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Setting Up Shop in Uzbekistan: TESL Programs in New Markets

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Introduction

"Uzbekistan. You should go. Plan for a week." This was the directive I was given that would soon after lead to a project that seemed impossible. In 2018, I was tasked with launching in the Republic of Uzbekistan our master's in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) program, which I have directed since 2011. This master's degree became the first U.S.-based academic program to be offered in Uzbekistan and in 2019 we graduated 114 students from this rigorous year-long intensive program and then enrolled 170 new students in three locations for year two of this project along with opening the first U.S.-based university in Uzbekistan.

As English language teachers we are trained to address teaching in unfamiliar contexts by planning based on a needs analysis (Long, 1985) and knowledge of our learners (Brown, 2014), attending to syllabus design (Nunan, 1988), and being reflective practitioners (Richards & Lockhart, 1994) so we can improve upon the choices we have made. There is far less literature on program development, project implementation, and ELT leadership with notable exceptions being Brumfit's (1983) edited volume for the British Council on *Language Teaching Projects for the Third World* and Christison and Murray's (2009) edited volume *Leadership in English Language Education*. But guidelines on opening a full ELT academic program in a new country could not be located. To address the need for scholarship on establishing ELT programs in new markets, this report will summarize many of the challenges encountered and solutions developed along the way and will also help inform future program directors who seek to "set up shop" in a different country. It is organized into six major topics to consider. While to a certain degree projects like these require taking a leap of faith, setting up shop in a new market also requires attention to research, documentation, adaptability, communication, and relationships before you have the opportunity to celebrate success. These topics may serve as a framework for the planning, ongoing implementation, and assessment of a new program launch.

1. Do Your Homework

Before embarking on a project of any size in a new country it is important to do your homework. Whether you are being invited to set up shop (as was the case for us in Uzbekistan) or you are starting your own expedition, research ahead of time will prove invaluable. This requires learning about the general history, recent politics, the linguistic landscape, the educational system, and most importantly the role of English in that country. In terms of Uzbekistan, it is a relatively young country that declared its

independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency maintains an online World Factbook with detailed entries on countries that can serve as a good overview of basic facts and figures for any international project. Based on CIA (2020) data, Uzbekistan has a population of approximately 30.5 million and is the most populous nation in Central Asia. While the official language of the country is Uzbek (74.3%), other common languages are Russian (14.2%) and Tajik (4.4%), and in the western portion of the nation the Karakalpak language is co-official with Uzbek in the autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan.

In Uzbekistan, I found that many people were bilingual in both Uzbek and Russian and that in Samarkand (the second-largest city of Uzbekistan) many also spoke Tajik. Russian was frequently used in meetings as a Lingua Franca and then translated into English for me and my colleague, especially when we met with older Uzbeks who had been educated during Soviet times in Russian. But multiple conversations confirmed a long yet slow shift away from Russian to English as a Lingua Franca, which strengthened the invitation and reception of our TESL program in their country (see Hasanova, 2007 for her analysis of the broadening role of English in Uzbekistan).

Politically, the phrase most often used to describe changes in Uzbekistan has been "opening up." In preparation for my first visit, I used my time at the TESOL Convention in Chicago in 2018 to network and meet with two former English Language Specialists from the U.S. Department of State, the Regional English Language Officer for Central Asia, and an Uzbek faculty member attending the convention. The four shared with me a few cautionary tales but primarily stories of change and opportunity, which encouraged me to move forward with a positive attitude. A few days later the *New York Times* ran the article "As Authoritarianism Spreads, Uzbekistan Goes the Other Way" outlining many changes since Uzbekistan's first president, Islam Karimov, died in 2016 to be succeeded by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. In this article, Higgins (2018) addressed the recent cessation of involuntary cotton picking and other ways that Mirziyoyev was opening up the country.

In addition to learning more about the politics and linguistic landscape, I also researched the education system. Tempus (2012), a program of the European Commission, published a short report on higher education in Uzbekistan, which was helpful in understanding the composition of tertiary education. Four-year bachelor programs are the norm in Uzbekistan along with two-year master's programs, which was of note because we were proposing a one-year intensive master's program. The Tempus report also discussed plans for revisions to the Doctor of Science degree. Learning that doctoral degrees were less common in the country was important to know before seeking to recruit faculty because our accrediting body expects faculty teaching in graduate programs to have doctoral degrees. Many of the published sources I could find were outdated, so seeking information from multiple sources (academic publications, reports, and newspapers) along with direct contact with ELT professionals who had recent experience helped provide enough of a context before my first visit. When you do your homework it is important to seek out multiple sources and different kinds of sources. This will minimize surprises and also help in writing questions to ask, which is covered in the next section.

