BG Pulse Journal USA

ISSN:1947-2536 http://www.bgpulseusa.com/index.php/bg

BG PULSE JOURNAL

FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE: THE IMPLEMENTATION OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICY IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN UZBEKISTAN

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Doi: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23194160

Abstract: This article examines the implementation of foreign language education policy in Uzbekistan through the experiences and perceptions of school students, language teachers, parents and educational administrators. The study is based on empirical data collected in February–March 2020 through a mixed-method design: an online questionnaire completed by 150 upper-secondary students and 20 semi-structured interviews with teachers, parents, a student and school administrators. The analysis focuses on the reforms associated with the 2012 Presidential Decree PQ-1875 on the further improvement of the foreign language education system and the 2017 Decree No. 610 on further actions to improve foreign language education. The findings indicate substantial positive changes following the reforms, including the earlier introduction of foreign language instruction, the adoption of CEFR-oriented curricula, textbook redesign, incentives for foreign language teachers, internationalized assessment mechanisms and the modernization of language classrooms. At the same time, implementation was uneven. The data reveal a pronounced gap between the reform generation that entered school after the 2012 reform and upper-grade learners who remained within the previous curriculum. Students' evaluations were broadly positive—80% rated the quality of English teaching at their school as excellent or good—yet teacher qualification, textbook appropriateness, uneven use of classroom technology, and the organization of upper-secondary education remained significant concerns. The article argues that the Uzbek case illustrates the difference between formal policy adoption and policy enactment in schools: reforms can establish new institutional conditions, but their educational effects depend on alignment among curriculum, materials, teacher competence, assessment, infrastructure and learner trajectories.

Keywords: language policy; language education policy; foreign language education; English language teaching; Uzbekistan; CEFR; policy implementation; secondary education

1. Introduction

Foreign language education has become an increasingly important component of language policy in Uzbekistan. Following independence in 1991, language policy was strongly associated with the development and institutionalization of Uzbek as the state language. Over time, however, the policy agenda expanded toward foreign language education, particularly English, in response to globalization, educational mobility and the perceived economic and social value of foreign-language competence. The resulting shift is especially visible in the reforms introduced during the 2010s, which sought to transform not only the amount of foreign language instruction but also its starting age, curriculum, assessment, teacher development and material resources.

The 2012 Presidential Decree PQ-1875 marked a major stage in this transformation. According to the policy framework examined in the original study, foreign language instruction was introduced from the first grade beginning with the 2013/2014 academic year, and a CEFR-oriented approach was incorporated into curriculum and textbook development. The reform also created financial incentives for foreign language teachers who demonstrated an appropriate level of language proficiency. The 2017 Decree No. 610 continued the reform trajectory by introducing internationalized assessment practices and a national testing mechanism.

From a language-policy perspective, these measures can be understood as language management: formal interventions by authorities intended to influence language practices. Spolsky's (2004) framework distinguishes language practices, language beliefs and language management, while Shohamy (2006) emphasizes the role of education as a mechanism through which official language policy can become de facto language practice. The Uzbek case is therefore particularly useful for examining what happens between the adoption of a policy and its enactment in classrooms.

The present article revisits the empirical component of the author's 2020 Master's research and concentrates specifically on this policy-to-practice relationship. Rather than reproducing the dissertation as a whole, it reorganizes its findings around one central question: to what extent did the foreign language education reforms produce the intended changes in secondary-school practice, and where did implementation remain uneven?

The article addresses three related questions:
(1) What major changes did the 2012 and 2017 foreign language education reforms introduce into secondary education?
(2) How were these reforms perceived by students, teachers, parents and school administrators?
(3) What implementation gaps were visible in curriculum, textbooks, teacher quality, classroom resources and the organization of secondary education?

2. Conceptual Framework

The analysis is grounded primarily in Spolsky's (2004) understanding of language policy as involving three interconnected dimensions: language practices, language beliefs and language management. In the present study, official decrees and institutional reforms represent language management; students', parents' and teachers' evaluations represent language beliefs; and classroom practices, participation in foreign language lessons, textbook use and engagement with additional language courses provide evidence concerning practices.

