



DEVELOPING 21ST CENTURY SKILLS THROUGH ENGLISH LANGUAGE
TEACHING: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN A REGIONAL UZBEK
CONTEXT

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Abstract

Since the proclamation of the "New Uzbekistan" vision and the adoption of the Presidential Decree on measures to improve the foreign language learning system (2021), English Language Teaching (ELT) in Uzbekistan has been repositioned as a pillar of national human capital development. Within this reforming landscape, policy documents emphasise competency-based education and the cultivation of 21st century skills critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication yet classroom practice frequently remains shaped by transmission-based traditions, examination cultures inherited from the Soviet period, and an acute disparity in the distribution of qualified teachers and digital resources between the capital and the regions. This study investigates how 21st century skills can be developed within ELT beyond Tashkent, drawing on a qualitative case study conducted at Bilim Ziyo, a private English language centre in Angren, Tashkent Region, over one academic semester. Data were generated through twelve structured classroom observations, six semi-structured teacher interviews, and four learner focus-group discussions involving thirty-two adult learners at B2 level. Reflexive thematic analysis reveals that task-based instruction, project-based learning, and digital multimodal tasks are the pedagogical approaches most strongly associated with skill integration, while high-stakes assessment regimes, constrained access to professional development in regional settings, uneven digital infrastructure, and the sociolinguistic complexity of Uzbekistan's trilingual environment (Uzbek, Russian, English) constitute the most consequential barriers. The study argues that realising the transformative potential articulated in Uzbekistan's reform agenda requires targeted regional investment in teacher professional development, assessment redesign, and digitally equitable resource provision conditions that cannot be assumed outside the capital.

Keywords: *21st century skills; English Language Teaching; Uzbekistan; regional education; competency-based education; task-based instruction; multilingualism; teacher professional development*

1. Introduction

Uzbekistan entered the third decade of the twenty-first century with an ambitious and clearly articulated educational agenda. A series of presidential decrees and government resolutions adopted between 2017 and 2022 signalled the state's intention to transform the



national education system from one predominantly oriented toward knowledge transmission and credential acquisition to one centred on competence, innovation, and integration into the global knowledge economy (Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2017; Presidential Decree No. UP-6108, 2021). English language proficiency was elevated to a strategic national priority: the 2021 decree on improving the foreign language learning system mandated English instruction from the first grade of general secondary education, established requirements for English-medium instruction in certain higher education programmes, and set national targets for increasing the proportion of the working-age population with communicative competence in English (Ministry of Public Education of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2021).

Yet the reach of these reforms is profoundly uneven. The overwhelming majority of empirical ELT research in Uzbekistan, and the preponderance of institutional innovation, is concentrated in Tashkent a city whose private language education sector, internationally connected universities, and relatively affluent learner population represent conditions that are qualitatively different from those prevailing in provincial and industrial cities across the country. Angren, a mid-sized city of approximately 190,000 inhabitants in the Tashkent Region, is one such context: built around coal extraction and chemical industry, located roughly 100 kilometres south-east of the capital, and served by a state education infrastructure that, like much of provincial Uzbekistan, continues to grapple with teacher shortages, ageing facilities, and limited access to the professional development networks and digital resources that reform-oriented pedagogy demands. Understanding how ELT reform plays out in contexts like Angren rather than exclusively in the showcase institutions of the capital is essential if the "New Uzbekistan" agenda is to translate into genuinely national rather than merely metropolitan transformation.

This study investigates how 21st century skills critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, and digital literacy can be developed within ELT at Bilim Ziyoy, a private English language centre in Angren. Its central research question is: How do ELT teachers and adult learners at a regional language centre perceive the integration of 21st century skills into English language instruction? Three subsidiary questions structure the analysis: (1) Which instructional approaches are most conducive to 21st century skill development in this regional context? (2) What structural and pedagogical barriers impede skill integration? (3) What conditions institutional, professional, and sociolinguistic enable more effective integration in a setting beyond the capital?

