English language proficiency. In response to this rise in demand, universities such as Webster University in Tashkent, Westminster International University in Tashkent, and AKFA University have introduced programmes to train prospective English language teachers to meet the growing need for high-quality English language instruction.

The rapid surge of newly trained teachers in Uzbekistan's ELT landscape has brought to light concerns about their preparedness and capacity to teach effectively. This paper explores three questions related to these new teachers and their language proficiency:

1. What is the average language proficiency among English teachers in Uzbekistan?
2. How does English proficiency correlate to professional experience among English teachers in Uzbekistan?
3. How do English teachers in Uzbekistan conceptualise their own relationship to language learning and language proficiency?

There is a general consensus among researchers that a high level of English proficiency is essential for an English teacher to be effective. Researchers such as Mahboob and Dutcher (2014), among others, have pointed to the importance of language proficiency in the overall success of language teaching. Faez, Karas and Uchihara (2019, p. 3) found that “Teachers require language-specific competencies such as the ability to provide good models of English, maintain fluent target language use, identify student errors, provide appropriate feedback, and engage in improvisational teaching.” Furthermore, language proficiency is closely linked to self-confidence, which is considered by Eslami and Harper (2018) to be a major predictor of teacher success.

Institutional policies related to language proficiency among English teachers vary across different countries and institutions. The most renowned and popular English teacher training programs, the Cambridge CELTA and Trinity CertTESOL, require a minimum of C1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) scale to enter their programs. In Uzbekistan, the government has not set any minimum standards for language proficiency for English teachers, however, since 2021, they have established financial incentives for teachers who achieve C1+ in English on certain standardised exams (Norma.uz, 2021).

## **Survey Methodology and Findings**

To establish the average proficiency level among English teachers in Uzbekistan, and to investigate the relationship between language proficiency and teaching effectiveness, an anonymous online questionnaire was distributed to participants who self-identified as English language teachers in Uzbekistan. The questionnaire was shared within Facebook and Telegram groups dedicated to English language teachers in the country. Participants were asked to self-report their latest overall score on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) as an indicator of their language proficiency level. IELTS was chosen as an objective and widely recognized measure of English proficiency that is commonly used in Uzbekistan. In addition to IELTS score, the survey also asked respondents to report on a Likert scale of 1-5, how satisfied they were with their current salary, how easily they believed they could find a new job, if needed; and how confident they felt teaching English. In total, 84 respondents completed the survey.

According to the survey, the median overall IELTS score among English teachers in Uzbekistan is 7.0, with almost half of all teachers reporting an IELTS score corresponding to C1 (IELTS 7.0 or 7.5) on the CEFR scale. Approximately one-third of teachers reported a score corresponding to B2 (IELTS 5.5-6.5), while a significantly smaller number reported a score equivalent to C2 (IELTS 8.0-8.5, although no respondent reported an overall score higher than 8.0).

In addition to the findings related to language proficiency levels among English language teachers in Uzbekistan, the survey data also revealed several interesting correlations between language proficiency and other factors. Firstly, the data indicated a moderate correlation ( $r=0.384$ ) between language proficiency and pay satisfaction. Teachers who reported higher language proficiency levels were more likely to be satisfied with their current salary than those with lower proficiency levels. Secondly, the data showed a moderate correlation ( $r=0.327$ ) between language proficiency and job security, with teachers who reported higher language proficiency levels being more likely to believe they could, if needed, easily find a new job. However, there was only a weak correlation ( $r=0.219$ ) between language proficiency and feelings of confidence in the classroom, suggesting that teachers' perceived level of confidence in their teaching ability is not highly influenced by their language proficiency.

## Interview Methodology and Findings

To complement the survey data, interviews were conducted with 11 English teachers from Tashkent, Fergana, and Samarkand with IELTS scores ranging from 6.5-8.0. The interview questions were designed to elicit both objective information about the participants' experiences as well as their subjective opinions regarding the role of language proficiency in English language teaching. Some standard questions included:

- What training and qualifications have you completed related to teaching?
- Do you still study English? What do you do to improve your English?
- Are you satisfied with your current level of English? Why or why not?
- Do you think you have enough access to professional development?
- Do you think it is important for English teachers to have high English levels? What level is high enough?

The respondents' answers were then transcribed and analysed for trends, three of which are described below.

One of the major themes that emerged from the interviews was the concept of "enough English" for effective teaching. While about half of the participants believed that a B2 level was sufficient for an English teacher, the other half believed that C1 was required. However, each of the 11 interview subjects believed they had "enough English" to be an effective teacher. This contrasts with a study of non-native English-speaking teachers from Korea, Taiwan, and Japan, which found that many teachers believe their English proficiency is below the required level for effective teaching (Butler, 2004). One interpretation of this result may be that English teachers from Uzbekistan are disproportionately more self-confident in their teaching abilities than their colleagues from other Asian countries. The specific cause of this anomaly is unclear, as are the ramifications, if any, on the teachers' level of motivation to develop themselves professionally. This question merits further study.

Another trend that emerged from the interviews was a lack of ongoing formal language study among English teachers in Uzbekistan. None of the subjects at the time of the interview was engaged in English study in a formal setting, such as at language centre or in a university class. However, some subjects did indicate that they were engaged in informal study, such as reading books or using apps and websites. Some subjects also seemed to confuse language study with other types of learning, such as the study of linguistics or training for pedagogical skills.

In addition, some subjects reported that the language learning opportunities for teachers in Uzbekistan did not adequately match their needs and interests. Although they were aware of such opportunities, teachers felt that they were often either too expensive, too time-consuming, or too inflexibly structured. It is important to note that most teachers in Uzbekistan are women, a very significant number of whom have to balance family responsibilities with their professional commitments.



## **Key Conclusions and Contributions**

Based on the survey and interviews, the following key findings can be highlighted:

1. Roughly half of all English teachers in Uzbekistan are C1 users of English, however, roughly one-third are B2, which is below international and local standards.
2. There is a noticeable correlation between language level and pay satisfaction as well as job security among English teachers in Uzbekistan. Teachers with lower English proficiency tend to receive lower pay and enjoy less job security.
3. There is no strong correlation between language level and feelings of self-confidence among English teachers in Uzbekistan. Teachers in Uzbekistan are generally confident about their language level and its effect on their ability to teach effectively, at odds with regional trends.
4. Lack of ongoing formal language study is a significant issue among English teachers in Uzbekistan. While some subjects are engaged in informal study, many are not able to access professional development opportunities, including formal language study, due to financial or time constraints.

