

When you want to learn about teacher training in Namangan, everyone knows—ask Mamura. Mamura Alimova is a senior teacher in the English Philology Department at Namangan State University, located in the beautiful Fergana Valley of eastern Uzbekistan. Ms. Alimova's university, in the heart of the moderately sized city of Namangan, is known as one of the best in the Fergana Valley and for producing renowned scientists and professionals. And Ms. Alimova, through her involvement in countless projects, has established herself as an important contributor to the field of English teaching in Uzbekistan.



Mamura Alimova in her classroom at Namangan State University

Photo by Muqaddam Ibrokhirimova

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Ms. Alimova's contributions include obtaining grants for three teacher-training projects and conducting training for reform projects, which include preservice training, English for Academics, and English for Specific Purposes. In an additional project, English for Teachers, she serves as a materials designer for distance learning. Ms. Alimova has also taken part in other special projects, such as a teaching-materials design group that culminated in the publication of the textbook *B2 Ready*. She has also succeeded in bringing professionals in the field of English-language teaching to her university to enhance English teaching and learning.

Besides working on these projects, Ms. Alimova teaches a full load at the university. As a senior teacher, she teaches 940 hours per year and at times upwards of 35 hours per week. She may have from 100 to over 200 students during the year. She is also involved in delivering retraining

courses—mandatory professional-development courses for teachers—at the university. And Ms. Alimova has found time to publish articles and English teaching materials. One such publication is a school coursebook that she and other teachers were chosen to write through a materials-design course.

It is not only Ms. Alimova's involvement in so many projects, but more so her positive attitude and her persistence through obstacles to enhance teaching in her community that make her stand out. Despite her busy schedule, she is always ready to help find solutions to issues her colleagues or students consult her about. On the subject of offering help, she says, "I am also sometimes in this condition—I also ask help from someone, and ... I'm rejected, but I don't want these people to be rejected." Through challenges and blocks, she keeps trying and finds the silver lining in a situation. She doesn't allow herself to give up.

Over the years, Ms. Alimova has seen firsthand the development of English-language teaching across her country.



Ms. Alimova leading learners in one of her favorite activities, “Two Boyfriends”

Photo by Elise Brittain

Over the years, Ms. Alimova has seen firsthand the development of English-language teaching across her country. Ms. Alimova, who now speaks English confidently, reflects that she could not always do so. Like many learners of English in Uzbekistan, Ms. Alimova primarily learned through the grammar-translation method and intensive reading. Although she loved her English lessons, she reflects now, “We learned *about* the language, not the language itself.” She credits her love of English to her first English teacher, Ra’no Ganieva. Ms. Alimova remembers, “I loved everything: my teacher, my teacher’s voice, the sound of English.” Ms. Alimova also views those first English lessons, when she was 12, as an important point in her life: “I felt something inside. Something that this [English] is my thing, this is my field, or something is related with my future.” Ms. Alimova’s feeling was right, as she went on to work hard in her English classes, even asking her teachers for extra work to pursue at home. She graduated from university and began her English teaching career, teaching in the same way she was taught.

According to Ms. Alimova, from 1983, when she started learning English in school, until 1999, when she transitioned from teaching in school to teaching in university, she learned a lot about English vocabulary, grammar, and texts, but in some ways it was 16 years “for nonsense.” She describes her experience in the classroom at that time: “Students sat in rows, and we didn’t have any pair work or group work. We just did grammar exercises, and we did lots of translation. But we also learned vocabulary, and we learned by heart texts and dialogues.” When she was graduating from university, she recalls, “I met one foreigner, and I couldn’t understand any of his words. I just understood *good morning*—that’s all.”

