

Language Instruction in Kazakhstan’s Higher Education: A Critical Examination

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Article information

Submission	29/02/2024	Revision received	31/03/2024
Acceptance	14/04/2024	Publication date	28/04/2024

Keywords:

Kazakh language,
language education,
educational
programs,
higher education

Abstract: The article examines the current situation of language instruction in higher educational institutions in the Republic of Kazakhstan. Higher educational institutions play a crucial role in providing professional training in the country. The official language strategy focuses on developing the Kazakh language as the language of science. The researchers performed a survey among educators and students from both national and regional universities in the country. They then analysed the findings to identify the issues within this domain. The survey included 122 participants from 16 different universities. An investigation was conducted to analyse respondents’ answers using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The results of the study were used to identify the critical problems. The concerns were identified based on the viewpoints and stances of both native and foreign scientists, and implications were provided.

Anahtar Sözcükler:

Kazakça,
dil eğitimi,
öğretim programları,
yüksek öğretim

Kazakistan Yüksek Öğreniminde Dil Öğretimi: Eleştirel Bir İnceleme

Özet: Bu çalışmada Kazakistan Cumhuriyeti’ndeki yüksek öğretim kurumlarında yabancı dil eğitiminin mevcut durumu eleştirel bir açıdan incelenmektedir. Yükseköğretim kurumları ülkede mesleki eğitimin sağlanmasında önemli bir rol oynamaktadır. Resmi dil stratejisi, Kazak dilinin bilim dili olarak geliştirilmesine odaklanmaktadır. Araştırmacılar, ülkedeki hem ulusal hem de bölgesel üniversitelerden eğitimciler ve öğrenciler arasında bir anket gerçekleştirmiştir. Ankete 16 farklı üniversiteden 122 katılımcı katılmıştır. Katılımcıların cevapları hem nicel hem de nitel yöntemler kullanılarak analiz edilmiştir. Bulgular, yerli ve yabancı bilim insanlarının bakış açıları ve duruşları dikkate alınarak yorumlanmış ve doğurgular ortaya konulmuştur.

To Cite This Article: Yermekova, T. N., Ryskulbek, D., Azimova, G., Kapalbek, B., & Mawkanuli, T. (2024). Language instruction in Kazakhstan’s higher education: A critical examination. *Novitas-ROYAL (Research on Youth and Language)*, 18(1), 190–198. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11058493>

1. Main Provisions

The issue of language is paramount and of utmost concern in society. Language issues have been a prominent topic in society since the country gained independence. This includes establishing special education schools, colleges, universities, and official and unofficial language courses. Additionally, numerous candidates, doctoral and PhD dissertations have been defended, and monographs and manuals have been published, all aimed at meeting the needs of society. Various methodologists analyse language instruction from different perspectives, and practitioners propose their own techniques for teaching the Kazakh language, significantly contributing to this field. Along with traditional language teaching methods, there are also works of practitioners (e.g., polyglot D. Petrov's works) focusing on grammar-free learning, situational learning, and the Kazakh language (in 16 lessons); the most manageable three parts are learning through a brand (Ibraimova *et al.*, 2023).

Nevertheless, it is premature to assert that the difficulties associated with teaching the Kazakh language have been entirely resolved. The primary concern in language teaching is the preparation of professionals. To investigate the teaching of the Kazakh language in higher education institutions, we organised a seminar meeting titled "Teaching the Kazakh Language in Russian Groups in Higher Education Institutions" on December 19, 2023. A survey was conducted with 122 participants, including students from various educational institutions and the teachers who instruct them.

