

Global Competitiveness Myths and Ideals: English Language Policy in Universities in Kazakhstan

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Abstract

It seems Kazakhstan couches superior knowledge in one particular language. The government policy for educational change focuses on reaching some aspects of equivalence or parity with developed and advanced nations to the extent that they approximate the attributes of prestigious national societies such as the rich European and North American countries. Current government policy in Kazakhstan calls for a policy dubbed “trilingualism” which means proficiency in Kazakh, Russian, and English. This study utilized various qualitative methods such as interviews, participant and non-participant observation, and document analysis to investigate faculty, students, and administrators’ experiences of the change from teaching and learning in Russian and Kazakh to English. The findings indicated that for Kazakhstan’s universities to become globally competitive, they must have clear-cut goals that directly manifest how language conveys society’s essential values. The unpreparedness of students, faculty, and administrators delimits the changeover from Kazakh and Russian to English. Accordingly, among the essential criteria to foster the foundation of development are national identity, harmony between the educational system, and, most generally, the extent of political decision-making to meet the national society’s educational needs.

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Introduction

“This area is an English-only zone” is a standard inscription on university campuses in Kazakhstan. Departments, lecture halls, offices, and even open spaces carry the inscription to deter the university community from speaking languages other than English (Agbo & Pak, 2017). Over the past two decades, Kazakhstan has introduced substantial reforms to language acquisition to become globally competitive (Agbo & Pak, 2017). One of these reforms is what is known as *trilingualism*. *Trilingualism* in Kazakhstan is the concept of multilingualism. This concept holds that the people of Kazakhstan must become fluent in the Kazakh, Russian, and English languages and for education to serve as a conveyor belt to achieve a multilingual society (Agbo & Pak, 2017; Zenkova & Khamitova, 2018; Zhetspisbayeva & Shelestova, 2015). Universities sufficiently dedicate themselves to this purpose, and higher education in Kazakhstan is enthusiastic about English language proficiency (Agbo & Pak, 2017).

The government’s multilingual education policy places a higher responsibility on education to play a significant role in achieving a *trilingual* nation-state. Accordingly, universities have mandated English as the language of instruction on many campuses and programs. The present study explored how the university community has been coping with the language policy. We interviewed students, faculty, and administrators concerning English as the language of instruction policy in universities in Kazakhstan. We analyzed various government documents relating to the multilingual policy and engaged in participant and non-participant observations in collecting our data. Our primary intent was to examine the possibilities offered by the policy for Kazakhstan to become globally competitive. First, we look closely at globalization and its impact on educational reforms. Second, we explore the historical background of multilingualism in Kazakhstan as a backdrop to highlight the significance of the complex relations between Russian as the *lingua franca* and English as the language of instruction in universities. We then discuss our research methods, sample, and analysis procedures.

Globalization and Educational Reforms

With the proliferation in the volume of global communication about social, normative, and technological structures and of the significant networks such communication circulates, nation-states can select the aspects of development they wish to emulate. Frequently, scholars have worked with a conception of globalization that amounts to no less than a reference to all the significant economic, social, cultural, and information and communication technological changes taking place in the world today (Brassett &

Higgot, 2003; Carney et al., 2012; Clayton, 2004). Through recent information and communications technologies, all nations, peoples, and cultures come into face-to-face proximity from which there is no escape (Chan, 2018; Dale & Robertson, 2002, 2009). Globalization has positive and negative aspects (Veneziani & Yoshihara, 2017). It supports the leading assumption that globalization enables societies to reach vastly higher economic growth in its rudimentary structures and potential abilities to increase interdependence, integration, and interaction between nations and businesses (Chang, 2018). More relevantly, globalization is an engine of commerce that brings prosperity and increases living standards to the South (developing countries) and wealth to the North (rich countries).

However, negatively, globalization has failed chiefly to translate development into normative structures of the South (Klerides, 2009; Veneziani & Yoshihara, 2017). One of the immediate consequences of globalization has been to motivate so-called deprived nations to strive for (globalization) system dedifferentiation to enhance their standing vis-à-vis richer countries (Beech, 2009; Jarvis, 2009). In a sense, globalization implies a process of international dedifferentiation. That is to say, it tends to exert a tensile strain against the various internal structural differentiation reform processes, the spread of specialized global agencies, and various epigenetic developments (Chang, 2018; Robertson & Dale, 2015; Veneziani & Yoshihara, 2017). Because of the heavy responsibility of education as the co-partner of the politics of comprehending and implementing a popular culture on a worldwide scale, globalization then becomes a powerful symbol by which to consider the adequacy or inadequacy of current educational objectives (Akkary, 2014; Beech, 2009; Robertson & Dale, 2015; Trihn, 2018).

The literature gives little attention to the effects of crosscurrents of globalization in educational policymaking (Klerides, 2009; Price, 2014). Neither the vast body of work in globalization nor educational policy has yielded much in thoroughgoing analyses of interception between the effects of national educational policymaking based on globalization goals (Akkary, 2014; Trihn, 2018). Such gaps are particularly remarkable, seeing that globalization's pervasiveness in recent times provides us with a ready-made theoretical construct for the assumption of global competitiveness typically associated with development (Klerides, 2009; Price, 2014). As Klerides (2009) reminds us, the focus on the global competitiveness argument only partially reflects evidence of sustaining political style beyond the terminal point of the *actual* relevance of globalization reforms to nation-states. A pivotal element to considering the relevance of educational reforms must be a sharp focus on the relations between national identity needs and the nation's development (Klerides, 2009). Globalization provides extensive information about the rich Northern countries and their educational institutions. Within this system, the drive toward human capital development implies the South's motivation to reach equivalence in rank vis-à-vis the North (Ginsburg & Megahed, 2013). Accordingly, human capital development has come to play an essential role as a critical component in selecting criteria for development and the formulation of corresponding goals of education (Furlong, 2013). As Furlong (2013) argues, "National prosperity, social justice, and social cohesion are all seen to rest on the shoulders of education"

(p. 29). Therefore, politicians compel education to carry out reforms as guiding purposes that serve as beacon lights on the path of economic and social development (Chang, 2018).

