

English as a Foreign Language in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia

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Abstract: This article will explore the practical and pedagogical aspects of teaching English as a second language in Kyrgyzstan vis-à-vis the demands of a Communist past and post-Communist present and future. Reconstruction, democratization and human rights are inextricably connected to the issue of foreign language instruction in the former Soviet Union. Importantly, Kyrgyzstan can be seen as representative of Central Asia and a model of reform and development. A foreign language is crucial to science and technology in the region and, of course, to anyone working in the field; English as a foreign language and writing courses in particular, are in great demand in Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian Countries for this reason. Mastering the English language is considered an essential to the well being of both the individual and society. As I will attempt to show, university-level writing courses being offered in Kyrgyzstan not only have a contribution to make to the larger field of ESL/EFL instruction and to professionals working in other Central Asian countries, but to the course of democratization in the region.

Key words: English Teaching • Experiment • Foreign Language

INTRODUCTION

English Language in Kyrgyzstan: Kyrgyzstan is located just west of China and famous for its incredible natural beauty and proud nomadic traditions. It's entirely mountainous terrain is dominated by the Tien Shan range, consisting of many tall peaks, glaciers and high-altitude lakes. Annexed by Russia in 1864, Kyrgyzstan achieved its independence in 1991 following the collapse of the U.S.S.R. A population of roughly five million, 64.9% are Kyrgyz, 13.8% are Uzbek, 12.5% are Russian, with Dungan (1.1%), Ukrainians (1%), Uigur (1%) and another nondescript 5.7% filling out the ranks (1999 census). An overwhelming majority are Muslims (75%), with a sizeable Russian Orthodox minority (20%). Kyrgyzstan has two official languages: Kyrgyz and Russian.

Not unlike other Central Asian countries, Kyrgyzstan has a number of responsibilities and objectives in the field of education. The main reason for educational reform in Kyrgyzstan is a lack of international accreditation, especially where its university degrees and titles are concerned. The Ministry of Education and Culture of the Kyrgyz Republic is reforming post-secondary education in accordance with a new educational standard vis-à-vis the larger educational community of other Central Asian member states and world educational associations.

The creation of a powerful educational union of Central Asian countries is part of this reform strategy.

Today, educational institutions in Kyrgyzstan must choose between several competing models: Soviet, post-Soviet, Eurasian and America. A number of the country's leading universities are revising their curricula with the assistance of cooperating foreign universities and NGOs (Kyrgyz State National University, the International University of Kyrgyzstan, the American University-Central Asia, Kyrgyz Turkish Manas University, the Kyrgyz Russian Slavonic University and Osh State University). Moreover, China, South Korea and Iran are planning to open their universities in the country.

Scholars here are experimenting with many interesting and useful approaches first introduced by foreign partner universities and faculty in the field of educational development. New, independent institutions and educational centres have been formed, having their own funding and flexible structures for securing funding that are dictated by market conditions. The number of universities and educational centres has created a very competitive environment for young people in Kyrgyzstan, who want to study at the best schools. Opportunities vary depending on where they live. Students from urban centres tend to do better than students from rural schools. Being educated in the country as opposed to the city is

also a problem since most students from rural schools are at a disadvantage compared to their urban counterparts. Students who are fortunate enough to travel abroad to study at leading educational institutions in Asia, Europe and America are best equipped to compete in this market-driven and extremely competitive educational environment. The only problem in this case is a lack of interest in Kyrgyz culture, custom and national tradition as having little practical value or usefulness.

Since 1991-1992, there have been cardinal changes, not only in political, economic and social affairs, but in educational reform in Kyrgyzstan in particular. Because change in any area, including education, is predicated on changes in individual attitudes and behaviors--changes that take place slowly as a rule--it is important to analyze previous experiences and systems for possible answers. This is all the more important because the phenomena we encounter today are the consequences of things we have done before [1].

