



Recent Advancements in English Education in the Multilingual Context of Kazakhstan

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ABSTRACT

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This study explores recent changes in teaching English and how its integration into Kazakhstan's educational system. Taking a historical approach, the research implemented Language Planning and Policy (LPP) framework by investigating policy and diverse initiatives at the national, institutional and classroom levels. Hence, we first look at the English education during the Soviet era, including Kazakhstan, where the prominence of Russian significantly influenced subsequent English learning. We then explore Kazakhstan's post-independence English education and the introduction of the 'Trinity of Languages' project, which aims to enhance English proficiency among Kazakhstani citizens. The integration of the English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) policy into Kazakhstan's education system, as a part of this project, has led to the establishment of various initiatives, including early English education and teacher training programs. Overall, this policy has enhanced English language learning in Kazakhstan by improving proficiency levels and student engagement, strengthening national competitiveness and global image and increasing academic opportunities for students. However, difficulties were encountered as a consequence of an inadequate level of governmental preparation and a lack of effective stakeholder interaction among policymakers, educational institutions, teachers and students, as evidenced by the LPP framework (Ricento and Hornberger 1996), which eventually impeded the progress of the project.

KEYWORDS

English, trilingual education, EMI, policy, language, STEM

1. Introduction

As a former Soviet Union country, Kazakhstan, similar to other Central Asian countries, is home to residents of different ethnicities who speak Kazakh and/or Russian for communication, in addition to their native language. Several years after gaining independence, in 1995, Kazakhstan declared Kazakh as the sole state language, while Russian was granted official administrative language status in the Constitution and remained a language for inter-ethnic communication (Smagulova 2006). Because of this sociolinguistic complexity, Kazakhstan's government has focused on learning English as the medium of instruction in the trilingual education system, wherein students receive simultaneous instruction in Kazakh, Russian, and English. For this reason, Bahry (2020) suggested that Kazakhstan is "a center of educational innovation" (p. 201), considering the fact that multilingualism is not commonly seen in educational practices in former Soviet Union countries for diverse historical and cultural reasons. For instance, countries such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan implemented de-Russification policies, elevating the status of their national languages to the highest degree (Fierman 2013). Moreover, Ahn and Smagulova (2022) pointed out that Kazakhstan is the country which explicitly incorporated English into its national language policy.

In today's globalized world, an increasing number of people are speaking multiple languages, leading to a rise in multilingual environments. Consequently, English is increasingly being used as a medium of instruction across educational institutions. The increasing significance of English within international communication and professional settings demonstrates the vitality of proficiency in the language for participation in the global economy. With this in mind, exploring the development of English language learning in this specific context of Kazakhstan can facilitate a comparative perspective when studying related cases where a trilingual policy is integrated into education. What distinguishes the Kazakhstani case from other nations is the active use and learning of three languages from different language families: Kazakh belonging to the Turkic family, Russian to the Slavic family, and English to the Germanic language family. As each of these languages possesses distinct linguistic characteristics, the Kazakhstani experience provides valuable insights into the effective balance of these languages and offers perspectives on language policies and strategies, with a particular emphasis on English education. Furthermore, the present study discusses a variety of educational implications for neighboring Central Asian countries that also continue to have a prominent presence of the Russian language and learn English as a second or foreign language. With this paper, stakeholders including policymakers, school administration, curriculum developers, language experts, and educators in other countries can develop a better understanding of the potential benefits and obstacles associated with the implementation of EMI into education system.

The Language Planning and Policy (LPP) framework facilitates the investigation of language policies in terms of their evolution and impact offering insights into how such policies respond to challenges and influence educational outcomes. In this historical study, LPP plays a pivotal role in understanding how governments and institutions manage language use within educational systems. This framework is especially applicable for the analysis of language policies in multilingual societies, such as Kazakhstan, where the promotion of English within a trilingual system represents efforts towards global integration while accommodating the country's social and linguistic diversity. Through the lens of LPP, this study investigates the advancement of the English language in Kazakhstan, highlighting the complexities and the broader dynamics of language planning in a multilingual landscape.

Overall, this study explains the development of English language learning in Kazakhstan and recent changes to it by exploring the following questions:

- (1) What was English education in Kazakhstan like during the Soviet era (1922-1991)?
- (2) How has English education in Kazakhstan progressed since Kazakhstan's independence (after 1991)?

2. Method

To answer our research questions, we applied a historical research design. Cohen et al. (2007) stated that historical research can help explain how an educational system was formed, which in turn serves as the groundwork for solid progress. Historical research comprises a systematic investigation into the past and strives to distinguish authentic from fictional information by thoroughly examining relevant resources (Mcdowell 2013). Apart from comprehensively outlining historical events, it is also essential to question why the particular events took place. In the field of education, historical research may deal with individuals, groups, ideological movements, ideas, or educational practices (Cohen et al. 2000), and studying them enables us to gain informed perspectives on the present educational system and how it has developed as well as provide suggestions for further evolution (Albulescu 2018).