Nations in the South, such as those in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, can select the aspects of development they wish to represent and which they wish to imitate. Expanding global knowledge about social structures, information, and communication technologies and the opposite channels by which such information reaches audiences make imitation possible (Clayton, 2004; Dale & Robertson, 2009; Kellner, 2002). “World culture,” as it is sometimes called, globalization, has become lingering, typical, and omnipresent. Its ever-increasing tempo outpaces nation-states’ capacity (particularly in the South) (Furlong, 2013; Hu, 2018). In juxtaposing globalization and its influence on societies, we must re-examine the goals of national educational reforms and policies in contemporary times (Ahmed, 2018). In this framework, the current educational reform pattern, particularly in developing nations such as Kazakhstan, appears to provide evidence of some change away from satisfying national needs (Akkary, 2014; Furlong, 2013; Kim, 2005; Komatsu, 2013). In other words, reforms have depended on educational borrowing, emphasizing selective education-related patterns that can best be understood in terms of equivalent aspirations to catch up with developed nations (Beech, 2009; Margalit, 2012; Robertson & Dale, 2015; Tarc, 2012). Accordingly, new educational borrowing indicates the increasing degree to which developing nations such as Kazakhstan tend to focus on the socio-cultural characteristics of developed nations, not merely to respond positively to changes in their material and socio-cultural environments (Akkary, 2014; Beech, 2009; Brown, 2008; Carney et al., 2012; Phillips & Ochs, 2004). Embedded in the view of development is the idea of equivalence with developed nations to the extent that they approximate the attributes of prestigious national societies (Banaji, 2013; Brousseau et al., 2011; Chang, 2018; Komatsu, 2013; Trihn, 2018; Silova, 2009). Consequently, education has come to play an essential role as a critical component in selecting criteria for development and formulating corresponding national well-being goals (Furlong, 2013). Thus, the problem for education becomes one of charging its capacities with educational reform that conceals or warps national needs such as identities and similar meanings but instead reveals and translates them into the development consistent with global competitiveness (Agbo & Pak, 2017; Klerides, 2009). However, contemporary development theory has mostly failed to cope with just this translation problem (Wang, 2018). For the most part, present-day educational reform has neither asked nor responded forthrightly to the critical question of the kind of institutional change necessary for national development’s potentialities to flower to the maximum (Agbo & Pak, 2017; Kamens & McNeely, 2010; Klerides, 2009). From the extent of its concentration on global competitiveness to the neglect of the normative aspects, contemporary educational reform has evaded the direct and logical consequence of directing human capital development toward the particular needs of nation-states (Agbo & Pak, 2017; Akkary, 2014; Banaji, 2013; Chang, 2018; Komatsu, 2013). Education, therefore, carries out reforms as guiding purposes that serve as beacon

lights on the path of globalization (Agbo & Pak, 2017). Thus, globalization changes the structure and orientation of existing modes of educational borrowing as it attempts to push normative structures into the background in favor of global competitiveness (Klerides, 2009). The danger is that nation-states will be satisfied with platitudes or pleasant-sounding generalities. Platitudes such as “world culture,” “human capital,” “global competitiveness,” “neoliberalism,” and “knowledge economy”—are phrases more harmful than helpful because they conceal underlying differences of meaning when we pay lip service to them (Anand, 2015; Furlong, 2013). Contemporary education requires a normative framework that avoids clichés and undefined terms as much as possible. For Furlong (2013), “whatever the underlying material changes of globalisation, as a process, it is almost universally ‘imagined’ as necessitating neoliberal policies” (p. 29).

History of Multilingualism in Kazakhstan

Historically, Kazakhstan has sustained a multicultural and multiethnic community (Fierman, 2006). Kazakhstan inherited the Russian language as *a lingua franca* from the Russian Empire in the eighteenth century and as part of the former Soviet Union (Agbo & Pak, 2017; Fierman, 2006; Graney, 1999). In the the1930s, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) government introduced a policy to endorse the Russian language as the collective language that would unite the diverse cultural and ethnic groups of the USSR and provide a national identity for all the Soviet states (Fierman, 2006). While, in principle, the Russian language occupied a pivotal position, the Russian and Kazakh languages have created a bilingual structure for the country (Fierman, 2006). The self-determination and nationalism of post-Soviet states that followed the disintegration of the Soviet Union engendered the passing of the *Law of Languages in Kazakhstan*. This law assigns the Kazakh language the legal position as the national language of Kazakhstan and imputing the Russian language the status of ‘the language of interethnic communication’ (Graney, 1999; Law of Languages, 1989). Four years after independence in 1991, Kazakhstan’s Constitution officially endorsed the Kazakh and Russian languages as Kazakhstan’s national languages (Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 1995; Graney, 1999). Accordingly, since independence, government policies have continued to build an all-encompassing multilingual society (Pavlenko, 2013). The Assembly of Nations of Kazakhstan that the President created in 1995 brought new changes to multilingualism. The changes involved the development of the *Triedinstvo Yazykov*, a new definition of Kazakh as the national language, Russian as the language for intercultural and interethnic communication, and English as the language for global competitiveness (Agbo & Pak, 2017). The multilingual policy has had overwhelming changes in higher education institutions (Zhetpisbayeva & Shelestova, 2015). From institutions that teach English as a foreign language, universities have transformed into institutions where English has become the language of instruction (Agbo & Pak, 2017; Zhetpisbayeva & Shelestova, 2015).

