Materiallar to’plami · Conference Proceedings
QATAG‘ON QURBONLARI: TARIXIY XOTIRA, MILLIY O‘ZLIK VA MA’NAVIY MEROS
10 September – 10 October 2026
UDK 94

TEACHING HISTORICAL MEMORY THROUGH ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION: BRINGING THE STORIES OF REPRESSION VICTIMS INTO EFL CLASSROOMS IN UZBEKISTAN FOR CULTURAL IDENTITY AND CIVIC LEARNING

Diloram Yusupovna Kambarova*
PhD, Associate Professor, Fergana State University, Uzbekistan
✉ kambarova3112@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper looks at how English language teaching in Uzbekistan can help young people learn about historical memory and the victims of repression. It is a conceptual study. It brings together theory from social psychology on collective memory and social representations, a recent interview study on how Uzbekistan’s Independence Generation reinterprets Soviet-era memories, and research on dynamic memory organisation in AI systems. The review shows three main things. First, memory is not fixed. It is rebuilt again and again inside social groups, and schools, museums, and textbooks shape it. Second, older Uzbeks mostly share positive and nostalgic stories about Soviet everyday life. Stories about political repression rarely reach young people through the family. Third, young people don’t simply accept this nostalgia. They read it as a longing for lost youth, and this shows an early form of critical historical awareness. Based on these points, the paper argues that EFL classrooms can be a useful space for memory work. Reading, discussion, storytelling, and project tasks in English can support language skills, civic learning, national identity, critical thinking, and intercultural competence at the same time. The paper also discusses practical challenges, such as emotional sensitivity, limited materials, and the risk of one-sided narratives.

Keywords

historical memory, repression victims, English language teaching, EFL, Uzbekistan, cultural identity, intergenerational memory, critical thinking.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.23279125

INTRODUCTION

How does a society remember its painful past? And who passes that memory on to young people? In Uzbekistan these questions are not abstract. The country became independent after the Soviet Union broke up, and since then the state has worked hard to reinterpret the Soviet period. One clear example is the Tashkent Museum in Memory of the Victims of Repression, which opened in 2002. It presents both the tsarist period and the Soviet regime as times of colonial domination and repression (Abashin, as cited in [1, p. 5]).

But official memory is only one side of the story. Research on Central Asia shows two different lines of memory. One is state memory, which is built through laws, museums, memorials, textbooks, and media. The other is public or ”vernacular” memory, meaning the personal stories people tell in everyday life [1, p. 4]. These two don't always agree. Official narratives in Uzbekistan describe the Soviet past as a time of oppression, while a lot of ordinary people remember it with warmth and nostalgia [1, p. 6–7].

This gap matters for education. A recent study of 20 young Uzbeks found that older relatives talk about the Soviet past often, but they mostly talk about cheap prices, good products, and close neighbours. Bitter

memories do appear. However, they usually concern daily hardships, not large-scale political repression [1, p. 18]. So the stories of repression victims don't travel easily through family conversation. If schools don't take up this role, a whole generation may grow up with only a partial picture.

Why English classes, though? Isn't this a job for history teachers? Partly, yes. But English lessons already work with texts, stories, discussion, and personal expression. They are a natural place for students to read about the past, compare points of view, and say what they think. Also, learning to tell your own country's story in English lets students share it with people from other cultures.

So the purpose of this paper is to explore how the history of repression victims and the wider topic of historical memory can be brought into EFL classrooms in Uzbekistan. The paper uses theory on collective memory and social representations [2, p. 1–4], empirical findings on youth memory in Uzbekistan [1, p. 4–18], and ideas about linked and evolving memory structures from AI research [3, p. 1–9]. It then suggests practical classroom approaches and discusses their challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Memory as social thought

A good starting point is the idea that memory is social. Haas, Eskinazi, and Jodelet explain that memory and social representations are both forms of social thought. They shape communication, guide practices, and build a shared reality inside a group [2, p. 2]. Moscovici, who created social representations theory, described representations as a system of values, ideas, and practices. This system helps people orient themselves in their world and gives a group a common code for talking about its history [2, p. 1].

Halbwachs added a key point: all memory is socially framed. Memory isn't a fixed record. It is rebuilt again and again inside ”social frameworks” – sets of ideas, values, and beliefs that a group shares [2, p. 2]. Bartlett said something similar from psychology. He rejected the idea that remembering is just passive copying. Instead, people make an ”effort after meaning” and reshape what they remember through familiar cultural frames [2, p. 3].

Two processes from social representations theory are especially useful for teachers. The first is anchoring. New and unfamiliar information gets connected to what people already know, so it becomes easier to understand and accept [2, p. 1]. The second is objectification. Here something abstract becomes concrete – for example, when complex historical events are turned into images, memorials, or rituals that a group can share [2, p. 1]. A memorial museum for repression victims is a clear case of objectification.

