Heritage Language Experiences and Proficiency Among Ethnic Kazakhs Abroad: Exploring Challenges, Language Skill Requirements, and Acquisition Barriers

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Abstract

This research explores into the issues faced by heritage language speakers and learners, a topic gaining increasing relevance as millions of individuals reside outside their country or region of birth for various reasons. The primary objective of this study is to investigate the experiences and proficiency of the heritage language among ethnic Kazakhs living abroad, with a particular emphasis on those in Russia. The aim is to shed light on the challenges they encounter in using the Kazakh language, their language skill requirements, and the obstacles hindering language acquisition. The research employs a descriptive, non-experimental, quantitative research design, utilizing survey research, descriptive statistics, and descriptive analysis of research data. The survey questionnaire includes participants' personal data, scales addressing challenges in using the Kazakh language, needs in Kazakh language skills, and barriers to language acquisition. The survey involved 100 ethnic Kazakhs in the Russian Federation, ranging from 10 to 72 years old (mean age 43.4 years). The study's findings reveal infrequent use of the Kazakh language by ethnic Kazakhs abroad and a low language proficiency level, with 40% at 0-A0 proficiency levels and 15% at B2-C2 proficiency levels. Younger participants exhibit lower levels of heritage language proficiency and less frequent use of Kazakh compared to their older counterparts, indicating a generational decline in language skills and usage. Challenges in using the heritage language manifest in difficulties writing in Kazakh due to a lack of knowledge about grammar and spelling, struggles in reading and understanding books, newspapers, and magazines, and ineffective communication with Kazakhs from Kazakhstan due to a lack of familiarity with cultural nuances and communication subtleties.

Keywords: Ethnic Kazakhs abroad, heritage language, language shift, language decline, linguistic minority.

Introduction

Globalization and migration have culminated in a rise in heritage language speakers (Armon-Lotem et al., 2021). According to World Bank estimates, approximately 3.6% of the global population permanently resides outside their ethnic birthplace. A significant number of ethnic

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Kazakhs also find themselves living in other countries, affected by historical factors such as border changes and migration. Notable Kazakh populations include around 1.7 million in Uzbekistan, 1.5 million in China, 750,000 in Russia, 100,000 in Mongolia, 70,000 in Turkmenistan, 30,000 in Afghanistan, and 25,000 in Turkey (Eurasian Research Institute, 2021). Against this backdrop, the issues faced by heritage language speakers and learners become increasingly relevant.

Preserving a heritage language is considered crucial, prompting parents to often impart their mother tongue to their children. This practice aims to instill a sense of cultural identity and facilitate communication with both immediate and extended family members (Fishman, 1991). Maintaining a student's heritage language is crucial for their psychological, cognitive, linguistic, social, and academic success.

Unfortunately, the proficiency in the heritage language tends to diminish in the second and third generations due to limited usage. These later generations have fewer opportunities to speak the language and pass it on to the next generation. Consequently, even if their parents or grandparents are proficient in the original language, the proficiency in the heritage language diminishes in the third generation (Frese et al., 2015).

Research has now focused on heritage language proficiency, which has consequences for children's educational, social, emotional, and cognitive outcomes (Goldberg et al., 2008). Because of the rise in heritage language speakers as a result of globalization and migration, it is critical that we shed light on the issue. Investigating Kazakh as a heritage language adds a unique contribution to understanding the language experiences and proficiency, as well as the challenges and barriers that ethnic Kazakhs residing abroad face in terms of heritage language use and acquisition, as previous research has not addressed this topic.

This study aims to examine the experiences and proficiency of the heritage language among ethnic Kazakhs residing abroad. To align with this objective, the following research questions have been formulated:

RQ1: What are the challenges in using the Kazakh language, needs in the Kazakh language skills and barriers to the Kazakh language acquisition of ethnic Kazakhs in the Russian Federation?

RQ2: What proficiency levels do ethnic Kazakhs abroad exhibit in their heritage language?

RQ3: How do the heritage language experience and competency of ethnic Kazakhs abroad vary based on age and family nationality composition?

Literature Review

Heritage Language Experience in the Country of Residence

A heritage language is identified as a minority language that differs from the dominant language spoken by the majority in a given society (Fairclough & Beaudrie, 2016). According to Montrul (2018), a heritage language is often spoken by second-generation immigrants at home during their early childhood, either sequentially or concurrently with the society language. The complexity in terminology used to describe heritage languages, along with the challenge of differentiating between heritage, community, and ancestor languages, is acknowledged by Wiley et al. (2015). Carreira and Kagan (2011) provide two definitions for this term: a narrow definition focuses on the chronological order in which a language was acquired, while a broader classification includes the speaker's family or cultural heritage, without necessitating knowledge or usage of the language within the home.