Even with the change in Kazakh's status as the national language, Russian is still the *lingua franca* representing the nation's political, family, school, and workplace (Agbo & Pak, 2017; Arenov & Kalmykov, 1995; Fierman, 2006). In assessing the status of the Kazakh language *vis-à-vis* the Russian language, Arenov and Kalmykov (1995) indicated that 31% of Kazakhstan inhabitants acknowledged using the Kazakh language. In contrast, about 86% indicated fluency in speaking, reading, and writing in Russian. They assert that

17.5 percent read fluently but do not know how to write it [the Kazakh language]; 7 percent can express themselves with difficulty, 1 percent can understand a little of the language but cannot converse in it, 2 percent can read Kazakh with a dictionary, and 1.5 percent do not know the language at all. (p. 74)

Hence, like in many post-Soviet states, the Russian language has emerged as the natural language for upward mobility economically and socio-culturally in Kazakhstan (Fierman, 2006; Pavlenko, 2013). As Fierman writes:

At the end of the Soviet era, over 80 percent –and quite possibly over 90 percent—of Kazakhstan's urban population was literate in Russian. In contrast, even though Kazakh had been declared Kazakhstan's single 'state language', the share literate in Kazakh was probably not higher than 10–15 percent. (p. 101)

As a result, the Russian language fills a unique role in higher education in Kazakhstan. This article explored students', faculty, and administrators' experiences of changing from teaching and learning in Kazakh and Russian to teaching and learning in English. Next, we discuss the research procedures employed in this study.

Methodology

This study draws on qualitative methodology, utilizing interviews, document analysis, and participant and non-participant observations to study and interpret the impact of English as the language of instruction for students, faculty, and administrators in universities in Kazakhstan (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2014). The use of interviews, document analysis, and observations is akin to Miles and Huberman's (1994) notion of triangulation which helps to cast light on experiences that assist researchers in creating meaning and developing insights of validity and credibility to the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2014). In the present study, we engaged in a deeper understanding of the impact of the language policy on students, faculty, and administrators by utilizing triangulation to move our interpretations from seeking to understand each category to developing a holistic sense of the impact of the language policy (Creswell, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Data Collection

We drew on data collected through pre-interview activities such as field notes, participant and non-participant observations, document analysis, and open-ended, audio-recorded interviews (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The different procedures allowed us to develop an in-depth understanding of the three subunits in our study, namely, students, faculty (teaching staff members), and administrators. We collected data over 18 months, from April 2018 to December 2019. Our data collection mostly comprised interviews complemented by participant observations in classrooms and university campuses. We kept copious field notes from the observations to support our interview data.

Interviews

We conducted face-to-face dialogical interviews with 80 participants from four Kazakhstan universities, including graduate and undergraduate students, faculty (teaching staff), and administrators. The administrators comprised Deans, Vice Deans, Heads of Department, Department Chairs, Librarians, and Laboratory Heads. To capture participants' experiences regarding their unique roles in the university, we designed 11 questions for undergraduate students, 12 for graduate students, and 11 for faculty and administrators. We conducted English interviews for those who could understand and speak English and consented to have English and Russian interviews for those who consented to have them in Russian. Each tape-recorded interview lasted from 50 min to one hour. The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions that allowed respondents to express their unique experiences about English as the language of instruction in their university. We transcribed all the interviews verbatim as soon as we completed them. Members of the research team proficient in English and Russian acted as interpreters to translate Russian responses to English. We focused on the following examples of fundamental issues that captured the participants' experiences, such as:

1. How did they consider the importance of switching from teaching in Russian and Kazakh to English?
2. How they rated themselves in English language competence.
3. What they said about their preparedness to teach/learn in English.
4. What they considered hindered the teaching/learning of English in their departments.
5. Their assessment of academic achievement using English as the language of instruction instead of Russian or Kazakh.
6. The realities of teaching/learning in English and ideas for improving their English language competence.

Document Analysis

For the document analysis, first, we reviewed each government document relating to multilingualism in Kazakhstan, determined its significance to our study, and prepared

a document summary form (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Questions guiding the document analysis included the notions that have led to mandating English as the language of instruction in universities, perceptions of global competitiveness that the document conveyed, and its policy connotations. The issues that arose from the document analysis provided some direction and guidance in the field and enabled us to understand the impact of the language policy on the university communities.

Research Context and Sampling

We conducted this study in four universities located in southern Kazakhstan. Three universities were in the greater Almaty area, the largest city in Kazakhstan. The fourth was in a medium-sized city of about 400,000 residents, 500 km away from Almaty. All the participating institutions offer undergraduate and graduate programs leading to master's and doctoral qualifications in Social Sciences, Sciences, Law, and Engineering. We purposefully selected the universities based on their sizes and the integration of English as the language of instruction in their teaching and learning programs. The student populations in the universities ranged from 4,000 to 18,000 students. In allocating quotas for the study, we assigned 16 interviews to each of the three universities with student populations below 10,000. We also assigned 32 interviews to the only university with more than 10,000 and about 18,000 students. All the selected universities embarked on the Academic Mobility program that establishes cooperation with universities in English-speaking countries and facilitates joint programs and projects that organize student and faculty exchanges to enhance their English language skills.

Data Analysis

Data analysis focused on generating meaning from participants' responses. Qualitative methodology scholars (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2014) argue that qualitative data collection and analysis are inseparable and mutually constituted. Accordingly, responsive, well-designed qualitative studies must integrate data analysis with data collection. We analyzed the data continuously from the beginning of the research. We continually referred to the data we were collecting and compiled systematic field notes from observations that captured the participants' perceptions (Creswell, 2007). The analysis involved classifying the data into emerging themes, forming and testing ideas and connections among the ideas, and relating concepts to the themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994). We initially listened to each audiotape for the interview data as we made detailed notes. Next, we subjected each data from the interviewee's responses to a coding system that we developed to identify the interview questions and their responses (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2014). We identified each response using the research questions as guidelines and categorized each response into common themes, patterns, and ideas that corresponded with the research questions

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2014). Because we had to translate responses from Russian to English, we envisaged the possibility of misinterpretation. We subjected the tape recordings in Russian to a second translator to minimize this possibility.