## **Recommendations**

To address the language proficiency gaps among teachers in Uzbekistan, it is recommended that the language proficiency requirements for entry into teacher training programs, such as MATESOL programs, be raised. This can help ensure that incoming teachers have a solid foundation in English, which is crucial for effectively teaching English to speakers of other languages. Raising the language requirements would also have the added benefit of increasing the likelihood that students understand the course material they are assigned, which would, in turn, translate into better teaching knowledge.

In addition to raising the language proficiency requirements, it is also recommended that teacher training programs integrate language learning into their curricula. This can help ensure that future teachers are continuously improving their language skills throughout their training and are better equipped to teach English to their students. This recommendation is in line with that of Eslami and Harper (2018), who argued that TESOL programs ought to consider language teaching as a part of, and not separate from, the professional training of non-native English-speaking teachers.

Moreover, policies should be developed to encourage ongoing language learning and professional development for in-service teachers. This could include financial incentives or release time from teaching duties to attend language courses. Furthermore, it is essential to promote a culture of continuous language learning among teachers in Uzbekistan. This can be done by further encouraging teachers to engage in informal language learning, such as reading books and watching TV shows while, at the same time, providing support in the form of language learning resources, materials, and mentorship. Finally, there needs to be a greater awareness of the importance of language proficiency among policymakers, school administrators, and the wider community to

create an environment that values and supports the ongoing language learning and professional development of English language teachers.

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# MAPPING THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE IN KAZUO COUNTY

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**Keywords:** linguistic landscape; mixed research methods; ethnic minority; language policy

**Description:** The article presents the findings of linguistic landscape analysis in Kazuo County in China. The study adopted a mixed method to explore the linguistic landscape in the Kazuo County of China, expected to provide references for the establishment of linguistic landscapes in ethnic minority areas and the improvement of language policies.

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## Problem Statement

Languages spoken by members of minority racial or ethnic groups are vital resources for social interaction and cultural production. China has 55 ethnic minorities with more than 80 different languages. In a sense, ethnic minorities symbolize the spiritual and historical culture of the nation, with each nation's language presenting its own distinctive cultural heritage. In recent years, there has been an increased interest in linguistic landscape research, particularly in multilingual and multi-ethnic settings. Linguistic signs are the main research object of the linguistic landscape, and the use of language in private signs is relatively free and diversified, which reflects the personal preference and demands of sign makers (Shang and Zhao, 2014).

At the end of the 20th century, Landry and Bourhis (1997) first proposed the definition of linguistic landscape in a study on Quebec: those in public road signs, billboards, street names, place names, shop signs, and government buildings. The language on public signs constitutes the linguistic landscape of a certain territory, region, or city group. This is the definition with the highest recognition, pointing out the linguistic landscape concept. Furthermore, the two main functions of the linguistic landscape are symbolic function and informative function. Until now, linguistic landscape studies have entered a fast-developing stage with wider research objects and richer theoretical research frameworks, and more journal papers and special conferences are emerging.

Although empirical research on the linguistic landscape has been carried out for a long time, only few related papers on the linguistic landscape in Northeast China can be retrieved on the Internet. For example, Shao (2020) investigated the bottom-up linguistic landscape of Harbin Central Street, while Yang and Liu (2020) used site semiology as a framework to explore the linguistic landscape of the Dalian underground. Research on the linguistic landscape of Northeast China is extremely limited, and there is very little literature on the linguistic landscapes of minority groups in this area. Therefore, through the exploration of the linguistic landscapes of minority groups in Northeast China, the author hopes to enrich the relevant research in this field.

## Method and Data

The research site is Harqin Zuoyi Mongol Autonomous County, which is abbreviated as Kazuo County, a subdivision of Chaoyang, Liaoning Province. It is located in the western portion of Liaoning Province, a significant area of the Circum-Bohai Sea

Economic Zone. Kazuo is home to 18 different ethnic groups at the end of 2017, including Mongolians, Manchus, and Huis. Mongolians make up the majority of these minorities, making up approximately 90,000 people or 21% of the country's overall population. In this study, the center street named Minzu Street is selected as the research site in order to investigate the private signs in this area.

The overall study adopted a mixed method with both qualitative and quantitative analysis, specifically including field observation methods by photographing with a camera and in-depth interviews with residents to learn their perspectives on the local linguistic landscape, which enables the empirical study more expeditiously and efficiently (Morse, 2016). To ensure the effectiveness of the interviews and facilitate the subsequent transcription of the text, the author recorded the entire interview process and protected the privacy of the interviewees. In the end, the total number of photographs was 127 with visibility and accountability. And 10 participants including shop owners and consumers were invited to take part in a face-to-face interview.

### **Findings Statement**

We have gathered quantitative data on the contents of language signs concerning language code, code combination, dominant code, and code size, which is a way of mapping the linguistic landscapes of Kazuo.

Through analyzing the quantitative data, it was found that the language of the signs on Minzu Street of Kazuo contained three languages: Mongolian, Chinese, and English. Most of the signs are bilingual (N=118, accounting for 93%), followed by trilingual (N=7, accounting for 5%), with the lowest proportion being monolingual (N=2, accounting for 2%). Among bilingual signs with the highest proportion, all of them are combined with Chinese and Mongolian, with a larger Chinese font occupying the middle of the sign, while the translated Mongolian content is located directly above the Chinese characters in a relatively smaller font. To highlight the integrity of signs, the fonts of Mongolian and Chinese are in the same color, but in different sizes. Among trilingual signs with Chinese, Mongolian, and English. Chinese continues to occupy the most prominent position, which is in line with the Chinese policy of promoting Mandarin and standardizing Chinese characters as the common language. For example, the trilingual sign “水星家纺” (Mercury Textiles) has its Mongolian version above it and the English word “MERCURY” on the left. The emphasis on the word “Mercury” shows Kazuo's government is committed to creating an international business environment and demonstrates the internationalization of the city. Another trilingual sign “辽宁省农村信用社” (Liaoning Rural Credit Cooperatives) adopts a top-bottom layout with the languages respectively being Mongolian, Chinese, and English. Furthermore, the monolingual signs are those in English, such as "ANTA SPORTS", and those in Chinese. However, there is no monolingual sign written in Mongolian, which means that although it belongs to Mongol Autonomous County, Mongolian is still not the mainstream, and citizens living in this area rely on Mandarin to make daily communication. To conclude, the language codes of Minzu Street in Kazuo County are monolingual, bilingual, and trilingual, while the code combinations are Chinese, English (monolingualism); Chinese+Mongolian (bilingualism); Chinese+Mongolian+English (trilingualism). The dominant language code is mostly Chinese, which has the largest code size of three, followed by English and Mongolian.

