

Mukadas Tashieva has a personal history that reflects the changes her nation continues to undergo as it transitions from Soviet Kyrgyzstan to the post-Soviet Kyrgyz Republic. As a faculty member at the Osh State University Faculty of Foreign Languages and Culture, a leader and trainer for the Kyrgyzstan Forum English Teachers' Association (KFETA), and an English Access Microscholarship coordinator and instructor, she has many roles as both an educator and a leader. Her classrooms blend modern teaching methods and traditional practices to improve student outcomes, especially in English.



Mukadas Tashieva in teacher training for Aravan English teachers, sharing her experience in teaching young learners

Throughout her childhood, education was important to Mrs. Tashieva's family of six, as her mother and father were teachers. She attended a village school in the mountainous Kara-Suu region, where students would either walk or arrive by horse. Under the Soviet educational system, education was free and compulsory, teachers were strong, and classes were highly structured. There were challenges, however, as curricula often were outdated and lacked opportunities to develop critical thinking. According to Mrs. Tashieva, "As a first-grader, I remember going into the red schoolhouse and watching the 'pioneer' senior-class members help younger students who didn't know where to go and what to do in school. They helped us, especially with learning the alphabet . . . and I hoped to become a leader like them." This drive to help others through compassionate leadership guided Mrs. Tashieva through her studies and came to define her personal and professional ambitions.

In 1991, Kyrgyzstan declared independence from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, renamed itself the Kyrgyz Republic, and established a democratic government and market economy. Changes affected life throughout the country, including the remote villages. Mrs. Tashieva recalls, "We had independence, but we struggled to change and to survive in this new system, as there were few jobs, and businesses were just starting." As economic, political, and social reforms took place, new ways of life had to develop. Language also had a significant role in the transition, and while Russian maintained its predominance, the native Kyrgyz language was reintroduced and emphasized as a source of pride. Meanwhile, with the opening of borders and access to the global economy, English emerged as a valuable skill in an increasingly difficult job market.

Mrs. Tashieva's family relocated to a larger city, Osh, the de facto capital of Southern Kyrgyz Republic, in search of better opportunities. "Everything changed quite suddenly," Mrs. Tashieva remembers, "and no one knew what the government would do or what would happen next." She recalls her mother working

three jobs, while her father traded goods and began working as a police officer; the rest of the family bartered and worked as they could to make ends meet. "We were lucky that we had most of what we needed," she says. "My parents worked very hard to ensure that." During this time, Mrs. Tashieva developed empathy for those less fortunate, and she has consistently contributed her time and energy to finding opportunities for individuals with the motivation to better themselves and improve their livelihoods.

Regarding her education, Mrs. Tashieva remembers a difficult experience when her family moved to the city: "I didn't understand why I was placed in the lower-level English class, as I was motivated and I loved studying languages. . . . I then came to understand that all village students were placed in the lower levels and was disappointed." By 1993, teachers' salaries were low and unreliable, and extra courses were offered to students whose families could pay; she watched English courses through a window from the hallway and tried to follow along. "I wanted so badly to participate and learn more English, but this was my only chance," she says, "I understood there was no way we could afford it at that time." These experiences guided Mrs. Tashieva in her decision to become a teacher; she promised not to judge students on their background and to include those who weren't lucky enough to have extra money or support but wanted to learn.

Reflecting on her school experiences, Mrs. Tashieva universally praises her teachers for their strength. Some criticism, however, is warranted. "To this day," she says, "I do not like red ink, as bad marks and mistakes were always in red. . . . There wasn't enough feedback, so I didn't know what I was doing wrong or what I should improve." Classes were almost always lectures, textbooks were usually in Russian, and students took notes that they memorized and recited many times. Mrs. Tashieva says, "I promised that if I became a teacher, I would be a good teacher, but I would not be boring." Observing her classes today, it is evident that she has kept her promise to herself. Students are actively



At a professional-development winter camp in Chiyirchyk, members of the Kyrgyzstan Forum English Teachers' Association gather to promote team-building and develop regional initiatives.

Photo by Kishimzhan Imanaliev

engaged in class activities and ask questions throughout. They often search the Internet for materials to complete class projects and take great pride in showcasing their efforts to the world through social media platforms. It is evident to anyone observing these classes that Mrs. Tashieva is fostering the development of young leaders with the English skills necessary for the modern economy.

Mrs. Tashieva attended five schools, as her family moved throughout the South, and she learned to address challenges on her own and trust in herself. In the tenth grade, she joined a group of volunteers at a center for children with disabilities and taught as she was able, developing her own language skills along the way. She was accepted at a university in the Northern capital city of Bishkek in 2003. She recalls, "I learned the differences between the North and the South when I began studying in Bishkek and encountered some difficulties. At the time, I felt I had to hide my accent to try and fit in." Now, through her classwork and community work, Mrs. Tashieva stresses to students that whether you are from an urban or a rural place, an advantaged or a disadvantaged family, you can strive to be and do your best.

Mrs. Tashieva earned excellent marks; at the same time, images of life and culture in the

United States captivated her, establishing a long-term personal goal to see the nation in person. She says, "I knew I was getting closer to my dream of moving to the United States, and once I felt comfortable and demonstrated my skills in university, I no longer hid my birthplace or accent and educated others about the South." Family comprises the center of Kyrgyz culture, and respect for elders is paramount; when Mrs. Tashieva married, her studies were put on hold as she joined her husband's family and began her own.