Accordingly, data analysis involved transcribing, recycling the data to a second translator, coding, counting the data, placing them in the categorized indicators, and underscoring other indicators evident from the collected data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In most cases, the second translator confirmed the translation of the first one, and where necessary, the second translator made revisions. Furthermore, to capture the commonality of experiences, we counted the number of respondents that expressed particular views or themes relating to the major concepts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Rather than considering each group's unit analysis, we were interested in the majority view of the total experiences of the respondents we invited to participate in the study (Creswell, 2007). In considering groups such as undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, and administrators as levels of analysis and searching for repeated themes or views and patterns that conformed to the emerging perspectives, we drew commonalities in the experiences. If most of the respondents in each group referred to an issue, we considered it deserving of reporting in the findings.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

Given the researchers' commitment to subjectively capturing the participants' perceptions about English as the language of instruction policy, we did not intend to present the present study's findings with the purpose of the validity and reliability required in positivistic research paradigms. Nevertheless, we found it imperative to assess and devise strategies for ensuring our data's credibility and trustworthiness. We utilized various procedures to triangulate the data (Creswell, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2014). Further, we employed Lather's (1986) methods of face validity followed by "recycling categories, emerging analysis, back through at least a subsample of respondents" (Lather, 1986, p. 78). After transcribing the interviews verbatim in the present study, we sent the transcripts back to a sample of participants in each group to review them to confirm their submissions. The confirmation of the participants of their submissions assured our data's credibility and trustworthiness in all cases.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations have been crucial to the design of this study (Butler-Kisber, 2018; Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). We secured ethical approval for the present study from the Research Ethics Board (REB) of Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada. All the research team members took the Canadian Panel of Research Ethics Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2) Tutorial and obtained the TCPS 2 certificates to proceed with the study. Accordingly, all the authors of this article obtained ethics certificates to participate in the present study.

Thus, this study strictly followed the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans (Tri-Council Policy Statement, 2014) procedures. We informed the research participants about their rights and their ability to withdraw from participating in the research. We informed all the participants thoroughly about the study's purpose and assured them about their confidentiality and anonymity. In reporting the present study's findings, we referred to all the participants by pseudonyms and therefore did not include information that would identify any of the participants. The participants were required to sign consent forms before we proceeded with the data collection.

Findings

Five main themes materialized from this study: (1) English as the global language; (2) Prior English language proficiency levels; (3) Perspectives on academic achievement in English learning; (4) Viewpoints on English language acquisition; (5) Ideals and realities. The first, English as the global language, concerns how participants viewed English as the language of upward mobility in a contemporary global society. The second, prior English proficiency levels, documented students' experiences with the English language before entering university. The third, perspectives on academic achievement in English learning, elucidates faculty and students' views about how they considered student academic achievement levels if the instructional language were in Russian or Kazakh instead of English. Viewpoints on English language acquisition explain participants' opinions and recommendations about acquiring English proficiency to teach and learn English effectively. Finally, the theme, ideals, and realities illuminate the outcomes of English as the language of instruction policy. Here, we explored the challenges to faculty and students and solicited ideas on improving English teaching and learning. We report the findings of faculty, students, and administrators' experiences in teaching and learning in English instead of the traditional Russian *lingua franca* in universities in Kazakhstan.

English as the Global Language

In the minds of faculty, students, and administrators, English as the language of instruction policy in universities is a reality, and there is no need to contest, interpret and decide on its necessity. The majority of the participants agreed that the supremacy and the suitability of English as the global *lingua franca* demand the maintenance and speeding up of the English language to move universities in a better direction by allowing them to catch up with institutions in developed countries. Perhaps, the most explicit and most salient description of the importance of English is stated by Nurken, a faculty member who teaches in a social sciences department:

There is no question that our universities need to teach and learn in English. The only way that we can better understand the world is for us to read, write and speak English. English

is getting everywhere worldwide, and Kazakhstan does not want to be left behind, so we must do all we can to learn English.

Similarly, Nursultan, a graduate student in information and communications technologies, indicated that recent changes in the knowledge-network society call for new understandings and a more far-reaching consideration of relationships between nations, which requires understanding English. As Nursultan puts it:

I'm an IT [Information Technologies] student, and almost everything new is published in English. If you want to be in the knowledge network, then you must be able to understand English. I want to study abroad, and I know that if I understand English, I can go everywhere because every nation is trying to learn English.

Correspondingly, a second-year undergraduate student, Aigerim, echoes the voice of the majority of undergraduates who see English as the spoken language of the world, the language of the media industry, science, and the Internet:

I consider English very important for my study, because I'm studying at the faculty of foreign languages, we demount a lot of texts, topics, articles in English and I have to know it. And also, I like this language. I like to listen to music, watch films, and serials in it. Learning English is important and people all over the world decide to study it as a second language. English is the most spoken language in the world. One out of five people can speak or at least understand English. Also, English is the language of science, of aviation, computers and tourism. Knowing English increases your chances of getting a good job in an international company or of finding work abroad. English is the language of the media industry. If you speak English, you won't need to rely on translations and subtitles anymore to enjoy your favorite books, songs, films and TV shows. English is also the language of the Internet. Many websites are written in English – you will be able to understand them and to take part in forums and blogs. That's why I think that English is essential not only for my study, even for my life.

Moldir, a third-year journalism student, connects the importance of the English language with multilingualism in Kazakhstan. She surmised that it is essential to properly borrow ingredients from many different languages to communicate through the media. As Moldir expressed:

Nowadays, English is very popular all around the world. Not only all around the world but in Kazakhstan also. So every article, publishing, and all is written in three languages. So English is the requirement of modern society. I think so.

Relatedly, Zarina, a master's student, saw globalization as a phenomenon of contemporary times. Holding that development must be based upon knowledge of the

English language, upon information about facts and skills that come down to us from the advanced developed countries. As Zarina indicated:

Nowadays, with globalization, English has become an essential language. It helps us enrich our knowledge, get new information, and develop in tune with the times.