The study contributes to the literature on ELT reform in Uzbekistan and Central Asia by providing empirical evidence from a regional, non-metropolitan context, a perspective almost entirely absent from the existing scholarship. The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature, with particular attention to the Uzbek and Central Asian context and to the urban-regional dynamics of educational reform; Section 3 describes the qualitative case study methodology; Sections 4 and 5 present and discuss the findings; and





Section 6 draws conclusions with explicit implications for Uzbek ELT policy and practice at the regional level.

2. Literature Review

2.1 21st Century Skills: Frameworks and Definitions

The concept of 21st century skills has attracted both widespread adoption and sustained scholarly critique. Frameworks such as the Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21), the Assessment and Teaching of 21st Century Skills (ATC21S) project (Griffin et al., 2012), and the OECD Learning Framework 2030 (OECD, 2019) have provided policymakers, curriculum designers, and teacher educators with a shared vocabulary for articulating educational priorities that extend beyond content knowledge. At the same time, scholars including Dede (2010) and Rotherham and Willingham (2010) have noted that the concept's broad definitional parameters encompassing critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, digital literacy, flexibility, and social-emotional competencies risk rendering it analytically imprecise and susceptible to divergent ideological appropriations.

For the purposes of this study, 21st century skills are understood as a cluster of higher-order cognitive, social, and digital competencies that are increasingly required for effective participation in the knowledge economy and civic life, and that cannot be adequately developed through passive, transmission-oriented instruction (Voogt & Roblin, 2012). Critical to this understanding is the sociocultural recognition, rooted in Vygotsky's (1978) account of the social formation of higher mental functions and elaborated in contemporary second language acquisition research (Lantolf et al., 2015), that such competencies are not individual attributes but are formed through collaborative interaction, shared meaning-making, and participation in authentic, purposeful activity. This understanding is particularly consequential for the regional ELT context, where the social and material conditions of learning class size, physical space, access to technology, teacher expertise directly shape the quality of interaction available to learners.

2.2 ELT as a Site for 21st Century Skill Development

The theoretical consonance between communicative language teaching traditions and 21st century skill frameworks is well established. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), emerging from Hymes's (1972) sociolinguistic model of communicative competence and operationalised by Canale and Swain (1980), centres the language classroom on authentic communication, negotiation of meaning, and the social dimensions of language use all of which are constitutive of 21st century collaboration and communication competencies. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), as elaborated by Long (2015) and Ellis (2018), organises instruction around real-world tasks whose completion requires simultaneous linguistic and cognitive engagement, creating natural conditions for critical thinking and collaborative problem-solving.

Project-Based Learning (PBL) has attracted particular attention as a vehicle for 21st century skill integration in ELT contexts. Thomas (2000) and Stoller (2006) identify PBL's defining characteristics sustained inquiry, student agency, authentic purpose, and public





product as precisely those that differentiate skill-developing from skill-inert pedagogical arrangements. Subsequent empirical work in ELT settings, including Tsiplakides (2018) and Beckett and Slater (2005), documents the positive cognitive and motivational outcomes of well-designed PBL, including more frequent higher-order thinking, stronger learner investment, and greater transfer of both linguistic and conceptual learning. Importantly for the regional context, PBL requires minimal external infrastructure it can be realised with modest digital resources and flexible physical arrangements making it particularly viable in settings where technology and facilities cannot be assumed.

The multiliteracies framework, proposed by the New London Group (1996) and developed by Cope and Kalantzis (2015) and Kress (2010), provides a further bridge between ELT and 21st century digital and media literacy. The framework argues that contemporary meaning-making is inherently multimodal and that education must expand its conception of literacy to encompass digital composition, multimodal reading, and the critical evaluation of diverse communicative modes. For ELT in regional Uzbek settings, however, multimodal task design must be sensitive to the digital equity dimension: the assumption of reliable internet access and personal device ownership that underpins much of the multiliteracies literature is significantly less tenable in provincial cities than in Tashkent, and pedagogical approaches must be designed with this constraint in view (Pegrum, 2019).

2.3 The Uzbek ELT Context: Policy, History, and the Urban-Regional Divide

Uzbekistan's educational system emerged from the Soviet model, characterised by centralised curriculum design, teacher authority, rote learning, and encyclopaedic knowledge acquisition (Silova, 2009). English language education within this system was marginalised relative to Russian and subordinated to grammar-translation methodologies. Following independence in 1991, English was progressively elevated in the national curriculum, but methodological change lagged behind structural reform: teachers trained in Soviet-era institutions continued to employ transmission-based approaches, and CLT-oriented resources remained scarce and unevenly distributed a disparity felt most acutely outside Tashkent (Dzhaksybekov, 2020; Hasanova & Shadieva, 2020).

