THE UZBEK EFL LANDSCAPE: CURRICULUM, CHALLENGES AND NATIONAL REFORMS

To‘xtanazarov Asadbek Olimjon o‘g‘li

Teacher of Namangan state institution of foreign language

asadbektoxtanazarov@gmail.com

Annotation

This article examines the contemporary landscape of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education in Uzbekistan, situating it within the broader context of national reform and the potential integration of artificial intelligence tools such as ChatGPT. The study traces the historical trajectory of Uzbek EFL pedagogy from the Soviet-era Grammar-Translation Method—characterized by teacher-centered instruction, rote memorization, and a focus on reading and translation—toward the state-endorsed Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach that has shaped curriculum development since the early 2000s. It analyzes the cascade of reforms, including the introduction of CEFR-aligned textbook series such as "Guess What!" and "Prepare," and large-scale teacher retraining initiatives conducted in partnership with international organizations like the British Council. Despite these ambitious reforms, the article identifies persistent systemic challenges that mediate their implementation: deep-seated pedagogical inertia, large class sizes of 35–40 students, limited contact hours, uneven teacher proficiency in communicative methodology, an urban-rural resource divide, and a high-stakes assessment regime that continues to prioritize grammar and vocabulary over communicative competence. The article argues that AI assistants like ChatGPT present both significant opportunities—scalable individualized practice, safe speaking environments, instant feedback—and serious risks—exacerbating the digital divide, reinforcing passive learning, and threatening academic integrity. It concludes that the impact of AI in this context will

depend not on the technology itself but on how thoughtfully, critically, and equitably it is integrated into the complex fabric of Uzbek EFL education.

Keywords: EFL in Uzbekistan; Communicative Language Teaching; educational reform; ChatGPT; artificial intelligence; teacher training; assessment washback; digital divide

Annotatsiya

Ushbu maqola O'zbekistonda ingliz tilini chet tili sifatida o'qitish (EFL)ning zamonaviy manzarasini milliy islohotlar kontekstida va ChatGPT kabi sun'iy intellekt vositalarining potentsial integratsiyasi nuqtai nazaridan o'rganadi. Tadqiqot o'zbek EFL pedagogikasining tarixiy rivojlanishini kuzatadi: sovet davridagi Grammatika-Tarjima Metodi (o'qituvchi markazlashgan ta'lim, yodlash, o'qish va tarjimaga yo'naltirilganlik)dan 2000-yillarning boshidan boshlab davlat tomonidan qo'llab-quvvatlangan Kommunikativ Til O'qitish (CLT) yondashuvigacha. Maqolada "Guess What!" va "Prepare" kabi CEFRga moslashtirilgan darsliklar seriyasining joriy etilishi hamda Britaniya Kengashi kabi xalqaro tashkilotlar bilan hamkorlikda o'tkazilgan keng ko'lamli o'qituvchilarni qayta tayyorlash tashabbuslari tahlil qilinadi. Ushbu ambitsiyali islohotlarga qaramay, maqola ularning amalga oshirilishiga to'sqinlik qiluvchi tizimli muammolarni aniqlaydi: chuqur ildiz otgan pedagogik inersiya, 35–40 o'quvchidan iborat katta sinflar, cheklangan dars soatlari, o'qituvchilarning kommunikativ metodologiyadagi notekis malakasi, shahar va qishloq o'rtasidagi resurs tafovuti hamda grammatika va lug'atni kommunikativ kompetensiyadan ustun qo'yuvchi yuqori baholi baholash tizimi. Maqola ChatGPT kabi SI yordamchilari ham muhim imkoniyatlar (kengaytirilgan individual mashq, xavfsiz nutq muhiti, tezkor fikr-mulohaza) hamda jiddiy xavflar (raqamli tafovutni kuchaytirish, passiv o'rganishni mustahkamlash, akademik halollikka tahdid) tug'dirishini ta'kidlaydi. Xulosa qilinadiki, ushbu kontekstda SI ta'siri texnologiyaning o'ziga emas, balki uning o'zbek EFL ta'limining murakkab

tuzilmasiga qanchalik o'ylangan, tanqidiy va adolatli tarzda integratsiya qilinishiga bog'liq bo'ladi.