Language education policy is particularly significant because schools are institutional sites where policy is translated into everyday behavior. Shohamy (2006) conceptualizes language education policy as a mechanism for creating de facto language practices in educational institutions. This perspective makes it possible to distinguish between a policy as a formal document and a policy as it is actually experienced by teachers and learners.

A further concept relevant to the analysis is policy enactment. A reform may prescribe a curriculum, assessment framework or textbook, but teachers remain central actors in interpreting and implementing those prescriptions. The findings of the original study support this view: the introduction of new materials and standards did not produce identical outcomes across grades

because teachers' ability to use the materials, learners' previous educational trajectories and the compatibility of materials with students' levels influenced implementation.

The article therefore treats implementation as a multi-level process rather than as a simple transfer of governmental decisions into schools. The analytical chain is: policy design → institutional provision → teacher enactment → learner experience → perceived outcomes.

3. Methodology

The study employed a mixed-method design combining quantitative and qualitative data. Data were collected in February and March 2020. In total, 170 participants were involved: 150 respondents completed an online questionnaire and 20 participants took part in semi-structured individual interviews.

The questionnaire was designed in Uzbek, Russian and English and distributed online among students in grades 9–11 in the Khorezm region and Tashkent city. It contained 20 questions focusing on students' attitudes toward foreign language education and the problems they experienced in the existing system. Among the 150 respondents, 54.4% were male and 45.6% female. Participants were predominantly 15–20 years old; 92% reported Uzbek as their mother tongue, and the same proportion reported studying English and Russian as foreign languages at school.

The qualitative component consisted of 20 semi-structured interviews. Nineteen interviews were conducted in Uzbek and one in English. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and were audio-recorded. The interview sample included five parents, one 11th-grade student, two administrators and twelve language teachers working with Uzbek, Russian and English. Real names were replaced with pseudonyms. Teacher interviews addressed national and foreign language policy, implementation, challenges, classroom practice and possible improvements; parent interviews focused on language preferences, perceived benefits and problems in school foreign language education.

Quantitative results are reported descriptively because the original study was designed primarily to identify patterns of attitudes and perceptions rather than to conduct inferential statistical testing. Qualitative interview evidence is used to interpret and contextualize the questionnaire results. The study should therefore be read as an empirical case study of policy implementation rather than as a nationally representative evaluation of all Uzbek schools.

4. Policy Context and Reform Trajectory

The reforms examined in the study represent a shift from a system in which foreign language instruction traditionally began later in schooling toward a model emphasizing earlier exposure and internationally oriented standards.

The 2012 Presidential Decree PQ-1875, implemented from the 2013/2014 academic year, introduced foreign language instruction from the first grade and provided for the redesign of curriculum and textbooks in accordance with CEFR principles. It also created financial incentives for foreign language teachers who obtained the required language-proficiency certification. These measures were intended to increase both the quantity and quality of foreign language education.

The 2017 Decree No. 610 extended the reform agenda. The study documents the introduction of assessment mechanisms based on the four language skills—listening, reading, writing and speaking—and the establishment of a national foreign-language testing mechanism. The policy also linked recognized language certificates to admission and professional incentives.

The reform package was therefore multidimensional. It did not simply add more English lessons. It attempted to change the starting age, curricular standards, textbooks, teacher incentives, assessment and classroom infrastructure. Such breadth is important when evaluating implementation because weaknesses at one level can reduce the effect of reforms at another level.

5. Findings

5.1 Positive changes in foreign language education

The first major finding is that participants generally perceived the reformed foreign language education system as an improvement over the previous system. Eighty percent of questionnaire respondents evaluated the quality of foreign language teaching at their school positively: 30% selected “excellent” and 50% selected “good.” Fifteen percent selected “not very good” and 5% “poor.” The result indicates a predominantly positive perception of the direction of reform.

Interview evidence reinforces this pattern. Several teachers described students who had entered school after the 2012 reform as noticeably stronger in English than students from the previous system. One teacher explicitly compared learners who had started foreign language education under the new program with older cohorts and attributed the difference to earlier instruction and the CEFR-oriented system.

The significance of this finding is not that the reform automatically produced high proficiency, but that participants perceived a generational difference associated with the new policy trajectory. The policy appears to have created conditions that were viewed as more favorable for foreign language learning than those available under the earlier system.

