



## Seol WONTAI: “FOREIGN LANGUAGES EDUCATION LEADS TO COUNTRY DEVELOPMENT”

International organizations play a major role in developing the teaching foreign languages in Uzbekistan. South Korea's Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), functioning on education, science and culture as 'world friends', is considered to be one of our close partners. This academic year began with a good news in this cooperation, as KOICA's advisor, professor WonTai Seol joined the faculty of Uzbekistan State World Languages University. We had a talk with WonTai Seol on reforms of Uzbekistan education system, particularly foreign languages teaching and learning.

— **Dr. Seol, welcome to our country, sunny Uzbekistan. We are glad to see you at the International Journalism Faculty of Uzbekistan State University of World Languages. First of all, please, introduce yourself to the readers of “Foreign Languages in Uzbekistan” journal.**

— I was born in 1959 in Daegu city, South Korea. I started my career as an English teacher for middle and high school students. From 1977 to 1983 I studied English Language at Pedagogical College of Seoul National University. I worked as a teacher for three and a half years (1983–1986), then I changed my career course to be a broadcast journalist working for the Korean Broadcasting System (한국방송공사, TV and radio: 1987–1988). While working as a broadcast journalist, I felt empty because I felt that all the words in my news articles just evaporated after being aired, nothing remaining; at least that was my thought at that time. (But I was assured that the job at KBS was secure.)

And so I started my new career as a newspaper journalist at a newly launched newspaper named The Seke Ilbo (The Seke Daily Newspaper, 세계일보: 1988~1996) in order to have something concrete on paper and in order to learn how to write.

At the Seke Ilbo, I worked on the city desk (covered the Court and the Prosecution Office, Environment Ministry and Seoul City), the foreign desk (covered Asia, Middle East, Europe, and Russia, in turn) and the culture desk (covered Ministry of Culture and Sports) and so forth. Initial years of my newspaper career were filled with lots of

hardships, but gradually I acquired necessary skills. In 1996 I was newly employed by an established newspaper named The Kyunghyang Shimun (The Kyunghyang Daily News, *경향신문*: 1996~2012). At this newspaper, I worked for the foreign desk, the weekly desk, and was promoted to deputy editor, and later to editor and senior editor. The last journalistic job for me was managing the English version of newspaper's website as an independent editor.

While working as a deputy foreign editor, I felt that my journalism career was drawing to a close. In fact, in anticipation of the end of my journalism career, I tried to put all my knowhow and much of my energy into my doctoral dissertation. I wanted it to be a grand conclusion of my journalist life. After obtaining the PhD degree, I moved again. This movement was because the pay was too low and I was not promoted, considering my sincerity and ability in work. I was selected to work for two years(2012~2014) through an open competition as Director of Public Relations and Education for the Northeast Asian History Foundation(NAHF). This is a government-funded research institute deals with historical conflicts among Korea, China and Japan. Issues that NAHF addresses include China's distortion of ancient history named Northeast Project and other historical problems related to Japan's colonial rule, Japanese atrocities committed during the rule, lack of sufficient Japanese apologies to Koreans for that, 'comfort' women ('sex slaves' for Japanese Imperial Army during colonial rule) issue, and territorial issue(Dokdo Islets) and so forth.

My early retirement due to the expiration of the two-year contract with NAHF led me to return to journalism research, which is my specialty area and was left unattended due to a hectic job. Holding a part-time position of Deputy Director of Journalism Studies Institute(JSI) since the launch of this small organization in 2011, I actively participated in the (re)translation and proofreading processes of a book entitled "The Handbook of Journalism Studies (2009, Routledge, Ed. Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, et al.)," which amounts to more than 450 pages. In the meantime, I also translated into Korean a book entitled "WITHOUT THEIR PERMISSION: How the 21st Century Will Be Made, Not Managed(2014, Alexis Ohanian, Business Plus)", which shows how men can utilize the Internet productively for business and charity purposes. While adding last touches on the translated manuscript of the Handbook, I was sent to Tashkent by KOICA. Thank God. (I do not have any religion. But as I advance in age, I think that some Being ordains me to take a certain path. In recent years, I feel that I cannot make decisions or choices, but that I am led to make decisions or choices. Because Somebody offers me a certain environment, I have no fear in making decisions. All I need to do is just make my own efforts to fit myself into a newly given environment).

In sum, my career consists of three and half years as an English teacher, more than 25 years as a journalist, 2 years as director of public relations and education, one and a half years as a journalism researcher and translator. I worked over 30 years full-time. Now, it is time for me to work for some good cause, not to make a living for me and my family.

It was in the evening of August 16 that I arrived at the Tashkent International Airport. It was my first visit to the great country of Uzbekistan. My feeling is that this warmest welcome emanates from the commonalities we have: teaching and learning journalism and languages.

