Application Features of Language Acquisition Assessment System in Kazakhstan: KAZTEST

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ABSTRACT
The article deals with the analysis of peculiarities of language acquisition assessment system in Kazakhstan – KAZTEST. The author pays attention to the role of control as a way of assessment students' skills, habits and knowledge. In addition, author determined the place and functions of tests as a form of control. The author explores the specificity of testing in the educational system of Kazakhstan. KAZTEST system is the Kazakhstani system based on international standards. The KAZTEST system plays an important role in social and political life of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Its national peculiarities, advantages and disadvantages are determined in the present research. The background of KAZTEST formation and its role in society are under discussion in the framework of official language policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan. However, besides Kazakhstan, the language policy problems are the inherent part of national policy in many multinational and multilingual countries.

Introduction

Education is one of the main tasks among other social systems of a country. Nowadays Kazakhstani society pays much attention to education innovations within the developing situation of the society. Thus the knowledge assessment is the constituent part of education system in general. The assessment of student's knowledge is an important step to formation of appropriate system of education.

Testing is the most objective method in acquiring knowledge (Perzadayeva, 2014). Besides the disadvantages of testing as assessment of the efficient creative potential, the depth of knowledge, the psychological and physical peculiarities, testing is considered to be the unique assessment system in many countries (Avanesov, 2007).

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Language acquisition assessment system by testing coinsides the general knowledge assessment, but nevertheless it has its own inherent peculiarities (Avanesov, 2007). The language acquisition assessment consists of level assessment, general assessment and language as a communication tool assessment by requirements for professional competence of a person (Alderson & Banerjee, 2002; Gu, 2014).

The language acquisition assessment system is very important for any country, for official language acquisition is considered to respect the state values, to follow the social values and to acquire the personal values, that are very important for any republic.

According to National Programme of Language Development and Functioning of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2011-2020, a gradual knowledge raising is being planned in the country among the population speaking state, Russian and English languages. "Trinity of languages" project determines the Kazakh language as the state language, Russian – official, English – the language of international communication (Sadybekova, 2013). In despite of the fact that the Russian language lingua franca for most countries in the region, this function reaches a larger scale in Kazakhstan than in other countries of the Soviet Union (Beacháin & Kevlihan, 2013). In such circumstances, level of state language proficiency raising is a challenge of high priority that requires a certain caution.

Gradual knowledge raising among the population is being planned in the country. The Kazakh language acquisition assessment system of the Republic of Kazakhstan is called KAZTEST. KAZTEST system is developed by the National Testing Center of the Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the given testing system functions from 2006. KAZTEST fulfils many measures in the framework of language policy of the multinational country as Kazakhstan, it assists the official language acquisition development.

Literature Review

The control is the important constituent of educational process and it is impossible without it to provide efficiency of teaching. The control is a supervision and verification of the students' progress, as a subsystem within the framework of the departmental teaching on the whole, which will realize functions inherent to it and had by the object and methods (Pavlov et al., 2000).

The processes, which take place in the educational industry lately, require strengthening of efficiency of control system after educational-educative activity of students. The control is not only fixation of certain result of students' achievements, but also effective project vision of the ways of development, removal of the exposed failures with the purpose of improving the efficiency of educational-educative activity of the establishment (Pavlov et al., 2000). The control is usually considered in two planes – theoretic-methodological and practical. If to outline this notion as system of assessment of the students' educational achievements and permanent basis for perfection and self-perfection of teachers, then the category takes the poly-aspect value.

The control is determined as verification of something, principle of feed-back that has the educational and educative value. The control has the substantial value both for a teacher, and for a student. A teacher must have data about the level of formation and development of the students' skills, habits and knowledge. Thus, the control is one of the instruments of teaching control process. It basic function is feed-back. Without the feed-back the students will repeat the same errors and, as a result, the education would be unsuccessful. In turn, the qualitative feedback as one of the functions of knowledge and skills control provides conditions for students' transition to self-regulated learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Thus, the control's signification is displayed in objective level of knowledge, as well as in education quality improvement through effective motivation and engagement.

Achievement control often occurs by means of tests. In proper test using, this control allows the student to go further in learning (Black & Wiliam, 2009).

Implementation of testing in the Kazakhstan system of education now is possible owning to the different information technologies used as the effective means of students' knowledge control (Ibraeva, 2015). Test tasks in the Kazakhstan system of control can bear different character. They may be educational and applied with the aim of independent study of the topic. Executing these tasks, students can use different text-book and reference materials, thus this type of testing requires high level of students' knowledge and possibility of independent work. Also the test may be professional in order to check the level of applicants' knowledge. Obviously, all types of tests are used with the main purpose of checking knowledge and obtainment information about the gaps in them.

