



Mark CROSSEY: “PEOPLE WHO KNOW THE CENTRAL ASIA REGION ALWAYS SAY THAT THE LEVEL OF ENGLISH IS BETTER HERE!”

Coverage of foreign languages education reforms, events and projects, initiatives of national and international level is an important mission for the Fledu.uz web portal. The better people’s awareness about the efforts made in the development of this sphere, the more they try to contribute to it or participate in it properly.

Till now, the news feed of Fledu.uz homepage has included hundreds of stories about how Uzbekistan is stepping up to the next level in terms of improving foreign languages teaching and learning. ‘British Council’ is probably one of the most popular tags there, as there is a huge input from the representative office of British Council in Uzbekistan to all what has been being done in English language and literature promotion, professional development of teachers, new educational innovations implementations, etc.

Our editorial team welcomed Mark Crossey, Country Director of British Council Uzbekistan. Here we are proud to share our warm, cordial and very substantial conversation.

– First, the thing we were interested in was the results of 20 years bilateral relations that our guest would list as the best ones...

– British Council Uzbekistan actively realizes many projects and we have a great amount of people involved in our programmes. It is often noted by our Headquarters in London just how many thousands of people we work with, because in fact we have a quite small team in Uzbekistan: here are only 16 of us. We are getting bigger, and that is why we have to move to a new office very soon (details will be on our website!). Our programme is getting bigger all the time. It is very difficult to count the biggest successes, simply because we don’t do programmes that aren’t successful! We test new ideas with our Uzbek partners very carefully before proceeding: we have to prove success first, so technically they are all really successful. I am particularly proud of the work that we have done, since the start of our operation opening here in 1996, on teacher training: PRESETT and INSETT, because that has born real and important fruit throughout the country. Those visitors

to Uzbekistan, who know the region, tend to comment that the levels of English are better here in Uzbekistan. I do believe that it is at least partly due to the reforms on which we have partnered with Uzbekistan on now for over 20 years. Projects in the English language training system have been an undoubted success. They have been recognised by the international academic community and publications around this a real success story. I am very proud of that, partly because my own background is as an English language teacher: was long time ago, but it is still here in my heart.

However, that is not all. Certainly, our work more recently with researchers, on our project called Researchers Connect, I think, is hugely important, as the government of Uzbekistan has asked us to work with developing young researching on helping them to publish internationally, which is significant for the country and our partnership. Why? Because research is really everything, it is not only for bettering the education system, but for the wider economy and for increasing intellectual potential of a country. To be able to cooperate on this with Uzbekistan is a huge honour for us. The talent of young researchers here is great. We are helping them with academic English, citation skills, presentation skills that assist to internationalise their excellent work.

More recently we have recommenced an arts programme. We had done very little in arts here for 8 years and I thought this a pity. Our reopening of our Arts programme has been a huge success. The audience was been enormous for Henry Moore exhibition, as well as more recently for our Contemporary UK Arts exhibition at the National Arts Gallery of Uzbekistan. And I’m also very pleased with our Shakespeare Lives programme, where young Uzbek actors are working with British trainers, actors and coaches to produce, I think, world-class performance in the Russian and Uzbek languages. We have started doing this in English as well; although I don’t think the language is the most important thing about this project. It is really about the acting and the quality of performance. However, it is interesting that we are doing it in three languages now. This project is something I won’t forget, because the first time I saw the results of this was very moving. It was a phenomenal standard of acting.

These I think are my main highlights, although there are lots of other projects to be counted.

– *When we asked about what has changed in English language teaching and learning over the past few years...*



– It is a bit of a risky question, because I haven’t been teacher for years: when I was teaching originally it was with the blackboard and chalk. Obviously, now then technology is the major change. And that’s fundamentally changed teaching. However, I still see that we are not moving away from the classroom and I think that is a good thing. I think we are using technology and the face-to-face model much more successfully than maybe five years ago, where there was a really general understanding that it should be just online. I thought that was wrong. It has to be face-to-face and online as well. We are coming to better understanding on that as a global profession. We, the British Council, are developing much more specialised training modules concerned with ICT to help teachers work with technology. In addition, British Council has successfully launched a lot of free online materials. We are constantly thinking about the ways of helping teachers use technology much more. That’s an important change, I guess.

As standard of teaching English is high here, also, we are developing English for Specific Purposes training modules a lot more. That has been an important part of our English for Tourism program working with secondary specialized vocational educational establishments. Obviously, Uzbekistan has a massive tourism attraction potential that will grow more in coming years. English is part of that. Well, it is not the only language of tourism here, but probably one of the most important one.

We've been doing a lot in curriculum design and teacher training to help vocational education prepare young specialists with necessary set of skills.

– ***A topical issue for today: ESP has become another subject for our talk. So, what are the perspectives of British Council and ESP programmes?***

– Actually, there are two angles to this direction. First is English for Skills and that deals with vocational education. We have been developing ESP teaching at tourism colleges in Uzbekistan for over three years now. In the coming years, based on the success of the tourism model, we may collaborate on (for example) equipping future engineers with the special English that is required by the contemporary labour market. Second is our ESP Reform Project, which is larger, that deals with the phenomenon itself, how to design curricula for your specialisation. Because we could spend a thousand years, frankly, going through all the different specialisations. So it is really helpful to use the best curriculum design teacher training experts from the UK to help specialists on how to work with industry, how to do needs analyses for their own field. That involves the university sector as well.