2. Prepare Documentation and Questions

Before proposing any kind of program, it is helpful to have on paper what you can offer and to prepare questions to ask. This documentation can help guide conversations and lead to additional important questions as you clarify, negotiate, and refine plans for a program that is not only mutually beneficial but also realistic. This is an area where I felt like I had overprepared but found that I was still underprepared. During my first visit to Uzbekistan, my colleagues and I had multiple meetings at potential university partners and also with officials from the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialized Education (MHSSE). I compiled information on our program into a five-page proposal with the program's goals, admission requirements, three different kinds of program schedules, a list of classes with course descriptions, additional information on our program, and contact information. This document would later

serve as a working document that could be modified as plans developed and also helped when it came time to put together promotional materials on the program (and with less than a month to recruit, having this documentation ready saved precious time).

In addition to this program proposal document, I walked into meetings with a list of questions to help guide conversations. These questions asked about the current demand for English in the country and the ultimate goals they had for English language teaching and learning; estimates for the first year of enrolment and the locations of these students; the typical school year in the country and if we would need to adapt to their schedule or if we could run the program using our own academic calendar; any holidays or vacation periods that we should be aware of when scheduling; and the levels of English expected to teach English at various levels of education in the country and the kind of degrees or qualifications required to teach English at these levels. Having a clear list of questions demonstrated that I had done my homework and also allowed early exploratory meetings to focus on aspects that would be required for set up. While relationship building is important (see #5), if you do not take time to discuss "make-or-break" issues closer to the beginning then you risk putting the entire project in jeopardy.

As the timeline progressed, additional documents were necessary to assist with this project. In addition to basic program documents and questions, some of the documents that would have been helpful to have prepared earlier in the process would have been the following:

- a clear job description for qualified faculty to teach, including minimum and preferred qualifications (to facilitate conversations on recruiting and identifying faculty to teach but also to clearly outline the expectations and compensation of those hired),
- course syllabi for all proposed courses along with assignments and activities (to assist with conversations on the program content and also to assist with identifying faculty and textbooks),
- a complete list of textbooks required and recommended for the program (including details such as author, publication year, edition, publisher, and ISBN).

While it may seem premature to have certain conversations early on (for example, which textbooks to order if you have not even agreed to run the program) this could save time in the future. In our particular case, sourcing textbooks was one of the greatest challenges and it required that we be prepared for the next topic.

3. Be Prepared to Make Modifications

Despite assurances that textbooks not only could be sourced but would arrive on time, less than half of the titles we requested ever arrived. This was coupled with a very late recruitment period (we literally had one month to recruit 100 students and started with 125 after receiving approximately 200 applications) and miscommunication between our on-ground handling of application materials in Uzbekistan and central processing of applications in the USA. As a result, our back-up plan of providing instructional material through our course management system was not possible because too many students were not yet in our system to allow us to share the online materials we had prepared. Meanwhile, both copiers and printers made available onsite by our partner would quickly break, be low on toner, or run out of paper (and finding supplies or someone who could repair often took several days). To say the least, it created a frustrating situation for faculty and students alike, but it also provided opportunities for language teachers to be resourceful.

We quickly found that the use of Telegram, a third-party mobile messaging application, was nearly ubiquitous in Uzbekistan. Karimov and Kim (2017) described Telegram as the "most widely used application in Uzbekistan […] among mobile instant messaging apps" (p. 832) and a survey conducted on technology and its uses in Uzbekistan's classrooms found that 89 per cent of our Uzbek students preferred Telegram when interacting with students or teaching English (Dolosic & Mann, 2019). Our Uzbek faculty

quickly turned to Telegram as a solution by sending articles to read, distributing assignments, and even snapping photos of an activity from a book to quickly push out to the Telegram group that had been created for their class.