The educational reform wave initiated under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev from 2017 onward has accelerated institutional change at the national level. The Presidential Decree on improving education quality (Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2017) mandated a shift toward competency-based standards. Subsequent decrees targeting English language education established requirements for increased contact hours, English-medium streams in higher education, the phased introduction of IELTS and TOEFL as university admission criteria, and targets for the proportion of teachers holding internationally recognised qualifications (Ministry of Public Education of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2021). The establishment of internationally affiliated universities in Tashkent has diversified the capital's ELT landscape considerably.

However, empirical research consistently reveals a deepening urban-regional asymmetry in the implementation of these reforms. Hasanova and Shadieva (2020) document that





communicative competence development in state secondary schools is impeded nationwide by large class sizes, inadequate infrastructure for group work, accuracy-focused assessment cultures, and learners' ingrained expectations of teacher-fronted instruction but these challenges are systematically more acute in regional settings. Provincial cities such as Angren face additional structural disadvantages: a smaller pool of teachers with communicative or task-based training, weaker access to professional development networks, more limited availability of English-medium media and cultural contact in the surrounding environment, and digital infrastructure gaps that constrain the use of online resources and multimodal tasks (Dzhaksybekov, 2020). The private language education sector in regional cities of which Bilim Ziyo is a representative example occupies a distinctive niche: operating with greater methodological flexibility than state schools, but without the resource base of capital-city private centres or the institutional prestige that attracts internationally qualified teachers.

Uzbekistan's trilingual sociolinguistic landscape adds further complexity that is especially salient in regional industrial cities like Angren. The city's population includes substantial communities of ethnic Uzbeks, Russians, Tajiks, and Koreans a legacy of Soviet-era industrial migration making it more linguistically diverse than many rural areas, though differently so from cosmopolitan Tashkent. In practice, Russian functions as a dominant inter-ethnic language in Angren's professional and social life, often more visibly than in rural Uzbek-speaking areas, while English occupies the position of aspirational international language for younger urban residents. For learners at Bilim Ziyo, English is typically a third language, acquired in a Russian-dominant professional environment and an Uzbek-medium state schooling context. The translingual framework (Canagarajah, 2013; Garcia & Wei, 2014) suggests that this multilingual repertoire Uzbek, Russian, and English in dynamic interplay can be leveraged as a pedagogical resource for developing metalinguistic awareness and intercultural competence, provided that teachers have the theoretical and practical tools to do so.

2.4 Teacher Professional Development in Regional Contexts

Across educational reform literature, teacher professional capacity is consistently identified as the most significant determinant of learning quality (Burns, 2019; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Richards & Farrell, 2019). In Uzbekistan, professional development provision is characterised by significant centre-periphery inequality. A small but growing cohort of ELT teachers in Tashkent holds internationally recognised qualifications (CELTA, DELTA, MA TESOL) and accesses contemporary pedagogical research through professional networks, conferences, and digital communities of practice. Teachers in regional cities typically hold qualifications in English philology from post-Soviet institutions, have had limited or no exposure to communicative or task-based methodologies in their initial preparation, and access in-service professional development through nationally organised regional seminars of variable frequency and quality (Hasanova & Shadieva, 2020). The physical distance from Tashkent where the most active teacher training providers and professional associations are concentrated creates additional barriers to participation in