– **What do you think is the role of learning culture in acquiring knowledge and skills in particular languages?**



– I think it is absolutely essential to have a cultural background of the language you are learning to engage with. My personal view is that languages that were designed from scratch, such as Esperanto haven't been successful in the long run because of that. English is obviously a complex case, because it represents a variety of cultures. But I think any successful learner should engage with one of those cultures, be it British, American or some kind of other global industry culture. In our case, obviously, it is British culture. I think it is a huge asset for us, because the language originally came from the UK. We have masters such as Shakespeare, who actually contributed to the development of the language very significantly. I think that people in Uzbekistan are very culturally attuned and there is a big intellectual background here. That is why our Shakespeare project has been so successful here. So, the answer is yes, and I can't remember any time, when I was a teacher of English, that I did not refer to the culture of my country throughout a course, frankly.

– *How many languages does our guest speak?*

– That is a good question. I have constantly been learning languages along my career. It is something continuous for me. My best foreign language is Polish, because I worked in Poland for a long period and my wife is Polish. My kids speak Polish and English as well. So that's a language that I use a lot. Also in my career, I've learnt Romanian, Indonesian, and now Russian and Uzbek.

– *Having language lovers only in our company, we could not help not asking what methods he uses in learning languages...*

– I was more of an autodidact in learning Polish, for example. I only had a brief course of Polish for few days, and then I basically immersed myself in the culture. Because my first job, before I joined the British Council, was a teacher trainer in a small town. And in those days in Poland, it is a long time ago now, very few people spoke English. So I had to really immerse, and for me immersion is the best way. If you have the opportunity to throw yourself in it, there's no better way. You have to be brave, you have to speak and make mistakes.

Indonesian I took very seriously for two years, but the problem is when you move to a completely different context, you actually forget it very quickly. When I was on my way here in the car, an Indonesian contact wrote to me on Facebook in Indonesian. I can read it and remember it, but producing it is more difficult. Reading is something that I can remember well. I can still read Romanian newspapers without too much problem, but can hardly speak a word now! So production is the one skill that you should keep active.

I did a short course to learn Russian before I left Indonesia. Actually, that was the first case when I took a formal course in a foreign language since school. For some

weeks I studied at the Russian Cultural Centre in Jakarta. I had some grammatical basis and the fact that I speak Polish was helpful, as they are quite similar in some ways.

With Uzbek — I’ve got a very good teacher. As I say I’m a bit of autodidact and so am fairly disciplined about doing a bit every day, exercises, listening to something. Though I am not so good at all of the languages I speak, I think it is very important indeed to understand and appreciate some of the language of people you are working with.

– *So which Uzbek cities has he been to? This question opens his box of impressions and memories about different destinations from Nukus to Tashkent...*

I am lucky to travel quite a lot. Where I haven’t been at all yet is the Ferghana Valley, that’s really overdue. And I’m hoping to go there next month. I’ve been to Khiva, Nukus, Bukhara, Karshi, and of course Samarkand.

This country is really diverse in language, culture, cuisine, etc. I really enjoyed three or four days around Khiva in the Khorezm desert area, where there are amazing forts and citadels that are 3-4 thousand years old. This is one of the jewels of the world, so I am extremely lucky to have been there. Khiva is a very special place and I would recommend anyone who goes there to get up out of bed very early — even at five o’clock and wander around those beautiful streets bathed in green light. It is unforgettable

However, I also have very fond memories of my visit to Nukus, for instance. The cuisine is very interesting, different. And people are extremely friendly. I liked Karshi as well for its food. It has special Tandir dishes, which are among my favourite.

I can say Bukhara is a very special place, too. The atmosphere is unique. And because I am a foodie, I love the restaurants there. I eat a lot in Uzbekistan!

Tashkent as well. I really like living in Tashkent. It is a great place for having family and kids. It is a very pleasant, relaxed and friendly capital city. I always recommend people to visit this green city.

– *At the end of our conversation, the respected guest of our editorial office also stated:*

– What I saw in this office has been extremely impressive environment and, obviously, you have a world-class portal. Therefore, we at British Council are really interested in your work. I am also impressed that the scientific journal is just online. One aspect of my job, which is less known, is that I am an environmental champion for the British Council. My job in that is to encourage people to use less printed materials, to think about how they travel, how they work, considering their impact on the environment. It is an important agenda for us now. This is a good contribution

to what we are doing in partnership with the ministries of education on Education for Sustainable Development.

In addition, this is a good contribution to specific education reforms in Uzbekistan. As for me, I have worked in six countries so far, this country is very unusual. Because here we work very strategically across the whole education system. Changes in curriculum design and teacher training are visible all the time. Generally, standards are going up. Engagement, which is a very important thing, is worth mentioning. Everyone – from a minister to a pupil at school and his parents – are deeply engaged, positive and open to new reforms and improvements.

He was a good diplomat in our minds, when he entered from the door. Our conversation let us make more discoveries about him. He is a former, (but as he says from inside current) teacher, manager, lover of culture, languages and cuisine. He is an environmental champion! He has become became a good friend of our team, as well. One of the results of our meeting was that he has joined the Editorial Council of “Foreign Languages in Uzbekistan” electronic journal. Thankful for his visit, we hope for close collaboration!