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The study utilized the Language Planning and Policy (LPP) framework, employing the 'onion' model proposed by Ricento and Hornberger (1996). This model views LPP as a complex, multi-layered construct in which various elements, such as agents, levels, and processes, interact. Classroom practitioners, situated at the core, are not passive recipients of policy but active interpreters and implementers, influencing policy at outer layers. This dynamic interaction among layers allows various stakeholders to participate actively in policy processes (Menken and Garcia 2010). Therefore, it is crucial to thoroughly examine all layers to understand language planning effectively (Hornberger and Johnson 2007). Similarly, this research closely examines the policy and its implementation process from three different levels and their respective perspectives. The language policy objectives are defined at the national level by policymakers and government, where they outline the goal and guidelines for implementation and development. The next level involves educational institutions and organizations taking further steps to develop the policy into more detailed regulations that can be applicable to specific institutional contexts. These include directives on language instruction and teacher training. Finally, the policy reaches the classroom practitioners, teachers and students, who implement the policy.

Incorporating the LPP framework provides a robust foundation for understanding the evolution of language policies over time. By using the layers of LPP, this approach offers valuable insights into the impacts of language policies and practices on educational and social systems, disclosing how past decisions continue to influence current and future language practices. Accordingly, through the LPP framework, the complexities of language planning in history can be systematically explored, shedding light on the broader implications for both education and society.

2.2 Data Collection

According to Cohen et al. (2007), there are two types of data in historical research: primary and secondary. Primary data, which is the main source of historical research, is data that can transmit original reports of events. Some examples are manuscripts, charters, laws, archives of official minutes or records, files, memoranda, official

publications, newspapers and magazines, log books, and research reports. Another type of source, secondary data, can be used when there is a lack of primary data and additional support is required. These data do not have any direct contact with the past event but rather have been obtained by other researchers from different sources. Quoted materials, textbooks, encyclopaedias, and other replicas of material or information are examples of secondary data.

The initial search for data was conducted online using databases such as SCOPUS and Web of Science, resulting in 58 primary studies. A further 37 studies were identified through extended searches in other languages available to the authors, excluding eight national policy documents such as government decrees, strategic plans and national programs accessible through the official website of the Ministry of Justice. Additionally, we conducted manual searches of related documents both online and offline, including related websites, news portals and the national library located in one of the cities in Kazakhstan. The final data set searched from April 2023 to February 2024 consisted of 32 primary documents, including manuscripts, laws, and official documents, and 71 secondary documents, such as textbooks and studies reported by other researchers. In conducting this study, the researchers (primarily the first author) utilized and translated primary and secondary data from other languages such as Kazakh and Russian. To enhance the credibility of the current research, we applied a triangulation method. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), triangulation refers not only to using multiple methods but also to “combining different types of data on the background of the theoretical perspectives, which are applied to the data” (p. 788). Hence, diverse data provides multilayered information and therefore advances the research quality.

The analysis was guided by the LPP framework, which focuses on the interaction between agents at the national, institutional and interpersonal levels, who engage in language policy enactment by influencing each other. To this end, a combination of thematic and interpretive analysis techniques (Gross 2018) was utilized to examine the data. According to Gross’s analysis, interpretive analysis primarily centered on national policy documents and decrees addressing English language learning and teaching, while thematic analysis was applied to other sources such as books, academic papers, and newspaper articles. Notably, the analysis relied heavily on secondary sources due to limited access to primary materials. Ultimately, the findings are presented in line with the historical research design, incorporating concepts relevant to the specific historical period and texts under study (Meskus 2009a as cited in Denzin and Lincoln 2011). As such, this paper offers a comprehensive investigation of materials relevant to the contexts and emerging concepts during the periods preceding and following Kazakhstan’s independence, spanning a century from 1922 to the present.

3. Findings

After analyzing the collected data, we present our findings in correspondence with the research questions and interrelated historical events. Thus, we explain the historical development of English education in three sections: 1) English education during the Soviet era (1922–1991); 2) English education after gaining independence (1991–2006); and 3) Trilingual education policy to promote English (after 2007).

3.1 English Education During the Soviet Era

3.1.1 Introducing English education across Soviet Union countries

Upon the establishment of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan was a part of the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic (RSFSR) and was often referred to as Kirgiz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1925, it was

renamed Kazakh Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, and only in 1936 did it obtain the status of Soviet Union Republic, eventually becoming Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (Kazakh SSR). During this period, education policy, curriculum development and academic programs were regulated by Moscow, the capital of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) at the time. Accordingly, the policy determined by the Soviet government and the Communist Party of the USSR was to be followed and implemented across Kazakhstan (Khrapchenkov and Khrapchenkov 1998 as cited in Mynbayeva and Pogosian 2014).