**— I should inform you (maybe you already knew it before you came to Uzbekistan) that during the years of independence, attention to learn foreign languages in Uzbekistan has increased. In our country huge reforms have been implemented in the sphere of languages. We see your visit to Uzbekistan as one of results of these reforms. In this regard, what is the meaning of learning foreign languages in order to develop cultural relations between South Korea and Uzbekistan?**

— I found out this point while conversing with professors of this university. I heard that President Islam Karimov placed great emphasis on teaching foreign languages. I heard that Uzbeks currently have two writing systems: Cyrillic alphabet and Latin alphabet. In order to nourish nationalistic sentiment among Uzbeks, the Uzbek language has regained its official mother tongue status.

Before I came to Tashkent, I perused a book entitled “Korean Social Scientists’ Exploration of the Silk Road: Understanding of Uzbekistan Society and Culture (revised in 2012, original in 2007)” co-written by 12 social science professors of the Seoul National University. This book consists of 12 chapters and deals with 12 topics such as politics, economy, social welfare, food, and so forth. However, this book did not say a word on Uzbekistan’s national language policy and its foreign language education strategy in the context of educational reforms. This book stated, in part, that reform in economic area is slow, and so on, somewhat negative to neutral. While talking with Koreans operating in Tashkent, I felt that if I have some time, I will write about Uzbekistan’s language and foreign language issues: the history of the Uzbek language, its origins and development, how Uzbeks’ writing systems have changed over time, how close Uzbek is to Korean in terms of sentence structures. I discovered several young Koreans who speak fluent Uzbek.

In reality, President Karimov’s emphasis on foreign language learning is an excellent policy. Uzbekistan needs to speed up its reforms in various sectors to become a more lively and growing society. I believe that teaching foreign languages to students could lead to higher productivity and speedier economic growth. The initial stages of

growth for a country or an individual might be import of knowledge and skills from abroad. Think about South Korea's path to economic growth. Parents of South Korea, I mean, my generation and my parents' generation, placed great emphasis on education, in which foreign language education (i.e., mostly English education) was a very important part of it. As a result of that passion for education, South Korea has now become a successful country envied by many other developing countries.

To be more specific about foreign language education, students (as well as adults) who learn foreign languages can learn about foreign countries as a necessary by-product. This implies that vision of foreign language learners can be broader and wider. While learning a foreign language (or several foreign languages), the learners can also think deeply about their own language and culture of their fatherland. I remember renowned German literary figure Goethe saying that "without knowing a foreign language, you cannot know your own mother tongue".

While studying Russian and Uzbek myself in my late 50's, I found that Russian and Uzbek speakers are in a more favourable position to learn English, French, German, or other alphabet-using foreign languages. Simultaneously, Uzbek-speakers are in a better position to learn Korean or Japanese, because these languages have very similar sentence structures to Uzbek, I was told. In fact, I personally started to study Russian and Uzbek these days.

During my recent conversations with Uzbek intellectuals at the university and Korean experts operating in Tashkent, I realized that Korean and Uzbek relations should be deepened by several notches. Some Koreans in Tashkent and I reckon that now is the time to deepen our mutual understanding. How can this deepening of mutual understanding be achieved? It can be achieved only through opening up our hearts on both sides and through deeper understanding of the other's language, history and culture. Without it, Koreans and Uzbeks can never be true friends (In Uzbek they say *sodiq do'st*, in Russian it is *искренний друг*, isn't it? As I am a beginner learner of these both languages, I tried to translate them).

In this vein, I see some worrisome signs myself. In comparison with economic cooperation, cultural understanding of each other is still at a very initial stage. The evidence is that it was very hard for me to buy or get books in Tashkent to teach the Uzbek language to Koreans, and perhaps the reverse may also be the case. I was told that KOICA is proceeding with a plan to develop a kind of Korean-teaching program online (I am not sure. I need to check this up later). But KOICA can do more. It also has to get itself involved in developing Uzbek-teaching programs simultaneously. Although a former young KOICA volunteer named Park Jeong-eun (박정은) published a cute Uzbek-teaching manual entitled "Uzbek Conversation for Korean Speakers" with the

assistance of Uzbek friends in 2012, it can never be sufficient. The manual seems to be a survival language kit for Koreans operating in Uzbekistan. However, it has to be given high marks as a starting point to understand the Uzbek language and people more deeply. Now is the time for Koreans and Uzbeks to author serious books which can teach their language to the other party sufficiently. This measure could lead to a deeper understanding of the other's language and in turn other's culture. Linguistic and cultural understanding of the partner country is the true foundation to expand areas of cooperation. Without it, true cooperation between the two countries will never expand.