Memory, time, and identity

Memory also connects three times: past, present, and future. Haas and colleagues describe memory as a ”temporal triad” that mediates both individual and collective identity [2, p. 2–3]. This means that when people remember, they are also answering questions about who they are now and where they are going.

This link to identity explains why governments care so much about memory. Research reviewed by Saida shows that post-Soviet states used history for nation-building. Torbakov (as cited in [1, p. 5]) argues that the politics of history has two connected goals: building a cohesive national identity and freeing the nation from a ”problem of guilt.” Haas and colleagues make a similar point from a different field. Social representations of history bring certain events and figures to the front, especially those that help shape national identity, and they work like symbolic ”charters” for a group's values [2, p. 3].

So the two bodies of work agree on one thing. Memory of the past is never neutral. It is always selected and organised for present needs.

Official memory and education in Central Asia

Education is one of the main channels for this. Haas and colleagues note that representations of history are influenced by institutional transmission through education, media, and public policy. They also point out the gaps and distortions between official narratives and the way groups reinterpret events [2, p. 2]. The Central Asian research fits this very well.

In Uzbekistan, history textbooks gradually replaced Soviet history with national history (Ersanlı, as cited in [1, p. 6]). The first president, Karimov, took an uncompromising line and portrayed the Soviet past as

oppression (Dadabaev, as cited in [1, p. 6]). Other countries chose different tones. Russia promoted a restorative nostalgia, and Kazakhstan's former president acknowledged both Soviet modernisation and colonial domination (Dadabaev, as cited in [1, p. 6]).

But it isn't all top-down. Kuryłowicz found that textbooks in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan don't fully reject the Soviet legacy, even though they follow the state's political position (as cited in [1, p. 6]). Dukeyev showed that Kazakh textbook authors describe the famine of 1931–1933 in mixed ways – sometimes as a tragic result of collectivisation, sometimes as a genocide against Kazakhs. This shows that authors have some agency, even in a non-democratic state (as cited in [1, p. 6]). For teachers, this is an important reminder. A textbook is a negotiated text, not a final truth. Scholarship on Stalin's repressions and the rehabilitation of victims in Uzbekistan's politics of memory also exists (Malikov, as cited in [1, p. 4]), which suggests the topic is now an open field of research.

Public memory, nostalgia, and the Independence Generation

Public memory tells a different story. Dadabaev's research, discussed in [1, p. 6–7], shows that ordinary people remember the Soviet period in a practical way, based on daily life and moral values rather than ideology. Many elderly people in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan focus on social welfare and equality and see the era as stable and community-based. At the same time, Kurmangaliyeva Ercilasun's interviews about the Kyrgyz famine of the 1930s and 1940s record very bitter memories (as cited in [1, p. 7]). So public memory is not one voice. It's mixed.

Saida's study adds the missing piece: what happens when these memories reach young people. The study used 20 semi-structured interviews with people born in 1991 or later. All but one were at least 18 (one participant was a 17-year-old schoolgirl in Khorezm). Interviews took place in three waves in 2025, online and in person, with participants from nine regions. Andijan had the most participants (7). Half of the participants were female, and about 45% grew up in rural areas [1, p. 7–10].

A small note on the data is needed here. In the education table, 10 participants (50%) had a bachelor's degree, 6 (30%) a master's degree, 2 college or lyceum, 1 a PhD, and 1 secondary school [1, p. 9]. However, the text of the same study also says almost 60% were at bachelor's level, 22.7% at master's level, and 6.8% at PhD level [1, p. 10]. These figures don't match the table. The author also admits that the sample is mostly highly educated because of network-based recruitment [1, p. 9]. So the results should be read with some care.

What did young people hear? Mostly nostalgia. Elders talked about cheap prices (”bread cost just one tiyin”), durable products like old televisions that still work, free education and healthcare, easy travel across the Soviet Union without visas, and kinder relations between neighbours [1, p. 11–13]. Negative memories were there too: shortages and queues for flour and oil, forced cotton labour, limits on religion and language, and domestic abuse linked to alcohol [1, p. 13–15]. One grandmother remembered picking cotton even in winter, a kolkhoz boss with a whip checking houses at night, and planes spraying chemicals over the fields [1, p. 14].

The study also found a gender pattern. Older women usually talked about household life, work hardships, and neighbourhood relations. Older men focused more on prices, equality, mobility, and sometimes ideology [1, p. 15–16].

The most important finding, for this paper, is how young people interpret all this. Most of them did not see the nostalgia as political support for the Soviet system. They saw it as a longing for their elders' own youth [1, p. 16]. Some also read it as a comment on problems in the present. A few went further and linked it to low financial literacy or limited access to information in Soviet times [1, p. 17]. Saida calls this a growing ”critical literacy of memory” among young Uzbeks [1, p. 18].