In modern language teaching, writing is a communicative activity and should be taught as such. This means the teaching of communicative writing, that is, writing that facilitates genuine communication. Importantly, learning to write in English in a communicative way was foreign to the old Soviet EFL curriculum. Other communicative activities were emphasized at different periods and at different educational institutions from the 1950s onwards when English gained some ground as the leading foreign language to be taught. However, learning to read in English as a second language rather than to write per se was the emphasis, reading not writing taught in a communicative way. Beginning in the 1960s, speaking and listening, especially speaking, gained prominence as the primary goals of teaching and learning. It should be noted, however, that most often the results did not live up to expectations--which were ambitious, indeed.

Then again, the study of writing in English as a communicative activity was not taken all that seriously or made a practical part of any curriculum, except for the odd university course for teachers of English as a foreign language. Even so, it ranked a distant third, with reading and spoken English receiving the greatest attention. It did not help that specific materials for the teaching of writing as a communicative skill were scarce and a highly developed method of instruction conspicuously absent. Many teachers of English who graduated from Soviet universities were functionally illiterate when it came to the written language and thus completely unprepared to teach English composition per se.

This blind spot in their educations was never an obstacle to their careers in education because, as already mentioned, teaching communicative writing was not in demand. To justify leaving it out of the curriculum, a specific line of thought was followed, somewhat akin to the idea expressed in "*an emphasis on correct usage of grammar and spelling*" by [2, 3]. Because so few people in the former Soviet Union were allowed to write or send written documents outside the country without attracting unfavorable attention from the state security authorities, there is a certain logic to the argument that written English had no practical value or usefulness at the time. This does not mean that writing was totally excluded from the curricula of different educational institutions. Writing as a communicative activity was limited to secondary school exercises such as "letters to a foreign pen-friend" or summaries of more difficult English texts for the higher schools. Most of the time, however, learning to write in English consisted of locating relevant sentences and rewriting them according to some prescribed format--either as a letter or précis.

Not surprisingly, research on English composition as a communicative activity failed to attract serious scholarly attention among Soviet scholars and pedagogues. Research in the field by Western ESOL professionals was not accessible to counterparts in the Soviet Union and so the absence of home-grown research on teaching English composition became all the more problematic. When the Soviet Union disintegrated, teaching written English as a communicative activity was practically non-existent. Teaching materials, approaches, methods and trained professionals were also sorely lacking.

In Kyrgyzstan and despite a boom in ESL/EFL instruction that began almost the minute the country declared its independence, little has changed vis-à-vis the written word. Many still hold to the old Soviet preference for speaking and reading. Writing is still not a high priority in Kyrgyzstan; and this is surprising given the fact that it is among the most liberal and progressive of the Central Asian republics. Writing in English is still the purview of a select few. Why that is and how it can be corrected is the subject of what follows.

Obstacles to the Teaching Writing in English: There are several reasons for the lack of progress in the teaching of English composition for its own sake in Kyrgyzstan, in Central Asia in general and other parts of the developing world. The first is a simple lack of expertise. There are very few teachers who know how to teach English writing as a

communicative activity and universities have not yet focused their attention on training future teachers to fill the void. The second is related to the first, a shortage of money. Because of the deep economic crisis in Kyrgyzstan, ESOL research at state-run educational institutions is not being funded, whereas commercial ESL programs are not designed with research in mind. As a result, English composition continues to be ignored and methods of teaching (adapted to local conditions) remain undeveloped. Western teaching materials are available in principle, but once again a lack of money means that such materials are out of reach for most students and teachers. There are infrequent attempts to change this, invariably by state-run universities, but such attempts are few and far between. There are several explanations for this, too.

- English teaching materials for beginners [4], writing is an academic exercise or a series of pseudo-communicative assignments. They do not allow for an approach to learning to write in a playful and experimental way. Moreover, such curricula make writing a part of conversation and/or reading course, which was the problem with the old Soviet curriculum and others in the world. English materials and methods for teaching written English according to a communicative curriculum do not “deal with writing instruction at the beginning level of English study” [5].
- English teaching materials for the students are not cheap, educational institutions in the country cannot bear the cost and students cannot either.
- Teaching methods and materials are largely for the instruction of English as a second language in English-speaking countries and for students enrolled in US or British universities. This matter may be solved by combining Western materials and methods adapted to local needs. But there appear to be no such local methods upon which to draw.