Like Zarina, Karina, a fourth-year student in the Department of Foreign languages, reiterates how globalization makes it necessary to become proficient in the English language that would allow her to secure employment overseas:

It's not a secret that English is a global language nowadays. So, while studying at school, I mainly focused on this language. Moreover, I knew that my future career would be closely connected with the English language. I would consider it as necessary because it is very prestigious and knowing this language guarantees you broad perspectives. I also consider the English language necessary for my studies as it will improve my employability and even find a job abroad in a country like America, Canada, or the UK.

Administrators across the universities unanimously endorsed English as the language of instruction policy. They argued that globalization and the pervasiveness of English as the global language provide the requirements to become proficient in English, as English proficiency is essential for national development. Therefore, it is important for administrators and students to learn English. The response provided by Bauzhan, who described himself as the Scientific Secretary of the Academic Council of his university, is representative of the opinions of the majority of administrators:

In the modern world, English proficiency is considered very important. Becoming competitive in the labor market is the goal of education. That's why I believe every employee, scholar, and teacher should know English. A well-qualified employee, responsible, proficient in his profession, and possessing a higher level of education and intellectual development works effectively when integrated in the global educational space of the English language. I consider English a necessity in my work because I strive for constant professional growth and mobility, which are impossible without knowing English. Thus, let me repeat once again that English is essential in my work and for students and all administrators.

Relatedly, using the importance of multilingualism in Kazakhstan as a point of reference, Sergey, Academic Vice-Rector, recounts how English as a global language enhances intercultural communication:

Language proficiency is necessary for a person's personal and professional activities to occupy a more prestigious position in society, both socially and professionally. To be communicatively adapted in any environment is easier once you have a good command

of a language. To know foreign languages is always vital and modern. How many languages do modern Kazakh people need to know? At least three languages are required: the Kazakh language is the state language, and the Russian language is a communication language in the post-Soviet space. English is necessary to communicate with colleagues from foreign universities, attend some educational courses, and participate in international scientific conferences within academic mobility programs. Thus, I need to know the language to reach all these.

A widely recognized conception of the English language in universities in Kazakhstan is that English equips the university community with the tools to make life as intelligible and meaningful as possible. Such a conception is sufficiently recognized so that students, faculty, and administrators agree that one of the most somber obligations confronting them is to become proficient in English. We now explore the levels of competence in studying the English language.

Prior English Language Proficiency Levels

While administrators, faculty, and even students agree about the importance of English as the language of instruction policy in universities, we were unsure about the students' proficiency levels. We were particularly interested in students' prior experiences with the English language before entering the university and the faculty's experiences with students' English comprehension levels at the university. One way for students to demonstrate their experiences with English, we first asked them about aptitude tests or standard screening that they completed to determine their English competence levels before being accepted into their study programs. Most undergraduate students said they had to pass entry-level English tests administered by their universities. The response from Talgarth, an undergraduate student who takes all his courses in English, is representative of most of the students:

"I passed [name of university] pre-intermediate level English test before I was admitted."

We surmised that it is one thing passing the entry-level test and another being prepared to study in English, so we asked the follow-up question, *"How would you rate your preparedness in English in your primary and secondary education as adequate for you to study and write papers and exams in English?"* The first-year undergraduate student, Nazira's response captures how most undergraduate students thought about how their preparedness in elementary and high school made them ready to study English at the university:

I don't think that my English knowledge is sufficient to study and write papers and English exams. Because in my primary and secondary education, I did not give time to English.

In response to how graduate students rated their preparedness in English in their undergraduate studies as adequate for them to study and conduct research in English in graduate programs, we find a difference in the responses between science students and those in the humanities or the social sciences. Darren's response is reminiscent of the responses of students in the sciences and technology:

It [the preparation] is inadequate for the Master's because the undergraduate program didn't prioritize language competency as much as technology. We had only the Upper-Intermediate level in the curriculum.

Contrarily, Samal, a first-year graduate student in the social sciences, like other graduate students in the social sciences and humanities, indicated that while undergraduate studies prepared him adequately to understand English lectures, the preparation was not enough for research. As Samal put it:

I'd rate my English preparedness in my undergraduate studies as adequate but insufficient for researching English within graduate programs.

Faculty responses about students' preparedness to study in English showed a marked difference in the university's location. Faculty in universities in the large city of Almaty shared that their students were proficient in studying English at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. In contrast, faculty in rural universities think that most of their students from the rural communities were not very much exposed to the English language before entering university and therefore were not ready to study in English. The preparedness of students in urban universities is apparent in this description by Sultan, a faculty member in a large urban university:

Some of my first-year undergrad students have passed IELTS with a high score of 6 or even seven, and the rest could understand English well. My Master's students are outstanding. They all know English well and understand English well.

Nazim, a member of faculty in a mid-size rural university, cogently pointed out the plight of first-year students in rural universities as she stated:

The first-year undergrad students who came from villages and could speak only Kazakh, like me, don't know English, but those who finished school in cities could speak English. And I hope that in a year those Kazakh students will cope with English as well.

Our field notes indicate that in terms of exposure to the English language, city dwellers in Kazakhstan have the upper hand over rural dwellers. City dwellers aspire to become proficient in English, as many city employers look for proficient candidates. Therefore, city parents become influential in their children learning English in elementary and secondary schools.

Perspectives on Academic Achievement in Learning in English

In the interest of understanding students' experiences in their journey of learning English at the university, we asked the students to explain the extent to which they had improved their English competence since entering the university. We followed up to ask how they assessed their academic performances between learning in English and learning in Russian or Kazakh. Most undergraduate students acknowledged improvement in their English language competence after spending a couple of years in the university. They expressed that the English lessons at the university and their efforts, such as watching English movies and documentaries, improved their English competence. Kuralay, a third-year undergraduate student, captures the sentiments of the majority of the undergraduate students about how the university helped to improve their proficiency in English:

At the university, we learned phonetics: pronunciation, correct intonation, features of American and English accents, comparing and discussing their differences. We learned more about the sounds, and it helped us fix our mistakes in pronunciation. We learned basic English by doing some activities such as reading, translating, learning new words and their meanings in different positions, correct usage, making dialogue, and writing essays in different themes. Then country studying. Here we studied more about the English-speaking countries, their geographical, economic, political positions, social life, culture, and customs. Moreover, all those activities helped me improve my speaking skills by retelling the texts and listening skills by watching documentary films about the countries, reading and writing skills. Then I started to watch films in English with subtitles because I have difficulty listening and comprehending other people's speech.