Using of testing is conditioned by the range of objectives the teacher must decide while teaching students. One of them is integration of education in the Republic of Kazakhstan into the world community (Zaitseva & Prokofiev, 2004). Presently, in Kazakhstan, tests with closed form of issues is predominantly used. Testing as a form of control in Kazakhstan is based on the choice of one of several variants of answers offered to consideration in the process of testing. The problem with of this type of testing is that it doesn't cover all varieties of control materials required for monitoring students' knowledge quality. Moreover, the tested students can often choose the right answer associatively. However, this form of assessment is simplest to conduct and to analyze results (Perzadayeva, 2014). This explains the widespread use of tests.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this research is to study KAZTEST system application dynamics and characteristics in line with state language policy with a view to develop recommendations for a more effective testing system application in order to create and maintain the national identity of citizens.

Research Questions

The overarching research question of this study was as follows:

What are the KAZTEST system application dynamics? How testing by means of this system affect the use of state language in Kazakhstan?

Method

Methodology of the research – analysis of documents and comparative analysis of language testing systems in different countries. Analysis of documents was undertaken in two directions. Participants' data allowed to create a comprehensive dynamics picture of testing by means of KAZTEST system by years, as well as to show civil servants distribution that were participating in the study. This allows drawing conclusions about KAZTEST system relevance to society. An analysis of documents containing programs of action of the Republic of Kazakhstan led to conclusions about the role of KAZTEST system in language policy of the country and about its function to establish and maintain the national identity of citizens. Comparative analysis of language testing systems of various countries was undertaken to show KAZTEST system features – alike and distinguishing from similar systems. That allows creating a set of recommendations to improve the considered test effectiveness.

Data, Analysis, and Results

During the development of the Kazakhstani assessment system the international practice and experience of assessment systems used in different countries are investigated (Sagindikov & Abdyhalikov, 2010). On the bases of the study of international practice the Kazakhstani assessment system was developed taking into account the Kazakh language peculiarities.

The main purpose of KAZTEST system is the language acquisition assessment for the Kazakh language. In general, according to the structure KAZTEST is like American TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreing Language) and Russian TORFL (Test of Russian as a Foreign Language) (Abdyhalikov & Sadvakasova, 2012), but nevertheless it is the national system that has inherent peculiarities like any national system (Stricker, Rock & Lee, 2005).

TOEFL and TORFL are designed for people speaking English or Russian as a foreign language, and KAZTEST is designed for citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan and abroad to assess the Kazakh language acquisition and identify the levels of language acquisition.

TOEFL certificates are necessary for applying for educational establishments, business structures and research centers, also the governmental and international organizations demand the presence of TOEFL certificates. The validity of the TOEFL certificate is 2 years. TORFL certificates are needed for applicants for higher educational establishments with Engineering, Humanitarian and other sciences and there is no validity period for TORFL certificates. But KAZTEST system has its own peculiarities: KAZTEST is designed for applicants to State Service, National Companies, Presidential «Bolashak» International Programmes for achieving Bachelor's, Master's and Doctor's degrees in abroad and teaching staff of Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools. The validity period of KAZTEST certificate is 3 years.

The procedure of testing according to KAZTEST system foresees using two stages of testing. The first stage includes determination of the level of mastering the Kazakh language. At this stage the tested person receives test tasks, which answers are assessed according to the scale. For example, if among 150 test tasks a person receives 110 points, this figure shows the intermediate level of acquisition of the Kazakh language: the elementary level amounts 31-64 points, basic level – 65-104 points, intermediate – 105-119 points, upper intermediate – 120-134 points, high level – 1 35-145 points and advanced – 146-150 points.

The second stage includes assessment of the level of mastering the Kazakh language. The tested person receives the test tasks of the corresponding (intermediate) level. Testing is conducted by three blocks: auding, vocabulary and grammar, and reading. Generally, 2 hours 30 minutes are provided for taking this test. Each block consists of certain quantity of tasks: auding block amounts 30 test tasks, that must be executed during 25 minutes; vocabulary and grammar block includes 70 test tasks (60 minutes); and reading block covers 50 test tasks (65 minutes).

The conception of KAZTEST implementation is the basis of organization of measures directed at conduction of comprehensive testing with the aim of assessment of the level of Kazakh language knowledge, and also determines the basic direction of legislative, legal-regulatory acts and target programmes on the system implementation. Implementation of KAZTEST is actual presently for creation of the assessment system of Kazakh language knowledge that corresponds to the state standards of testing, and formation of structure, content, and mechanisms of organization and management of this system.

The number of participants passing KAZTEST system during 2006-2013 is indicated in the Table 1.