The following course of action vis-à-vis course development in communicative writing in Kyrgyzstan is offered as a solution to the above.

- Main teaching approaches, methods and teaching materials for the course (if it is found to be needed) should be selected. Writing should be taught, moreover, for its own sake and not as not an auxiliary part of courses principally aimed at developing speaking, listening and/or reading skills [6].

- ESL/EFL students should first be tested to determine whether a writing course is in fact required and what kind or level of instruction they require.
- When chosen materials and methods originate in the West, they should be adapted to local conditions, suitably modified and/or supplemented. The first version of the course itself with all its components can be elaborated, tried out in practice and change in order to maximize its effectiveness.

Writing English as a Foreign Language for Kyrgyz

Learners: I developed an intensive ESL program for Kyrgyzstan in 1994, to be introduced in Bishkek city. It attempted to satisfy the requirements of the greatest number of potential adolescent and adult students from Kyrgyzstan who were interested in learning English for a variety of personal and professional reasons. The program was designed for a commercial language school organized and owned by me. I designed the curriculum with learners in mind and their “*English for Specific Purposes*”. Analysis was necessary to determine what to teach and what guidelines to follow in the development and selection of teaching materials. In this vein, 250 potential learners from Bishkek were interviewed in 1994 and 1995 and then another 230 in 2005 and 2006. All the interviewees were people who expressed an interest in learning English. Those interviewed for this study ranged in age from 18 to 42 years old.

The 1994-1995 data was analyzed in detail, [A] whereas the 2005-2006 data was identical and so will not be discussed in quite the same detail. In both surveys, upwards of 70% of those interviewed required some ESP course and not less than 66% preferred that it to be oriented around business or commerce. However, with few exceptions, they thought a general English course ought to come first. Moreover, a shift over the years in their interests was detectable and, importantly, one which included writing along with speaking, listening and reading.

In the 1994-1995 survey, 61% were only interested speaking and listening skills. They believed that reading and writing were secondary. The remaining 39%, again with few exceptions, ranked speaking and listening as the most important skills but not to the exclusion of reading as essential for their personal needs. Only 24% listed writing as vital to the study of English as a second language (Fig. 1).