2. Introduction

Individuals who studied Nogai became accustomed to the Nogai word system, while those who studied Russian became accustomed to the Russian word system. To avoid this flaw, it is crucial that individuals initially educate their children in their native language, teaching them to read and write in their mother tongue, familiarise them with the structure of their language, guide them accordingly, and only then introduce alternative methods of instruction once the children have become accustomed to it. If we wish to preserve the integrity of our language, we must first instruct in our native language before attempting to use other methods (Aitova, 2022). From Baitursynuly's perspective, it is crucial to provide a proper foundation for teaching the national language right from the beginning (Aitova, 2022). To address the deficiency in linguistic knowledge pertaining to a specific language, particularly at the elementary level, linguists must assume the duty and conduct extensive study. In contemporary Kazakhstan, the language proficiency of our students enrolled in higher educational institutions varies. Specifically, individuals who are fluent in Kazakh, Russian, or both languages, as well as those who are trilingual in Kazakh, Russian, and English. This problem also highlights the necessity of considering many factors when teaching the official language.

The issue of instructing the Kazakh language has escalated to a higher degree. Teaching the Kazakh language to a non-Kazakh speaking audience posed a linguistic and cognitive challenge due to various social factors, the prevailing time and era, and the student's proficiency in speaking, reading, writing, and communicating in Kazakh. Additionally, it aimed to foster critical thinking skills and the ability to articulate thoughts in Kazakh. As the authors indicate: «Learning a new language is like discovering a new world, exploring all the phenomena and actions in it, and learning the cognitive characteristics and national values of native speakers (Yeleussiz, 2024). Therefore, to learn any new language, a person must first become acquainted with the culture of the native speakers (Taylor, 2022). This necessity, in

turn, can shape language learning flow through the cultural dimension, especially in a multi-ethnic society (Dwomoh *et al.*, 2023; Ibraimova *et al.*, 2023).

In addition to the materials provided by teachers, linguists, and scientists addressing the issue of teaching the Kazakh language to individuals of other nationalities, it is essential to acknowledge the educational and methodological complexes (EMC) and tools published as part of state programmes. Local language courses have successfully utilised these resources, including standard EMCs (e.g., state standards, textbooks, lexical minimums, grammatical determinants, and Electronic Support Programmes) for different language learning levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1). One such EMC is “Tildaryn,” developed under the Karaganda Regional Department of Language Development order. Another example is the EMC “Saryarka-2,” which contains an extensive lexical and grammatical minimum of the Kazakh language (137, 500, 900, 1200, and 1500 words). Additionally, there is the methodological complex “Kazakh Word” and various multimedia applications, among other resources. Each entity, in alignment with its objectives, made contributions to the advancement and enhancement of language education in our nation.

1.1. Literature Review

The dominant status of the Russian language in Kazakhstan is mainly attributed to political and sociocultural factors, even though the Kazakh language has official recognition in the country. Undoubtedly, the 70-year presence of Kazakhstan in the Russian Empire played a significant role in shaping the current linguistic situation in our nation, particularly among the residents who received education during that time. This impacts the governing class and all aspects of society, particularly the education system. Within the scientific community, a concept known as the global dominance of languages exists. In his article on the competition between languages for supremacy in the field of science, Melosik (2023) explains that throughout history, there has been a continuous battle for linguistic dominance in the global scientific community. Initially, the Latin language held sway for centuries due to its significant role in scientific discourse. He subsequently emphasises the significance of French and German in this context and examines the reasons behind their decline. He analyses the phenomenon of English language dominance in contemporary global science, highlighting its growing status and even approaching monopoly. He asserts that while a rich vocabulary is not the primary factor in language dominance, the influence of science, civilization, and religious domination plays a significant role (Melosik, 2023). Based on the data presented at the Goethe Institute in Germany, it is evident that the global prominence of the German language is diminishing annually despite an increase in the number of students enrolling in German courses (Korshunova & Turova, 2020). Zhilyuk (2014) attributes this to the fact that German, the country's language that was defeated, is not included in the list of official languages of the United Nations. Undoubtedly, the phenomenon of globalisation is impacting our languages and exerting influence on the linguistic landscape and political dynamics of highly developed European nations characterised by modern technology and a robust economic climate. Researchers studying the impact of English on the German language have found that the use of English slogans has risen by 30 per cent in the 2020s compared to the 1990s (Korshunova & Turova, 2020).