Over the last 200 years, there has been a surge in the number of communities relocating from their country of origin to a new place of residence, where the societal language spoken is typically different from the language spoken in the country of origin, due to migration waves between countries within the Global North for work and/or study (Wallerstein, 1974). First-generation migrants who have just moved here eventually pick up bilingualism, if they didn't previously before. Within the family and the local community in the new country of residency, the language used in the place of origin is designated as the minority heritage language (Montrul, 2015; Montrul & Polinsky, 2021).

According to Benmamoun et al. (2013), the term "heritage language learner" is typically used to refer to individuals raised in bilingual or multilingual environments whose native language is also the dominant language in their community.

However, as noted by Fairclough and Beaudrie (2016), identifying heritage language learners is not a straightforward task. Carreira (2004) outlines that the majority of definitions of heritage language learners revolve around three key elements: involvement in a heritage language community, a personal connection to the heritage language stemming from family history, and proficiency in the heritage language. For instance, Fishman (2001) classifies individuals who speak languages other than English and have a personal connection to a specific cultural or ethnic group as heritage language learners. In a similar context, Hornberger and Wang (2008)

characterize heritage language learners as individuals with ancestors or family ties to a language other than English. Conversely, Valdés (2001) defines heritage language learners as those brought up in households where English is not the primary language and who possess a degree of bilingualism in both English and their heritage language. In line with this, Polinsky and Kagan (2007) describe heritage language learners as individuals who transitioned to the dominant language after initially acquiring the heritage language, thereby not achieving full proficiency in the latter.

Due to their minority status, heritage languages face pressure to conform to the dominant society language. Researchers indicate various challenges in heritage language use in the country of residence and barriers to its acquisition (Dwomoh et al., 2023; Guerra et al., 2020; Makena & Feni, 2023). As stated by Montrul and Polinsky (2021), learning a heritage language typically entails less exposure to the language relative to the mainstream, fewer opportunities for practice with a small number of speakers who might be native speakers of the language or speakers of the heritage language as a second language, and in a small number of settings (e.g., community schools, immediate family, and community).

The wide range of experiences that speakers of the heritage language have with it, as well as the varying levels of competency and results they achieve, can be attributed to these language learning conditions. Research to date has primarily examined whether or not heritage children attend heritage language schools, how much they use the heritage language within the family and the larger community, and what opportunities they have to engage in various activities in the heritage language in a variety of contexts or with different heritage language speakers (Paradis, 2023).

In their study of heritage Portuguese in Germany, Torregrossa, Flores, and Rinke (2023) discovered that children's performance in late acquired complicated syntactic structures was more closely related to formal teaching and the proportion of heritage language speakers than to home language use. Similarly, Hulsen (2000) discovered that the vocabulary of Dutch immigrants was predicted by their use of heritage language outside the home rather than their use of home language, probably because language use outside the home involves speaking with a variety of people in a variety of circumstances. According to findings from ethnographic, sociolinguistic, and other quantitative heritage studies, the minority language is used less across generations (Fishman, 2012; Montrul, 2015), and this is consistent with the decline in heritage language use and richness that is currently observed as a function of generation.

However, heritage language experiences affecting heritage speakers' language outcomes and proficiency related to the Kazakh as a heritage language have not received due attention. Studies outline that the heritage language fosters positive family dynamics and productive relationships with members of their community, which aid in the development of ethnic heritage identification (Kang, 2013). Effective parent-child communication utilizing the heritage language promotes beneficial outcomes like self-esteem and healthy attachments (Müller et al., 2019).

Conversely, it has also been shown that heritage language attrition can result in low self-esteem, identity confusion, estrangement from the community, and family misunderstandings (Chen & Padilla, 2019). Strong identification with ethnic heritage is defined by established models (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014) as belonging to, feeling proud of, and having a good attitude toward the group. For young people whose sense of identity is still developing, using the heritage language as an observable culture "marker" and social behavior allows one to learn about their heritage culture, and develop a sense of belonging with others from that culture (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).

Heritage Speakers' Language Proficiency

Heritage language is defined by Polinsky and Kagan (2007) as a continuum ranging from fluent speakers to those who speak it little at all as speakers of heritage languages acquire proficiency in a distinct dominant language during their upbringing. Researchers (Kelleher, 2010; Valdes, 2005) agree that heritage speakers are defined as those who speak the same heritage language and were raised in the same community, even though their linguistic skills may range greatly. It's possible that some heritage speakers are multilingual and extremely skilled in the language, while others may only be able to grasp it. A minority language may be considered their legacy language by others who just have a cultural bond with it but do not speak it.

For pedagogical considerations, definitions centered around proficiency have gained preference in educational settings. For example, Carreira and Kagan (2011) focus on learners who possess functional abilities in their heritage language to contribute to the development of methodologies and curricula that enhance the linguistic skills of these learners. Similarly, Fairclough and Beaudrie (2016) assert that distinguishing between second or foreign language learners and heritage learners based on linguistic criteria is considered to necessitate a certain level of proficiency. Another aspect that influences learners' acquisition is their eagerness or reluctance to learn their heritage language (Dressler, 2010).