On the extent to which undergraduate students accessed their academic performance between learning in English and learning in Russian or Kazakh, the students acknowledged that they comprehended lessons taught in Russian and Kazakh more than lessons taught in English. However, they emphasized the importance of studying in English for global competitiveness. They did not consider all other considerations, such as the comprehension of the lectures essential. As Zamira, a fourth-year undergraduate student eloquently pointed out:

I'll definitely understand lessons taught in Russian or Kazakh more than lessons taught in English. In our university, we have courses in a language other than English. For example, Kazakh language and the History of Kazakhstan are taught in Kazakh and some other Russian lectures. I understand these lessons very well. However, I want to study abroad in the future and would want the majority of lessons to be in English. It will help us in our future professions since English is the global language. If you want to make progress in this world, then you have to know English very well.

Like the undergraduate students, a majority of graduate students acknowledged how their English competence improved upon entering university as Aidana, a second-year graduate student, stated:

My knowledge has improved, especially in grammar accuracy. Moreover, I'm taking some private tutorials to improve my English. I'm watching TV programs in English, and I added some channels like BBC for my TV plan. I should say that I understand about 75% of the programs and that I understand the gist. My English competence has improved by about 30% since I entered the master's program. Moreover, I started studying in English.

To the graduate students, one of the most passionate beliefs is that the English language, apart from offering them the opportunity to research because most research articles are in English, would also afford them mobility to high-end jobs in Kazakhstan and abroad. So, it is not a question about the language in which they comprehend lessons, but it is about the language's importance. As Ainur, a second-year master's student stated:

The level of understanding would be much better if the courses were taught in Russian and Kazakh. However, the crucial final result is that for the research, it will be useful to study in English because we are in the Master's program and the requirement is doing research in English. I also think that the more our classes are taught in English, we will become better English writers and speakers, helping us obtain good jobs in Kazakhstan and abroad.

Therefore, like undergraduate students, learning in English, for most graduate students, is the be-all and end-all of global competitiveness itself.

Viewpoints on English Language Acquisition

Our findings in the previous sections indicate how university students in Kazakhstan place the English language in a potentially powerful position beyond Russian and Kazakh. The high status accorded to English is premised on how competence in English would make the students competitive in the job market globally. With this in mind, we then investigated the structures that help students cope with learning English by exploring their experiences with the necessary English language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Most undergraduate and graduate students indicated that listening was the most difficult among the four basic skills, while reading and writing were the easiest. Undergraduate, Dauren relates experiences about learning English:

In learning English, I find listening the most difficult because the voice that is reproduced in tape recorders speaks with an English accent. At first it was pretty hard for me, I did not

understand English speech well, because before that I watched only American tv shows, movies, sitcom and there they respectively speak American English. But after a lot of listening to records I've begun to understand English speech. Now for me, it is still a bit difficult to understand the English accent, but as for everything else such as writing, reading and speaking, I have no problem.

Similarly, master's student Alvira echoes the sentiments of most graduate students that stated that listening is the most difficult of the four necessary skills:

The most difficult I find is listening. I can speak, read, and write. Reading is not so difficult since I know quite a lot. I watch films in English and pay attention to the new vocabulary and pronunciation. I always try to imitate actors and have fun with it. I read aloud. I read the newspapers or magazines on my own. I always find the script for my favorite TV show and read along with the TV show.

Going beyond student responses to members of faculty, particularly those that taught graduate students, also acknowledged that listening is the most difficult of the basic English skills, as stated by Bauzhan, an instructor in the Department of Philology:

I think reading is easier for graduate students, and listening is difficult. Reading is easy because graduate students learn English from grade school to know the alphabet, sounds, and all the basic things about reading. However, they listened difficult because they had no practice in listening at school and seldom heard people speak English. They find it especially difficult to understand native speakers such as English and Americans.

Science instructors generally think that their students find speaking more difficult than reading, writing, and listening. Mathematics instructor Yersin, representatively stated that speaking is more difficult for his students:

The most difficult is speaking, because we don't have an English environment and people prefer their native language, Kazakh or Russian. The easiest is reading because they have developed this skill since grade school. In mathematics listening and writing are not difficult because of the formulas. When I write formulas in my lectures, students understand without any problem, but I think it will be difficult to comprehend in other courses.

Although students and instructors differ in English basic skills acquisition in Kazakhstan universities, they do not differ in their assertion that students lack the necessary skills to comprehend English lessons fully.

Ideals and Realities

In view then of the universality of accepting English as the preferred language of instruction in universities, it became imperative for us to probe deeper into the realities, that is, how students comprehended lessons in English. We then asked them to suggest ways they could benefit most from English language instruction. We first asked students to rate their comprehension levels of lessons taught in English and then asked the instructors to rate their students' comprehension of lessons taught in English. Responses from the undergraduate students showed that very few understood the instruction in English. For the graduate students, about half of those interviewed indicated that they could comprehend lessons taught in English.

Faculty members indicated that about a quarter of their students did not understand and speak English and therefore did not comprehend lessons taught in English. An instructor in Economics and Business, Lara's response to the comprehension level of lessons taught in English is representative of a majority of instructors teaching in undergraduate programs:

In my undergraduate classes, I think only about 10% of the students understand lessons taught in English. I'll say about 60% of the students partially understand, and about 30% do not comprehend lessons taught in English.

Similarly, Yersen's response to the comprehension of lessons taught in English is illustrative of graduate student instructors:

I believe that only about 30% of my graduate students comprehend lessons taught in English, while I think that about 60% partially understand the lessons and about 10% do not understand.