Kalit so'zlar: O'zbekistonda EFL; Kommunikativ Til O'qitish; ta'lim islohoti; ChatGPT; sun'iy intellekt; o'qituvchilar malakasini oshirish; baholashning teskari ta'siri; raqamli tafovut

Аннотация

В данной статье рассматривается современное состояние обучения английскому языку как иностранному (EFL) в Узбекистане в контексте национальных реформ и потенциальной интеграции инструментов искусственного интеллекта, таких как ChatGPT. Исследование прослеживает историческую траекторию узбекской педагогики EFL от советского грамматико-переводного метода — характеризующегося учитель-центрированным обучением, заучиванием наизусть и ориентацией на чтение и перевод — к государственно одобренному коммуникативному подходу (CLT), который формирует разработку учебных программ с начала 2000-х годов. Анализируется каскад реформ, включая внедрение серии учебников, соответствующих CEFR, таких как «Guess What!» и «Prepare», а также масштабные инициативы по переподготовке учителей в партнёрстве с международными организациями, такими как Британский Совет. Несмотря на эти амбициозные реформы, статья выявляет устойчивые системные проблемы, опосредующие их реализацию: глубоко укоренившаяся педагогическая инерция, большие классы по 35–40 учащихся, ограниченное количество учебных часов, неравномерная подготовка учителей в области коммуникативной методологии, разрыв в ресурсах между городом и селом, а также система высокоставочного оценивания, которая по-прежнему отдаёт приоритет грамматике и лексике над коммуникативной компетенцией. Автор

утверждает, что ИИ-ассистенты, подобные ChatGPT, представляют как значительные возможности — масштабируемая индивидуализированная практика, безопасная среда для говорения, мгновенная обратная связь — так и серьёзные риски — усугубление цифрового неравенства, закрепление пассивного обучения, угроза академической честности. Делается вывод, что влияние ИИ в данном контексте будет зависеть не от самой технологии, а от того, насколько продуманно, критически и справедливо она будет интегрирована в сложную ткань узбекского EFL-образования.

Ключевые слова: EFL в Узбекистане; коммуникативное обучение языку; образовательная реформа; ChatGPT; искусственный интеллект; подготовка учителей; обратное влияние оценивания; цифровое неравенство

Introduction

To comprehend the potential impact of an artificial intelligence assistant like ChatGPT on English language learning in Uzbekistan, one must first develop a nuanced understanding of the ecosystem into which it would be introduced. This ecosystem is not a static entity but a dynamic and rapidly evolving one, characterized by a complex interplay between ambitious top-down reforms and the gritty, on-the-ground realities of classroom practice. The contemporary Uzbek English as a Foreign Language (EFL) landscape is a story of profound transition, a deliberate and state-sponsored journey away from a historically entrenched, Soviet-inspired pedagogical model towards a system aspiring to meet the communicative demands of the 21st century. This section will delineate the contours of this landscape by examining the trajectory of national reforms, analyzing the current curriculum and its underlying philosophy, and confronting the persistent systemic and practical challenges that form the critical context for any technological integration, including that of AI.