In 1932, foreign-language learning was first introduced in middle schools¹ across Soviet countries (Garrard 1962). The 1932 Decree of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party stated that students were obliged to know at least one foreign language upon graduating from middle school (The USSR Government 1940). However, at the same time, it was critical to prepare students to have a good command of scientific subjects such as physics, chemistry, and math because the main purpose of education in the USSR was to foster active workers who contribute to the construction of a socialist society (Charques 1932). Therefore, the emphasis in these foreign language classes was on learning grammar and writing abilities with the goal of the “production of qualified translators of technical and scientific materials” (Garrard 1962, p. 71). The insufficient number of language teachers and a high level of discontent with foreign-language teaching at schools resulted in another Decree by the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (The USSR Government 1940), which provided as follows:

- (1) Starting from 1943, all schools were to teach at least one foreign language out of three (English, German, or French) starting from grade 5.
- (2) The number of students admitted to pedagogical and foreign-language higher institutions was to be increased.
- (3) Students enrolled in tertiary-level pedagogical institutions with knowledge of foreign languages in the scope of secondary school programs are to be assigned 2-year foreign-language courses and given a license to teach grade 5–9 students in secondary schools.
- (4) Students who majored and graduated from pedagogical and foreign-language higher institutions, as well as 2-year foreign language courses, were obliged to work as teachers in secondary or higher education.
- (5) All higher education institutions were to teach a foreign language 2–3 hours a week throughout the 4 years of study, and aspiring graduates were required to pass the exam, or they would not be allowed to take the stake exam or thesis defense.

The Academy of Pedagogical Sciences supported by RSFSR was in charge of constructing the textbooks, teaching materials, and curriculum, which were later utilized by all other republics including Kazakh SSR. Hence, the language of the textbooks and the instruction in the English classes was Russian, and almost no school provided English language teaching in the native Kazakh language (Sadykbekova 2022). During this period, there was only one English textbook in the Kazakh language, which was published by Mektep Publishing House in 1981.

Regardless, by the time of World War II, the ‘Russification’ policy had been initiated in school education, making learning the Russian language obligatory in Kazakh schools (Sembayev 1958). Although English was

¹ Compulsory education in the USSR started at the age of 7 and consisted of primary school (grades 1–3) and middle school (grades 4–8). High school (grades 9–10/11) was not considered mandatory until 1977 (Rosen 1978). Kazakhstan’s present educational system is analogous to the USSR system but with some changes in grades: primary school (grades 1–4), middle school (grades 5–9), and high school (grades 10–11/12). For admission to tertiary-level institutions, students are required to take the Unified National Test (UNT) at the end of grade 11 or grade 12 (Pans 2015).

present in these schools' curricula and students had to learn at least three languages including the mother tongue, Russian, and English, the situation changed after World War II (WWII). After the end of WWII, Kazakh SSR, being the second-largest republic after RSFSR in the Soviet Union, became the target of WWII Stalin's ethnic deportations, and evacuations of multiple sectors led to the abundant immigration of speakers of other languages into Kazakhstan (Mynbayeva and Pogosian 2014). At that time, the number of ethnic Kazakh people residing in the territory was estimated to be around 29% of the population (Khazanov 1995), and the remaining proportion consisted of Russians and people of other ethnicities. Therefore, Russian, instead of English, began to function as a language for interethnic and intercultural communication.

3.1.2 English in educational institutions

Throughout the 1950s–80s, the education system of learning foreign languages, including English, did not alter much. The students started learning one of the languages available in grade 5 until they graduated from school after grade 10. Accordingly, four hours a week in grade 5, three hours in grades 6 and 7, and two hours in grades 8, 9, and 10 were devoted to learning a foreign language (Rosen 1978). Notably, in Kazakh SSR, apart from foreign languages, Russian was learned as a second language, and the hours spent learning English might have been fewer (Abell 1959).

In this system, students had to choose one foreign language among English, German, and French. Although there were more learners of English in Soviet Union Republics, in Kazakh SSR, interest in the German language appeared as well after the number of German residents increased in Kazakhstan following WWII (Smirnova et al. 2018). Germans were among the many who were resettled as a consequence of Stalin's ethnic deportations. Smirnova et al. (2018) stated that around 90% of students learned English and German, this number being distributed equally with 45% each, and the remaining 10% chose the French language. Overall, the program of English language was to contribute in 'solving the tasks of Communist upbringing and education' (Dewey 1959). Therefore, the instruction focused on learners' reading abilities so that they could comprehend authentic foreign texts and acquire passable speaking skills. However, in reality, most classes applied a grammatical approach, prioritizing the memorization of vocabulary, the repetition of grammar, dictation and completing exercises on pronunciation and spelling (Abell 1959, Rosen 1978). Consequently, upon completion of their secondary education, the students were evaluated through an exam that assessed their skills in reading, grammar, and translation of English texts.

One advancement during this period was the special foreign-language school. Established in the early 1960s, schools specializing in foreign languages were spread across the USSR, reaching 800 schools by 1972. The main difference between these schools and general schools was that several subjects such as world geography, history, natural science, physics, and biology were instructed in a foreign language. Given the prevailing popularity of Western languages at the time, English was predominantly selected as the language of instruction. Thus, unlike general schools, which started teaching a foreign language in grade 5, these special foreign-language schools began foreign-language instruction from grades 1 or 2. Additionally, special foreign-language schools allocated more hours to language classes compared to regular schools: three hours per week in grades 1–4, and six hours per week in grades 6–10. With a more rigorous curriculum and a requirement for both students and teachers to speak English in the classroom, these schools proved to be more effective in language teaching than general schools. Aiming for native-like fluency, students were better equipped to enter their desired higher institutions, and in some cases selected a path related to and immersed in foreign languages after completing these schools' programs (Rosen 1978).

