

PRELIM 2

Azerbaijan: AzETA (Azerbaijani English Language Teachers Association) with Professional Language Solutions Ltd (PLS)

August 2022

Project background

Partnership overview		
Course overview	ETA partner	Azerbaijani English Language Teachers Association (AzETA)
	UKI partner	Professional Language Solutions Ltd (PLS)
	Course length	12 weeks
	Number of groups/cohorts	2
Participant profile	Total number of CPs	Core programme - 17 (VLE for all AzETA)
	Language level(s)	CEFR A2 – B2
	CPs' teaching context	Primary and Secondary schools + Tertiary
Mode of delivery	Synchronous platforms used	Zoom
	Synchronous session length	60 minutes
	Synchronous session frequency	1 session per group per week
	Asynchronous workload	1 – 2 hours per week
Course content	Language development focus	English for the classroom
	Methodology focus	Communicative Language Teaching
	Technology focus	Zoom / VLE

Description of the partners

AzETA is the national ETA of Azerbaijan and has members working in Primary, Secondary, Tertiary and the private English teaching sectors. AzETA is split into 10 local branches across Azerbaijan where each Branch Manager (BM) coordinates a range of local events and informs local members of national and international events.

PLS is a London based language training organisation providing English and foreign language training and assessments within the UK and internationally to government and corporate clients. See www.langsols.com for further information.

Key features of the context

Some of the core local factors faced by AzETA that had an impact on the design and delivery of the PRELIM course included:

- **COVID pandemic:** all AzETA meetings have traditionally been face to face workshops, so all teacher development activity had been suspended due to national COVID restrictions since the start of the pandemic in 2020 with no opportunities for CPD.
- **Regional Branches:** Azerbaijan is a large country and so AzETA is practically managed on a local level across 10 regional branches with limited opportunities to come together as a national group and minimal interaction between branches.
- **National events in Baku:** any events typically take place in the capital Baku, and so opportunities for teachers in more rural areas is limited.
- **Female membership:** The majority of AzETA members are female (most English teachers in Azerbaijan are apparently female), all BMs are female, and all PRELIM II participants were female. Azerbaijan is both a traditional country and predominately Muslim which has an impact on the accessibility of the predominately female membership of AzETA to actively engage in professional CPD.
- **Low Internet bandwidth:** is common outside of Baku and major cities. Connections are not very robust, and the cost of mobile data is high in Azerbaijan. Delivery solutions had to accommodate potential slow bandwidth. The British Council grant to provide financial support for bandwidth was taken up by all CPs.
- **Mobile Phones:** During the TNA it was noted that the majority of course participants would be accessing the PRELIM training by mobile phones. Online course design had to accommodate software accessible by mobiles and that scaled effectively onto smaller screens.
- **Selection Process:** It was decided by AzETA that each branch would send 2 members to the PRELIM course with the selection process defined locally in each branch.
- **English Language Level:** No English language testing was to be conducted and the self-declared English levels in the TNA ranged from CEFR A2 to CEFR C1. Course design therefore had to accommodate a range of English language levels.
- **Availability:** All selected PRELIM members worked fulltime so the PRELIM course needed to be flexible around their professional and personal commitments.
- **Teaching Context:** CPs worked in a range of education settings including Primary, Secondary Tertiary and adult professionals.

Outline of the course and rationale

Based on the challenges of the local context the key principles driving the creation of the AzETA PRELIM programme was **accessibility** and **inclusivity** whilst also looking at longer term **sustainability** beyond the project duration of PRELIM. We also wanted to create a programme that gave a wide range of the content delivered to the CPs to be available for all members of AzETA across Azerbaijan and support the cascading of PRELIM training locally within each branch.

Our course comprised of three core components: elearning modules, live zoom workshops and a VLE

1. *Elearning modules* - based on a flipped classroom approach the elearning modules provided the core content for CPs to flexibly study around their professional and personal commitments prior to live workshops. These modules were focused on demonstrating the principles of communicative language teaching methodology, provide English for use in the classroom setting and model lots of practical activities and games usable in a wide range of English teaching contexts.

The 11 modules were:

- Teaching Online
- Learner-centred classroom

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- Giving Instructions
 - Error Correction
 - Lesson Planning
 - Teaching Listening
 - Teaching Reading
 - Teaching Speaking
 - Teaching Vocabulary
 - Teaching Pronunciation
 - Teaching Grammar

Elearning was Authored and delivered via Avallain to ensure the best experience for the users whilst also being accessible on mobile devices. All CPs were trained to use the platform and the broader AzETA teachers were given access to materials upon request. Funding did not permit on-going access to the platform beyond the PRELIM period.

2. *Zoom instructor-led workshops* – an introductory session provided IT support and training on how to use Zoom (as well as the elearning and VLE). Each topic was delivered two times a week (Tuesday and Thursday) to two fixed groups of CPs. However, there was flexibility for CPs to change groups as and when if needed. Zoom lessons were recorded and posted on the VLE so absent CPs and all AzETA members could watch.