For the qualitative data, in order to better understand the linguistic landscape in Kazuo, especially the perceptions and feelings of local residents, the author conducted

face-to-face interviews with the shop owners of the bilingual and multilingual signs. Based on the recorded interviews, it was figured out that the shop owners of bilingual signs did not understand the meaning of their Mongolian signs, rather they could not read Mongolian. Some of the shop owners said that they were used to bilingual signs, they did not pay attention to the content of their Mongolian signs, and they just followed requirements and regulations from the government. At the same time, an interviewee stated that the Committee on Ethnic Affairs is responsible for the unified management of Mongolian cultural dissemination across the city, according to which, the author found that the latest version of the *Regulations on Mongolian Cultural Work in Harqin Zuoyi Mongol Autonomous County* was updated on 28 October 2021. It clearly states that the citizens should respect and promote the traditional Mongolian culture with harmony, and gradually improve the iconic Mongolian facilities in Kazuo County. As for the owners of the trilingual signs, they believe that English was used to attract customers' attention and made their shops look stylish.

Moreover, some young consumers shopping on Minzu Street were also interviewed, and all of them supported the government's approach to promoting Mongolian culture. Because some schools also offer Mongolian courses, in this way, students are able to speak few words of Mongolian through studies. When asked whether they still used Mongolian for daily communication, they said that they hardly communicate in Mongolian, however, some elder citizens spoke a lot. Mongolian, as a representative of the ethnic language and culture of Kazuo County, is urgent to be promoted and spread. Therefore, it is well-defined that language policy in Kazuo County has the greatest influence on the linguistic landscape, and secondly, its symbolic function far exceeds the informative function concerning functions of the linguistic landscape.

### **Key Conclusions and Contributions**

Governments and people around the world have become increasingly aware of the importance of preserving and promoting local culture and language, and linguistic landscape can reflect the cultural diversity and social changes of a region. This study used the mixed method to explore the linguistic landscape in the Kazuo County of China. Findings showed that: First, the combination of Mongolian and Chinese is the most commonly used language form in this region. Second, language policy is the most important factor that affects the linguistic landscape of a region. Last, the appearance of English is often intended to attract customers in these linguistic landscapes.

This study is expected to provide references for the establishment of linguistic landscapes in other ethnic minority areas and contribute to the improvement of language planning policies. However, the study has certain shortcomings, such as the small number of interviewees and the fact that only one street was selected to represent the linguistic landscape of Kazuo County. Therefore, it is hoped that scholars can be able to make more detailed studies with more comprehensive data in the future.

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# CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS FOR UZBEK LANGUAGE EDUCATION AT TOKYO UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN STUDIES (TUFS) OPEN ACADEMY IN THE POST-COVID ERA

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**Keywords:** online lessons, Uzbek language education, TUFS Open Academy, post-COVID

**Description:** The article shares the author's experiences in teaching the Uzbek language at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (TUFS) Open Academy (TOA) and reflect upon the issues surrounding Uzbek language education in Japan.

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**Problem Statement (research question):** This study aims to describe the current conditions of Uzbek language education in Japan and propose solutions to enhance it.

**Goal statement:** I insist that teaching methods in TOA are an advanced attempt to be suitable for the (post-)COVID era by reflecting on the process of teaching Uzbek in Japan so far.

## Methodology Statement

The methods and data of this study include outlining the current state of Uzbek language education in Japan, providing basic information about TOA and Uzbek language lessons, and suggesting ways to overcome the barriers that hinder online lessons.

This study initially discusses the state of Uzbek language education in Japan. Uzbek is not taught in high schools or junior high schools across Japan, apart from the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (TUFS). TUFS is the sole institution that consistently offers Uzbek language lessons, and it provides a dedicated program in Central Asian studies. For the purpose of this research, approximately 45 students were pursuing a major in Central Asian studies, and there were two full-time Japanese instructors involved. In the first year, the students focused on studying Russian. As for the second and third-year students, they studied both Russian and Uzbek. During the second year, the curriculum included two grammar lessons and one on conversation. In the third year, the students engaged in two reading lessons and one conversation lesson. The Japanese instructors, who are specialized researchers in the history of Uzbekistan and contemporary topics related to it, delivered lessons on grammar, and reading.

The Uzbek language textbook used for instruction is titled *Daigaku no uzubekugo* 『大学のウズベク語』 (*The Uzbek Textbook for University Students*) and is authored by Shizuo Shimada. (For detailed information, please visit the webpage of TUFS Press (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies Press, no date)) This textbook is written using both the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets. In the classes at TUFS, the Cyrillic alphabet is utilized by both teachers and students. Upon completing this textbook, students can achieve the A2 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

(CEFR). The syllabus for second-year students comprises Uzbek Grammar 1A, Uzbek Grammar 2A, Uzbek Grammar 1B, and Uzbek Grammar 2B (SHIMADA, no date and KIMURA, no date). During the reading lessons, students engage with materials such as elementary school textbooks, internet news sites, articles from encyclopedias, legal provisions, and a novel. For third-year students, the syllabus includes Uzbek Reading A1 and Uzbek Reading (Intermediate) B2\_ (SHIMADA, no date and KIMURA, no date). In terms of conversation lessons, a native-speaking teacher provides instruction. Second-year students follow the syllabus of Uzbek Conversation IA and Uzbek Conversation IB, while third-year students follow Uzbek Conversation IIA\_ and Uzbek Conversation IIB (TURDIAHUNOVA, no date). These conversation lessons cover a range of topics. Annually, around three students can study at the Tashkent State Institute of Oriental Studies for ten months, spanning from September to June.

Students can learn Uzbek through the Japan-Uzbekistan Association, which provides online Uzbek lessons (The Japan-Uzbekistan Association, no date). These lessons are divided into four levels: beginner, intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced. The instructor for this study was a native Uzbek speaker currently studying at TUFS. The lessons were conducted over a period of five months, with a frequency of once every two weeks for a total of ten sessions. I needed detailed information on textbooks, the number of students, and the content. Another option for students interested in learning Uzbek is the TUFS Open Academy (TOA), which offers language courses in multiple languages. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, TOA only conducted in-person lessons. However, since 2020, they have also started offering online language courses through Zoom and Google Classroom. As an Uzbek language teacher, I have taught at TOA since then.

TOA operates on a two-term system: the first term runs from April to July, and the second term runs from October to January. Each term consists of 15 lessons, with classes held once a week. Each lesson has a duration of 90 minutes, starting at 19:30 and ending at 21:00. Additionally, TOA provides three-day summer courses, with each day featuring a 150-minute lesson. However, these intensive summer courses are not within the scope of the present study.

During each term, students can study at one of three levels: beginner, lower-intermediate, and intermediate (TUFS Open Academy, no date). The course syllabus is provided in Japanese. In my lessons, I presented examples using Latin and Cyrillic alphabets, allowing students to choose their preferred variant.