In terms of politics and the law, it comes down to social justice: heritage language proficiency is a privilege that shouldn't be denied to young people in any way. According to Vallance (2015), maintaining the heritage language of English language learners in American school systems is an easy, affordable way to meet the growing demand for bilingual citizens in a society that is becoming more and more globalized and varied.

Preserving a heritage language holds significant importance for many individuals, leading parents to impart their mother tongue to their children. This practice not only facilitates communication with immediate and extended family members but also instills a sense of cultural identity in their children (Fishman, 1991).

However, as children born in the receiving country engage in preschool and school-related activities, they inevitably encounter the language of the host country, peer influence, and media exposure. This exposure often leads to language shift over time for many linguistic minorities (Valdés, 2005). The desire to interact with members of the host society, coupled with the need for social acceptance and conformity to group norms, contributes to the gradual loss of one's native language. External factors, such as the sociopolitical climate and the level of societal acceptance of differences (with language being a clear and identifiable distinction), play a role in this decision-making process (Fillmore, 2000). The perception of not being accepted can lead individuals to feel less positive about their heritage language, resulting in reduced likelihood of its use (Frese et al., 2015).

Proficiency in the heritage language typically diminishes in the second and third generations due to limited usage. Second-generation parents often have fewer opportunities to employ the ethnic language and pass it on to their children. Consequently, the third generation starts to experience a decline in competency in the heritage language, even when their parents and/or grandparents are fluent speakers of the original language (Frese et al., 2015). "The complete heritage language loss within three generations in most families" (Szilágyi et al., 2013) is a phenomenon that is seen all across the world (Carreira & Kagan, 2011). According to Polinsky and Kagan (2007), even those who are still able to comprehend their heritage language frequently lack the ability to speak it. Studies pertaining to the age-related decline of heritage language proficiency indicate that younger people are more vulnerable to this decline if appropriate preventive steps are not implemented (MacSwan, 2000; Porcel, 2006). Negative interactions between the heritage language and the school, notably "negative peer pressure, discrimination, assimilative nature of curriculum," and

"lack of opportunities," are one of the main causes of heritage language loss, according to Wang (2009). Crawford agrees that pressure from society leads to a change in values in people, which shows itself as a disregard for the heritage language (2000).

Armon-Lotem et al. (2021) state that language-specific knowledge in heritage speakers may require more experience in order to achieve proficiency. To genuinely enhance the language proficiency of minorities, fostering language awareness is essential. This involves enabling individuals to analyze, discriminate, and grasp language skills. Defined as "explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning and use" (McCarthy, 1997), language awareness also considers sociocultural and pragmatic factors (Gürsoy, 2010). The lack of this capacity in heritage language learners limits their ability to identify the goals of their learning process and formulate a learning strategy conducive to the growth of their linguistic skills (Csire & Laakso, 2011). It is feasible to prevent a decline in heritage language proficiency with age by offering heritage language education (Montrul & Potowski, 2007).

The findings of this study will enhance our comprehensive understanding of heritage language issues and the experiences of heritage language speakers. By illuminating the challenges faced by Kazakhs in Russia in using the Kazakh language, identifying their language skill needs, and uncovering barriers to language acquisition, the research results will contribute valuable insights. Moreover, these findings can play a significant role in informing methodological policies related to the teaching of Kazakh as either a heritage or foreign language.

Methods

Design

The study employed a descriptive, non-experimental, quantitative research design, utilizing survey research methods along with descriptive statistics, and descriptive analysis of research data to examine the experiences and proficiency of the heritage language among ethnic Kazakhs residing abroad. With the goal of analyzing social phenomena without directly altering the conditions that participants experience through, a descriptive non-experimental design used comparative research to examine into the way two or more groups differ on the phenomenon under study (Frey, 2018). With the power of explanation of social phenomena and prediction of outcomes, quantitative

research allows statistical inference that ensures generalization of the findings to be possibles, being, at the same time, a relatively economical and time-saving methodological approach due to its involving less advanced statistical analyses and complex research designs (Leung, & Shek, 2011).

Study Sample

The present study sought to gather data through an online survey due to its several benefits over traditional paper surveys, including more control over design and coding, cost-effectiveness, and worldwide accessibility (Wright, 2005). The online survey was shared as a public message on social media networks in order to reach as many individuals as possible and create the most representative sample possible. The link to the survey was additionally sent to students and academic staff of educational institutions within the Russian Federation. The study sample, consisting of ethnic Kazakhs residing in the Russian Federation, was selected using a simple random sampling technique. To ensure comprehensive representation, the sample was diverse, encompassing various characteristics such as age, marital status, family nationality composition, and economic level. Participants were recruited from educational institutions within the Russian Federation and were also invited to participate through online social networking sites. The study participants comprised 100 ethnic Kazakhs residing in the Russian Federation, ranging in age from 10 to 72 years old, with a mean age of 43.4 years, which allows to show broad trends about a population and to ensure generalization. Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic information of the participants.