— **You have worked in the journalism sphere for many years. What were the main topics of your researches?**

— While working as a journalist and as a public relations and education officer, my main job was directed to international affairs and understanding. As journalist, I covered Russia, Europe(France and Germany included), Asia(Japan and China, included), Americas(US included) and wrote about a variety of world affairs. I wrote stories about US presidential elections, Japanese and Chinese politics, price liberalization by Yeltsin and democratization processes in Russia, integration of Europe into the European Union, Vietnam's reforms, and so forth. In a word, I liked to deal with international affairs and meet foreigners with the foreign languages I learned.

While working as journalist, I started to learn Japanese(currently, I understand NHK news broadcast fairly well), kept on studying French and German(albeit, on and off. In fact, I started to learn French and continued to study German in college. I started to learn German in high school). I liked to read books on international politics in college. While working for NAHF, I started to learn Chinese for work-related purposes and kept on sharpening my Japanese skills. That was because Chinese and Japanese scholars frequently visited NAHF for academic conferences.

In the meantime, my journalistic research is centered around international journalism and political communication. While working for international desk, I cultivated an interest in international politics and US politics, in particular. I authored a book in English with a summary in Korean, entitled "Presidential Communication and News Media: How Do News Media Flatter Or Criticize The President?: 대통령과 언론, 친구인가 적인가(2005)" based on my master's thesis. I published a joint research report in book form on exchanges of journalists between Korea and other countries in 2011. The title of the report is "Meeting, Learning and Sympathizing: A study on methods for exchanges of global journalists and network construction(2011, Korea Press Foundation)". I also wrote a book in Korean entitled "An Excursion into the World of Journalism: summary and comment on influential journalism books published in English

(Korean title is 저널리즘이란무엇인가, 영문저널리즘서적국문요약및논평모음 (2007, 엔북)”) And I contributed several papers to academic journals published in Korea. These papers were based on my doctoral dissertation.

— **In the academic year of 2015-2016 you have started working as a volunteer teacher at the International Journalism Faculty of Uzbekistan State World Languages University. What are the main subjects you teach to Uzbek students?**

— It is great honor and pleasure, in the real sense of the words, for me to start teaching students at this faculty. I have five courses to teach and will have one more course for returning seniors from internships. The courses are News Journalism, The System of Foreign Media, Introduction to Specialty, Media Ethics, Analytical Journalism and Commentary Journalism. Officially, I am required to do only one course for this semester, but I decided to do more voluntarily, if I can handle. This is for me to have a wider contact with Uzbek professors and students. I am confident that I can also learn a lot by talking with Uzbeks.

Classes are conducted in cooperation with one faculty member and me. As of September 13, I already had two weeks together with your teacher and students. I think close prior cooperation and coordination are required to conduct the courses smoothly and effectively. Additionally, I find that English skills are needed on the side of the faculty members for productive classes, because I cannot yet speak in Russian or Uzbek. Prior sharing of all teaching materials and discussion on classes between teachers will also lead to better results.

— **What are your first impressions about training process, professor and teachers activity, students, who are keen to learn?**

— I felt that they were all waiting for my arrival. It seemed that the professors and students had curiosity towards me. Some students looked me in the eye intently for several seconds on end. I think combination of lecture (one-directional provision of knowledge by teachers) and seminar (presentation by students and comments/ advice by teachers) looks real good. The most surprising to me is that the class size is only about ten students. When I gave a lecture as a part-time instructor for a Mass Communication English course in a university in Seoul several years ago, I had 55 students in a big hall. Although I gave them home assignments, I could not make comment on their submitted assignments. From the viewpoint of the class size, this university has reached a world class. My natural question is why and how can this class size be possible? By the way, I am also curious to know what “the Russian group” in class means. Might this presuppose the existence of Uzbek group and English groups, too?

— **What is the importance of learning foreign languages for future journalists? If it is possible, could you share your personal practice with us?**

— My best guess is that because students learn international journalism, they need to learn foreign languages simultaneously. You cannot do international journalism without the equipment of foreign languages. However, my basic position is that regardless of whether the students specialize in international journalism or just “(domestic) journalism,” students must learn foreign languages. Learning foreign languages must be a task for all Uzbeks. Without the tool of foreign languages, you cannot export your culture or merchandise, you cannot import foreign culture or merchandise. Foreign language is the basic and fundamental tool to do this kind of work : exchange of ideas, products and people. I am confident that Uzbek journalists equipped with refined foreign language skills and in-depth knowledge of foreign countries can pave the path to a more open, more civilized and more lively Uzbekistan.

I met plenty of foreign experts in various fields in Korea and overseas as a journalist. The tool that enabled me to interview foreigners online and offline was my English (and foreign language) skills. Editor-in-chief once gave me a directive to meet foreigners only and do interviews. I met many foreign journalists, scholars, diplomats and politicians, who took advantage of their knowledge and skills on foreign languages.