The class sizes varied, with approximately 20 students in the beginner class, about 10 students in the lower-intermediate class, and six students in the intermediate class. Different textbooks were used for each level. In the beginner class, we utilized the textbook *Daigaku no uzubekugo* 『大学のウズベク語』 (*The Uzbek Textbook for University Students*). For the lower-intermediate class, we used *Uzbek: Real-Life Conversation for Beginners* (Lingvor, no date) and *O'zbekcha O'qish Kitobi* (*Reader of the Uzbek Language*; Institute of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, no date). In the beginner class, I read the explanations provided in the textbook, while the students took turns reading the examples aloud in front of the class. To practice listening and comprehension, students also had to listen to MP3 files (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies Press, no date) and answer practice questions. Before introducing new grammar concepts, we engaged in easy conversations in Zoom breakout rooms, which will be discussed in detail in the next section. During the first half of the lower-intermediate class, we focused on conversation practice. I prepared a worksheet, and the students filled in



the gaps in the worksheet before the lesson. In class, I explained grammar and vocabulary within the context of a conversation, and we practiced speaking using the worksheet in Zoom breakout rooms. In the second half of the lower-intermediate class, we shifted to reading short stories. Each student took turns reading sentences and translating them into Japanese. I explained and asked questions about these sentences based on grammar and vocabulary. In the intermediate class, we read both short and long texts. The method of progressing through the lesson was similar to that of the lower-intermediate class. After reading the short texts, I posed questions in Uzbek to the students, allowing them to practice their expressive language skills.

In the following section, I will discuss strategies to overcome challenges in online lessons. Moreover, I propose that students in foreign countries consider studying Uzbek to maintain their motivation at a high level.

### **Key Conclusions and Contributions Statement**

In this section, I will address the challenges faced when studying Uzbek in a foreign country and propose solutions to enhance Uzbek language education.

Firstly, one of the main challenges is the lack of opportunities to speak Uzbek in daily life, especially in countries like Japan. To tackle this issue, I have implemented various strategies to increase speaking and writing practice in my lessons. For instance, in the beginner class, I provide students with worksheets before the lesson, which they use for conversation practice. During the lesson, we utilize Zoom breakout rooms, where students are divided into small groups of approximately four students. They engage in conversations with their peers in these breakout rooms, while I rotate between them, providing feedback, answering questions, and pointing out mistakes. Additionally, after the lesson, students can submit their completed worksheets through Google Classroom, which I promptly review and return to them with feedback.

Secondly, there is a scarcity of language learning materials for Uzbek in Japan. Currently, the only readily accessible textbook is *Daigaku no uzubekugo* 『大学のウズベク語』 (*The Uzbek Textbook for University Students*), found in local bookshops. To address this gap, I am personally working on developing an Uzbek textbook specifically designed for beginners, which includes a skit to make learning more interactive and engaging. I also plan to create a grammar book tailored for intermediate-level learners.

Furthermore, I propose the implementation of a certification exam for students studying Uzbek. Certification exams serve as a motivational tool, encouraging students to maintain their dedication to learning the language. With a recognized certification, learners can demonstrate their proficiency in Uzbek, attracting more interest in Uzbek language education and fostering cultural exchanges between Uzbekistan and other countries.

Overall, by providing ample opportunities for speaking and writing practice, developing relevant language learning materials, and introducing certification exams, we can enhance Uzbek language education and sustain students' motivation to learn Uzbek in foreign countries. This, in turn, can contribute to increased interest in Uzbek and promote cultural exchanges between Uzbekistan and other nations.

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# THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL EDUCATION ON DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF LEARNER AUTONOMY. A LONGITUDINAL STUDY

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**Keywords:** learner autonomy, beliefs and behaviours, digital education

**Description:** The present study addresses the influence of digital education and looks into the possible changes in language learners' beliefs and their reported behaviour concerning autonomous language learning in a Hungarian secondary school context.

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## **Problem Statement**

One of the central themes of 21st-century pedagogical research is autonomous learning, which has taken on an independent life from the research area of learning motivation. According to the earliest definition of learner autonomy (Holec, 1981), the autonomous learner can control his or her learning process, and the most generally accepted definition (Little, 1991) is that autonomous learning involves students taking responsibility for their own learning process. This means that the autonomous learner is an active participant in the learning process, aware of their strengths and weaknesses, reflects on their own learning process, applies learning strategies, makes decisions, uses complementary tools and resources, organises their own learning outside the classroom and makes the most of their time in the classroom. As it is impossible to teach in a classroom setting everything students need to know, and because learning does not stop outside the classroom, skills which students can apply to other learning situations need to be taught. In the 21st century, the focus from content knowledge is increasingly shifting to skills and competence, therefore, the development of autonomous learning competencies may be one of the answers to the problems and challenges of today's education.

## **Approaches to Developing Learner Autonomy**

Autonomy has several dimensions and many different forms depending on individual and contextual factors. The level of autonomy in learning is influenced by the current state of mind, motivation, socioeconomic background, learning context, classroom atmosphere, group dynamics, and institutional expectations and limitations (Benson, 2013). Learners show autonomous behaviour in different ways, leading to different approaches to autonomy that need to be followed to promote learner autonomy. The resource-based approach underlines the importance of providing learners with materials and resources that support self-regulated learning (Benson, 2013). Access to opportunities for authentic language use without institutional control supports lifelong learning, encouraging learners to move from teacher dependence to autonomy.

According to the technology-based approach (Benson, 2013), technology empowers learners to take control of their learning. Participation in technology-assisted learning increases opportunities for foreign language interaction outside the classroom, supports students' control and assessment of their own learning process, and supports decision-making (Reinders and White, 2011). Learners involved in ICT communication showed a high level of autonomy and metacognitive awareness and used a large variety

of strategies for learning and communication (Figura and Jarvis, 2008). However, unrestricted access to information without proper guidance and feedback may hinder learners from taking greater responsibility in the learning process (Reinders and White, 2011).

### **Hungarian Aspects of Learner Autonomy**

Several analyses examine the effectiveness of teacher initiatives aimed at increasing learner autonomy, while other analyses look into self-regulatory strategies that can help students learn autonomously. Related studies carried out in the Hungarian public education context have shown that the willingness to learn autonomously is inversely proportional to age change (Csizér and Öveges) and that there are differences between different types of schools in this sense (Nikolov and Öveges, 2012). Comparing learners' beliefs about autonomous language learning and their autonomous behaviours, research (Szőcs, 2017) found a mismatch in favour of beliefs, showing that students' behaviours lagged behind their perceived responsibilities. Szőcs (2018) also claimed that socialised in a context where teachers' roles were associated with authority, students tended not to take responsibility for their own learning but tended to rely on their teachers to take control over their learning process and provide them with instructions.