Table 1

Participants' Demographics (n=100)

Items	Characteristics	Amount (%)
Family Nationality composition	Two parents Kazakh	75
	Kazakh father, mother – other	21
	Kazakh mother, father – other	4
Age	<29 years	16
	30-60 years	67
	>61 years	15

Marital status	Single	30
	Married	56
	Cohabitating	0
	Divorced	4
	Widowed	10
Living with / married to	Kazakhs	83
	Other nationality	17
Economic status	Skilled professional	63
	Unskilled manual	4
	Stay at home parent	16
	Student	13
	Unemployed / seeking employment	4

Instrument

The questionnaire survey consisted of three parts. The first section focused on participants' demographic information and included family nationality composition (two parents Kazakh, Kazakh father, mother – other, Kazakh mother, father – other), age in terms of categories (<29 years, 30-60 years, >61 years), marital status, nationality of spouse, and economic status.

The second section of the survey comprised scales assessing challenges in using the Kazakh language, needs in Kazakh language skills (adapted from Valdés et al., 2008), and barriers to acquiring the Kazakh language. Respondents were instructed to rate the strength of their agreement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Comparing the survey results with the proficiency test results allowed for the study's concurrent validity to be established. The testing scale quality is shown in Table 2.

Table 2

The Quality of the Scale with Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients (n=100)

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	Conclusion
Challenges in using the Kazakh language	0.872	Good
Needs in Kazakh language skills	0.780	Good
Barriers to acquiring the Kazakh language	0.861	Good

The scale reliability of the variables is of good quality, and Cronbach's Alpha coefficient is > 0.8. Thus, the scales have good quality, high reliability, and good use.

The third part of the survey took the form of a proficiency test designed to assess the participants' proficiency in the Kazakh language. The Kazakh language proficiency test for ethnic Kazakhs abroad, structured according to language proficiency levels ranging from zero to full proficiency (A0, A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2), was developed by the authors. Each proficiency level consisted of 25 multiple-choice questions. The test tasks featured five answer options, with one correct answer, and were organized in ascending order from zero proficiency (A0) to full proficiency (C2). The construction of the test questions followed a principle of increasing complexity from one level to the next, evident in both content and task structure. Additionally, a thematic sequence was maintained in all questions, aligned with ethno-cultural units for task development. The test tasks are structured on a cognitive basis utilizing ethno-cultural units, incorporating the most commonly used ones familiar to ethnic Kazakhs. A total of 25 ethno-cultural units, prevalent in everyday life, such as Greeting, Kazakh family, Ancestral ties of Kazakhs, Genealogy of Kazakhs, Kazakh zhuzes (tribal unions), childbirth, life and economy, Traditions, the theme of love in understanding, Oral folk art of Kazakhs, superstitions, prohibitions of Kazakhs, sacred numbers of Kazakhs, Kazakh religious culture, etc., were identified. To accommodate ethnic Kazakhs living abroad who may not be familiar with certain ethno-cultural units despite having Kazakh language skills, the option "I don't know" was introduced as the last answer option. For A0, A1, A2 level test tasks, settings are provided in both Kazakh and Russian, employing a visualization principle. This approach requires respondents to identify the meaning of depicted objects/subjects from possible options presented in pictures, enhancing comprehension.

Data Collection

To enhance the study's reach and accessibility, the survey was administered through Google Forms. Data collection took place over an extended period, specifically in October-November 2023. The prolonged duration of the study allowed for a meticulous and precise approach to data collection, contributing to the inclusion of a broad and representative sample. This strategy aimed to enhance the study's robustness and reliability. Google Forms survey data were exported to Excel spreadsheets for data analysis.

Data Analysis

The survey encompasses three types of data: demographic information categorizing participants, data characterizing people's behavior, perceptions, and attitudes (including challenges in using the

Kazakh language, needs for Kazakh language skills, and barriers to language acquisition), and data indicating people's language proficiency (proficiency test results). These data were analyzed using computer software and Excel spreadsheets. Descriptive statistics were applied to assess both continuous and categorical data, presenting the findings in terms of frequencies and percentages. The heritage language proficiency of respondents was evaluated based on the language assessment scale developed by the authors. The Language Assessment Scale of ethnic Kazakhs abroad features quality criteria (descriptors) and performance criteria aligned with seven levels of language proficiency (A0 to C2), as outlined in Table 3.