5.2 Curriculum and textbook reform

Curriculum and textbook redesign constituted a central element of the reform. The study found that the new materials for the reform generation were generally viewed positively. Teachers reported that primary-grade textbooks were more modern, skill-oriented and engaging than earlier materials, and that they supported the development of multiple language skills.

At the same time, the data reveal an important implementation problem: curricular reform did not affect all cohorts equally. Students in upper grades who had entered school before the 2012/2013 reform were still associated with the previous educational trajectory. In interviews, teachers described a mismatch between the level of redesigned materials and the actual proficiency of learners in some upper grades. Some teachers consequently used alternative textbooks or supplementary materials.

This finding demonstrates that textbook reform cannot be evaluated independently of learner history. A textbook aligned with CEFR expectations may be appropriate for students who have

received continuous instruction from an early grade, but the same material may be too demanding for students whose previous schooling followed an older curriculum. Thus, the problem was not necessarily the quality of the new textbook itself; it was the lack of alignment between materials and the educational trajectories of different cohorts.

5.3 Teacher quality and policy enactment

Teacher quality emerged as one of the clearest implementation challenges. The reform introduced financial incentives intended to encourage foreign language teachers to improve their proficiency and professional qualifications. Interview evidence suggests that this mechanism had a positive influence in at least some contexts: participants described an increase in teacher proficiency and linked improved teacher competence to better classroom instruction.

However, the student questionnaire presents a more complex picture. Only 43% of respondents agreed with the statement that their school English teacher had good knowledge in the relevant teaching areas; 40% were neutral and 17% disagreed. In an open-ended question about problems in foreign language education, approximately 40% of students identified poorly qualified teachers as a problem.

These findings should not be interpreted as evidence that the teacher-incentive policy failed. Rather, they indicate an implementation gap between the formal provision of incentives and the uneven experiences of learners. Teacher development is a continuing process, and certification or financial incentives cannot by themselves guarantee effective classroom practice.

The interviews also show that teacher competence interacts with curriculum and materials. One teacher argued that even a well-designed textbook could not achieve its intended effect if teachers lacked the language proficiency or professional development needed to use it effectively. Teachers therefore function as policy actors who mediate between official curriculum requirements and actual classroom practice.

5.4 Classroom technology and infrastructure

Modernization of foreign language classrooms was another visible component of the reform. Teachers reported receiving interactive boards, laptops, speakers, projectors and other equipment. These resources were generally associated with more interesting and flexible lessons.

Nevertheless, implementation was not uniform. Some teachers reported that technological equipment was not consistently used because devices could be broken, unavailable or insufficiently supported by school administration. The finding is significant because it demonstrates the difference between provision and effective utilization. A policy can successfully deliver physical resources without guaranteeing that those resources become sustainable elements of teaching practice.

From a policy-enactment perspective, infrastructure should therefore be evaluated not only by whether equipment has been supplied, but also by whether schools maintain it, teachers know how to use it, and institutional routines support its integration into lessons.

5.5 Assessment and the wider secondary-school structure

The 2017 reform introduced new assessment mechanisms and a national testing system, strengthening the connection between foreign language proficiency and educational progression. The policy context also included a broader restructuring of secondary education. The shift to an 11-year general secondary education model affected the organization of upper-secondary schooling and created new pressures for teachers and students.

The study found that upper-grade learners were particularly affected by the coexistence of old and new educational trajectories. Teachers and students reported difficulties associated with the non-specialized structure of upper-secondary education and the need to prepare for university entrance examinations while studying a broad set of compulsory subjects.

Foreign language policy was therefore embedded in a wider education reform. The effectiveness of English-language reforms depended partly on how well the broader secondary-school structure accommodated language learning, assessment and examination preparation.

5.6 Instruction time and learner perceptions

The questionnaire also examined whether students considered the amount of English instruction sufficient. Fifty-five percent of respondents believed that English lesson hours at school were not enough, while 45% considered them sufficient. Teacher interviews produced a similarly divided view.

Importantly, some teachers argued that simply increasing lesson hours would not necessarily solve the main problems. They emphasized teacher quality and the need for appropriately designed textbooks. This is an important policy implication: quantity of instruction and quality of implementation are not interchangeable. Additional hours may have limited effects if curriculum, materials, teacher competence and assessment are not aligned.