This fits the theory quite well. Bartlett's ”effort after meaning” and Moscovici's anchoring both describe people fitting new material into existing frames [2, p. 3]. Young Uzbeks do exactly this. They take their grandparents' stories and fit them into a post-independence frame of understanding.

Where do official and family memory disagree?

There is a clear tension between the sources. Official memory, as seen in the Tashkent museum, builds a national story of collective suffering (Abashin, as cited in [1, p. 5–6]). Family memory, however, is mostly nostalgic, and when it is negative, it rarely concerns political repression [1, p. 18]. Haas and colleagues predict

exactly this kind of gap between institutional narratives and group reinterpretations [2, p. 2].

This is not a problem to hide. It is actually a good teaching opportunity. Students can look at both kinds of memory and ask why they are different.

Memory as a linked and evolving network

One more source offers a helpful idea, though it comes from computer science, not education. Xu and colleagues designed A-Mem, a memory system for large language model agents. It is based on the Zettelkasten note-taking method [3, p. 1]. Each new memory becomes a note with keywords, tags, and a short context description. The system then links it to related older notes. When new notes arrive, older notes can be updated too – the authors call this ”memory evolution” [3, p. 3–5].

Their tests showed that linking and evolution really matter. When both parts were removed, performance dropped a lot, especially on ”multi-hop” questions that need information from different places [3, p. 7]. The system also used about 85–93% fewer tokens than some baseline methods [3, p. 7].

Of course, AI memory is not human or collective memory. But the idea is surprisingly close to Halbwachs and Bartlett. In both cases, memory is not a storage box. It's a network that keeps changing when new information comes in [2, p. 2–3; 3, p. 4–5]. The authors also warn that the quality of the memory structure depends on the language model, and different models may describe and link things differently [3, p. 9]. That warning is useful for teachers who plan to use AI tools with historical content.

A gap in the research

The sources reviewed here say a lot about memory, identity, and textbooks. But none of them directly study English language teaching, intercultural education, or heritage education in Uzbekistan. So the link between memory work and EFL is the author's own argument, built on the findings above. It needs testing in real classrooms.

DISCUSSION

How can memory be brought into English lessons?

The main idea is simple. EFL lessons already need content. Why not use content that matters to students' own history? Instead of reading only about far-away topics, learners can read, listen, and talk about the lives of repression victims, the Tashkent memorial museum, and the stories their own families tell.

The findings from [1, p. 11–18] give a clear structure for this. Students come to class with family memories. These are mostly nostalgic, with some hard parts. The school can then add what families usually leave out, which is the history of political repression. And English can be the language in which students compare these different memories.

Anchoring helps here [2, p. 1]. A teacher can start from something students already know, like a grandmother's story about cotton picking or queues for flour. Then the class moves toward less familiar history, like the fate of people who were repressed. The new topic becomes easier to understand because it's connected to something personal.

Benefits for language learning

Memory topics create real reasons to use English. Students need past tenses to tell stories. They need reported speech to explain what elders said. They need comparison language (”prices were lower, but shops were empty”) to discuss the past and present.

Saida's study gives a nice example from Uzbek grammar. Participants used habitual past forms, like *so'rardim* (I would ask), to show that conversations happened again and again [1, p. 10–11]. A teacher could compare this with English ”used to” and ”would.” So students learn grammar through their own language and memory, not through random examples.

Benefits for civic education

Haas and colleagues argue that the social manipulation of memory and forgetting is a serious social problem, and it's important to show the risks of manipulating the past [2, p. 4]. Civic education needs this kind of awareness. When students learn that textbooks, museums, and family stories all select what to remember, they become more careful citizens.

Remembering repression victims also has a moral side. It teaches respect for human dignity and shows what happens when a state limits religion, language, and freedom. The memories in [1, p. 13–14] – an atheism course with exams, people afraid to buy a car because of questioning – make these ideas concrete for young people.

Benefits for national identity

Memory and identity are closely linked [2, p. 2–3]. Learning about repression victims helps students understand the historical roots of independent Uzbekistan. But identity built only on suffering can be narrow. The research shows that official memory may use collective suffering to legitimise power (Abashin, as cited in [1, p. 5–6]). So teachers should aim for a reflective identity, not a closed one. Students can feel connected to their national history and still ask questions about it.

English adds something here too. When students can tell their country's history in English, they can represent Uzbekistan in international settings. Their identity doesn't stay only inside their first language.

Critical thinking

This is maybe the strongest benefit. The young people in [1, p. 16–18] already showed critical thinking. They separated emotional nostalgia from historical accuracy. One participant argued that the old ”one tiyin” price comparisons don't really prove things were cheaper, because currency conversion changed the numbers [1, p. 17]. That's the kind of reasoning teachers want.