While students, faculty, and administration highly lauded the ideal of English as the instructional language, the reality that our findings indicated was that students were unskilled in the integration of the material taught in English. One crucial challenge for English as the language of instruction seems to be the lack of culture-bound thinking as instructors teach lessons within the English cultural milieu.

We concluded our data collection by asking the university community to give suggestions/recommendations about what they should be doing to enhance teaching and learning in English. Interviews with participating students and faculty yielded information about changes in the organizational structures of the university. Most respondents were interested in programs such as summer institutes, academic mobility, English language-speaking clubs, and international conferences that would expose them to new ideas about teaching and learning English as a foreign language. Aikerim, an instructor in English, like most of her colleagues, suggested the importance of academic exchanges that mainly offer study abroad opportunities for students and faculty exchange programs:

For our students and us to become proficient in English, the university needs to collaborate with English-speaking countries, which would allow our students to study abroad and allow faculty members to experience real life in English-speaking universities. Faculty members can bring expertise from foreign universities to organize speaking clubs and seminars for students, administrators, and other faculty members.

Similar to Aikerim's response above, English language instructor Nursultan suggested the importance of hiring foreign professors for the students to have no choice but to communicate in English regularly and also to expose students, particularly graduate students, to international scholarly meetings:

There should be a condition for them to speak only English in the classroom. For example, they ask me questions in Kazakh when they have a problem. However, if in my place there were a foreign teachers – they would try to explain everything in English, so it's essential to have foreign teachers that don't speak Russian and Kazakh so that students would communicate in English only. For Master's students, I recommend they participate in international conferences: to make presentations, meet with foreign professors, and so on.

The participants suggested various pedagogical issues that would help English teachers establish their positionality in the classroom and deal with tensions that arise from the lack of student achievement. As Bayan, a faculty member, rightly stated:

First of all, I think there should be university administrative support to organize English language courses for the teachers to deal with classroom problems. The courses should help instructors to know the best methods to teach in English. The administration asks us to teach strictly in English without using Kazakh or Russian in the classroom. However, when we only teach in English, we notice that our students don't fully understand, but our hands are tied not to explain further in Russian or Kazakh. We need to take courses about how to go along smoothly with the English language policy, and I think it is the responsibility of the administration.

Our findings uncovered several issues that may constitute significant shortcomings for English as the language of instruction policy in Kazakhstan universities. These include students' unpreparedness to comprehend English lessons and inadequate exposure to the English language in a country where Russian is the *lingua franca*. However, one clear thing is that the English as the language of instruction policy has come to stay even though faculty, students, and administrators accept that many students do not understand lessons taught in English.

Discussion

The dominant finding is that the participants tend to be optimistic, feeling that their exposure to teaching and learning in English will help them triumph over global

challenges and shape them to achieve upward mobility in their careers. Accordingly, they also felt that achievement in the language would measure their best and that their future would be superior if they held on to the English language. This thinking assumes the central tendency of core values representing the Kazakh culture conveyed through language is unimportant. We believe that the English language policy in the universities represents a subsystem of values that deviates from the central value system that the Russian and Kazakh languages convey, with the deviant value system (English) pulling the culture apart.

Essentially, our data indicated that many respondents have argued for the efficacy of English as the language of instruction based on global competitiveness that English is the global language, and that downplaying the importance of the English language is to be left behind in development. However, by assigning such importance to English in a situation where the university communities are minimally proficient in English, the role that language plays in Kazakhstan's social, political, and cultural factors is necessarily seen as unimportant and inconsequential (Klerides, 2009; Pickel, 2013). The present study has indicated that higher education in Kazakhstan has shifted from being an institution in the Kazakh culture. Like all institutions, it ceases to have a reciprocal agreement with the Kazakh culture since language is the fulcrum on which culture rotates (Agbo & Pak, 2017; Klerides, 2009). The English policy has followed a trail of grafting values of universities in English-speaking countries as a way of convergence (Akkary, 2014).

Klerides (2009) and Pickel (2013) have posited national identity elements in language acquisition and use. We do not have the luxury at this moment to delve profoundly into language analysis of identity and nationhood. However, we should be pretty clear on the basic concepts germane to this study. Accordingly, we will pithily discuss two leading constructs from Klerides' analysis. First, education aims to transmit a nation's cultural heritage; second, language plays a dual role in a nation's education and national identity (Klerides, 2009). Klerides asserts that nations design education and its substantial components "to protect, preserve and hand on the so-called cultural inheritance of a nation, and use this heritage, to foster a sense of national belongingness among citizens and assure the cultural continuity of the nation" (p. 1228). Klerides's discursive approach describes how language expresses meaning through its ability to produce preferred results and shapes memberships through collectively shared meanings. As Klerides writes:

This discursive approach to nationalist phenomena is based on structuralist and post-structuralist linguistic philosophy. This theory sees language not as a neutral medium merely reflecting reality but rather as a means of creating an experience, identities, and systems of knowledge about the world. (p. 1233)

The above means that higher education in Kazakhstan alters their national identity by selecting English as the language to teach and learn. Klerides's examples from

England and Cyprus indicate that “national identities and nationhood are now seen as products of language and discourse” (p. 1234).