Table 3

Proficiency Levels of Kazakh as a Heritage Language

	Descriptors	Performance criteria
A0	Does not speak the Kazakh language but understands the whole meaning of what he/she hears through borrowed words (from Russian, Turkic, Arabic) and determines the meaning of phrases by the method of exclusion.	I don't speak Kazakh, but on an intuitive level I can roughly understand the general meaning of the simple expression I heard.
A1	Can pronounce simple phrases about people and places. Knows simple definitions of the names of household and jewelry items, tools, national games, types of national dishes, and clothes.	I can understand and pronounce very simple familiar words and expressions in Kazakh to solve specific tasks in everyday communication. I can introduce myself and others and ask simple personal questions.
A2	Can present people in simple language or describe living and working conditions, daily activities, likes and dislikes in the form of a series of short simple phrases and sentences in a list form. Understands the specifics of kinship relations, knows the names of Kazakh clans, is familiar with the Kazakh oral folk art, knows the names of historical monuments of religious significance.	I understand individual sentences and phrases, I can speak and exchange simple information in Kazakh on familiar topics in most typical communication situations.
B1	Can use simple descriptive means of language to briefly express his/her judgment and compare various objects or possessions. Can understand in more detail the aspects of the ethnic Kazakh culture. Can recognize a number of written simple phrases and sentences.	I can understand the basic meaning of the information heard and separately recognize simple familiar words and expressions in the written Kazakh language. I can maintain communication in Kazakh only on familiar topics.
B2	Can tell about plans and arrangements, what he/she does, and personal experience. Can describe familiar topics of interest in simple language. Can recognize simple and coherent written texts on a wide range of familiar and interesting questions. Understands the subtleties of greeting elderly people, knows the genres of folk art, superstitions, and prohibitions of Kazakhs, and freely understands the units of measurement.	I can understand and verbally compose a simple coherent text in Kazakh, as well as recognize the basic meaning of the written information. I can maintain communication in Kazakh on unfamiliar topics.

C1	He can describe his/her experience, his reaction to this experience, feelings about it in detail, and can give clear descriptions on a wide range of issues of interest to him/her. Can recognize clear written texts, covering in detail a variety of issues of interest to him/her. At a higher level, understands the ethnocultural units of the Kazakhs and demonstrates a deep knowledge of Kazakh traditions, mythology, and folklore.	I can express my thoughts freely on a variety of topics in Kazakh without preparation. I understand the meaning of the written text.
C2	Can give clear and detailed descriptions and make reports on complex topics. Can freely operate with ethno-cultural units in all spheres of communication. Has a deep knowledge of Kazakh traditions, folk art, and ethnic culture. Can write clear and well-structured texts. Shows full command of the Kazakh language.	I know the norms of the Kazakh literary language. When communicating on complex topics, I express my thoughts fluently and clearly.

Results and Discussion

Challenges in using the Kazakh Language, Needs in the Kazakh Language Skills and Barriers to the Kazakh Language Acquisition of Ethnic Kazakhs Abroad

Figures 1 and 2 depict the frequency of Kazakh language usage among ethnic Kazakhs in Russia and their heritage language communicators (individuals with whom they speak in Kazakh).
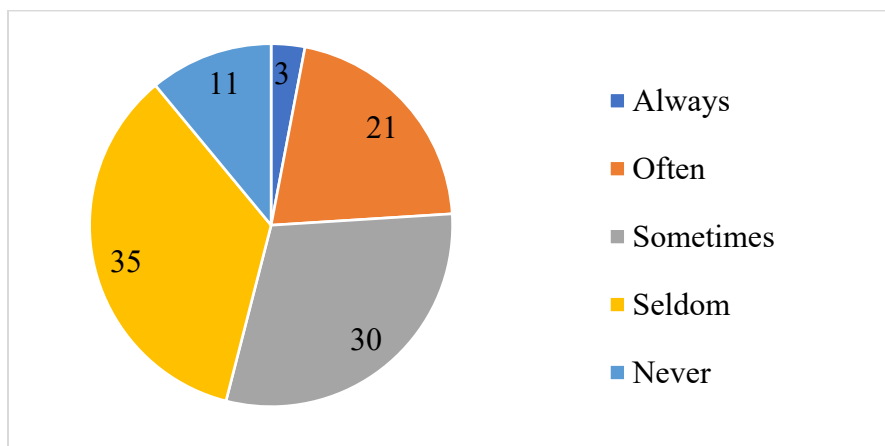

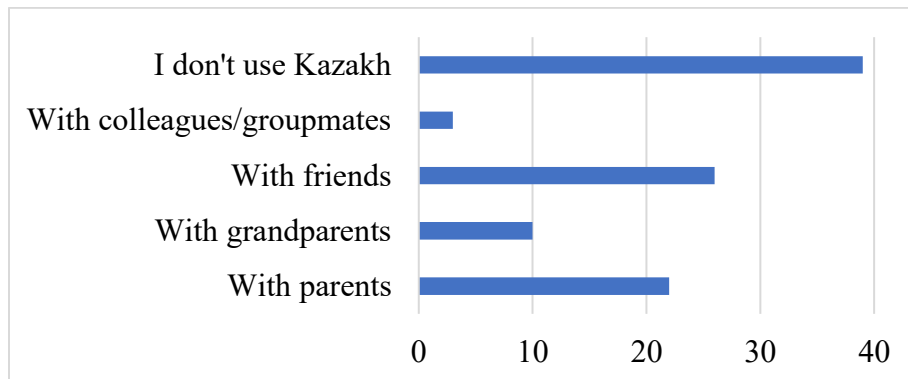*Figure 1. Respondents' frequency of speaking Kazakh*