Classroom tasks can build on this natural skill. Students can compare a textbook paragraph, a museum description, and a family story about the same period. They can ask: Who is speaking? What is missing? Why? The disagreement between official and family memory [1, p. 5–7; 2, p. 2] becomes material for analysis, not something to avoid.

Intercultural competence

Memory of hard pasts isn't only an Uzbek topic. Haas and colleagues mention research on commemorations in Brazil, the July 22 memorial in Norway, and Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park [2, p. 2–3, 5]. At Hiroshima, visitors experience tensions between war and peace, and past and future [2, p. 5]. A study of young people in 11 countries found that their picture of European history stressed democracy and humanism but left out figures from decolonisation and underrepresented women [2, p. 5].

These examples can enter English lessons as comparison texts. Students can see that other societies also argue about how to remember victims. This helps them understand other cultures and see their own experience in a wider frame.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Classroom activities and storytelling

A simple first step is an intergenerational interview. Students ask a grandparent or older neighbour about life before independence, then retell the story in English. The findings in [1, p. 10–11] show that elders usually share memories without being asked, so this task feels natural. Students should also note what the story leaves out. For example, did the elder talk about prices but not about religion or repression?

The gender pattern in [1, p. 15–16] can be discussed too. Students might compare stories from grandmothers and grandfathers and see if the focus is different.

Historical narratives and reading materials

Teachers can create short, graded reading texts in English about repression victims, the Tashkent museum, and cotton labour. Narratives work well because, as research in cultural psychology shows, narratives help people understand the time they describe, and they are also shaped by the present [2, p. 3]. Pairing two short texts with different views – one official, one personal – gives students a lot to talk about.

Objectification [2, p. 1] also suggests using photos of memorials, museum objects, and symbols. A picture can open a lesson faster than a long text, especially for lower-level learners.

Discussion tasks

Discussion questions should be open. For example: ”Why do some older people miss the Soviet time?” or ”Why does a museum remember the past differently from your family?” Students can use the explanation found in [1, p. 16] – nostalgia as longing for youth – and decide if they agree. Debates and role plays (a museum

guide, a grandparent, a young student) can also work.

Project-based learning

Longer projects give students time to go deeper. A class could build a small English-language ”memory map” of their region, a digital exhibition about repression victims, or a short podcast with interview stories. Haas and colleagues point out the role of space and urban places in collective memory [2, p. 3]. So a walking project to local memorial sites can connect memory, place, and language.

Digital tools

Here the Zettelkasten idea behind A-Mem is useful [3, p. 1–2]. Students can keep a shared digital notebook. Each note holds one story or fact, plus keywords, tags, and a one-sentence context – the same kind of structure A-Mem uses [3, p. 3]. Then students link related notes, for example a grandmother's cotton story linked to a reading on forced labour. When they learn something new, they go back and update older notes. This mirrors ”memory evolution” [3, p. 4–5] and also Halbwachs' idea that memory is always rebuilt [2, p. 2].

AI tools can help students organise notes or check their English. But teachers should be careful. Xu and colleagues admit that different models may produce different descriptions and links [3, p. 9]. With sensitive history, this is a real risk. Students should always check AI output against reliable sources.

Possible challenges

There are several challenges. The topic is emotional. Some families may have painful stories, and some elders may feel their nostalgia is being judged. Teachers need to respect both. The young people in [1, p. 18] showed a good model here – they didn't reject their elders' memories but saw them as incomplete fragments shaped by emotion and time.

Materials are another issue. Graded English texts on Uzbek repression history are rare, so teachers may have to write their own. There is also the risk of replacing one simple story with another. If lessons only repeat the official narrative of suffering, students lose the chance to think critically [1, p. 5–6; 2, p. 4]. And teachers may worry about political sensitivity, so clear school support helps.

Finally, the evidence base is still thin. Saida's sample was small and mostly highly educated [1, p. 9], and there are no classroom studies on this approach yet. So these suggestions should be tried, observed, and improved.

CONCLUSION

This paper argued that English language classrooms in Uzbekistan can support the memory of repression victims. Theory shows that memory is social, rebuilt again and again, and closely connected to identity [2, p. 2–3]. Research on Uzbek youth shows that family stories are mostly nostalgic and rarely include political repression, but young people already read these stories critically [1, p. 18]. And the linked, evolving memory model from AI research offers a useful metaphor and a practical tool idea for organising knowledge [3, p. 9].

Together, these points suggest that EFL lessons can do more than teach grammar and vocabulary. They can help students hear their elders, learn what families don't say, compare official and personal memory, and express all of this in English. This supports language skills, civic awareness, a reflective national identity, critical thinking, and intercultural understanding.

For English language teaching in Uzbekistan, the main implication is clear. The history of repression victims can become meaningful content for language learning, as long as teachers approach it with care, use more than one perspective, and give students room to think for themselves.

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