As a result of the digital curriculum introduced under duress in 2020, it became clear that one of the most important competence areas of our time is the maximum development of student autonomy. In the renewed version of the National Core Curriculum (Nemzeti Alaptanterv, 2020), becoming an independent language learner appears with a completely new level of detail and weight compared to previous versions of the document. Autonomous learning is presented as a skill with age-appropriate expectations at different pedagogical stages: language learning strategies, language learning objectives, assessment of progress, real language use, and digital language use. The use of digital tools and interfaces in the target language is also a skill that is reflected at the level of separate learning outcomes in the National Core Curriculum (Nemzeti Alaptanterv, 2020), emphasizing that learners should be able to create, understand and interact with texts on digital channels and tools in a way that is also appropriate to the characteristics of the target language.

### **The Study**

The present study was conducted in a comprehensive secondary school in the south of Hungary, which provides training in IT, economics, and pedagogy. At the time of the research, the school employed 54 full-time and 7 part-time teachers, with a total of 642 students. Students could choose between two foreign languages, English or German. All classes from grades 9, 10, and 11 participated in the study as follows: 2019: n=324, 2020: n = 317, 2021: n=309, 2022: n=311. The age of the participants varied between 14 and 18 years, and at the time of the research, students studied a foreign language for 1 to 13 years.

As a response to the Covid-19 pandemic situation, primary and secondary education switched from attendance education to digital education on the 17th of March 2020, using different online platforms depending on the possibilities of individual institutions. The institution participating in the research used Microsoft Teams as the main interface for online education. In 2021 spring schools opened their gates again, operating on mixed platforms until the end of the school year, then from 2021 September schools went back to the regular routine.

## Research Questions

based on my experience as a language teacher, i have sensed the difficulty of promoting the autonomy of my students. to identify and understand the factors that lead to the development of autonomy in learning, since 2014, students in grades 9, 10, and 11 have been asked to answer a questionnaire at the end of each school year concerning their beliefs about their autonomy in language learning and the way it manifests in their behaviour during learning. the present study sought to answer the following questions: to what extent did digital education influence the relationship between students' autonomous beliefs and behaviour? which areas of autonomous learning have been most affected?

## Data Collection and Analysis

The choice of the data collection method was determined by the complex nature of beliefs influenced by many factors. The final version of the questionnaire was adapted from Chang (2007) and piloted, it requested demographic data on age, gender, and language learning experiences. The main part of the instrument consisted of 18 closed questions on a four-point Likert scale, which asked about the extent learners believed that it was their responsibility to be autonomous in different areas of the learning process (1: not responsible, 2: a little responsible, 3: responsible to some extent, 4: mainly responsible) and the extent they acted accordingly (1: never, 2: sometimes, 3: often, 4: usually). The study compared data collected in 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022, subjecting quantitative data to statistical analysis. The comparison of results over four consecutive years helped to provide a more detailed picture of the relationship between students' beliefs and behaviour and how it changed over the period studied.

As for their beliefs about learner autonomy, students showed the greatest responsibility in setting their own learning goals in the first two years and consistently high in the third year. In 2019, students scored high in stimulating their interest in language learning and deciding what to learn outside the classroom, whereas in 2020 they showed a higher level of responsibility for identifying their strengths and weaknesses and discovering the language without the help of a teacher. In 2021 they responded with an exceptionally high score (3.8) believing that it was their responsibility to improve their language skills independently, this slightly increased (3.83) in the next year. This may have been due to increasing trust in the interface used in the era of digital education, more conscious and routine use of tools, and familiarization with the diverse resources and learning materials used for language learning. During the period under review, there was an increase in the need for students to make decisions about the content of language lessons and extracurricular learning opportunities, as well as an increased sense of responsibility for identifying strengths and weaknesses. On the other hand, the research revealed that among the areas studied, students still felt least responsible for expressing an opinion about what to learn in class, despite an increased sense of responsibility for this during the study period. There was a sustained decrease (2.83/ 2.78/ 2.62/ 2.57) in responsibility for learning from fellow students. This may have been due to the isolation associated with digital education due to the lack of physical presence. The results showed that overall perceived responsibility increased only slightly in different areas of language learners' autonomy (3.02/ 3.06/ 3.12/ 3.13). In terms of autonomous behaviour, all three datasets showed that students most often set their own learning goals and encouraged their own interest in language learning. Furthermore, during the period studied, despite achieving low scores, identifying strengths and weaknesses (2.6/ 2.94/ 3.0/ 3.0), deciding what to learn outside the classroom (2.58/ 2.88/ 2.8/ 2.95), and assessing the success of their own development (2.7/ 2.71/ 2.9/ 3.01) showed the most significant increases.

Students reported that they were least independent in expressing opinions about what to learn in class (2.09/ 1.71/ 1.91/ 1.74), with the largest decrease during the study period. The research found that, like beliefs about autonomous language learning, autonomous behaviours underwent slight positive changes (2.71/ 2.75/ 2.75/ 2.76). As regards the relationship between perceived responsibility and behaviours in learning, the greatest convergence in values was seen in assessing progress success, maintaining interest in language learning, and peer learning. Beliefs and actual practice of setting your own goals in language learning, deciding what to learn outside of the classroom, and expressing opinions about what to learn in class areas diverged the most during the study period.

Comparing the extent to which learners considered it their responsibility to be independent in language learning (3.02/ 3.6/ 3.12/ 3.13) and the extent to which this was reflected in practice (2.71/ 2.75/ 2.75/ 2.76) during the period under review, it can be seen that students' autonomous behaviour in language learning lagged behind their perceived responsibility and that the duration of the transition to digital education did not significantly affect the relationship between beliefs and behaviour.

### **Key Conclusions and Contributions Statement**

The research revealed that there is not complete overlap in student beliefs and behaviours regarding learner autonomy. Concerning learners' autonomous beliefs and behaviour, the present research revealed a divergence in favour of beliefs, suggesting that students' behaviour fell short of their perceived responsibility: language learners' beliefs about autonomous learning did not result in autonomous behaviour. The questionnaire study revealed the contradiction between ideal and real responsibility. The degree of exposure to digital education did not affect the relationship between students' autonomous beliefs and behaviour. Presumably, because learners socialized in pedagogical contexts where teacher roles have traditionally been associated with concepts of authority, they preferred to rely on the teacher as a guide and source of information rather than responsibly take control of their own language learning process.