Figure 2. Respondents' heritage language communicators

The findings reveal that only a quarter of ethnic Kazakhs residing in Russia consistently (3%) or frequently (21%) utilize their heritage language.   In contrast, up to half of them rarely (35%) or never (11%) use Kazakh in their daily lives. Table 4 outlines the challenges they face in using their heritage language.

Table 4

Challenges in using the Kazakh Language

Items	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Understanding oral speech	1	5	3.14	1.05
Formulating and expressing thoughts in the Kazakh language	1	5	3.54	1.09
Writing in Kazakh due to lack of knowledge about grammar and spelling	1	5	4.01	0.99
Reading and understanding books, newspapers, magazines	1	5	3.84	1.03
Communicating effectively with natives due to lack of culture-specific knowledge	1	5	3.62	1.14

Source: Authors, based on data analysis

As shown in the table, ethnic Kazakhs in Russia encounter challenges such as difficulties in writing in Kazakh due to a lack of knowledge about grammar and spelling, struggles in reading and comprehending books, newspapers, and magazines, and challenges in effective communication with Kazakhs from Kazakhstan due to a lack of knowledge about cultural peculiarities and communication subtleties. Table 5 outlines the language learning objectives for heritage speakers and underscores their perceived importance.

Table 5

Needs in the Kazakh Language Skills

Items	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Comprehend oral speech	1	5	4.23	0.87
Understand and interpret information available through mass media	1	5	3.99	0.92
Comprehend written materials on specialized business or professional topics	1	5	3.5	1.04
Participate in everyday face-to-face interactions using appropriate levels of Kazakh	1	5	3.92	0.93
Make oral presentations in front of an audience using appropriate levels of Kazakh	1	5	3.55	1.15

Items	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Spell correctly	1	5	3.68	0.95
Write informal notes and personal letters	1	5	3.43	1.03
Write narrative, informative, and persuasive essays	1	5	3.18	1.07
Comprehend and read with ease written materials such as novels, short stories, editorials, web materials	1	5	3.45	1.08
Develop a broad vocabulary	1	5	3.94	0.95
Know the grammar of the Kazakh language	1	5	3.72	0.98
Study the history of the Kazakh people using the Kazakh language	1	5	3.79	0.99
Know the features and elements of Kazakh culture	1	5	3.96	0.92

Ethnic Kazakhs residing in Russia deem it crucial to master their Kazakh language skills, particularly in understanding oral speech, interpreting information from mass media, engaging in daily face-to-face interactions using appropriate levels of Kazakh, studying the history of the Kazakh people in the Kazakh language, and expanding their vocabulary.

The study also identified barriers faced by ethnic Kazakhs in Russia in acquiring the Kazakh language, as detailed in Table 6.

Table 6

Barriers to the Kazakh Language Acquisition

Items	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Lack of time to study the Kazakh language	1	5	3.35	1.05
Unpopularity of the Kazakh language in the current country of residence	1	5	3.16	1.23
No need to know the Kazakh language (not needed now and will not be useful in the future)	1	5	2.47	1.09
Lack of motivation to learn the Kazakh language	1	5	2.71	1.09
No one to practice the Kazakh language with (oral speech, writing letters, etc.)	1	5	3.29	1.09
Misunderstanding of the cultural characteristics of representatives of the Kazakh ethnic group	1	5	2.7	0.97
Rejection of language (sound, pronunciation)	1	5	2.13	0.98

This study highlights that the most significant barriers to the acquisition of the Kazakh language among ethnic Kazakhs in Russia include a lack of time for language study, a shortage of communicators for practicing oral speech and writing letters, and the overall unpopularity of the Kazakh language in their country of residence.

The Heritage Language Proficiency Levels of Ethnic Kazakhs Abroad

The study, utilizing the developed Kazakh language proficiency test for ethnic Kazakhs abroad, delineated the participants' levels of Kazakh language competency. The heritage language competency of Kazakhs in Russia is detailed in Table 7.

Table 7

The Kazakh Language Proficiency of Kazakhs Abroad

Levels	Language skills	Amount (%)
0	No proficiency	10
A0	Low proficiency	29
A1	Basic proficiency	16
A2	Pre-Intermediate proficiency	14
B1	Intermediate proficiency	16
B2	Upper-Intermediate proficiency	11
C1	High proficiency	2
C2	Full proficiency	2
Total		100

The findings reveal that a substantial portion, up to 40%, of ethnic Kazakhs in Russia have either no or low heritage language proficiency (0-A0). In contrast, only 15% of them exhibit the skills of a proficient heritage language user (B2-C2).