The function of educational programmes developed by higher education institutions in addressing these deficiencies in language is significant. An essential training component, the educational programme should encompass the requisite educational content to develop a proficient specialist. Scientists researching English language development courses at

Bangladeshi universities have formed the following opinion: An essential requirement for effective training is a meticulously prepared and well-delivered curriculum that aligns with the most effective methods in this field. The investigation revealed that the content of these training programmes was delivered in a disorganised fashion. They fail to meet the majority of the criteria necessary for an exemplary curriculum in terms of its substance - they critique (Mamun, 2019). As Zorba *et al.*'s (2021) study revealed, English philology departments in Kazakhstan aim to imbue students with high research skills and knowledge to prepare them for academic life. In line with this, Kazakhstani specialists also underline the importance of aligning university educational programmes with professional standards to attain desired training outcomes (Abdiyev *et al.*, 2023).

Several academics argue that the government must oversee the focus on cultural values that promote intercultural understanding as a critical aspect of multicultural education in language instruction (Kuraedahet *et al.*, 2022). This will be particularly crucial while instructing other languages. Language acquisition can be accomplished through two processes: inculturation, which involves fully assimilating the language learner into the language of a particular nation, and acculturation, which entails integrating into a new language and culture while maintaining one's national identity (Corbett, 2022). Another crucial aspect to consider when learning any language is that students' attention is a prerequisite for successful learning. The main means of stimulating students' attention is the dynamic conduct of lessons using various methods, increasing students' activity, the vitality of the narrative, and the transition from one type of activity to another, distracting. It consists in the elimination of predators (Jabbarov, 2020). Pauntain (2019) highlights the significance of instructing 3L (language, linguistics, and literature) for the purposes of language education, reading, writing, and comprehension. Thus, while higher education institutions enjoy academic independence, it is advisable to prioritise the instruction of language courses as the 21st century entered the linguistic space as the age of polylinguism. Globalisation is progressively diminishing the spiritual barriers and distances that separate individuals, ethnic groups, nations, and continents. Intercultural communication is complex, but language remains the primary means of communication (Zorba & Arikan, 2020).

Regarding this matter, there is a growing number of individuals who are bilingual or polyglot in each country, as well as an increasing number of people aspiring to become proficient in many languages. Consequently, foreign language teachers are burdened with additional obligations. Within the field of sociolinguistics, there have been recent advancements in understanding native, first, second, and foreign languages, leading to the emergence of new ideas and perspectives (Yermekova *et al.*, 2022). This signifies the lack of universally applicable concepts in the practice of teaching language subjects.

3. Method

Contemporary demands place new responsibilities on teachers who educate students from different nationalities in higher education institutions, specifically those who speak Russian. To achieve these objectives, it is necessary to examine the issue of teaching the Kazakh language from many perspectives and determine the most successful methods and procedures in line with contemporary standards. In Kazakhstani institutions, the discipline of Kazakh language, including professional Kazakh language, is exclusively taught as a second language to Russian-speaking students, except philology students who study it as a primary language. It is not included as a separate subject in educational programmes for Kazakh-speaking students. Hence, this study aims to examine the existing methodology of

teaching the Kazakh language at higher educational institutions in Kazakhstan and ascertain the primary challenges. To accomplish this objective, the contents of the Kazakh language courses, the level of language knowledge sought at admission to and graduation from the university, and postgraduate education are sought to be answered. The investigation was conducted empirically. The survey method was employed to ascertain the specific issues present in the research study. The survey was administered to students enrolled in various educational institutions and the teachers who instruct them. The results were formulated using data processing techniques, including procedures such as analysis, comparison, qualitative, and quantitative analysis.