Table 1. The Number of Persons passing KAZTEST during 2006-2013.

Year	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Number of Persons	169	639	1633	2252	6400	7084	10250	13708

During 2006-2007 mainly the Russian speaking school and University students and statesmen participated in KAZTEST testing. In 2008 a new conception for KAZTEST was accepted where the obligatory requirement was for applicants of Presidential «Bolashak» International Programmes for achieving Bachelor's, Master's and Doctor's degrees in abroad and since 2008 the applicants of «Bolashak» International Programmes have started passing KAZTEST. Since 2009 Russian speaking school students of High Schools for Gifted children, participating at the educational olimpiads and educational contests pass KAZTEST. Since 2010 autonomous educational organizations, Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools, accepted KAZTEST for teaching staff. In 2013 national KAZTEST system became one of the requirements for applicants to vacancies for State service «A» Corpus positions of the Republic of Kazakhstan and personnel reserves for state service. The quantitative analysis of passing KAZTEST system during 2013 among statesmen is indicated in Table 2.

Table 2. The Number and Group of Persons passing KAZTEST in 2013.

№	Groups of tested persons	Number of Persons
1	Applicants to vacancies for State service «A» Corpus positions	197
2	The statesmen of Agency for Natural Monopoly Regulation of the Republic of Kazakhstan	70
3	The statesmen for State service «A» Corpus	1364
4	The statesmen of National Security Committee	11
5	The statesmen of the Ministry of Industry and Innovation Technologies of the Republic of Kazakhstan	303
6	The statesmen of the Agency of Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan	26
7	The statesmen of the Economic Department of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan	23
8	The statesmen of the Central Election Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan	34
9	The statesmen of the Treasury Committee of the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Kazakhstan	49
10	The statesmen of the Ministry of Economics and Budget Planning of the Republic of Kazakhstan	55
11	The statesmen of the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kazakhstan	54
12	The statesmen of the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Kazakhstan	153
13	The statesmen of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan	160
14	The statesmen of the Agency for Competetiveness Defence of the Republic of Kazakhstan	47
	TOTAL	2546

Since 2014 the given testing system is being conducted for personnel attestation in national companies as «KazMunayGaz», «Kazakhstan Railway» and others. In 2015, the Memorandum of Cooperation is signed between KAZTEST system and Nazarbayev University and it was decided to conduct the Kazakh language acquisition assessment of students with the help of KAZTEST system. As seen from above, KAZTEST system is increasing its potential year by year and started covering all the spheres of social life. At the beginning the KASTEST was conducted only among school and university students, but later the tests are passed by statesmen, flight attendants, teaching staff of schools and universities and professors, the managers of Presidents Administration of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Council of Prime-Minister, Supreme Court, Central Election Committee, managers of different positions at Agencies for State Service, and akims (mayors) of oblasts (regions), cities and provinces.

The Republic of Kazakhstan is a multinational country with about more than 130 nationalities and is characterized by outstanding cultural and linguistic diversity (Kadyraliyeva et al., 2013). As one of the multinational and multilingual countries of the world the Republic of Kazakhstan conducts the language policy directed to the national languages, culture, traditions and customs of other nation. Situation in the Republic of Kazakhstan is unique as the country was able to avoid the conflict expressed in the sphere of inter-ethnic and inter-confessional relations under state economic and political systems restructuring (Kadyraliyeva, 2014). The reason for such a "soft" transition is the

fact that population builds identity more on civil grounds, rather than national (Assyltayeva et al., 2012). However, national identity and state language positions growth is a current task in the country. Although the government cope with the strains between civilian and ethno-national trends in state development up to this point, as well as with relationship management between different ethnic groups within the country, without prejudice to relations with neighboring countries (Beacháin & Kevlihan, 2013), this is a significant challenge for policy-makers and administrators to preserve diversity and mutual understanding under proclamation of state language role and status raising course in multi-ethnic and multilingual society.

In consequence with the Law «On Languages of the Republic of Kazakhstan», the Kazakh language is considered to be the official language, and the Russian is the language of multinational communication. The Russian is used equally with the official language in state organizations and local governing organizations. At this point, elementary schools promote Kazakh identity growth by means of modern textbooks in both the Kazakh and Russian languages (Mun, 2014). One of the KAZTEST system development objectives is to contribute to national identity formation and consolidation among the adult population, as well as maintaining the level of state language proficiency, regardless of nationality.