professional learning that are rarely acknowledged in national policy documents. Fullan's (2021) argument that sustainable educational change requires coherence between individual practice and institutional culture acquires particular force in this context: without sustained regional investment in professional development infrastructure, reform-oriented curricula are likely to remain unrealised aspirations in the majority of Uzbek classrooms.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018), selected for its capacity to generate contextually rich, particularistic understandings of pedagogical processes within a bounded social setting. Case study methodology is well suited to research questions that ask "how" and "why" within real-life contexts where the boundaries between phenomenon and context cannot be sharply drawn a characterisation that aptly describes the relationship between ELT instruction and the broader institutional, sociolinguistic, and material environment in Angren. The bounded case is Bilim Ziyο English Language Centre, a private institution in Angren, Tashkent Region, serving adult and young adult learners at levels from A1 to C1. The centre implemented a revised curriculum informed by competency-based principles at the start of the study period, making it a theoretically productive site for investigating the conditions under which 21st century skill integration is possible in a non-metropolitan Uzbek context. Angren's character as an industrial city with a mixed ethnic population, significant Russian-language presence, and limited access to the professional development infrastructure available in the capital makes it a representative if not fully typical example of the regional ELT settings that serve the majority of Uzbekistan's English language learners.

3.2 Participants

Six English language teachers participated in the study: three women and three men, with classroom experience ranging from three to thirteen years. Qualification profiles reflected the regional norm: three teachers held Bachelor's degrees in English philology from regional pedagogical institutes; two had completed CELTA certification through distance or intensive formats; one held a Master's degree in Applied Linguistics from a Webster university. Two teachers were native Uzbek speakers from the Angren district; two were native Russian speakers with roots in the city's industrial-migration heritage; two held mixed Uzbek-Russian linguistic backgrounds. All had functional trilingual competence in Uzbek, Russian, and English and taught their observed lessons exclusively in English. Thirty-two adult learners at B2 level were recruited from two intact class groups; their ages ranged from 19 to 34. In contrast to the capital-city profile characteristic of much Uzbek ELT research, participants included technicians and engineers from the Angren coal complex, workers from the city's chemical industry, administrative staff, and young adults preparing for higher education entrance. Most described Uzbek as their home language and Russian as their dominant professional language, with several from Russian-speaking families reporting Russian as their





first language. Informed consent was obtained from all participants; pseudonyms are used throughout.

3.3 Data Collection

Three complementary instruments were employed over one academic semester of eighteen weeks. First, twelve classroom observations were conducted using a structured protocol adapted from the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; Pianta et al., 2012), modified to include categories relevant to 21st century skill engagement: learner-generated problem-solving, collaborative negotiation, creative task completion, critical evaluation of arguments or sources, and digital or multimodal production. Observations covered the full lesson duration (typically 90 minutes) and were supplemented by observer field notes and, where consent was granted, audio recording. Second, six individual semi-structured teacher interviews lasting 45–65 minutes explored teachers' conceptual understanding of 21st century skills, their perceptions of alignment between current practice and skill development, the challenges specific to the regional context, and the conditions they considered enabling or constraining. Third, four focus-group discussions with learners (eight participants each) explored their experience of different task types, perceptions of skill development through language learning, and the specific dynamics of acquiring English in a Russian-dominant regional environment.

3.4 Data Analysis

All interview and focus-group recordings were transcribed verbatim and subjected to reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase procedure: familiarisation, open coding, theme generation, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and report writing. Observation field notes were analysed alongside transcripts to identify convergences and divergences between espoused and enacted pedagogy. A 20% random subsample of coded data was independently reviewed to ensure analytic consistency. Member-checking was conducted with all six teacher participants. The researcher, as an ELT practitioner and Master's student based in Tashkent with close professional ties to the Angren context, maintained a reflexive journal throughout to document and interrogate potential interpretive biases arising from her positional familiarity with the setting.

4. Results

4.1 Pedagogical Approaches Associated with 21st Century Skill Development

Thematic analysis across all three data sources identified three categories of instructional approach most consistently associated with observable 21st century skill development: task-based instruction, project-based learning, and digital multimodal tasks. These were not mutually exclusive and frequently overlapped in practice, though the conditions under which each was feasible were shaped by the material and professional realities of the Angren context.