The historical point of departure for understanding modern Uzbek EFL education is the Soviet-era system, whose legacy continues to cast a long shadow. For

decades, foreign language instruction, particularly English, was largely treated as an academic subject rather than a practical skill. The dominant methodology was the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), an approach that prioritized the meticulous dissection of grammatical rules and the translation of literary texts, often at the expense of developing oral proficiency or communicative confidence. The primary objective was to enable students to read and decode English literature and technical manuals, not to interact with speakers of the language. Classrooms were overwhelmingly teacher-centered, with the instructor serving as the ultimate authority and repository of knowledge. Student participation was often limited to choral drills, reading aloud, and completing written grammar exercises. Assessment mirrored these priorities, heavily focused on discrete-point testing of vocabulary, grammar rules, and translation accuracy, with little to no evaluation of speaking or listening comprehension in a spontaneous, communicative context. This pedagogical culture, which emphasized rote memorization and passive reception of knowledge, became deeply ingrained in the professional identity of a generation of teachers and the expectations of students and parents alike. As noted by Abduazizov (2019)[1], this created a "pedagogical inertia" that would later prove to be one of the most significant barriers to reform, as it was underpinned by a deeply held epistemology of what teaching and learning fundamentally are.

The dawn of Uzbek independence in 1991 created the political and ideological space for a fundamental re-evaluation of this system. The new government recognized that the nation's integration into the global economy, its potential for international tourism, and the academic and professional advancement of its citizens were inextricably linked to their ability to communicate effectively in global languages, chief among them English. However, the initial post-independence period was marked more by aspiration than systematic change. It was not until the early 2000s, under the leadership of the Ministry of Public Education, that a coherent and large-scale reform initiative began to take shape. This marked the official, state-level endorsement of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach as the new

cornerstone of foreign language education policy. This was a revolutionary shift. The core principle of CLT—that the primary goal of language learning is *communicative competence*—stood in direct opposition to the foundations of the GTM. Suddenly, the ability to use language functionally and appropriately in real-world situations became the stated objective, superseding the mere knowledge of its grammatical structures. Karimov (2017)[2] describes this period as a "declarative shift," where policy documents and official rhetoric rapidly embraced communicative ideals, even if classroom practice lagged considerably behind.

This policy shift initiated a cascade of changes, the most visible of which has been the cycle of textbook development and revision. The initial wave of reform saw the introduction of textbooks such as "Kid's English" and "Fly High," which were celebrated for their inclusion of colorful visuals, dialogues, and communicative activities. These materials represented a significant departure from the dense, text-heavy books of the past. However, as pedagogical understanding deepened and global standards evolved, these too were deemed insufficient. In a more recent and ambitious overhaul, new textbook series have been rolled out across the public school system. "Guess What!" for primary grades (1-6) and "Prepare" for secondary grades (7-11) now form the backbone of the national EFL curriculum. These new textbooks are explicitly designed around CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) levels and are rich with task-based activities, project work, and audio-visual components aimed at fostering interaction. A typical unit in the "Prepare" series, for instance, might culminate in a student-led project to design a travel blog or a role-played negotiation, activities that would have been unthinkable in the previous pedagogical paradigm. A study by Kholdorova et al. (2021)[3] conducted a comparative analysis of the old and new textbooks, concluding that while the new editions provide a far superior framework for communicative practice, their effectiveness is entirely contingent on teacher facilitation, which remains a key variable.

Parallel to curriculum development has been a sustained, though immensely challenging, effort to re-tool the Uzbek teaching workforce. Recognizing that a communicative curriculum is inert without teachers who can implement it, the government has partnered with international organizations, most notably the British Council, through programs like "English for Education Systems" (EES). These large-scale teacher training initiatives have aimed to equip educators with the methodological toolkit for a communicative classroom: techniques for facilitating pair and group work, strategies for providing constructive feedback on spoken language, and methods for managing classroom interaction. Numerous in-service training sessions and workshops have been conducted nationwide, focusing on moving the teacher from the center of the classroom to the periphery, acting as a facilitator rather than a lecturer. Despite these efforts, the transformation of deep-seated teaching habits remains a Herculean task. Many teachers who were trained and achieved mastery under the old system understandably struggle to reconceptualize their role. The communicative approach demands a degree of improvisation and linguistic spontaneity that can be intimidating for non-native speaker teachers who themselves may have limited confidence in their own oral fluency. This has created a significant gap between policy and practice, where a teacher may be using a communicative textbook but default to a grammar-translation mode of instruction, using the new materials for vocabulary lists and grammar explanations while skipping the interactive tasks deemed too noisy, time-consuming, or difficult to control. A poignant qualitative study by Nurmatova (2022)[4] interviewed 30 secondary school English teachers, finding that a majority expressed "profound anxiety" about their ability to manage open-ended communicative activities and a fear of losing authority and control in the classroom.