Only three universities in the Kazakh SSR offered language learning opportunity. As a result of Decree by the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (The USSR Government 1940) these universities adopted two-year foreign language courses, and a pedagogical institute of foreign languages was established (Decree on the teaching of German, English and French 1940). Faculties of the English, German, and French languages were launched after the foundation of the Kazakh State Teachers' Institute of Foreign Languages, and 231 students began their studies, with English being the most popular among them (113 English, 97 German, 21 French). In these universities, English language students were required to take several courses, including general linguistics, educational psychology and language teaching methodology. Much emphasis was placed on students' practical phonetics and pronunciation, and many were highly self-critical of their English skills, recognising the considerable responsibility they carried as future language teachers (Nash 1971).

3.2 English Education After Gaining Independence

3.2.1 The status of English language

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan gained its independence in 1991. The situation with languages at the time was complicated, and the First President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev² focused on the revival of the Kazakh language. In the initial years of independence (1991–2000), the educational priority was placed on promoting the Kazakh language and shifting from Russian to Kazakh in the country. Yet, considering the substantial number of citizens of other ethnicities, the Russian language as a medium of communication among them could not be entirely ignored. Therefore, while the country tried to maintain the balance between these two languages and preserve the national language by initiating Kazakh language-learning programs and designing textbooks, English became relatively sidelined in the language development programs during this time.

Despite the evident interest in and existing efforts to promote learning English, as noted by Dave (1996), the lack of sufficient professionals hindered the progress of developing new approaches and methods in English teaching (Sulkarnayeva-Raphailovna 2017). As stated previously, the government was focused on revitalizing the Kazakh language. However, given the dominance of the Russian language over the previous century, there was a shortage of qualified professionals who were fluent in both Kazakh and English. Consequently, there was a scarcity of experts who could contribute to the formulation of policies and effective English teaching methods suitable for Kazakh speakers.

3.2.2 Innovations implemented within institutional framework

Despite the above limitations, several initiatives contributed to promoting English learning. In 1992, by the resolution of the Nazarbayev, the KIMEP University³ was founded. In establishing this university, various educators and professionals were recruited from abroad, with the goal of creating a U.S.-style university with English as a medium of instruction (EMI) courses. This type of educational institution was the first of its kind among the post-Soviet Union countries (Nazarbayev 2017).

² Tenure: 1991–2019.

³ Mainly known as KIMEP, an abbreviation for 'Kazakhstanskiy Institut Menedzhmenta, Ekonomiki i Prognozirovaniya' (the name of the university) in Cyrillic.

Similarly, educational institutions on the secondary-school level emerged as a result of an agreement between the presidents of Turkiye and Kazakhstan and are provided under the international educational fund Bilim-Innovation. First founded in 1992, Bilim-Innovation Lyceums (BILs)⁴ were a remarkable representation of multilingual education, teaching Kazakh, Russian, English, and Turkish and providing Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), where science and math subjects were instructed in English. Upon its establishment, foreign professionals and educators were invited, and Cambridge University Press and Oxford University Press textbooks were introduced into Kazakhstani educational institutions (Bridges 2014). By 1996, the number of BILs in Kazakhstan reached 28, and their recognition grew as soon as their students started earning medals in international educational competitions.

Furthermore, in 1993, the Bolashak Scholarship program was initiated to prepare competent specialists who could contribute to the country's development. Eligible students of different majors such as economics, engineering, and medicine could receive funding from the government to study in leading foreign institutions in the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and France. The knowledge of a foreign language, namely English, was compulsory to win the scholarship which, in turn, contributed to more students learning English. The number of successful applicants who started their studies in 1994 was 187 students, later reaching 785 students between 1994 and 2004 (Vaculík and Satanov 2019). To this day, the Bolashak Scholarship is in high demand among young scholars, which has prompted the change of the requirements regarding knowledge of English due to high competition.

3.2.3 The new direction of the English language

At the turn of the century, foreign languages in secondary schools, including English, French, and German, were being instructed similarly to how they were instructed during the Soviet era, i.e., from grades 5 to 11. However, in 2001, a Decree entitled 'On the State Program of Functioning and Development of Languages for 2001-2010' was issued wherein, for the first time, the concern for multilingual education was mentioned and learning English was emphasized (Ministry of Justice 2001). One of the goals was to implement English in business communication and create suitable conditions for learning the English language. Additionally, increasing the quality of English teaching in educational institutions of all levels as well as textbooks was highlighted. Finally, the possible introduction of early English education and instruction in all three languages was discussed, and Nazarbayev encouraged educators to consider the prospects of these matters.

Teacher educators from the First Pedagogical Institute of Foreign Languages were the first to assume leadership in overseeing the design of school textbooks in the Kazakh language, which was insufficient in number at the time, in accordance with the Decree. In addition, a group of researchers under the leadership of Professor Salima Kunanbayeva from the former Pedagogical Institute of Foreign Languages outlined a plan that meets the requirements of the globalized world, including improving English language teaching, which has been neglected in the Kazakhstani context. In the *Concept of Foreign Language Education Development for Kazakhstan* (Kazakh Abylai Khan University of International Relations and World Languages 2004), Kunanbayeva, Karmysova, Ivanova, Arenova, Zhumagulova, Kuznetsova and Abdygapparova identified existing problems, such as the absence of a unified methodological curriculum, which led to schools making arbitrary choices regarding language programs and teaching materials; the lack of teachers in secondary schools; and a decrease in the quality of instruction, which also impacted students' ability to communicate in the target language. Then, it was suggested

⁴ Mainly known as BILs, former Kazakh-Turkish high schools for gifted children.

that there was a need to update the educational policy and systematically organize language-teacher training. The paper also discussed other significant matters such as the direction of language education, training language instructors, the stages of implementing this concept, and the expected results. One novelty was the introduction of early English education, which would begin in grade 2 of an 11-year education.