— **Did you see any differences or similarities between Korean and Uzbek students regarding the learning of other languages?**

— It is too early to make any comment on this question. However, after having a couple of classes with the freshmen, sophomores and juniors, I found out that students from sophomores and above speak good English. The situation demands students to speak; class size is small and courses are composed of lectures and seminars. I saw several students making the presentation in Russian and doing it in English just after the Russian presentation. My temporary interpretation of this scene is that students of this university are active and good at English. I could witness signboards encouraging students to speak in English at the main campus: “Don’t miss any chance to speak English”.

In Korea, university students are advised or forced to take their specialty courses in English and university authorities struggle to internationalize their campuses by offering courses in English. One first-rate university offered all courses in English and forced students to take the courses in English, thus inflicting lots of stress on students. This resulted in suicides committed by several students. Many of Korean universities installed international department about two decades ago and now are offering courses in English at graduate levels(some are at undergraduate levels). It is true that many Korean universities struggle to offer courses in English under the name of internationalization of university campuses, but it is still controversial. Some news media criticized that students can learn better in the mother tongue, and that it is not a good policy and is even counter-productive to force them.

My basic position on this issue is that students should be given the choices to take courses in English or in mother tongue. I was told by a Korean teaching at Tashkent University of Information and Technology that the same courses are offered in three languages: Uzbek, Russian, and English. This is an excellent policy. But the case cannot be applied to foreign language universities, where students are gathered to learn foreign languages.

It seems common that both Koreans and Uzbeks place emphasis on English. But I think Uzbeks will do better in the future in foreign language learning, because English, German, French, Spanish, Italian and Russian do not look remote from Uzbek in appearance and in substance. I mean, Uzbeks already use Latin writing system. The linguistic environment for Uzbeks is already multilingual. Korean students will have to make more efforts to catch up with Uzbek students, because Korea is a monolingual society. It has become almost customary for Korean university students to go abroad (mostly English-speaking countries) for six to twelve months to learn English. Korean universities frequently make it compulsory for students to reach a certain level of English skills to graduate.

**— We know that KOICA plays an important role in improving the relations between Korea and Uzbekistan in the spheres of science, education and culture. What is your opinion, what can we do together in the journalism education in near future? What will be your personal role in that?**

— This is the most important question to me. To tell you the truth, I was extremely surprised to see the notice seeking a journalism specialist on the KOICA homepage. Information provided by Google and some available Korean materials drew a negative picture of Uzbekistan's mediascape. (Shall there be any role I can play in this information-controlled society? Shall I have to avoid making unnecessarily sensitive comment on this country and have to clam up? At least, I could lecture to Uzbeks some theoretical principles in journalism.) While talking with Uzbek professors and students in Tashkent, I gradually found that negative information about Uzbekistan was quite groundless. I started to shape a more positive view of Uzbekistan. Some Koreans said to me that Uzbek officials do not work aggressively. But I discovered very hard-working Uzbeks, very bright and eager Uzbek students and other Uzbeks open to me and willing to help me in various ways.

So, my personal role will be to spread correct information on Uzbekistan to Korea (and the world), thus deepening mutual understanding between Uzbekistan and Korea by utilizing my knowhow in communication areas. With this general mission in view, I will pursue the following:

a) To provide high-quality journalism education to students by lots of preparation prior to classes;

b) To provide useful information about Korea to students and professors;

c) To try to deepen mutual understanding by means of exchange of information between Korean students and professors vis-a-vis Uzbek students and professors. I will try to help to exchange information(news stories or others articles), students and professors. To achieve this goal, I would like to devise various ways, including giving advice as to how to utilize the portal site, fledu.uz. But to do this, Koreans (including me, of course) and Uzbeks need to play more active roles on both sides. We together(Mbi bmeste) must deepen our mutual understanding by utilizing the already operative portal site to the maximum.

— **“Foreign Languages in Uzbekistan” magazine is one of the first electronic journals in the country with scientific status. As a foreign expert what are your proposals to develop this magazine?**

— How do you know that I am interested in improving fledu.uz and intend to turn it into a hub of conversation for both Uzbeks and Koreans? In fact, when I tried to access this site at home, I was frequently frustrated by the slow pace. Sometimes I could not proceed, even after I got my initial access to it, but consider also that I am not a technology person. My first impression, not an in-depth analysis, of the site is that the stories looked very academic and heavy. I could not find the story of my first visit to the university by myself. However, my basic position is that the site should be a place where professors, students and others gather for some useful and/or interesting information sharing. The site fledu.uz must make every effort to make it more accessible(higher number of hits). The site should be more current. The site should be used for professors and students to improve their communication and also as a site for journalism and foreign language education.

— **Thank you for your attention and your time. I am sure our followers will find this conversation very interesting and informative.**

**By Nazira Tashpulatova.**