Over the first year, our course syllabi were modified quickly not only to ensure that course content was more relevant to an EFL and Uzbek context, but also more accessible. To address issues of textbook sourcing, we redeveloped a curriculum of eleven courses requiring fourteen textbooks so that only four textbooks were required for this one-year program. One preferred text was from a press that could not be sourced in Uzbekistan, requiring that we *again* adjust and modify that syllabus. Individual book chapters, peer-reviewed articles, and other selected readings were made available not only through our online course management system but also available in shared folders for faculty to quickly send out through Telegram. While this created additional work, this resulted in syllabi that relied on a variety of more canonical and contemporary readings. Modifications were made by a combination of full-time faculty at our home campus, a hired content expert in the USA, and several of our Uzbek faculty, which empowered them and also ensured that modifications would meet the needs of Uzbek English language teachers.

The culminated practicum experience required additional modifications. The majority of our TESL candidates were already teaching English in lyceums (secondary schools), universities, and language centres. Faculty observed these candidates in their real classrooms to provide feedback on their instruction. For others not teaching in classes, we matched them with experienced English teachers in contexts similar to the ones they would seek to teach in after our program. In some cases, candidates had opportunities to teach in the classroom found for their practicum experience, while others came to campus with a group of TESL candidates where they each taught demo lessons. In all cases, all TESL candidates were observed by a faculty member and completed the same required portfolio of lesson plans and reflection. These modifications have since made it into our program's practicum handbook.

Planning for time and resources to make both expected and unexpected modifications would be advisable. As we found through this process, most of the modifications that we made strengthened the program as a whole. For example, adapting courses so that they relied on fewer or no textbooks benefited students in our U.S.-based and online sections, making classes more affordable while increasing the variety and currency of course readings. These modifications are ongoing, which requires strong communication—the next topic of importance.

4. Foster Cross-Cultural Communication

Communication is essential to develop any successful partnership or program. Working with Uzbekistan not only presented issues with time zones (10 or 11 hours depending on the time of year) but also with establishing the best means of communication. At a U.S.-based institution (our original team actually included people from the USA, the U.K., and India) we may prefer email (and particularly the use of an institutional email address); however, we found that most Uzbeks preferred Telegram. When it came to more important meetings (such as interviews for faculty) we found that setting up reliable connections through Skype, WebEx, or Zoom could be difficult and even voice calls through Telegram would often cut out repeatedly. But more challenging than the technology itself has been the cultural differences between a more western perspective of our institution and the Central Asian perspective of Uzbekistan, which has created miscommunication and misperceptions.

During one train ride I asked an Uzbek ministry official about his impressions of the USA. He commented that Americans are very individualistic and make decisions without first discussing it with their superior. This helped me understand a strong sense of hierarchy and deference to those in authority. Fortunately for us it had been communicated by authorities in Uzbekistan that whatever was needed to make this project work would be provided to us; however, communication and cultural differences persisted. Statements such as "the books will arrive in time," "the printer will get fixed tomorrow," and "we will fix the air conditioning right away" may have been intended as communications of good-faith

attempts with the expectation that we would be understanding if it was not possible to meet deadlines or complete tasks as needed. From a western perspective these communication practices could be viewed as dishonest and from a practical standpoint it prevented us from developing timely alternative solutions.

Truthfully, both sides had issues meeting several deadlines, which required additional modifications, but the different perceptions of communication did create some delays and may not have always strengthened trust. Perceptions of honesty, feasibility, hospitality, and time requirements could often differ leading to miscommunication and, at times, frustration on both ends. While as westerners we had little trouble stating what we knew was not possible (which may make us seem disagreeable), our Uzbek colleagues usually made positive assertions to all requests (agreeable from their perspective). This is where building relationships (the next section), has been crucial as we seek to understand each other better not only linguistically but also culturally and in regards to cross-cultural pragmatics.

Boxer (2002) describes cross-cultural pragmatics as situations where "individuals from two societies or communities carry out their interactions (whether spoken or written) according to their own rules or norms, often resulting in a clash in expectations and, ultimately, misperceptions about the other group" (p. 151). With the paucity of research on pragmatics in Uzbekistan navigating misperceptions requires more "reading between the lines" and trying to understand the message behind the message. The most important thing to remember is that communication and misperceptions are a two-way street and require responsibility on both sides. Through stronger relationships we can navigate communication and work through the misperceptions that are guaranteed to occur in any cross-cultural partnership.

5. Build Relationships

By establishing a program in a new market you are entering into a partnership with a new community, and often specifically with a new institution or organization. In terms of our project in Uzbekistan, we entered into formal agreements through memoranda of understandings (another essential element of these projects) with the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialized Education (MHSSE) and now two separate partner universities. While outlining these legal and practical understandings serves as an official record of what each party agrees to, there are additional, ongoing relationships that are necessary to promote success. Early on these involved many lunches and dinners (and admittedly too much vodka), along with formal meetings including the exchange of gifts (many of which adorn my office to remind me of the relationships formed).