Specifics of the Heritage Language Experiences and Competency Among Ethnic Kazakhs Abroad According to Their Age and Family Nationality Composition

Figure 3 illustrates the variations in the usage of Kazakh among ethnic Kazakhs residing abroad, representing different age groups.
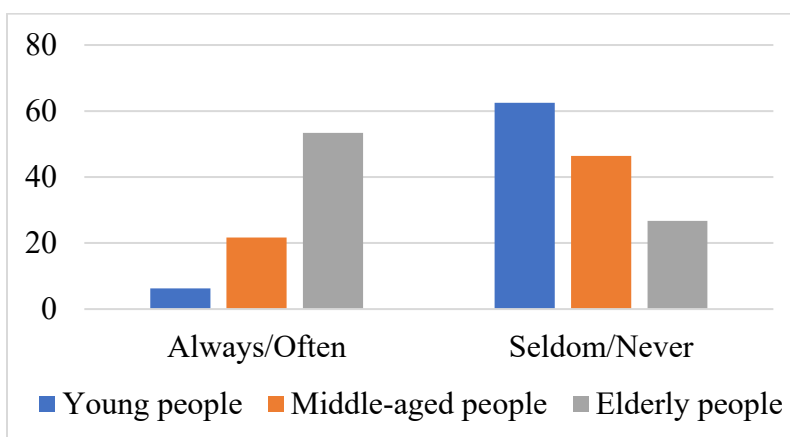
Figure 3. Ratio of heritage language use of young, middle-aged, and elderly ethnic Kazakhs

The study demonstrated that the utilization of the heritage language varies among young, middle-aged, and elderly ethnic Kazakhs abroad. Among ethnic Kazakhs in Russia, the most active users of the Kazakh language are the elderly group (n=15), constituting 53.4%, whereas only 6.25% of young individuals (n=16) report frequent use of Kazakh in their daily lives. In the case of middle-aged ethnic Kazakhs (n=69), 21.7% state that they often use the heritage language.

Figure 4 presents the distribution of Kazakh language proficiency levels among young, middle-aged, and elderly ethnic Kazakhs in Russia.
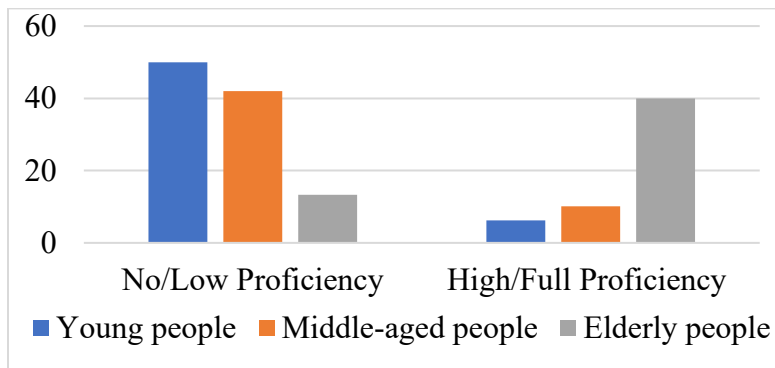

Figure 4. Ratio of heritage language proficiency in young, middle-aged, and elderly ethnic Kazakhs

The study results reveal that 40% of elderly, 10.1% of middle-aged, and only 6.25% of young ethnic Kazakhs exhibit high proficiency in the heritage language, while the lowest level of language proficiency in Kazakh is demonstrated by 13.3% of elderly, 42% of middle-aged, and only 50% of young respondents. Figure 5 illustrates the distribution of challenges related to heritage language use among young, middle-aged, and elderly Kazakhs abroad.
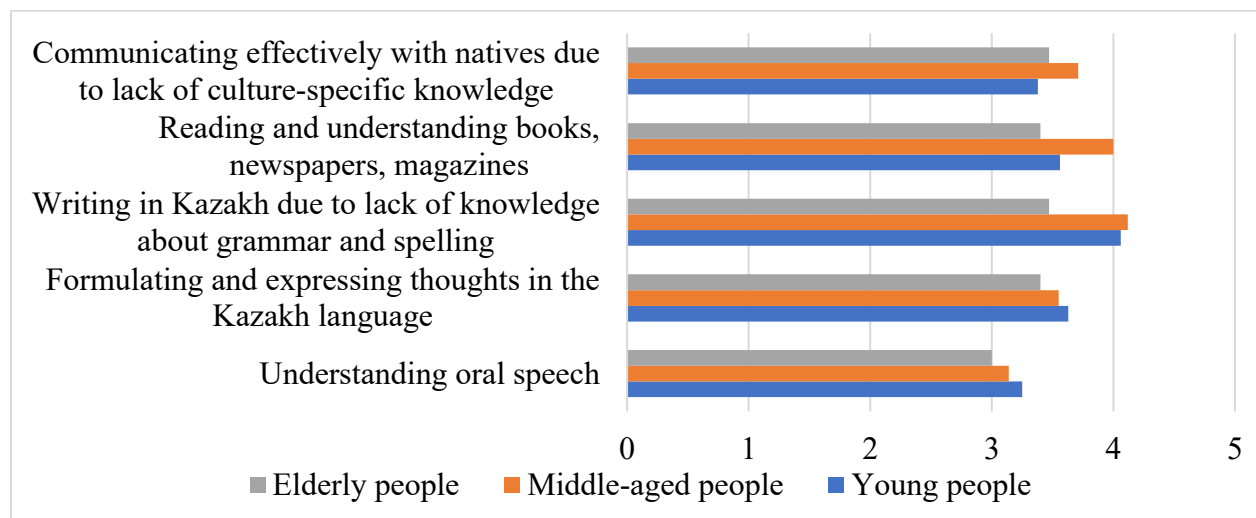