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# DYNAMIC LOW ATTAINMENT IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING: CHALLENGES, CONFLICTS AND AGENCY IN LEARNING ACTIVITY SYSTEMS

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**Keywords:** low attainment, foreign language learning, activity theory, agency, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

**Description:** This study aims to re-conceptualise low attainment as a contextualised, dynamic and developmental system and reveals how student agency plays a role in it.

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## Problem Statement

Low attainment in second language acquisition (SLA) has long been considered an important research area, and various studies have investigated the challenges that influence its process (Horwitz, 2001; Hu and Gao, 2018). The majority of these studies have focused on individual differences, using quantitative methods to seek generalisation over the cause-effect relationship between defined variables and low attainment (e.g., Bai, Hu and Gu, 2014; Habók and Magya, 2018; Hu and Gao, 2018; McDonald, 2006; Pishghadam and Khajavy, 2013; Sparks, Patton and Luebbers, 2019; Woodrow, 2006; Zhang and Xiao, 2006). Meanwhile, with the social turn in second language acquisition (Block, 2003), research has increased in numbers in regards to how contextual factors can bring difficulties to improving attainment (Cronquist and Fiszbein, 2017; Fakeye, 2010; Murphy, 2010; Rusli, Yunus and Hashim, 2018). Despite the momentum of studying social contexts, the contextualised and dynamic nature of low attainment (Pang, 2008; Zhang, 2003) and the role of student agency (Gao, 2010; Lantolf and Pavlenko, 2001) is still not fully understood. To fill this gap, we look into challenges faced by low-attaining students and re-conceptualise low attainment with activity theory that links the individual with the social (Leont'ev, 1981). From an activity theory perspective, low attainment is affected by contradictions (Engeström, 2001; 2014; 2018) in language learning activities that are constructed through students' challenging learning practices. Meanwhile, students use their mediated agencies (Ahearn, 2001; Gao, 2010; Xu and Lei, 2018) to interact with social influences, past experiences, and future goals (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2015), during which challenges or contradictions appear but can be resolved by discovering their developmental potential.

We aim to answer the following questions:

1. What are the challenges faced by low-attaining students from the perspective of activity theory?
2. How do students deal with these challenges with their agencies?

## Methods and Data

We adopted Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith and Osborn, 2003) which facilitates a naturalistic perspective of students' experience of learning

English. Four female students (Qi, Yang, Lin and Hui) from a prestigious high school in China were chosen through purposeful sampling to provide in-depth data concerning the experience of low attainment (Patton, 2015). Guided weekly journals (Alaszewski, 2006; Given, 2008; Kvale, 2009; Latham, 2002), synchronous online semi-structured interviews (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016) and asynchronous chat (Bryman, 2008; Bampton and Cowton, 2002; Bampton, Cowton and Downs, 2013) were used in this research to collect comprehensive data on low attainment. Due to travel restrictions during the pandemic, all data were collected online, and confidentiality was discussed with students to protect their privacy (AoIR, 2019). The whole process of data collection spanned over four months. As for data analysis, all data were analysed with activity theory following the analytical stages of IPA (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2013). The data were first categorised into different elements according to the activity system. After categorisation, IPA was carried out for each student to form individual learning profiles. Students' learning profiles were then iteratively compared, resulting in three superordinate themes: difficulties in using strategies to recite English words, challenges in understanding the English writing logic and negative washback effect on learning.

### **Findings Statement**

#### **1. Difficulties in using strategies to recite English words.**

The first challenge was related to problems in accessing effective learning tools or strategies to recite English words. In a typical example, Hui shared the challenges she faced when using the 'Pronounce-for-Spelling' strategy that demands an understanding of the English phonetic alphabet. She mentioned that for one thing, her secondary school teacher didn't teach her about the English alphabet, and for another, her high school teacher 'probably presumed that we all knew it, all understood it' (Interview), so the teacher did not further clarify the strategy. From the perspective of activity theory, Hui's inability to use this strategy suggests a contradiction between her and the strategy, which can be explained by two reasons. Firstly, Hui did not learn the English alphabet in secondary school, and her learning history mediated her current ability to use the 'Pronounce-for-Spelling' strategy. Secondly, the high school teacher's inaccurate image of the students affected Hui's progress since her teacher assumed that all students were already equipped with the relevant knowledge. In reference to activity theory, another contradiction between the subject (Hui) and the high school community was discovered. The little help offered by her teacher was an obstacle to her progress in learning English.

Nonetheless, Hui did not passively accept her struggles but used her agency to overcome her issues. She not only actively sought help from teachers and fellow students to aid her in understanding how the 'Pronounce-for-Spelling' strategy was meant to work but also kept searching for other tools independently to improve her recitation, such as mobile learning apps. Hui mentioned in the interview that she used an app called *Weici* ('Victory Vocabulary'), and she felt that 'it's pretty helpful, and I can recite words better.' (Interview)

#### **2. Challenges in understanding the English writing logic.**

Second, students mentioned that they found it challenging to grasp the internal logic of English writing, which affected their test results. Their lack of understanding was, however, mediated by the broader context. Qi and Yang's experience can best illustrate this. While Qi reported problems in the writing task, Yang found it challenging to grasp the internal logic of passages in reading comprehension. For both students, their challenges both lie in the difficulties in understanding the logic of English writing. When explaining

further what affected their difficulties, both students mentioned the lack of the teacher's explanations of English texts and that 'the teacher just goes through things very quickly' (Yang, interview). Instead, Qi mentioned that vocabularies, expressions, and grammar were the major focus in regular English classes. The emphasis on grammatical knowledge is based on the testing requirements. According to students, higher marks lie in having a greater command of basic vocabularies and grammar in the textbook, as well as uncommon and sophisticated words, expressions, and grammatical or sentence structures. With activity theory, the challenge in understanding the English writing logic represents a contradiction between students and the English learning and testing materials, which can be explained by the mediational role of the teacher's focus-on-forms teaching style that was further mediated by the underlying testing requirement.

To solve the difficulties, both students reported that they sought other resources to improve their writing and reading skills. While Yang explored English speeches made by celebrities to understand the logic of writing, Qi learnt a structure called 'Fei's three steps for writing' when attending an online extracurricular lesson, which significantly improved her understanding of the English writing logic.

### 3. Negative Impact of Washback Effect on Learning

Finally, test-oriented learning can pose challenges for students in two ways. A direct influence comes from the requirement in English tests for standard handwriting that has been introduced in recent years. The standardisation of handwriting has negatively impacted students' test scores, as they reported that their relatively low marks in writing tasks could be attributed to their non-standard handwriting. When students attributed the loss of marks in the writing task to their poor handwriting, a contradiction arose between their object to improving their test performances and the school's choice to make handwriting a criterion to judge a piece of writing. This rule subsequently mediated students' agencies as they concentrated on practising their handwriting. Importantly, their practices were accompanied by introspections about the legitimacy of using standard handwriting in tests. While Lin commented that it was 'strange', Hui thought it was 'very unfair' as she knew some students who wrote excellent content but 'lost many marks' due to bad handwriting.