It wasn’t until Ms. Alimova’s family moved to the capital, Tashkent, in 1999 and she began

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teaching at Uzbekistan State University of World Languages that her growth in English took a turn. She took part in multiple teacher-training programs and learned new methods, such as integrated-skills approaches. Ms. Alimova credits the foreign specialists who conducted these courses for helping her break free of her lack of self-confidence in English. Her interest in these new ways of learning English, along with her intrinsic motivation to improve, led her to become active in these courses and in interacting with specialists. The exposure she had to techniques such as brainstorming and mind mapping to generate and organize ideas and to the use of group and pair work in class affected her English use as well as her teaching. “We were learning language at the same time and teaching students,” she says, “and together with our students, we were improving, and our methodology, our teaching, and our language skills, they grew together with our students.” When she broke out of her shell and started to use the language to communicate, she was able to transform her understanding of what it is to *know* English.

Additionally, Ms. Alimova had the chance to go abroad for more teacher training. She continued to expand her understanding of language-teaching methodology and stretch her English-speaking skills, and she says that this experience changed her and her approach to teaching. In her lessons, she began replacing the translation exercises and learning by heart with group and pair work and other communicative techniques.

Ms. Alimova moved back to the Fergana Valley with her family and began working at Namangan State University in 2005, and she continued utilizing the skills she had been developing. Meanwhile, many educational reforms were occurring in

Uzbekistan. Students noticed the contrast between their traditionally taught classes and the student-centered techniques Ms. Alimova and other new teachers began using. A team of motivated teachers formed in her university community, along with increased administrative support. Ms. Alimova and her colleagues organized workshops that influenced others to adopt a more communicative approach to teaching. During this time, Ms. Alimova witnessed a true transformation in English-language teaching in her university and in the country.

Ms. Alimova is happy with the facilities and materials that she has access to at Namangan State University, but the most important resource for Ms. Alimova is books. For a long time, she had limited access to books and teaching materials, and now she has made it a personal mission to maintain and promote the use of a library of donated teaching materials and books at the university. She wants to make sure all teachers have access to the type of materials that she had only dreamed of as she was beginning her career.

Reading is one of the main ways Ms. Alimova gets inspiration for her lessons. She reads about activities she finds in the library she manages and then implements them in the classroom. Then she adapts the activity. Although sometimes she thinks that an activity will not work with her students, after she tries it in the classroom, it becomes the students' favorite. Ms. Alimova likes to begin her lessons with a warm-up activity. “I want to get first of all students' attention to motivate them, to encourage them to the class,” she says. One of her favorite warm-ups is called “Martian.” She pretends to be a Martian who understands some English but needs the students to explain terms that she doesn't understand. She notes that this activity serves

an essential function at the beginning of a new course or topic as a diagnostic tool to assess students' prior knowledge.

When asked what drives her, Ms. Alimova simply says that she loves to learn and share what she learns. As a result, most of her projects involve teacher training. She especially likes teaching elicitation techniques, such as one activity called “Two Boyfriends.” A woman wants to choose only one of two men who have contrasting characteristics (young vs. old, wealthy vs. unwealthy, etc.). Instead of describing them herself, Ms. Alimova elicits descriptions from students, noting on the board only the information that matches her prepared story. This technique pushes students to use multiple vocabulary words until they find the one that Ms. Alimova is eliciting. The activity can also be used to inductively teach grammar, as students use comparative forms to discuss the two boyfriends—or (in different scenarios) two girlfriends or two of almost anything.

Ms. Alimova does not see an end to the development of her teaching and learning. “Every day we learn something,” she says.

“Something is added to our knowledge.” She would like to continue her own education with a master’s degree in the United States and then do research. In her retirement, she wants to write a book about her experiences in order to share her feelings, philosophy, and background with teachers who are just beginning their careers. Those who know her can attest that her unending dedication to learning about teaching and the support she gives to enhancing the knowledge and experience of other teachers in Uzbekistan have been impactful in the continued reform of English-language teaching in the country and will continue to be significant. That’s definitely a life worth reading about.

This article was written by **Elise Brittain**, who served as an English Language Fellow in Uzbekistan from 2016 to 2018. She obtained her MA in TESOL from Murray State University in 2011 and has been nurturing her love for and skill in teaching English ever since.



Ms. Alimova, shown here with two of her students, makes sure the library of English teaching and learning resources is available for use by teachers and students.