The suggestion from participants is that by merely participating in English lessons, albeit lack of comprehension, over time, they could quickly learn the English language. In doing so, they could improve their proficiency in learning in ways that the English language could replace their native languages of Russian and Kazakh. Respondents cited ways in which they expected to improve their English while studying at the university, such as being taught by English-speaking visiting scholars, watching English movies, and establishing speaking clubs in the universities. However, in a study captioned *Nations, national cultures, and natural languages*, Pickel (2013) argued that “National cultures are intimately tied to natural languages, and the acquisition of a national culture occurs as part and parcel of the acquisition of a natural language” (p. 245). Pickel draws parallels between *artefactual* and *natural* languages. She defines artefactual languages as scientific and technical competence, artistic practices, religion, and other social symbols that we may, at any age, be able to learn over time. Pickel says, “Artefactual languages populate the broad range of modern knowledge areas, above all in science and technology” (p. 430). Pickel then defines a natural language:

A natural language, on the other hand, is the substrate for a myriad diverse subcultures, from sectoral macrocultures (e.g., of political systems) to the microcultures (workplace, club, family) of everyday life. A natural language, contrary to what its name may suggest, is not a biological artefact. It is a cultural achievement that is passed on to new generations via non-genetic mechanisms, though without having to be explicitly taught. (p. 430)

Perhaps, we can cue from Pickel’s analysis that the desire of respondents in the present study to learn English to replace their natural languages is an unrealistic myth. Pickel clearly distinguishes between learning a natural language and an artefactual language at a later age. According to Pickel (2013), “Learning a natural language at a later time in life is generally significantly more difficult than learning artefactual languages that do not depend on other culture-specific knowledge but are universal” (p. 431). Therefore, summoning most of what we have been discussing up to this point in our analysis, we can conclude that the language reform policy is not efficacious. Russian and Kazakh have long-established educational traditions and virtues that the English language does not convey in a culture-bound context. In other words, because of the long-standing position of the Russian language as the language of upward mobility and the Kazakh language as the natural language for a large segment of the population of Kazakhstan, the English language policy in universities has not been producing the intended results of higher academic achievement of students culturally. Fierman (2006) draws attention to the traditional position of the Russian language, “Indeed, in the late 1980s, even among adult urban ethnic

Kazakhs, most had graduated from schools where Russian was the sole medium of instruction, and their children were following in their parents' paths" (p. 101).

There seems to be a pervasive belief that English proficiency would engender global competitiveness, enabling developing countries to catch up with the rich countries. We indeed, however, tend to support the dependency theory (Frank, 1972) argument that it is not thinkable to reach equivalence with the North (rich nations) if the South (developing countries) espouses the North's cultural and value orientations (Agbo, 2005). Dependency theorists reject the idea of modernization theory that development would transpire by exposing the modern values of the North to developing nations such as Kazakhstan (Frank, 1972; Harrison, 1988; Santos, 1973). Instead, the dependency theory states that the persistent poverty in the South results from exposure to the cultural, economic, political, and social aspirations of the North (Hettne, 1990; Webster, 1984). Head (1991) asserts that the rich countries' growth means the contemporaneous underdevelopment of the poor countries' whose economic surplus enriches them. Accordingly, given time, the South would develop, but as long as the South continued to succumb to the North's exploitation, poverty in the South would persist.

Conclusion

We believe that educational reform tied to the virtues and ideals of the North and processes associated with globalization run the risk of compromising the national identities of developing countries (Agbo, 2005; Akkary, 2014; Beech, 2009). Universities in developing countries that approximate the ideals of the universities in the developed countries become archetype adaptations and would only be able to use to a minimal extent the constitutive features of the universities in the developed countries that they emulate (Agbo & Pak, 2017; Robertson & Dale, 2015). We believe that the shift to English as the language of instruction in universities helps to undermine complete confidence in Kazakhstan's natural languages. That is to say, by assuming that the nation's natural languages cannot sufficiently constitute effective education and that, accordingly, some transcendental fountainhead of the goodness in English is required upon which to draw when desperate or doubtful about the capacity of the Russian and Kazakh languages to educate the youth. We suggest that national identity development should be the main benefit of education and one of education's important goals (Jarvis, 2009; Klerides, 2009). Thus, the challenge for universities in Kazakhstan becomes one of charging normative capacities with the kind of energy that no longer conceals or warps national identity and similar concepts but instead reveals and translates them into effective education. We also believe that superior knowledge is not only couched in a particular language such as English.

We further believe that higher education is an institution in the culture of Kazakhstan. Like all institutions, higher education has a give-and-take covenant with the Kazakh culture. To a degree, education should define the culture, and to a degree, the culture should define the educational system (Agbo, 2005; Klerides, 2009). As language is the pivot of culture (Klerides, 2009; Pickel, 2013), the English instructional policy begs the

debate of whether higher education functions in Kazakhstan should reflect Kazakh culture as it is or restructure it. It may be unnecessary to commit to a debate of this kind at the present moment. However, it seems reasonable to assert that education should preserve those aspects of the Kazakh society that are worthwhile in promoting student sociocultural and academic achievement and that education should not perpetuate those things that are not part of the virtues, values, and norms of the society. However, despite the challenges of teaching and learning in English, the present study respondents did not deem it necessary to teach and learn in the community's languages. The idea of global competitiveness is justifiably related to the level of success of a nation's human capital development to sustain the capacity to function effectively in its social, linguistic, and cultural environment (Agbo & Pak, 2017). We recommend that education reform in the South should embody processes that involve national identity and, at the same time, international cooperation (Klerides, 2009). In other words, we are suggesting that as the university is an institution in Kazakhstan, it must, like all other institutions have a reciprocal agreement with the culture conveyed through the nation's languages. Accordingly, policymakers must redesign education reform in harmony with a different non-globalization emphasis with a combination of value orientations most conducive to steady national growth. Because higher education does not couch knowledge in a particular language, decision-makers should spend much energy sponsoring the development of country-specific capabilities that profoundly contribute to universities' academic goals. Indeed, politicians and policy actors need to shift educational reforms to meet their countries' cultural and socio-economic conditions. Akkary (2014) has argued about educational reforms in the Arab countries, that "reformers in developing countries still need to control their urges for imported quick fixes as a means for hastily turning around their failing educational systems" (p. 196). Thus, we conceptualize educational reform in line with Klerides (2009) as he advocates a look "beyond economic aspects of education and globalisation into a cultural and historical motif of analysis reinvented, however, along the lines of the new emancipatory views on nationhood and cultural identity" (p. 1226). We unequivocally agree that universities in Kazakhstan should promote the cultural, social, and political ideals essential for the harmonious operation of a system of economic growth and development based on global competitiveness. However, the question is how best to keep the Kazakh society globally competitive and move toward a greater degree of economic prosperity without compromising society's national identity and culture.


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Author Biographies

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