2.1. Materials and Methods

The Kazakh language is introduced to individuals of diverse linguistic backgrounds starting from kindergarten. Subsequently, the school curriculum is delivered continuously from Grade 1 to Grade 11, with periodic divisions into subgroups and a weekly allocation of 4 hours. Nevertheless, can the linguistic proficiency of a prospective university student accurately demonstrate the depth of their accumulated knowledge over the years? What proficiency level should a student's state language knowledge indicator be at while entering a university? Altogether, there is a cumulative period of 15 years of uninterrupted education, consisting of kindergarten, 11 years of primary and secondary schooling, and an additional 4-5 years dedicated to studying the "Kazakh language" from the first year of university education. However, what is the underlying cause for graduates not possessing proficiency in the official language of their country upon completing their studies? Despite the abundance of textbooks, manuals, online resources, multimedia programmes, bilingual and trilingual dictionaries, as well as the completion of numerous courses and the acquisition of certifications by civil workers, what is the underlying cause for the ultimately unsatisfactory outcome? Despite the presence of both subjective and objective grounds, industry professionals have significant concerns over implementing this problem of State importance. An inherent limitation is the absence of seamless integration across the curricula of kindergarten, school, and university. The absence of consistency in the educational levels and the diversity in the grouping of language disciplines and levels incorporated in the educational curricula of each institution have a direct impact on the quality of instruction in the official language at universities. This problem is classified as a research hypothesis.

Participating in the survey were teachers and students from various universities in Kazakhstan, including Korkyt Ata Kyzylorda University, Khoja Akhmet Yassawi University, Nazarbayev University, Kazakh-American University, Satpayev University, Al-Farabi University, A. Margulan University, Abai University, Kazakh National Women's Pedagogical University, South Kazakhstan Pedagogical University, Sh. Ualikhanov Kokshetau University, Astana Medical University, K. Zhubanov Aktobe Regional University, University of International Business, Suleiman Demirel University, and Kazakh-British Technical University.

3. Findings

The primary responsibility of higher educational institutions is to train scientific professionals and professional experts. In the country, the criteria regarding proficiency in the official language for university admissions, employment, and career advancement vary. There continues to be a significant societal demand for a specialist with expertise in English and Russian. If there is a demand for a language, individuals would learn it autonomously,

disregarding the languages that have been mentioned. To investigate these matters further, we conducted a survey among Kazakhstan universities.

The initial question of the survey was to ascertain the specific topics pertaining to the Kazakh language that are being taught in Kazakh universities. Results show that the Kazakh language is the leading topic (77%), followed by professional Kazakh language (33.6%), academic writing (29.5%) and academic Kazakh language (27.9%). The subsequent inquiry focused on establishing the appropriate academic proficiency level at which the Kazakh language should be instructed within the university. Of all the respondents, 32.8% of students (which accounts for 85% of the overall student population) agreed that starting at the A1 level was the right choice. The likely cause for this is the preconception that there would be less demand for Kazakh-speaking specialists among pupils in the future and the intention to simplify the curriculum rather than make it complex. Also, 68% of the participants believe that a university graduate should have a proficient command of the state language at the C1 level, followed by B2 (21,3%).

4. Discussion

We were intrigued by the answer to the question regarding the minimum educational level required for a student to enter a university. The responses of students and teachers to this question were diametrically opposed. Most students claim that teaching should begin at the A1, A2, and B1 levels, whereas teachers advocate for starting at the B1, B2, and C1 levels. This phenomenon can be attributed to the psychological inclination of students to prioritise classes that involve minimal effort in language learning. Therefore, increasing the qualifications of teachers can be seen as a practical measure towards addressing language policy issues. The following inquiry pertains to the proficiency level at which tertiary educational institution graduates acquire language skills. It is reassuring to note that the majority of responders demonstrated proficiency at the C1 and B2 levels. The significant proportion of those who believe that a university graduate should possess advanced proficiency in the country's official language at the C1 level serves as evidence for the necessity and desire for a workforce that is skilled in many languages. The students were likely motivated to make their choice due to the requirement of mandatory tests for admittance to master's and doctorate studies and the need to have proficiency in the state language, which applies to a range of occupations, professions, and positions. In the future, addressing this matter at the secondary level is advisable.

There are scientists in our country that are tackling this issue. The authors highlight the absence of a comprehensive assessment and certification system that evaluates the level of knowledge, proficiency, and usage of the Kazakh language in secondary education. They propose introducing qualimetric assessment criteria, which have been developed for the first time in the country's pedagogy and philology fields (Dinayeva *et al.*, 2021). It is crucial to enhance the domestic assessment system for measuring Kazakh language proficiency to enhance the KAZTEST system, which evaluates the proficiency in the Kazakh language of both citizens of Kazakhstan and foreign individuals working within the country. This improvement should be based on the principles and standards of internationally recognised language assessment systems, such as IELTS and TOEFL.