Later that year, Nazarbayev emphasized the importance of multilingual education and on October 24, 2006, noted in his speech at the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan's XII session:

In today's modern world, it may be good to know English, but it is a necessity for the world of the future. I have already said that the new generation of Kazakhstan should be at least trilingual, fluent in Kazakh, Russian, and English. In Europe, multilingualism has become the norm, and we must progress toward that point as well. Without a good command of the English language, it is challenging to claim the nation's ability to effectively compete with others. (Nazarbayev 2006)⁵

Eventually, the concept of trilingual education emerged in 2007. While addressing the citizens of Kazakhstan at the beginning of the year, Nazarbayev outlined the cultural project titled 'Trinity of Languages' and suggested its step-by-step enactment:

Kazakhstan should be recognized globally as a highly educated country whose population speaks three languages. The Kazakh language ... as the state language, the Russian language as the language of interethnic communication, and English ... as the language of successful integration into the global economy. (Nazarbayev 2007)⁶

3.3 The Trilingual Education Policy as a Way to Promote English (after 2007)

3.3.1 Extensive implementation of EMI at the secondary and tertiary levels of education

The concept of the 'Trinity of Languages' project introduced in 2007 was to promote Kazakhstanis speaking all three languages, and its ultimate goal was to increase the population's proficiency in the Kazakh, Russian, and English languages. One way to reach this goal was to implement EMI for teaching science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) subjects at the secondary and tertiary levels of educational institutions. Before implementing EMI in institutions across the country, the government decided to try out the policy first. Including Bilim-Innovation Lyceums, under the government-financed Scientific Practical Center, 33 specialized 'Daryn' schools for gifted children were designated to implement trilingual education and start teaching several subjects in English beginning in the 2007–2008 academic year.

In addition, Nazarbayev initiated Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS) and Nazarbayev University (NU) in 2008 and 2010, respectively. These two types of institutions were established particularly to test the "multilingual education model and educational innovations" (Ministry of Justice 2010a). Some of the novelties of NIS were 12-year education and EMI of several subjects in grades 11–12. Students were required to take exams on math, Kazakh, Russian, and English to be enrolled and could enter only after grade 6 upon establishment.

⁵ The original speech has been translated into English.

⁶ The original speech has been translated into English.

By 2015, the government was planning to increase the number of NIS to 20 across Kazakhstan. Similarly, NU had an EMI policy for all offered majors, and several academics and professors from abroad were recruited to teach there. Hence, by 2010, there were many schools such as BILs, NIS, and Daryn schools where EMI was practiced and the students learned English more intensively. Alumni of these schools were entering leading universities abroad, and schools became distinguished among the public, specifically for students who spoke English fluently. Children wanted to enter these schools, and parents had to send them to private tutoring to ensure that they would be admitted (Kalmurat 2020).

In 2010, the Decree entitled ‘On approval of the State Program for the Development of Education for 2011-2020’ was issued, which planned to increase the number of schools providing education in three languages to 700 (Ministry of Justice 2010b). This plan was not elaborated until 2015 when Nazarbayev included it in his program ‘The Plan of the Nation: 100 concrete steps’ to integrate teaching in English step-by-step both at the secondary and tertiary levels of education and further steps were proposed by the government (Ministry of Justice 2015). However, no guidelines, challenges and risk reports were offered to educational institutions by the government (Karabassova 2020). Next, the Decree ‘On approval of the State Program for the Development of Education and Science for 2016-2019’ contemplated constructing and adapting STEM textbooks in English, online English courses, teacher training, and solutions for the insufficient number of instructors (Ministry of Justice 2016). Namely, the government planned to recruit alumni of the Bolashak Scholarship program, initiate a professional development program for in-service STEM teachers, and shift pre-service teacher education programs to EMI. Moreover, Nazarbayev (2014) pointed out that efforts should be made to level mainstream schools with the NIS. In total, 117 schools and 42 higher educational institutions implemented the policy in 2016, where English was emphasized.

Although it has been years since the plan for trilingual education was announced, its actualization prompted diverse reactions among the public that were reflected in domestic newspapers. Academics differed in their opinions: while discussing the triangulation policy, some insisted that the education system would never be prepared and that it would be better just to start, whereas others claimed that only after teachers completed their training should the government consider whether or not to implement the policy (Abramov 2016). These heated debates continued across several levels and contexts.

Still, the necessary conditions for students’ learning were being formed. In 2018, textbooks in chemistry, physics, and biology written in English were ready, and after successful piloting, schools were to receive them for the new academic year. In addition, the Unified National Test (UNT), an exam for admission to higher-education organizations in Kazakhstan, started being offered in English. Only Kazakh and Russian were available before, but because of the increase in the number of trilingual schools, students were now able to take the test in a more comfortable language for them. In 2021, the number of test-takers in English reached a total of 350 students (Prime Minister’s Office 2021).