Historically the territory of Kazakhstan became the part of Russian Empire in XVIII century and during the period of Soviet Union for about 80 years, the Russian language served as an official and communicative language. Now, the Kazakh speaking spheres are spread mostly in education (kindergarten, school and etc.), science (social sciences), art and culture (literarture, theatre and etc.), mass media (radio, television, cinema and etc.), religion, way of life and family. But in the social and political life (governing system of the country, foreign and interior policy, economics and etc.), agriculture and industry, construction, transportation, communication, consuming and service, information (advertisements) the Russian was the leading language during a long period of time and it remains so today.

The Royal Russian government had the main principle of pressing the national policy, freedom and culture among the other countries. And as a result of such a pressing policy Kazakhstan became as a country with low level of literacy.

During the period of Soviet Union Kazakhstan was one of the centralized countries with social and economic part of Russia. At that time the Kazakh language was used only in education, literature, theatre and sometimes in mass media, but was not absolutely used in state governing, economics and politics. Approximately in 1917-1990 the number of population that does not speak the native language increased. That was the period of lost generation and dangerous period for the perspectives and future of Kazakhstan.

In 1991 after the Independence the Republic of Kazakhstan accepted the Law «On Languages of the Republic of Kazakhstan». The given Law defined the Kazakh language as an official language. Since Independence the various

measures directed to the spread of official language are being conducted in the framework of language policy of the country. Also every 10 years the National Programme for Language Development and Support is accepted and the execution of the given programme lies under the control of the Government. Thanks to the national programmes the language situation in the country is changed as a whole; the number of the Kazakh speaking communicative spheres of the society is increased. The language situation of the country may be depicted as follows: the citizens studied during the Soviet Union period, not speaking or speaking bad Kazakh use Russian as a language of communication; and those who studied after Independence use both Kazakh and Russian languages equally. Thus, learning the state language in order to undergo testing and, respectively, for college entrance and hiring becomes the personal need of a person, as the language prestige increased and the scope of its use is rapidly expanding.

Discussion and Conclusion

Nowadays the National Programme for Language Development and Language Use for 2011-2020 is in action. In consequence with the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Law «On Languages of the Republic of Kazakhstan» of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Conception of Language Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan and Doctrine of National Unity, the developed National Programme sets the main purpose as «The official language is the main factor of national unity» and in this framework the main objectives of conducting the programme cover the problems of language acquisition assessment system. The Kazakh language acquisition assessment ensures the execution of the principles of language policy. Assessment system helps the Kazakh language to develop as an official language and to increase the competitive ability of the language. Kazakh language competitiveness improvement is important primarily because Russian language still is the main language on geopolitical, political, military and economy levels in the region (Pavlenko, 2008). In addition, since most well paid professions, especially in urban environment, require excellent knowledge of Russian language in the first place, it affects the choice of the language of instruction (Fierman, 2006), which in turn will affect the use of language preferences in the future.

In this case, KAZTEST is depicted as an instrument to define the official language acquisition assessment level among the citizens of the Republic. The tests of KAZTEST system are confirmed by the requirements of communicative competence in Kazakh language acquisition of the National Standards of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The communicative competence consists of linguistic, speech, social, discourse, strategic, and social and cultural competences (Sadybekova, 2013). At the same time, communicative competence based on the use of only one language is a utopia, in the sense that success requires intercultural communicative competence and at least bilingualism in modern world, so the subject could be familiar with both national and international contexts (Alptekin, 2002). There are all conditions for intercultural communicative competence development in the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Moreover, it confirms with development program "Trinity of languages", as there are two international languages in the Republic of Kazakhstan – Russian and English. If Russian is widely used and Kazakh is not due to historical reasons, the number of English-speaking professionals in the country is very small (Pavlenko, 2008). Accordingly, English and Kazakh languages are priority among the population, not only as a less common, but also as languages giving the best opportunities in modern society because of globalization and due to pro-government efforts of the Government.

KAZTEST system is the result of the measures conducted in the framework of language policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan as a uniting factor of multilingual society of the state.

Implications and Recommendations

Implications and recommendations for future studies are as follows. It is necessary to improve the assessment system criteria by defining the KAZTEST testing specifications. The next objective in improving KAZTEST system should be the consideration and improvement of testing content and structure. Research on assessment criteria and "1 completed assignment – 1 point" system is of particular interest.

System's factorial studies are necessary in order to understand KAZTEST system. This understanding will allow to make reasoned changes in test structure. Also, a mutual cooperation of citizens of Kazakhstan and specialists in the fields of Education, Science and Engineering is needed in improving the national assessment system of language acquisition. And improvement measures have to be implemented under the auspices of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Level of state language proficiency raising, as well as the level of English proficiency as a language of international communication, and maintaining a high level of Russian proficiency as the lingua franca contribute to national identity formation among the population on the one hand, and effective communication skills formation in international context on the other hand.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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