Based on the questionnaire, proponents of introducing the topic "academic Kazakh language" to the Russian department of master's and doctorate studies emphasise the necessity of offering academic education in Kazakh, the state's official language. Presumably,

this is due to the necessity of elevating the Kazakh language to the status of a scientific language. Postgraduate education in the country's Department of Higher Education is offered in Kazakh-Russian and Kazakh-English or a single section. The Kazakh language is exclusively featured in the Kazakh groups of humanitarian educational programmes. It is excluded from other domains such as computer science, biology, medicine, chemistry, mathematics, physics, etc. In these fields, scientific literature lacks standardised terminology, and the Kazakh style lacks a systematic approach. Creating articles and dissertations through translation or direct copying is common practice. No language can develop until it becomes the language of science and knowledge. This language is exclusively used domestically. The crucial factor for the sustainability of the language lies in aligning actions with contemporary demands. Science and technology are primarily of interest when the official language of a country is spoken and the desire to study the language grows. There is a growing inclination towards integrating the Kazakh language in the field of research, particularly in digitalization systems. However, when providing training to a professional with advanced education, it is essential to consider their proficiency in the Kazakh language.

5. Conclusion

The study uncovered major concerns in teaching the Kazakh language, which is the state language, at higher educational institutions. After completing 11 years of schooling and enrolling in a higher educational institution, students in the Kazakh group will no longer have access to the subject Kazakh language. Universities are specialised educational institutions that provide higher education in various fields such as education, art, health, and production. In order to establish the Kazakh language as the language of science, Kazakh groups must study subjects like "Professional Kazakh language," "Academic writing," and "Professional terminology." Students enrolled in both the Russian and English groups must study the subject of the "Kazakh language" in their first year. The subjects studied by the Kazakh group indicated above should also be studied in the third and fourth years.

Overall, the identified issues include the absence of a uniform requirement for Kazakh language proficiency for graduates of higher educational institutions, the absence of a standardised textbook, and, most significantly, the lack of coherence between the Kazakh language programmes taught in secondary schools and higher education. In order to address these issues, the proposed language policy for the Republic of Kazakhstan for the period of 2023-2029 accurately asserts that "the Kazakh language is currently in the developmental phase as a scientific language. The primary factor is that most scientific works in natural and technical sciences are written in Russian, resulting in most Kazakh publications being translated from this language. Hence, it is imperative to contemplate strategies for enhancing the Kazakh language's status as a language of scientific discourse. (Presidency of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023b). There is a requirement for top-notch textbooks and innovative teaching methods in the Kazakh language. Additionally, there are concerns regarding professional terminology and academic writing. Among the best examples of modern educational technologies developed by our domestic researchers, we have language learning through participatory methods, language learning through language models, axiological learning, spending position, teaching position by comparing knowledge gained from the native language, teaching position, the position of design training, the position of selecting the grammatical minimum, the position of expansion, the position of language training through overcoming psychological barriers, taking into account the communicative and functional aspect of the system of professional language minimum, and more.

This paper concludes that some essential recommendations can be made to elevate the status of the Kazakh language by incorporating it into educational curricula at all levels. While doing that, Russian-speaking groups and Kazakh speakers must participate in the instructional processes. A few courses can be suggested, such as “Professional Kazakh Language” and “Academic Kazakh Language” in addition to Kazakh philology.

Financing Information

This article was written as part of the AP19678059 project titled “System of Level Teaching of the State Language in the Republic of Kazakhstan.” The project is funded by the Science Committee of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan through grant funding for scientific and technical projects between 2023 and 2025.

Note on Ethical Issues

The authors confirm that the study does not need ethics committee approval according to the research integrity rules in their country (Date of Confirmation: 15/04/2024).

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