Task-based instruction was most systematically employed by the two CELTA-qualified teachers and the teacher with an Applied Linguistics Master's degree. Observed tasks drew deliberately on content relevant to learners' immediate environment: a structured problem-



solving task in which learners evaluated proposals for economic diversification in Angren following projected shifts in the coal industry; a role-played municipal council meeting debating air quality management in the city; and a negotiation task in which learners, cast as representatives of different community groups, reached a position on a proposed industrial development. These tasks generated sustained episodes of collaborative argument, critical evaluation of evidence, and creative solution-framing. Learner Diyora, a 26-year-old chemical plant technician, commented in focus-group discussion: "I had to think seriously I could not just say the first thing that came to my mind. I had to find arguments, think about what the other person would say, and be ready to answer. That is a different kind of English from grammar exercises." Teacher Zilola, the most experienced qualified teacher in the study, reflected that locally grounded content was indispensable in the Angren context: "If I use tasks about globalisation or Silicon Valley, students struggle to engage they feel it is not about them. When the task is about our city, our industry, our future, the thinking is deeper and the English is richer."

Project-based learning was implemented in both observed groups through a semester-long group research project. Topics were chosen by learners themselves and reflected the intersection of local relevance and broader aspiration: one group investigated the prospects for agritourism development in the Chatkal mountain range accessible from Angren; a second examined energy transition options for the Angren-Pap industrial zone; a third explored the history and revitalisation of traditional crafts in the Tashkent Region. These projects enabled iterative cycles of research, drafting, peer review, revision, and public presentation that compressed multiple 21st century skill domains into a single sustained inquiry. Teacher Sardor described the projects as "the heart of the course the place where everything comes together: reading critically, working as a team, writing with a purpose, presenting with confidence." Learner focus groups consistently identified the project as the most demanding but also the most rewarding component of their learning, with multiple participants noting that research and presentation skills were directly applicable to their working lives. One learner, Rustam, a 29-year-old engineer, observed: "At work I often have to write a report or present to management. The project taught me how to do that in English, yes, but also how to organise thinking and present evidence."

Digital multimodal tasks were introduced by two teachers, taking the form of short video documentaries produced on smartphones, infographics designed using Canva's free tier, and voice-recorded audio reports. These tasks generated the highest observed levels of creative engagement, partly because learners reported greater motivation when producing artefacts with a real audience, and partly because the multimodal format accommodated diverse learner strengths. However, this category of task was also most sensitive to the material constraints of the regional context. Unlike the near-universal smartphone ownership and reliable mobile data access characteristic of the capital's adult learner population, Bilim Ziyo's learners showed more varied digital access: while all possessed smartphones, mobile internet reliability was uneven, and data costs were a genuine concern for several participants. Teacher





Khurshida, who introduced the video documentary task, described her response to this reality: "I planned the task so that all the research and scripting happened in class, and filming used the centre's wi-fi. I also always gave a non-digital alternative a live presentation with a poster so that no student was disadvantaged." This adaptive approach designing digital tasks with analogue fallbacks built in emerged as a distinctive pedagogical strategy in the regional context, one not anticipated in the international digital multiliteracies literature.

4.2 Barriers to 21st Century Skill Integration

Four categories of barrier emerged from the data: examination-driven assessment cultures, the regional professional development deficit, material and digital resource constraints, and the persistence of teacher-centred pedagogical norms.

Examination pressure was the most structurally pervasive barrier, as in the capital, but it operated with a distinctive regional inflection. Because IELTS and TOEFL represent not merely quality benchmarks but, for many Angren learners, life-changing gateway qualifications for university admission and government scholarship eligibility, the stakes attached to examination performance were experienced by both teachers and learners as more acutely personal than they might be for a Tashkent learner with multiple pathways available. Teacher Timur, the most experienced teacher in the study, articulated this with precision: "For a student from Tashkent, not passing IELTS this year means trying again next year maybe with a private tutor, maybe with another course. For my students, it can mean giving up on university entirely. So when I suggest a project instead of exam practice, I am asking them to gamble with something very important." This finding reveals a structural irony embedded in the reform agenda: the expansion of international examination requirements as a quality assurance mechanism has intensified examination orientation most severely in precisely the regional contexts where learners have least capacity to absorb the risk of deprioritising test preparation.