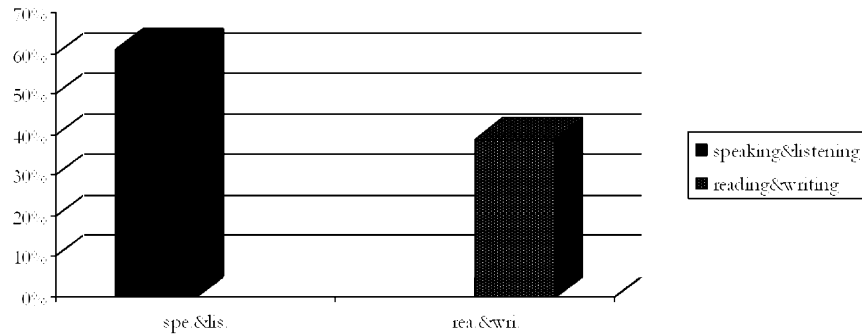


Fig. 1: Distribution of responders for the interest of skills in 1994-1995

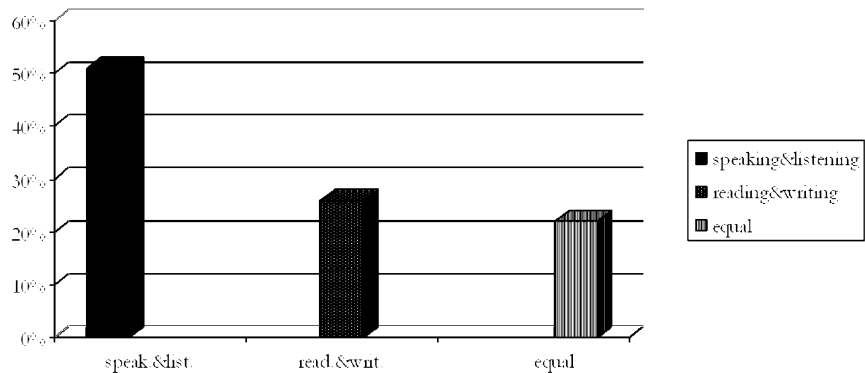


Fig. 2: Distribution of responders for the interest of skills in 2005-2006

In the 2005-2006 survey and to the contrary, an overwhelming majority (87%) emphasized how important all four skills were-speaking, listening, reading and writing-to the study of the English language. Of these, 51% thought that speaking and listening should come first, but that reading and writing should not be ignored. All four skills were of equal importance for 26% of those interviewed. 22% stressed the importance of reading and writing of English in the workplace (Fig. 2).

1994-1995 was a time of initial contact between the Kyrgyz people, businessmen and specialists and people from other, English-speaking countries. Those contacts necessitated personal meetings and oral communication, hence the emphasis on the oral over the written. Today, Kyrgyzstan has many well-established and regular contacts of a personal and professional nature. This new economic and political situation and history with foreign friends and/or partners has brought with it an obvious need for communication of a written or printed kind-papers, documents, letters, etc.

The shift in interest toward written English has a direct connection to rise of business and commerce in the region. 64% said that they needed to learn how to compose a standard business letters and draft other business documents. 94% were less specific and best

summarized by one 36-year-old research associate, who said he wanted first of all “a short course that would teach [him] the basic skills of writing in English and permit [him] to further develop [his] writing in any direction that [he] needed for [his] personal or professional purposes.” [B] He was not alone in wanting to acquire English-language skills that could be adapted to any purpose or situation.

The two surveys and the shift in attitudes away from the old Soviet practice of ESL/EFL as speaking and listening toward writing as well, calls for at least two approaches and curricula for the teaching of writing per se.

- A beginners’ course that will develop basic skills in communicative writing (written speech) without any special consideration to content or occupation.
- A separate writing course tailored to the specific purposes.

The result was an extensive needs-based English course curriculum (2006) made up of seven courses. Every course is a separate and complete unit so that student can enroll in only one or all seven as it suits their personal or professional needs and respective command of the English language. One of the seven, an 8-week writing

course for beginners, will be the subject of the following discussion and illustrative of the first of the two approaches already mentioned.

Teaching Writing Skills: Success and Failure [C]:

This writing course was intended for students with basic speaking and listening skills acquired in the preceding elementary conversation course (see above) and thus only beginners when it came to written English. The course was designed to take them from the beginning or elementary to the pre-intermediate level. A variety of writing exercises and genres were employed: simple informal letters such as an invitation to a friend to come and stay at the writer's country house for holidays, more formal letters such as reserving a hotel room and short compositions or essays of a descriptive and narrative nature about family and friends, one's house, or some personal experience.

The textbook for the course was Coe's *Writing Skills* (1991) which is designed for beginners and the teaching of the basics: grammar, sentence and paragraph construction [7]. Another reason I chose Peterson's text was because reading and writing are done in tandem and to facilitates the transfer of skills from reading to writing and writing to reading—the bedrock of modern methodology [8, 9]. Reading and analyzing texts from the point of view of contrastive rhetoric is also a good foundation for genre analysis. The book's only weakness is an overabundance of product-oriented controlled compositions which militates against process-oriented activities. Moreover, the communicative purpose of writing is not stressed vis-à-vis the importance of providing an audience for student writing—an audience that ought to include not only teachers, but other students as well who can engage in various role-playing activities, the exchanging of letters and other interactive and reciprocal reading and writing exercises.