However, because of this extensive focus on the English language, nationalists accused the government of neglecting to promote the Kazakh language (Karabassova 2020), as less attention was being paid to its development. These harsh criticisms influenced the direction of the initial policy, despite a high number of teachers receiving the aforementioned training on teaching STEM subjects in English at the secondary level. In 2018, the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) affirmed that instead of four subjects (physics, information and communications technology (ICT), biology, and chemistry) schools had a right to choose to teach at least one of them in English, taking into account parents’ and students’ opinions. However, this change did not guarantee the steady improvement of EMI policy but rather resulted in a slowdown. After 2019, the government also took the position not to force the EMI policy, and the MoES confirmed this, recommending instead to enact it gradually

when educators were ready (Rakhatkyzy 2019). Since then, the area of trilingual education has not been followed attentively, although some initiatives have been maintained such as teaching at least one EMI subject at the secondary level and majors being offered in English.

According to the official information resource of the Prime Minister, in the 2021–2022 academic year, 3,864 schools overall implemented the EMI policy: 439 of which were fully immersed, and 3,425 offered half immersion. Likewise, 55 universities provided 20% of the courses in the English language, and 26 of them had teacher education programs that prepared pre-service teachers of physics, ICT, chemistry, and biology to teach these subjects in English. Additionally, the government began to promote learning English in different ways to reach the goals of trilingual education. For example, the MoES provides scholarships to up to 1,000 students every year who will be majoring in teaching the aforementioned science subjects in the English language (Prime Minister's Office 2021).

3.3.2 Early English education

Before introducing early English education across Kazakhstan, the government decided to pilot it first, and in 2004, 32 primary schools were teaching English two hours a week to students in grade 2. With the successful results of the experiment, the number of schools increased, and in 2011, 115 schools and 51,000 second graders overall were learning English at school. Consequently, to implement this initiative on a larger scale, it was necessary to qualify English teachers first, which ended with testing multilingual education at the tertiary level. Soon, the English language found its way into all primary schools in the 2013–2014 academic year. The MoES declared that all students who started school would be studying English three hours a week and that teachers would receive sufficient workshops on how to work with younger learners (“Angliyskiy” 2012).

However, as soon as the year started, the news broke about the lack of teachers as well as textbooks. Multiple news media reported that some schools in different parts of the country had not received the books yet, whereas the remaining part, especially rural areas, shared that Russian-language teachers were needing to substitute because of the absence of English teachers (Medelbek 2013). Primary school teachers were facing several challenges. Namely, the lack of suitable opportunities for professional development and employer support and the inappropriateness of the teaching materials were concerns of English teachers (Zhetpisbayeva et al. 2016). Although the textbooks were designed by Kazakhstani scholars to fit the curriculum, complaints were received in terms of the content. Only after collaborating with renowned publishing houses such as Cambridge University Press and Oxford University Press did the quality improve and the textbooks become more communication centered.

Regardless of these issues in the primary levels of education, the government suggested that younger learners should be prepared for trilingual education and English language learning, which started at the age of 6–7 at schools. Consequently, the Decree entitled ‘On approval of the State Program for the Development of Education and Science for 2016-2019’ included the introduction of the English language in preschool education. That is, starting in 2017, kindergartens were obliged to partially combine elements of English in senior groups (age 5–6), and learning in kindergarten had basic objectives such as speaking common phrases and recognizing the alphabet and words and was addressed every day for 15–20 minutes.

In the years after, early English education remained consistent and unchanged in terms of policy. However, the MoES informed that starting in 2020, English would be excluded from the curriculum of preschool education, and starting in the 2022–2023 academic year, students would start learning English from the third year of primary

school (grade 3) instead of the usual first year, altering the initial introduction in 2013 (Ministry of Education and Science 2022).

3.3.3 Teacher training

In October 2010, a Decree entitled ‘The State Program of the Development and Functioning of Languages for years 2011-2020’ was issued, and one of its main goals was to increase the number of English learners. Specifically, this Decree stated that 10%, 15%, and 20% of the population should have a good common knowledge of the English language by 2014, 2017, and 2020, respectively. Although the educational institutions at different levels were not provided specific guidelines in implementing EMI, in 2011, the government initiated the project, specifically preparing teachers for all levels of educational institutions who can instruct in English. In 2012, NIS and the National Center for Professional Development launched Orleu teacher training centers where, in 5 years, approximately 125 000 teachers could undergo special training on teaching STEM subjects in English. As time passed, other teacher training centers such as Astana International University, Astana School of Business Technology, Astana Bilim Ordasy, and Ustaz Professional Learning Center were established and received orders to deliver teacher training.

In 2016, by order of the MoES, training for science teachers was initiated. The training was planned to last from 2 to 10 months, depending on the level of the educators. By the completion of the training, teachers would complete exams on their knowledge of EMI, and they were promised a 25% increase in salary upon finishing and starting to teach STEM subjects in English. Overall, more than 600 instructors received certificates in 2016 (Karabassova 2020). By 2018, a total of 18,902 teachers had undergone language training programs (Gorbunova 2019).