The regional professional development deficit constituted the second and arguably most distinctive barrier. Teachers at Bilim Ziya had significantly less access to professional development than their capital-city peers: the nearest CELTA provider was in Tashkent; national in-service training events were infrequent and, in teachers' accounts, primarily oriented toward curriculum documentation rather than pedagogical skill; and professional learning communities of the kind sustained by Tashkent's dense network of language centres, international schools, and university ELT departments were largely absent. Teachers with English philology backgrounds three of the six in this sample, and the clear majority in Uzbekistan's regional state sector reported substantial uncertainty about both the conceptual basis of 21st century skill frameworks and the practical design of skill-integrating tasks. Teacher Shakhnoza, who had taught for seven years on the basis of her philology degree, stated: "I understand that critical thinking is important. But no one has ever shown me what a critical thinking task looks like in a B2 English lesson. I try things, but I am mostly guessing." This is not an individual failing; it is a systemic consequence of a professional development landscape that has concentrated its most innovative resources in the capital.





Material and digital resource constraints formed a third barrier specific to the regional context. The centre lacked dedicated computer terminals; classroom projector availability was limited to one shared device; and the building's wi-fi connectivity was intermittent. While these constraints did not prevent skill-integrating instruction as the adaptive digital task designs described above demonstrate they imposed a cognitive and logistical overhead on task design that teachers in better-resourced settings do not face. Teacher Sardor reflected: "In Tashkent centres I have visited, teachers can assume a screen, wi-fi, and student devices. Here, every digital lesson requires a plan B and sometimes a plan C. That takes time and energy that I would rather spend thinking about pedagogy."

The persistence of teacher-centred norms was the fourth barrier, operating at the intersection of pedagogical habit, institutional expectation, and cultural script. Angren's learners, like the majority of Uzbek state school graduates, had been socialised into educational cultures in which the teacher is the authoritative source of knowledge and learner questioning can be experienced as a breach of deference norms (Silova, 2009). Several teachers described the process of establishing the interactional norms required for critical discussion disagreeing respectfully, challenging arguments rather than people, tolerating ambiguity as a substantial pedagogical investment that took several weeks before learners engaged with genuine analytical confidence. Learner Zara, a 22-year-old university applicant, reflected: "At school, if you disagreed with the teacher, it was embarrassing even rude. Here, [Teacher Zilola] says disagreement is good if you can explain why. That took time to believe, but now I think it is right."

4.3 Enabling Conditions

Five enabling conditions were identified across the data: institutional leadership alignment, peer professional learning, explicit metacognitive framing, locally grounded task content, and the strategic deployment of learners' multilingual repertoire.

Institutional leadership alignment was foundational. Bilim Ziyo's director had created curriculum space for the semester-long project, arranged a shared professional development session at the start of the year in which all teachers discussed the centre's pedagogical vision, and explicitly framed quality in terms of skill development rather than examination pass rates alone. Teachers consistently cited this as the structural precondition for pedagogical experimentation: "Without his support, the project would be the first thing cut when exam pressure builds," observed Teacher Khurshida. This finding corroborates Fullan's (2021) argument about the decisive role of institutional culture in enabling or constraining individual pedagogical change and it points to the critical importance of centre-level leadership capacity in the regional private language education sector, where directors function simultaneously as administrators, marketers, and de facto curriculum leaders.

Peer professional learning informal but frequent exchanges among teachers about task design and learner responses functioned as the primary mode of professional development for most teachers in the study. Given the absence of formal external professional learning opportunities, these conversations constituted an informal community of practice (Wenger,





1998) through which pedagogical knowledge circulated. The two most experienced and qualified teachers served as informal mentors, sharing task designs, offering feedback on observed difficulties, and introducing colleagues to theoretical frameworks they had encountered in their own education. While this peer learning community was organic and unstructured, its value in sustaining professional growth in a context of formal provision scarcity was evident. Teacher Shakhnoza stated: "Most of what I know about tasks, I learned from watching Zilola and talking with her after lessons. There was no training course just conversation."

Explicit metacognitive framing naming the specific skill a task was designed to develop, setting skill-related goals, and structuring post-task reflection was identified by four teachers as a powerful strategy for building learner investment in process-oriented tasks. In the Angren context, this strategy also served a trust-building function: when learners understood not merely what they were doing but why what skill the task was building and how that skill connected to their professional and academic aspirations their willingness to engage with unfamiliar, open-ended task formats increased substantially. This finding extends the metacognitive learning literature (Chamot, 2018; Zimmerman, 2002) to a regional ELT setting and suggests that the transparency of pedagogical intent is especially important in contexts where learners have been socialised into teacher-directed educational cultures that rarely explain the rationale behind instructional choices.