To facilitate a more communicative approach vis-à-vis the textbook, nineteen of the twenty-four classes that made up the course followed the textbook, whereas five classes were set aside (one every fourth class beginning with class number eight) where a more communicative and creative approach was employed. In these classes, students wrote informal and formal letters, as well as simple narrative and descriptive compositions which they exchanged and discussed. *The design of these classes followed (with minor changes) the sequence of activities in White and Arndt (1991) [11]:*

- Reading a teacher-supplied sample text,
- Discussing it from the point of view of contrastive rhetoric, defining its genre peculiarities and making conclusions about how texts of this kind should be composed,
- Writing a sample text following the practical recommendations in Fowler (1989), Gebhard(1990) and White (1980),
- Brainstorming in pairs or small groups,
- Writing a proper first draft,
- Exchanging drafts for peer-review and commentary,
- Sharing comments, experiences and ideas on how to write a final draft,
- Writing a second draft,
- Writing and proof-reading,
- Responding to and incorporating critical comments from the teacher and
- The final draft per se.

Despite its methodological strengths and the employment of a communicative approach, the course as originally conceived was unsuccessful part because of an enormous dropout rate. Of the 12 to enroll, 6 quit in the first month and only 3 went on to satisfy the requirements of the course. Reasons listed for dropping the course included simple boredom, suggesting that more classes of a communicative or interactive nature might have been advisable. Moreover, as one high school graduate to drop the course explained (M.U., 18): "*I like to learn writing in English very much, but I do not have an urgent need for it. And it is difficult to make myself work if the task at hand does not greatly give feeling of interest or excitement to me.*" Others surveyed confirmed the need for an approach to writing that was fun, as well as informative and practical, in part because writing is not a preferred activity.

Final Evaluation: Students were evaluated according to the following examination requirements: a formal or informal letter and a short 150-word essay or narrative. The topic for the essay or short story was assigned, as well as the purpose or reason for writing the letter.

Of questionable literary merit and even lacking in good taste, it is certainly creative and shows considerable progress from the initial stages of the class when simple descriptions. A steady improvement in the writing can be seen if one compares this to what precedes. In the short space of two months, students

progressed from simple to relatively difficult English texts with relative ease and largely because of the writing-for-fun component.

Clearly, writing for fun has something to offer the teaching of English Composition in Central Asia and other post-Soviet republics. In short, students will not acquire the necessary reading and writing skills if they do not find a good reason to want to read and write. Writing for fun will prepare them for the more serious work of letter writing, for example, or writing for business and government application. That students, of their own accord, preferred to work individually is suggestive of an evolution in their thinking-as serious students of English as a second language.

The differences in attitudes and performance between these students and the class of 2006, where writing for fun was not a factor, are striking.

A writing-for-fun component to teaching English composition is worthy of serious consideration for a number of reasons: as a means of facilitating learning by allowing time for and thus an opportunity to access and manipulate language, eliminated barriers to the free and fluent expression of one's ideas in a foreign language, develops an ability to "play" with language and find pleasure in the activity of learning and using another language. Writing has an important role to play in all of this, in part because students are more inclined to be playful and to take risks when writing rather than speaking. When speaking, one does not want to appear foolish or experimental, which often is not the case when writing. Finally, the employment of a team or group approach has merits, too, in its ability to promote a playful, interactive and communicative approach to the study of another language.

CONCLUSION

Teaching English composition as a communicative activity is new to Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian Countries, although some researches have been being done. This case study suggests that the time is right for such an approach. The only question is whether ESL/EFL as a reading and writing exercise will receive the necessary academic and governmental support necessary to be implemented on a larger scale. English as a second language is crucial, not only to the future development of Kyrgyzstan as a newly independent state and emergent post-Soviet democracy, but to the further development of

Central Asia. The moral of the story is that language and reform go hand in hand. Likewise, reforms to the way English as a second language is taught and civil society also go hand in hand.

NOTES

[A]. Interview Questions

- Name surname
- Age
- Nationality
- Religion
- Educational status
- English level
- Occupation
- Place of work (study)
- Purpose/s of learning English
- Language skill/s preference (reading, listening, writing and speaking)
- Potential and actual learners were always interviewed in Russian and Kyrgyz to give them opportunities to formulate clearly their opinions. For purposes of this article, I have translated into English the quoted interview information.
- The earlier and much abridged version of the of the article was read as a paper at the ELT Symposium in Canakkale, Turkey (May 26, 2005).

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