6. Discussion

Taken together, the findings suggest that Uzbekistan's foreign language education reform produced meaningful institutional change, but implementation was uneven across cohorts and educational levels.

First, the reforms demonstrate the potential of coordinated language management. The 2012 and 2017 measures addressed several components simultaneously: starting age, curriculum, textbooks, teacher incentives, assessment and infrastructure. Participants' predominantly positive evaluations suggest that these reforms were visible in everyday educational experience.

Second, the findings reveal a temporal implementation gap. The strongest positive effects were associated with learners who entered school after the introduction of the new program. Older learners, particularly those in upper grades, were less able to benefit fully because their prior educational trajectory did not match the assumptions embedded in the redesigned curriculum and textbooks. Reform therefore needs transitional mechanisms when old and new systems coexist.

Third, the study supports a policy-enactment perspective. Teachers are not passive recipients of policy. They interpret textbooks, compensate for mismatches, choose supplementary materials and

decide how technological resources are used. Their professional competence is therefore a critical link between policy design and learner outcomes.

Fourth, the findings point to the importance of policy coherence. A language reform may be strong in isolation but less effective when it conflicts with another part of the education system. The mismatch between textbook levels and learner preparation, for example, was not simply a textbook problem; it was a coordination problem between curriculum reform, cohort progression and secondary-school restructuring.

Finally, the data indicate that positive macro-level evaluation and local-level problems can coexist. Eighty percent of students evaluated school foreign language teaching positively, while substantial proportions simultaneously identified teacher quality and other implementation issues. This apparent contradiction is analytically useful: policy success should not be measured only by general satisfaction, but also by the persistence of specific barriers.

7. Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings suggest five areas for strengthening policy implementation.

First, curriculum reforms should be accompanied by explicit transition plans for cohorts educated under previous standards. Where new CEFR-oriented materials are introduced, bridging materials or differentiated pathways can help prevent a mismatch between textbook expectations and learner proficiency.

Second, teacher professional development should be continuous and practice-oriented. Financial incentives can encourage certification, but professional learning should also address classroom methodology, curriculum interpretation and the effective use of new teaching materials.

Third, textbook policy should include systematic feedback from teachers and learners. The appropriateness of materials should be assessed not only at the design stage but also during classroom implementation.

Fourth, investment in technology should include maintenance, technical support and teacher training. The presence of equipment is not equivalent to meaningful integration of technology into language teaching.

Fifth, foreign language policy should be coordinated with broader secondary-education reform and assessment policy. Students' language-learning opportunities are shaped by the total organization of schooling, not by the foreign-language curriculum alone.

8. Limitations

The study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. The questionnaire was distributed online through social networks and personal contacts, and participants were concentrated in Khorezm region and Tashkent city. The sample is therefore not nationally representative. The qualitative sample was also purposive and relatively small. In addition, the empirical data were collected in February–March 2020. Consequently, the findings describe perceptions and practices at that time and should not be presented as a direct evaluation of the Uzbek education system in 2026.

These limitations do not diminish the value of the study as an empirical case. Rather, they indicate that future research should revisit the same policy questions using nationally representative samples and current data, allowing researchers to determine which of the implementation gaps identified in 2020 have persisted, narrowed or disappeared.

9. Conclusion

This article has examined Uzbekistan's foreign language education reforms through the lens of policy implementation. The evidence indicates that the reforms introduced during the 2010s produced substantial changes in the organization and perceived quality of foreign language education. Earlier instruction, CEFR-oriented curricula, new textbooks, teacher incentives, assessment reforms and classroom modernization were all viewed as important improvements.

At the same time, the study demonstrates that formal policy change does not automatically produce uniform classroom outcomes. The most significant implementation difficulties were associated with teacher quality, textbook–learner mismatch, uneven use of technology, instruction time and the coexistence of different educational trajectories in the secondary-school system.

The central contribution of the study is therefore its demonstration of the policy-to-practice gap. Uzbekistan's experience shows that successful language education reform requires not only ambitious policy documents but also sustained alignment between policy design, teacher capacity, learning materials, infrastructure, assessment and students' prior educational experience. In this sense, the implementation of foreign language education policy should be understood as an ongoing process of negotiation between top-down language management and bottom-up educational practice.

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