Locally grounded task content was identified as the enabling condition most specific to the Angren context. Tasks that engaged with the city's industrial history and uncertain economic future, with the environmental landscape of the surrounding Chatkal mountains and the Ahangaran river valley, with the experience of managing Russian-Uzbek-English code-switching in professional settings, and with the aspiration to leave the region for higher education or to contribute to its development these tasks generated a quality of critical and creative engagement that generic international content reliably failed to produce. This finding resonates with Kumaravadivelu's (2006) post-method argument for context-sensitivity in language pedagogy and suggests that 21st century skill development in ELT is maximally effective when content is not merely meaningful in the abstract but genuinely significant to learners' situated lives.

The strategic use of learners' multilingual repertoire emerged as the fifth enabling condition, and one that requires particular elaboration in the Angren context. Given the city's linguistic diversity and the resulting naturalness of Uzbek-Russian code-switching in learners' daily lives teachers who explicitly acknowledged and worked with multilingual resources rather than treating Russian use as a classroom failure found that learners' metalinguistic awareness, confidence in communication, and quality of argument all improved. Teacher Zilola described one approach: "Sometimes I ask students to explain a difficult concept first in Uzbek or Russian, then find the English. The thinking is already there we are just moving it into English. That is not cheating; that is how multilingual people work." This translingual pedagogy, though not theoretically formalised by the teachers who practised it, instantiates





the principles articulated by Canagarajah (2013) and Garcia and Wei (2014), and it constitutes a distinctive and underutilised pedagogical resource in the regional Uzbek ELT context.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study both affirm the international literature on 21st century skill integration in ELT and extend it in directions that the capital-city-centred framing of most Uzbek ELT research has not explored. At the level of pedagogy, the effectiveness of task-based instruction, project-based learning, and digital multimodal tasks as vehicles for skill integration is consistent with Ellis (2018), Stoller (2006), and Tsiplakides (2018). What the Angren case adds is a set of regional specificities that substantially reshape both the challenges and the possibilities of this integration.

The most significant theoretical contribution of this study concerns the urban-regional asymmetry in ELT reform implementation. The barriers documented here particularly the professional development deficit and the material resource constraints are not merely local variations on universal challenges; they are systemic consequences of a reform architecture that has allocated its most innovative inputs disproportionately to the capital. The national policy framework mandates competency-based education and 21st century skill development without providing the regional professional development infrastructure, resource distribution mechanisms, or assessment flexibility that would make these mandates achievable outside Tashkent. This represents a structural contradiction in the reform agenda that has not been adequately addressed in policy discussions, and it suggests that national educational targets including those embedded in the "New Uzbekistan" programme risk reproducing and deepening the educational inequality between the capital and the regions rather than reducing it.

The regional inflection of examination pressure deserves particular attention. The finding that IELTS functions as a higher-stakes gate in Angren than in Tashkent because regional learners have fewer alternative pathways and less capacity to absorb the cost of examination failure reveals a distributional consequence of the national examination policy that is invisible from the perspective of capital-city research. The expansion of international examination requirements, introduced with the laudable intent of raising national English proficiency standards, has inadvertently created conditions in which risk-averse, examination-oriented teaching is more rational not less rational for teachers serving regional learner populations. Addressing this dynamic will require not merely encouragement of communicative pedagogy but the deliberate creation of alternative, competency-demonstrating pathways to higher education that reduce the all-or-nothing character of international examination performance for regional learners.

The adaptive digital pedagogy documented in this study designing digital multimodal tasks with analogue fallbacks built in, leveraging smartphone ownership while accommodating uneven data access represents a genuine pedagogical innovation that has not been described in the digital multiliteracies literature, which tends to assume relatively uniform technological access among learners in any given institutional setting. The teachers at Bilim Ziyo, working





within real resource constraints, developed practical task design principles plan the task around in-class wi-fi; offer a poster presentation as an alternative to video; use Canva's free offline-capable features rather than bandwidth-intensive platforms that have direct relevance for ELT practitioners across Uzbekistan's regional cities and potentially in analogous contexts globally. Documenting and disseminating these adaptive strategies should be a priority for regional teacher development initiatives.