Communication through Telegram, periodic emails, and face-to-face meetings and meals when one side or the other visits have been essential, but establishing deeper, ongoing relationships have played an even stronger role in the success of this program. With a program more than 6000 miles away and with work hours that are incongruent with ours, perhaps the most important thing we did was to hire a U.S.-based faculty member to move to Uzbekistan and teach for the program. Having just one faculty member in Uzbekistan provided opportunities for her to build stronger relationships with our local faculty and also the local staff and administrators. By staying longer in the country and working regularly with locals, each of our U.S.-based faculty members have been able to develop a better understanding of the cross-cultural pragmatics that can lead to miscommunication. These can also lead to relationships that extend beyond the project as has happened with our first two U.S.-based faculty members who each spent a semester teaching in Tashkent and sent special video messages to be played at commencement, which gets to our final topic.

6. Celebrate Successes

Any time you set up shop in a new market there will be challenges, and when you go into a new market that is less familiar to you, such as Uzbekistan, the available resources needed for research and support

may be lacking. While I could write pages about challenges and things that did not go as planned, there is far more to be proud of and to celebrate. Setting up shop in a new market is a difficult task and most start-ups of any kind fail, so celebrating every success is necessary and appropriate.

One platform commonly used in Uzbekistan is Facebook. On my Facebook page I would share photos from my visits and then photos from classes that had been shared with me through Telegram. My list of Facebook friends quickly grew as dozens of Uzbeks associated with our program and their friends added me to their network. Our partner institutions would also share photos on their institution's Facebook page and our partner in Samarkand even created a special page for our partnership. I also shared news on Twitter, a platform gaining popularity in Uzbekistan, so this has been another way to share successes.

Social media can be a great way to celebrate the ongoing success of a group of TESL faculty and students working together to take our curriculum, mix it with their local context, and create a true community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) of teacher scholars, but celebrating bigger milestones is also important. Shortly after our first classes began at our first partner institution, we had a grand ribbon-cutting ceremony with government officials and national media. It was a proud day to see my university's name and logo on a plaque affixed above the entrance to the building that housed our program. But celebrating the accomplishments of 114 teachers finishing their TESL degree during our inaugural year with a party made me even prouder. This was followed by a formal graduation ceremony in our new campus facility with cap and gowns. While I could not attend, we sent video messages from our top university administrators to congratulate our new graduates along with video messages from our U.S.-based faculty who taught them and another video message from me. Because in the end the true success of any new program is the success of those who complete it.

Final Words

Despite challenges, our program was strong enough to support students through two government-mandated quarantines due to COVID-19 and 161 additional TESL candidates completed their program on schedule by shifting classes to remote instruction via videoconference and other online tools. Our project started its third year with nearly 200 new TESL students in Uzbekistan and launched a cohort of TESL candidates in a new partnership in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan.

Setting up shop in a new market can be daunting for even the most experienced ELT professional. Whether you are the person leading the charge, one of the primary collaborators, or someone who has been asked to play a role on the team (no matter how big or small), this report is designed to provide some guidance at different parts of the process. At the onset of the project consider these six topics when you design a timeline of activities and see how and when you can address each of these. During a start-up project you can assess how well you are doing at each of these six topics. Consider how strong your relationships are and if you need to address issues of miscommunication. Perhaps some of your documentation needs to be revised, which may be informed by additional research. Be prepared for unexpected challenges (such as difficulty sourcing textbooks or a global pandemic). And at particular milestones, like the completion of your first cohort, use these six topics as a way to assess the project. Reflect on how you have celebrated successes or make a list of modifications that could help strengthen the project.

From my experience with this successful project in Uzbekistan and other projects that have been proposed but never came to fruition and some newer projects that are in the nascent phases I can say that taking a step back from the details to reflect on the process has greatly helped. As English language teachers we are more often trained to work in classroom-based environments. While training in curriculum design is common for ELT professionals, preparation for developing new partnerships and establishing programs in new markets is far less researched or theorized. For program administrators and collaborators that are setting up shop in new markets, many of the skills we develop as ELT professionals

will assist our work, but the six topics explored in this report can make your new program expedition a little less stressful and hopefully more successful for the students and teachers you serve.

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