However, several issues occurred related to teacher training. First, because of the variety of centers, teachers demonstrated different competencies and skill levels upon completion when they were supposed to have similar results based on the curriculum. The schedule was another issue: some educators were requested to attend during their working hours, which was impossible, and others had to commute from rural areas for 3–4 months. Additionally, teacher training programs were criticized for focusing more on teaching the English language (422 hours) rather than presenting CLIL methods and techniques (70 hours). Then, even if the teachers could pass the Cambridge English Placement Test (CEPT), in reality, many confessed that it did not match their actual English proficiency (Karabassova 2022) because a 10-month training period was not perceived sufficient to be qualified.

In 2019, around 5,900 teachers were teaching STEM subjects partially through EMI, and only 818 of them were teaching fully in English. After Nazarbayev’s criticism of the government, several issues were raised. For instance, the former Chairman of Parliament, Nurlan Nigmatulin, addressed the MoES and Minister Kulyash Shamshidinova and emphasized that the quality of teacher training should be prioritized (Gorbunova 2019). Despite the delay, in 2019, it was announced that teachers who already had completed the training were still expected to teach in English because they had signed the documents and received the money. Teachers continued advancing their language skills to improve their teaching practices. In 2020, more than 570 teachers took the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test, which is 39% more than in 2018 (Prime Minister’s Office 2021). Moreover, the MoES announced that teachers who instruct in English could receive a bonus from 30% to 50% of their basic income starting in 2022.

3.3.4 Teacher and student perspectives

Most of the time, the government continued to highlight the successful implementation of EMI in NIS and often regarded them as role models. Nevertheless, many educators were frustrated with the high expectations, especially considering that these institutions were funded and given plenty of money and time to prepare for the gradual shift to EMI. Karabassova (2022) studied the perspectives of two contexts and identified that although NIS was the piloting institution, no cooperation was established between mainstream school teachers and NIS teachers to negotiate or discuss the most efficient methods of implementing EMI. Moreover, NIS teachers had passed a round of selection and high competition to work in those institutions, meaning they had enough time to prepare, and even after recruitment, they were surrounded by positive enforcement, constant professional development, and support. In contrast, mainstream school teachers did not have a say when making decisions and thus were pressured to start teaching in English in a short amount of time with no relevant teaching resources.

Likewise, according to the Information-Analytics Center (IAC), students (68%) did not like the idea of studying STEM subjects in English when it was introduced in mainstream schools, mostly because they believed they would not improve either in language skills or in subject knowledge. Low proficiency in English (15%) might have been one of the issues in taking EMI classes. Notably, the majority of secondary level students showed a preference for the Kazakh and Russian languages over English. Additionally, a significant proportion (70%) favored local higher institutions compared to Russian (10%) and foreign (7%) institutions, indicating limited interest in English-speaking countries.

Unlike secondary-school students, university students believed that studying courses in EMI is more prestigious than doing so in either Kazakh or Russian (Yessenbekova 2023). However, the majority admitted that the challenge arose from their own and the instructors' lack of proficiency in the English language (IAC 2016) or their lack of experience in EMI classes and the prevalence of Russian language use in Kazakhstan (Agbo et al. 2022).

Comprehensive studies by Tajik et al. (2022, 2023) have also shown that many Kazakhstani students struggle with studying in an EMI environment. This led to inequality not only between high and low-proficiency students from different linguistic and social backgrounds but also a decrease in their academic achievement and mental health due to a lack of proficiency in English. For example, postgraduate students often struggle with writing academic papers because they were not taught how to write academic papers in English during their undergraduate years, and undergraduate students may struggle with the EMI environment due to a lack of proper systematic training at school.

It is concluded that educational and language reform should reflect the needs of both national and international practitioners. Although there are several studies where teachers' and students' challenges in EMI classes are stated, there was not active interaction between the government and stakeholders to improve the policy. Thus, in her study, Karabassova (2020) criticized the government, schools, and universities for not questioning and addressing the practicability of the project. All authorities and relevant organizations were functioning the role of "passive adopters" who were making sure to obey and accomplish the suggestions of Nazarbayev, because it is not acceptable to voice or oppose Kazakhstan's educational system (Karabassova 2020, p. 49).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Employing Gross's (2018) thematic and interpretive analysis techniques within the expansive LPP framework, this study delved into the evolution and transformation of English language acquisition within Kazakhstan's multilingual landscape. Specifically, it examined the policy, its implementation, and initiatives aimed at fostering English language acquisition across national, institutional, and classroom settings. The findings indicated that

English education in Kazakhstan has undergone drastic changes over the past few decades. After Kazakhstan gained independence, the English language was taught alongside other languages like German and French, with only 2% of the population (332,000 people) possessing a good command of English (Kirkpatrick and Liddicoat 2019). However, over time, there has been a significant increase in the number of individuals eager to learn English, resulting in a steady increase in proficient English speakers. Additionally, the promotion of the English language has expanded, notably, through the instruction of STEM subjects in English at the secondary and tertiary levels.