The role of locally grounded content as an enabling condition has implications for curriculum design that extend beyond the individual teacher. Commercially produced ELT materials including the internationally published textbooks that constitute the backbone of private language centre curricula across Uzbekistan are designed for globally generic learner populations and inevitably draw on content (urban Western professional life, international travel, digital consumer culture) that is experientially remote for many Uzbek regional learners. Developing supplementary locally authored content modules about Angren's industrial landscape and environmental challenges, the Chatkal nature reserve, the Ahangaran valley's agricultural heritage, the region's Korean and Russian community histories would provide teachers with the culturally relevant material that the findings of this study identify as a critical enabler of high-quality critical and creative engagement.

The study's limitations are acknowledged. As a single-site case study in one regional private centre, the findings are necessarily contextually specific: Bilim Ziyoy, with its active director and its small cohort of relatively well-qualified teachers, is not representative of the full range of regional ELT settings in Uzbekistan, many of which face more severe resource and staffing constraints. The researcher's positional familiarity with the Angren context, managed through reflexive journaling and member-checking, remained a source of potential interpretive bias. Future research should extend this work through comparative multi-site designs encompassing diverse regional contexts rural as well as provincial-urban, state school as well as private sector; longitudinal studies tracking skill development trajectories over extended periods; and participatory action research designs that engage regional teachers as producers rather than subjects of ELT knowledge.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined the integration of 21st century skills within English Language Teaching at Bilim Ziyoy Language Centre in Angren, Tashkent Region a regional industrial city whose ELT context is shaped by a professional development deficit, material resource constraints, digital equity challenges, and a distinctive multilingual social environment that distinguishes it markedly from the capital-city settings that dominate Uzbek ELT research. Three principal findings emerge. First, task-based instruction, project-based learning, and adaptive digital multimodal tasks are effective vehicles for 21st century skill development in this context, particularly when grounded in content that is locally and professionally meaningful to learners. Second, the regional context presents a distinctive configuration of barriers the heightened stakes of examination performance for learners with limited alternative pathways, the professional development isolation of regional teachers, material





and digital resource constraints, and culturally embedded deference norms that intensify challenges familiar from the capital while adding challenges specific to the periphery. Third, institutional leadership, peer professional learning, metacognitive transparency, locally grounded content, and translingual pedagogy constitute enabling conditions that, in combination, make meaningful skill integration achievable even within significant resource constraints.

The implications of these findings are directed at three levels. At the level of national policy, they reveal a structural gap in Uzbekistan's ELT reform agenda: the mandate for competency-based, 21st century-oriented English education has not been accompanied by the regional professional development investment, assessment flexibility, and resource distribution that would make this mandate achievable beyond the capital. Addressing this gap requires a deliberate regional equity orientation in ELT reform planning including regionally based teacher training programmes, regionally distributed resource development initiatives, and assessment alternatives that reduce the disproportionate stakes that international examinations impose on learners with fewer educational options. At the level of institutional management in the regional private language sector, the findings argue for investing in leadership capacity at the centre-director level, formalising the informal peer learning communities that currently carry much of the professional development burden, and creating local curriculum supplements grounded in regional content. At the level of classroom practice, they affirm that skilled, reflective teachers can create genuinely skill-generative learning environments in regional settings through adaptive task design, metacognitive framing, and the deliberate mobilisation of learners' multilingual resources without waiting for the ideal material conditions that national policy promises but has not yet delivered.

More broadly, this study contributes to a growing body of evidence that the geography of ELT research matters: the findings generated in Tashkent's internationally connected language centres do not automatically transfer to the contexts where the majority of Uzbekistan's English learners actually study. The cities and towns beyond the capital Angren, Namangan, Nukus, Termiz, Qarshi represent not merely underserved populations but underrepresented research sites whose specific challenges and innovations the field urgently needs to understand. Placing these regional voices at the centre of Uzbek ELT scholarship is not merely an academic corrective; it is a precondition for educational reform that is genuinely national in its reach and equitable in its consequences.

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