The negative washback effect can also be shown in the accompanying learning routines. When learning English takes place within the school setting, students are further faced with the additional pressure of learning six subjects alongside English. Therefore, even when they attempted to put more effort into English, their intentions were always in conflict with the need to balance their learning schedules. These requirements from the school context always mediated students when they exercised their agencies to improve their English and put obstacles in this process.

For example, Qi, Yang and Hui tried to put more energy into English in non-academic ways such as watching movies and making pen pals, but their wishes to spend more time learning English could not always be realised, as the usual learning activities were rather challenging. When sharing their weekly learning routines, students often mentioned how other subjects meant the time and efforts they would otherwise give to English sometimes had to be reduced. Qi and Yang mentioned how maths occupied most of their time as they did less well in it. On the other hand, Hui devoted most efforts to learning Chinese. Although this is the subject in which she has the greatest advantage, she still hoped that 'it can earn more marks for me'. (Interview). Although all three students intended to learn English for non-academic purposes, they were always constrained by the pressure of

learning other subjects. Here, a contradiction occurred between the object of improving their English skills and the rule of the school community to balance efforts on all subjects. This contradiction further brought other contradictions within their objects (the object of improving English vs the object of gaining higher overall grades) and divisions of labour (language learners vs high school students). These students were high school students first and language learners second, and thus were not always able to prioritise English. Instead, they tended to give more attention to subjects in which they either excelled or underachieved to improve their overall test scores, which could slow the progress of improving their performance in English.

### **Key Conclusions and Contributions**

The first theoretical implication is that low attainment is socially mediated (Pang, 2008; Zhang, 2003). The findings point to the possibility that students in this study may use strategies less efficiently (Bai, Hu and Gu, 2014; Gerami and Baighlou, 2011; Hiromori, Matsumoto and Nakayama, 2012). However, this study goes beyond the cognitive domain to consider the social origins of ineffective learning, i.e., teachers' pedagogical practices, school rules for learning, and the constriction of the testing system. Therefore, strong theoretical perspectives are needed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the socially constructed nature of low attainment in the future.

Second, the mediational influence of contexts is by no means unilateral as it is continuously shaped by student agency. Student agency has not been much discussed in previous low attainment studies, as much of the research on social context often separates the learner from the learning environment, seeing the context exerting unilateral influence over students (e.g. Ghadirzadeh, Hashtroudi and Shokri, 2013). On the contrary, this study has shown that students used their mediated agencies to actively and creatively interact with them instead of passively accepting social influences (Lantolf and Pavlenko, 2001). Altogether, student agency resides in the interaction among past learning experiences and preferences, present conditions of the school context, and future orientations to strive for higher marks (Biesta and Tedder, 2007; Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2015).

Finally, the agency-context interaction has contributed to a dynamic and developmental view of low attainment. While much previous research has considered it static (e.g., Lei, 2016), this study, by introducing the concept of contradiction, has revealed that low attainment is highly dynamic. Within their seemingly stable low attainment, students were constantly solving contradictions that were arising and dissolving, disappearing, and re-emerging. The dynamics within low attainment indicate that attainment has developmental potential (Engeström, 2001). This process of solving different contradictions means that some gradual improvement can be achieved, eventually giving rise to a qualitatively new learning activity with better performance. Thus, more effort is required to explore the dynamics and developmental opportunities in low attainment, which could subsequently be implemented in real-life teaching and learning to change the negative perceptions of low attainment.

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# LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN THE BANI WORLD

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**Keywords:** language, BANI world, teaching, Arabic.

**Description:** Using Arabic as an example, the article discusses effective approaches to language teaching strategies aimed at developing skills that meet the challenges of the BANI world.

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## Problem Statement

A rapidly changing world requires teachers to design and deliver innovative programs that enable the learners to adapt to the unpredictability of the future with their advanced lifelong learning skills such as critical thinking, problem solving and other soft skills which can help them be successful graduates and land a job. In this regard, the role of productive teaching, learning and research in education is immense.

The high standard education is supposed to reflect the present-day realities, which may be described by the concept of the BANI world, implemented by the futurist and anthropologist Jamais Cascio in late 2018 as a part of a larger talk about global chaos for a big Institute for the Future meeting (Cascio, 2023). The acronym BANI stands for Brittle, Anxious, Non-linear, Incomprehensible.

## Goal Statement

The present research regards the model of language teaching, which is to be implemented in order to provide learners with the necessary competences in the ever-changing world. The uniqueness of the current situation lies in the fact that educational functions are often taken over by employers who are forced to regularly improve the skills of employees to meet the requirements of the time, while universities often implement outdated programs that do not always meet the challenges of time. The paper gives some examples of the Arabic language teaching methods aimed at developing in students the necessary competencies of the BANI world. The study is based on the experience of applying classical and innovative methods of Arabic teaching in full-time, distance and blended modes.

## Methodology Statement

Key ideas of the BANI world. The effectiveness of the educational model in general and teaching a foreign language is largely determined by the correspondence to the challenges of the time. In the context it is necessary to understand what is hidden behind the concept "BANI world", what are its criteria and what methods can be used for a successful response to current threats. In accordance with the theory, implemented by Cascio (2023), the BANI acronym describes a set of characteristics that have been associated with the modern environment.

Brittle refers to systems that are brittle and can easily break under stress or pressure. In the BANI world, it is essential to build resilient systems that can withstand unexpected events and disruptions.



- Anxious refers to the feeling of uncertainty and unease that comes with rapid change and unpredictability. In BANI, it is crucial to develop strategies to manage anxiety and build resilience in the face of uncertainty.
- Nonlinear refers to the fact that the future is not a linear progression of the past. In BANI, it is essential to embrace complexity and develop nonlinear thinking skills to navigate the unpredictable future.
- Incomprehensible refers to the fact that the future is becoming increasingly difficult to understand and predict. In BANI, it is essential to develop new ways of thinking and learning to keep up with the rapid pace of change.

The above conclusions may raise a question from an inexperienced researcher - what does all this have to do with foreign language teaching? In-depth study of the issue allows us to identify several areas that indicate the need to consider the BANI realities.