Still, continuing her studies and completing her degree were priorities. "I was lucky to have the support of my family and my husband in furthering my education," she says. After completing her degree in English-language interpretation, Mrs. Tashieva worked as a faculty member, teaching at Osh State University. She says, "From the first class, I realized that while I understood how to apply linguistics to interpret and translate, the only teaching methodologies I knew were the traditional methods I had grown up with. I had to find other options." She continued hunting for methodology trainings and seminars and participated in professional-development opportunities. She and a group of colleagues worked together to complete the E-Teacher Scholarship Program and followed the American English Live webinar series. "I took

each instructional technique and strategy presented in these resources and applied them in my courses to see what would work with my students,” she says. Mrs. Tashieva observed that repeated attempts were necessary to implement project-based learning and other learning strategies, as they were so different from what students had experienced before.

The transition of Kyrgyzstan to the independent Kyrgyz Republic resulted in significant changes to education and challenges to teachers. Salaries rapidly destabilized, and schools had difficulty being at once traditionally Soviet and newly Kyrgyz. While Mrs. Tashieva could do little to improve working wages or conditions in schools, she identified teachers as being key to improving and maintaining the quality of education throughout the nation as it continued to transition. KFETA had existed in principle for several years, but membership and participation in the teachers’ organization had dissipated. Mrs. Tashieva set about rebuilding the organization. In coordination with the U.S. Embassy, English Language Fellows, Fulbright scholars, volunteers at nongovernmental organizations, and the Kyrgyz Republic Ministry of Education and Science, she worked with teachers to improve the quality of English as a foreign language

teaching and learning in the South by developing a community of practice.

Soon, Mrs. Tashieva was being called across the region to assist teachers in implementing student-centered approaches to communicative language learning. As a mother of four boys, she became adept at balancing family, teaching, and her volunteer work with KFETA, which functions as a nongovernmental and fully self-funded organization. She worked together with community leaders and stakeholders to mobilize KFETA into a professional community of practice with educators from around the country contributing. Now, she works in concert with her university colleagues, who volunteer as teacher trainers and regional coordinators throughout remote regions in the South. Maintaining this self-funded community of practice requires tremendous dedication by leaders and organizers. She says, “We don’t have any seasons or weekends off because even in hot or cold weather, and on Sundays, we provide trainings for teachers. We are responding to their needs and requests.” The gratitude and mutual respect within the professional community of practice is evident as instructors take their own free time and resources to arrange winter camps and social events to strengthen and support the organization.

ACCESS TEACHING AND COORDINATION

Mrs. Tashieva has worked with the U.S. Department of State’s English Access Microscholarship Program since 2014, when she started a group for children with disabilities. She initially identified a need to adapt her practices to accommodate students with mixed abilities. She says, “There wasn’t a clear English-language methodology for classes of teenagers with cerebral palsy, epilepsy, physical handicaps, and developmental delays, all from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.” At first, she found it difficult to manage the students as one, much less get them to collaborate. “Many were shy and scared, even closed. Many of



Mrs. Tashieva leads an outdoor professional-development summer camp for regional English teachers at Salkyn Tor resort, outside Osh.

Photo by Kishimzhan Tmanaliev



Mrs. Tashieva opens a recent Forum Regional Conference: Interactive Teaching and Learning Techniques for Young Learners and Children with Disabilities, held at Osh State University.

Photo by Eralli Torogeldiev

them had secluded lives with little to do,” she says. Mrs. Tashieva found that the key to motivate students was to convey to them that they were one big family. She guided students, getting them to help one another, and provided a glimpse of a future that mastering English could provide, all while incorporating accessible and inclusive games and activities. Mrs. Tashieva realized that “when you do not feel sorry for and do not pay attention to disabilities among students, then even they forgot about it and stop holding themselves back.” By the end of the project, a girl with cerebral palsy started completing her own tests and referred to Mrs. Tashieva as her second mother. Students from other groups spoke with excited emotions about their experiences interacting with and supporting their classmates.

Mrs. Tashieva earned the opportunity to participate in the Study of the U.S. Institutes (SUSI) program and achieved her childhood dream of visiting the United States. Upon her return to the Kyrgyz Republic, she set about building the connections needed to maintain and expand the communities of practice she had cultivated. By organizing camps and social events for instructors, she attracted regional KFETA coordinators to expand coverage to underserved regions. KFETA now has over 200 members, and they remain committed to developing their professional skills by employing communicative approaches to

language acquisition and learning. Maintaining KFETA and supporting other programs and initiatives require that Mrs. Tashieva constantly field emails, text messages, and phone calls while traveling throughout the country, all while balancing her responsibilities as a wife and mother in a traditional family home.

CONCERNS AND GOALS FOR THE FUTURE

Mrs. Tashieva continues to refine her personal goals and intends to develop her professional skills in educational leadership. Her overarching objective is to improve the quality of the national public education system in the Kyrgyz Republic for future generations. To do so, her focus remains on developing the professional skills of schoolteachers for the benefit of their students. She says, “When they [teachers] are well educated and professionally ready to teach children, then we can foster young people to help our society. Through education, we will build citizenship in the Kyrgyz Republic and a new generation of people who will develop and care about the future of our country.”

This article was written by **Jonathan Mettille**, who holds a PhD in Educational Leadership and Organizational Development from the University of Louisville and served as an English Language Fellow in the Kyrgyz Republic in 2016–2017. He is currently an ESP training specialist in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.