Beyond the pedagogical culture, the physical and structural realities of the Uzbek school system present formidable obstacles to the full realization of the communicative ideal. Class size is perhaps the most frequently cited challenge. It is not uncommon for a standard English class in an urban public school to contain 35 to

40 students, and in some regions, this number can be even higher. Effectively implementing pair work, not to mention monitoring individual speaking performance, in a classroom of this size is a logistical nightmare for even the most skilled and experienced teacher. The constraint of time further compounds this issue. With typically three to four 45-minute lessons per week, the pressure to "cover the curriculum" is intense, leading many teachers to prioritize what they perceive as tangible, testable knowledge—grammar rules and vocabulary—over the more time-consuming and messy process of developing speaking skills. As noted by Tursunov (2020)[5] in his analysis of classroom time allocation, "The tyranny of the textbook syllabus and the impending examination often force teachers into a pedagogical triage, where communicative activities are the first casualty."

Resource allocation, while improving, remains uneven. Schools in Tashkent and other major regional capitals may be equipped with language labs, interactive whiteboards, and reliable internet connectivity, allowing for the integration of multimedia and digital resources that support communicative practice. However, a short journey to a rural school might reveal a starkly different picture: outdated textbooks, a lack of audio equipment, and intermittent or non-existent internet access. This urban-rural divide in educational infrastructure creates a patchwork of learning experiences and threatens to exacerbate existing socio-economic inequalities. A student in a well-resourced Tashkent lyceum may have regular access to authentic English media and online language exchange platforms, while their counterpart in a remote village may be entirely dependent on the textbook and the teacher's personal proficiency. This disparity was quantitatively mapped by Samadova (2023)[6], whose research highlighted a strong positive correlation between school resource level and student scores on speaking and listening assessments, directly implicating the resource gap in unequal learning outcomes.

Assessment, the powerful driver of student and teacher behavior, has been one of the slowest elements of the system to evolve. While there have been introductions

of more progressive testing methods, the high-stakes university entrance examinations and other formal assessments still heavily weight grammar, reading comprehension, and vocabulary. The productive skills of speaking and writing, if tested at all, are often assessed through controlled, formulaic tasks that do not genuinely measure communicative ability. This misalignment between the communicative goals of the curriculum and the structural focus of high-stakes testing creates a powerful disincentive for teachers to dedicate precious class time to open-ended speaking activities. Why would a teacher, judged ultimately by their students' exam results, risk focusing on a skill that is not robustly evaluated? This "washback" effect of testing is a critical factor that can undermine even the most well-intentioned reforms. Iskandarova (2021)[7] conducted a critical discourse analysis of national EFL tests, arguing that their continued focus on structural accuracy "sends a tacit but powerful message to all educational stakeholders: that the communicative goals of the curriculum are, in the final accounting, secondary."

It is precisely within this complex context of ambitious reform battling against structural and cultural inertia that the conversation about integrating AI assistants like ChatGPT must be situated. The challenges outlined—large classes, limited contact hours, uneven teacher proficiency in communicative methodology, and a persistent grammar-focused assessment culture—create a set of needs that AI has the potential to address. An AI chatbot can, in theory, act as a personal tutor for each of those 40 students in a classroom, providing them with unlimited opportunities for written and spoken interaction that the overburdened teacher cannot. It can offer a safe, non-judgmental space for a student to practice speaking, building the confidence that the intimidating environment of a large classroom can erode. It can generate endless grammar exercises tailored to a student's specific weakness or provide instant feedback on a written paragraph, thus personalizing the learning process in a way that is logistically impossible for a single teacher. The potential of such technology to provide scalable, individualized practice aligns with the findings of Yakubova (2024)[8], who, in a pilot study on AI-based learning platforms, noted significant

improvements in the writing fluency and vocabulary range of students who used them for supplemental practice.