First, language is always a reflection of the processes taking place in society. As Sapir mentioned: "Language does not exist apart from culture, that is, from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives" (Sapir, 1921, p100). In this regard, anxiety, unpredictability, fragility, etc. in one form or another will manifest itself in the language at the macro and micro levels. The linguistic picture of the world is diverse, changing rapidly and often unpredictably. A competent specialist must have skills to adapt to variability and changeability. In the case of the Arabic language, variability is manifested in the variety of forms of its existence, which are constantly drifting and require specialists in the relevant field to fix changes and easily adapt to them. Specific aspects of learning Arabic will be discussed below, which should be considered when studying it, as well as the skills to work with it.

Secondly, the dynamism of the modern labor market has affected not only the nature of the professional skills of certain specialists, but also the disappearance of a number of professions and / or the emergence of new ones. This is probably one of the key points that create complexity today when teaching a foreign language. Established teaching methods do not always consider the emerging possibilities of machine translation, e-dictionaries and other software solutions that are actively used by modern students. At the same time, there is a need for personnel - linguists and translators who have information competencies and are able to create linguistic software products. And the "nonlinearity" of this kind of activity is manifested in the fact that no one can for sure predict what the next round of machine learning will lead to, and what the machine will generate tomorrow.

A striking example in this regard was the emergence of the GPT chat - the creation of the BANI world, which will inevitably affect the modern scientific and educational paradigm. Not surprisingly, this phenomenon and its use in education is already being studied in detail by the international scientific community (See, for example, Božić, 2023). Language education – methods of response to the BANI world. Language is considered to be the key tool of communication. In BANI communication is knowing how to transmit ideas, messages, values. It's not only essential for leaders, but also for every worker (Egyptian Banking Institute, 2022). Language education should focus on empowering learners to navigate a complex and rapidly changing world by developing linguistic, cultural, and digital competencies.

In this regard, a good example is the Arabic language, one of the key characteristics of which is the variability of the forms of its existence. A highly qualified Arabic language specialist must simultaneously be proficient in Classical Arabic, Modern

Standard Arabic, Arabic dialects, and a new heterogeneous idiom - the language of e-communications.

The study of Classical language, which implies the study of the text of the Qur'ān, medieval texts, is necessary for the preparation of an expert community, while knowledge of one or more Arabic dialects is also a necessary component in the Arabic language teaching.

Today there is an emphasis on teaching methods focused on providing communication skills. This approach is justified only if there is no task of training an expert community, specialists capable of in-depth analysis of original sources, scientific texts that provide answers to many disputes that arise in the public space. This kind of specialist must have a deep linguistic background, understanding the essence of each word morpheme. Experience shows that a one-sided communicative approach cannot provide this kind of competence.

An in-depth study of the grammar of any language allows you to develop mathematical abilities and critical thinking. In the case of Arabic, this circumstance is especially relevant, given its branched paradigm of inflection and word formation. At the same time, there are several conceptually and historically different approaches to describing the grammar of the Arabic language. The first refers to the Arabic grammatical tradition dating back to the seventh century AD. The second is based on the so-called Western European approach, which correlates with the development of General Linguistics. Given that both approaches are implemented in world practice, it is necessary to understand the "philosophy" of each of them, which differs significantly even when describing similar phenomena. It also seems interesting to use modern approaches to describe Classical Language, tracing the dynamics of its development. This kind of approach was applied in the development of a textbook "Grammar of the Arabic language on examples from the Qur'ān" (Redkin and Bernikova, 2019).

Finally, a new idiom that began to form about two decades ago is the language of social communication in the Internet space. This so-called e-Arabic has its own characteristics and rules for functioning in hyperspace. Considering the fact that at the moment the frequency of e-communications exceeds the frequency of face-to-face communication, the importance of understanding this variant of Arabic is obvious. Thus, effective Arabic learning requires the ability to quickly switch from one language variant to another, which will help to face the challenges of the world of BANI associated with Nonlinear, which refers to the fact that the future is not a linear progression of the past. This approach allows us to embrace complexity and develop nonlinear thinking skills to navigate the unpredictable future.

One important aspect of language that develops the ability to predict an unpredictable future is the mass media. It is the media that most quickly reflects the changes taking place in the language. The practice of reading the latest news is effective, which allows not only to develop language competencies, to see the real linguistic picture of the world here and now, but also to form socio-cultural competencies, thereby developing intuition, which is a necessary quality in the BANI world.

Encouraging intercultural competence (in classroom and through academic mobility) is also obligatory in the modern world. Arabs make up a diverse cultural group with varied dialects and customs which differ from region to region. Hence, Arabic language education should incorporate cultural elements in lessons to help learners effectively engage with and navigate different cultures, foster empathy, sensitivity, and intercultural dialogue.

Another feature of teaching language in BANI refers to incorporating technology. Technology-driven teaching tools, such as online forums, social media and educational apps can be an effective way to engage learners and enhance their experiences. Acquiring digital competencies, in relation to communication tools, is important to prepare learners to be versatile in responding to emerging needs of world.

Competency-based education in general and competency-based language teaching in particular addresses what the students are expected to do rather than what they are expected to learn about. The idea of the educational process is to create conditions for the development of students' experience of an independent solution of cognitive, communicative, organizational, moral, and other problems. It is the mastery of universal competencies that can meet the challenges of the time, regardless of the specific field of professional activity (Bernikova, 2017, p318).

Traditional methods of language teaching aim at providing learners with four major language skills which are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. All these skills need a special approach in the digital world. The present-day labore market witnesses a lack of experts in Arabic processing. That is why development of information competencies becomes an essential part of language teaching. Information competencies means the ability to find, process, use and communicate information in different formats. The awareness of Arabic inflectional paradigm provides not only in-depth knowledge of the language but skills for morphological modelling, which is of highly importance for Arabic language processing, machine translation solution, text and speech recognition, corpora processing and other practice-oriented instruments. Dealing with the language in cyberspace differs a lot from traditional social environment, it has a lot of specific features which should be reflected in the present-day solutions for Arabic teaching. The importance of considering the Arabic language in the context of technological development was highlighted in the "Status Report and the Future of the Arabic Language" (Ministry of Culture and Youth of the United Arab Emirates, 2021).

### **Key Conclusions and Contributions**

Statement Language teaching approach in the BANI world should strike a balance between traditional language teaching methods, such as lectures, reading, writing, and more modern teaching methods that incorporate interactive and immersive experiences focusing on real life communications.

Learners need to be able to think creatively and innovatively to navigate the nonlinear and incomprehensible elements of the environment. This can be encouraged by emphasizing research, critical analysis and synthesize findings apart from simple mugging up of language rules.

Effective language teaching trajectory in BANI should be comprehensive, covering all aspects of language development and be flexible, technological, practice oriented. BANI can be answered by the combination of professional and digital skills, openness towards new realities.

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