Indeed, Kazakhstan followed a distinctive path in its language policy among post-Soviet Union countries. While Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan eliminated Russian after gaining independence, Kyrgyzstan made Russian its official language the same way Kazakhstan did, leaving English a mere compulsory subject in educational institutions (Bekmurzaev 2020). The government promoted the EMI policy in teaching STEM subjects rather than focusing on English itself because it believed that this approach would accelerate the acquisition of the English language. Karabassova (2022) confirmed this, remarking that “trilingualism has merely become a synonym of teaching in English” (p. 1532), and the other two languages have not been given much priority.

Regarding the linguistic situation of Kazakhstan after gaining its independence, thanks to former President Nazarbayev’s initiative, trilingual education was implemented across Kazakhstan. The desire to quicken the process of learning English as a part of the ‘Trinity of Languages’ project led to the implementation of the EMI policy in educational institutions, and the focus on English shifted to teaching through English. Despite various initiatives, such as early English education, teacher training for STEM teachers and the formation of EMI majors, the government was unable to offer detailed and standardized guidelines for implementing EMI across educational settings at the national level. Similarly, instructions, including teacher training, were rushed through by educational institutions and administrations with no prior knowledge of the policy. As a result of the challenges that have arisen from the haphazard implementation of EMI and the problems with the teacher training program, the government has decided to slow down and prioritise the necessary arrangements, but the new programs and initiatives that were previously in place are still under way.

Furthermore, students and teachers, who is considered to be at the core of the language policy tasked with implementing it, had limited interaction with institutional or national authorities, resulting in a disconnect between policy planning and enactment (Hamid et al. 2013, Macaro et al. 2018). While one explanation for their challenges in transitioning to an EMI environment may be the proficiency levels of educators and students, the passive roles of classroom practitioners in receiving and adapting to the policy changes can be important factor as well. Therefore, it can be suggested that students in Kazakhstan have historically been subject to top-down implementation of English language learning, which has deprived them of choice and compelled them to conform to the demands of a globalized world as stated by the government.

According to the Education First English Proficiency Index (EF EPI) Kazakhstan placed 99th among 111 countries in 2022, demonstrating a very low command of English (EF EPI 2022). While EF EPI experts consider that this issue in Central Asian countries originates from Russian being taught as the second language at schools (Alymova 2021) and being predominantly used in the area, several Kazakhstani scholars have associated this issue with the lack of preparation in implementing language reforms, the absence of an English-speaking environment, and the different origins of the three languages (Sarmurzin et al. 2023).

Despite that, the study demonstrates that the transition from Soviet rule in Kazakhstan had a considerable impact on English language policies. While the Soviet Union provided conditions conducive to language learning (Dewey 1959, Nash 1971), Russian was the dominant language across Kazakhstan’s diverse linguistic communities and minimal emphasis on English hindered its acquisition. However, following independence, Kazakhstan made

several efforts to promote English, reflecting a strategic shift towards global integration and an increased prioritization of the English language.

The present study has several limitations. Firstly, the unavailability of essential historical documents and primary resources may have hindered a comprehensive understanding and elaboration of the historical events under investigation. Additionally, the lack of relevant materials and research studies could have limited the depth and accuracy of the findings.

This study provides the following implications. First, as shown in previous sections, the lack of cooperation between the government and its affiliated organizations, educational institutions and classroom practitioners significantly prevented the effective implementation of the policy on English education. In particular, the government has not thoroughly explored or acknowledged the perspectives of teachers and students, despite their crucial roles in the successful implementation of language policies. Therefore, it is imperative to closely re-examine their experiences and the methods used to teach English. Such research endeavors will allow for the identification of areas for improvement and the promotion of English language learning in Kazakhstan. Second, systematic and principled English instruction has been insufficient in Kazakhstan. The above circumstances emphasize the importance of seamless collaboration between government agencies and the sufficient provision of expertise in language education. Hence, the present study underscores the significance of English as a Foreign Language teaching first and highlights the need to strengthen English language education by reinforcing overall educational system. This includes improving access to quality instruction through teacher training programs, development of resources, better learning facilities, and the design of effective materials and programs.

In addition, in the context of the expanding concept of multilingualism in an increasingly globalized world, where the population of multilingual individuals is growing, it becomes highly important to emphasize the role of EFL which is gradually leading to the implementation of EMI across numerous countries. Consequently, this study is significant in highlighting the potential challenges and risks associated with implementing EMI into a national education system in a multilingual context. As Kazakhstan is among the first Central Asian countries to implement EMI at both secondary and tertiary levels, it offers valuable insights for stakeholders in neighboring countries. First, the various challenges, implementation processes, and outcomes observed in Kazakhstan can provide a valuable benchmark for other countries. This allows stakeholders to foresee potential issues, make well-informed decisions, and establish attainable goals for more effectively enhancing English language learning and incorporating EMI into their educational programs. On the other hand, a historical analysis of educational policies indicates how language use has evolved and the complex relationship between different languages, language policies and national identity. These changes may prove beneficial for multilingual countries with comparable historical and socio-linguistic contexts, particularly in terms of balancing languages, addressing linguistic challenges, and implementing educational reforms. Also, these implications may be particularly relevant in countries in East Asia, where the concepts of national identity and language are strongly emphasized. By closely examining the research, it is possible to gain valuable insights into how to navigate these complexities, managing sociolinguistic dynamics in a way that ensures a balanced approach to the promotion of English and local languages.

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Examples in: English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Level: Primary, secondary, and tertiary