3. *AzETA Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)* – built on Moodle the VLE was designed to develop a community hub for all AzETA members. This was used for several activities:

- Introduction to new weekly topics via a selection of warm up tasks such as short videos, interactive activities to engage CPs before starting the elearning.
- hosting of recordings of teacher-led Zoom sessions
- follow up activities for each module including links to videos, reading articles and references for further research
- discussion threads / forums for each topic
- shared folders for CPs to share resources
- chat functionality for live communications for the programme

Most importantly the AzETA VLE was set up on a free to use platform so it could be handed over to selected CPs as an ongoing resource and community hub for the whole AzETA organisation post PRELIM. Four CPs volunteered and were trained to become administrators of the VLE and have now taken on control of the VLE. Our IT manager will continue to provide support and perform VLE maintenance whilst the AzETA members become more proficient in administering the VLE.

Project findings

Working in partnership

Initial collaboration between PLS and AzETA was direct contact via the president and founder Ragsana Mammadova. Quickly and effectively PRELIM information was cascaded directly to the branch managers (BM) for dissemination to the ETA's members. Aside from an introductory zoom presentation and meeting there was no direct contact between PLS and the BMs. Internally, each branch identified potential CPs and a final list of CPs provided to PLS with direct contact details. Throughout the project primary contact was then directly with CPs with regular updates being provided to the president.

Working within the CoP

In principle the CoP is a wonderful idea and checking the various Slack threads we could see a lot of value of collaborative working. This was useful in the start-up stages to see how other UKIs were addressing their contextual challenges. However, in practice to really get the most out of the CoP you need sufficient time to be able monitor all the Slack threads and then engage with the CoP throughout the course. In practice though with a range of competing professional responsibilities and a huge daily workload to just deliver the PRELIM programme the CoP was used a lot less than would have been liked.

Working with the CPs

Working with the CPs was a wonderful experience – they were motivated, hardworking, and very appreciative of the PRELIM programme. The CPs set up a dedicated WhatsApp group which was a convenient way to post course updates and deal with any issues such as providing URLs, IT support etc.

Additionally, there was good contact with the broader AzETA teacher base with 69 teachers completing the initial TNA and 84 teachers registering to join the AzETA VLE. It is hoped that local branches will cascade PRELIM training locally and there will be a further uptake of VLE members registered by the new AzETA VLE administrators across the 10 branches.

Designing/delivering the course

Confirmation of course participants and initial TNA feedback meant course development only started in January. Elearning is a very time-consuming product to create requiring interdependent processes of materials writing and review, instructional design work including voice recordings and sourcing imagery as well as testing and proof reading. The resultant course development throughout the 3 months was very demanding for our development team of 5 people to meet our internal weekly deadlines to publish the following weeks content each Friday. The short lead times were probably too ambitious for PRELIM and several internal issues in our development chain over the 12-weeks included COVID illness, death of a family member and a 4-day power cut following Storm Eunice had a massive impact with little scope for delay. However, the end product was excellent and received superb feedback from the CPs.

Course outcomes

The training data and post course feedback forms from CPs all indicate a very successful outcome of PRELIM II.

Some training data:

- Average attendance of Zoom workshops – 91%
- Completion of 11 elearning modules – 13 out of 17 CPs completed 100%
- Average score of elearning – 91%

Some post course evaluation data:

- Elearning modules were useful and the materials were engaging – 100% strongly agree
- Zoom lessons were easy to attend and useful – 100% strongly agree
- The materials have helped me improved as a teacher – 100% strongly agree

Some feedback quotes

- *“I particularly liked module with “Error Correction”. I always did corrections in my classes but this training showed me clear steps how I did them.”*
- *“Lessons were so useful and easy to attend. Our tutor Gerett Viviers was so friendly.”*
- *“I had opportunities to use what I have learned at work and I will also do it in future .”*
- *“Nothing ever grows without a seed. We are the seeds of this training. Thank you very much.”*

Emergent learning

There are so many competing platforms, apps and communication channels for delivering online training; each excels in some area but not all often resulting in a lot of confusing crossover. At project start up we opted to use Moodle as the VLE for AzETA as this was a sustainable option as it's a free open-source platform. However, for accessibility, best in class performance and engagement we used Zoom for synchronous training and Avallain for the asynchronous elearning modules. The CPs also created a WhatsApp group. Whilst each excelled in their area in practical terms this created unnecessary confusion at times for the CPs – especially those with lower language levels. In particular the VLE and elearning platform had a lot of overlap with the elearning proving more popular and therefore used more frequently than the VLE. Having only one platform that met all the contextual requirements delivering accessibility, inclusivity and sustainability whilst giving best in class performance would have been ideal.