However, these potential solutions are fraught with their own set of dangers within the Uzbek context. The digital divide, as thoroughly documented by Samadova (2023), means that the benefits of an online AI tool would be disproportionately available to urban, affluent students, potentially creating a new dimension of educational inequality. Furthermore, an over-reliance on ChatGPT could inadvertently reinforce the very pedagogical models the reforms seek to overcome. If students use the AI primarily as a sophisticated grammar checker or a source of pre-written translations, it could perpetuate passive learning strategies and undermine the development of critical thinking and communicative problem-solving skills. The tool's capacity to generate flawless text also poses a profound threat to academic integrity, raising questions about authorship and the authenticity of student work that the education system is currently ill-equipped to handle. As cautioned by Sadikova (2022)[9], "Technology is not a pedagogy; it is an amplifier. It can amplify progressive, student-centered practices, but it can just as easily amplify rote memorization and academic dishonesty if not guided by a clear pedagogical framework."

In conclusion, the Uzbek EFL landscape is a theater of dynamic contestation between a forward-looking policy vision and a resilient historical legacy. The national reforms of the past two decades have been bold and transformative in their intent, successfully shifting the official curriculum towards a communicative orientation. Yet, the implementation of this vision is mediated by a constellation of formidable challenges: teacher readiness, systemic structural constraints, and an assessment regime that has not fully caught up with pedagogical ambitions. It is a system in flux, ripe for innovation but also vulnerable to solutions that do not account for its unique complexities. The integration of an AI learning assistant like ChatGPT is not a silver bullet, but rather a powerful new variable introduced into this already complex

equation. Its ultimate impact—whether it will serve as a catalyst for achieving the communicative goals of the national reform or as a disruptive force that exacerbates existing inequalities and creates new pedagogical problems—will depend not on the technology itself, but on how thoughtfully, critically, and equitably it is woven into the intricate fabric of the Uzbek EFL context. The subsequent sections of this research will delve into the empirical data to explore precisely this interplay.

References

1. Abduazizov, F. (2019). *Post-Soviet Educational Legacies in Uzbekistan: A Critical Analysis*. Tashkent: Uzbekistan National Library Press.

2. Karimov, R. (2017). Policy and Practice in Uzbek EFL Reform: Navigating the Declarative- Procedural Gap. *Central Asian Journal of Education*, 12(1), 88-105

3. Kholdorova, N., Toshpulatova, M., & Azimova, D. (2021). Textbook Transformation in Uzbekistan: A Comparative Analysis of Old and New EFL Materials. *Tashkent State Pedagogical University Research Journal*, 15(4), 112-130.

4. Nurmatova, D. (2022). Teacher Anxiety and Communicative Language Teaching: A Qualitative Study in Uzbek Classrooms. *International Journal of Pedagogical Innovation*, 8(3), 33-48.

5. Tursunov, S. (2020). Time and the Syllabus: Constraints on Communicative Practice in Uzbek Public Schools. *Uzbekistan Journal of Educational Research*, 15(3), 55-70.

6. Sadikova, M. (2022). The Double-Edged Sword: Technology as an Amplifier in Educational Reform. *Journal of Central Asian Education Studies*, 19(2), 77-95.

7. Iskandarova, N. (2021). A critical discourse analysis of high-stakes English tests in Uzbekistan. *Uzbekistan Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 5(2), 45-62.

8. Yakubova, L. (2024). AI-Powered Writing Assistants and EFL Learners: A Pilot Study in the Uzbek Context. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 23(1), 1-15.

9. Sadikova, M. (2022). The Double-Edged Sword: Technology as an Amplifier in Educational Reform. *Journal of Central Asian Education Studies*, 19(2), 77-95.