Figure 5. Ratio of challenges related to heritage language use among young, middle-aged, and elderly Kazakhs abroad

The study highlights that the most significant challenges across all three age groups of respondents pertain to reading and writing in Kazakh. However, the elderly population exhibits fewer challenges compared to the younger generation.

Table 8 outlines the participants' perceived importance of acquiring heritage language skills, indicating the respective ratios.

Table 8

Heritage language skills needed for young, middle-aged and elderly Kazakhs abroad (Mean)

Items	Young people	Middle-aged people	Elderly people
Comprehend oral speech	4.25	4.2	4.33
Understand and interpret information available through mass media	4.19	3.93	4.07
Comprehend written materials on specialized business or professional topics	3.81	3.43	3.47
Participate in everyday face-to-face interactions using appropriate levels of Kazakh	4	3.84	4.2
Make oral presentations in front of an audience using appropriate levels of Kazakh	3.94	3.49	3.4
Spell correctly	3.94	3.59	3.8
Write informal notes and personal letters	3.88	3.29	3.6
Write narrative, informative and persuasive essays	3.69	3	3.47
Comprehend and read with ease written materials such as novels, short stories, editorials, web materials	3.75	3.36	3.53
Develop a broad vocabulary	3.94	3.91	4.07
Know the grammar of the Kazakh language	3.94	3.62	3.93
Study the history of the Kazakh people using the Kazakh language	3.94	3.71	4
Know the features and elements of Kazakh culture	4.06	3.93	4

Ethnic Kazakhs in Russia, spanning young, middle-aged, and elderly age groups, emphasize the importance of acquiring skills such as comprehending oral speech, understanding and interpreting information available through mass media, knowing the features and elements of Kazakh culture, participating in everyday face-to-face interactions using appropriate levels of Kazakh, and developing a broad vocabulary.

Discussion

The current study findings are consistent with previous research indicating that heritage language experiences and proficiency vary within heritage language speakers and across their lifespan (Benmamoun et al., 2013). This is due to the fact that, as stated by Chondrogianni and Daskalaki

(2023), the heritage language interaction continues to take place in the country of residence and under pressure from the majority societal language, and in more limited contexts compared to the ones in the country of origin. Our study findings reveal that only a quarter of ethnic Kazakhs in Russia are regular users of their heritage language. Among the challenges they face are difficulties in writing due to a lack of knowledge about grammar and spelling, challenges in reading and understanding written materials, and struggles in effective communication with native speakers from Kazakhstan due to a lack of cultural knowledge. Ethnic Kazakhs in Russia express the importance of achieving fluency in Kazakh for studying the history of the Kazakh people in the language, understanding oral communication, interpreting information from the media, and participating in daily face-to-face interactions. These findings go in line with the previous study by Carreira and Kagan (2011), stating that the majority of heritage language learners who had learned English after learning their heritage language did not have much exposure to their heritage language outside of the home, according to a review of the national heritage language survey. They also found that the learners preferred to connect with their heritage language community and culture by being able to understand and speak their heritage language rather than reading and writing it.

The identified barriers to learning the heritage language among ethnic Kazakhs in Russia, including a lack of time for language study, a shortage of communicators for practicing writing and speaking, and the unpopularity of Kazakh in the nation of residence, resonate with challenges faced by various minority groups worldwide (Csire & Laakso, 2011). These common issues underscore the need for the development of specific teaching strategies and methods tailored for heritage-language learners. The study underscores that within the ethnic Kazakh community in Russia, the elderly population is the most frequent user of the heritage language, while young people use it the least. The proficiency levels in the heritage language also vary, with only 6.25% of young ethnic Kazakhs, 10.1% of middle-aged individuals, and 40% of elderly individuals demonstrating high proficiency. Also, 42% of middle-aged individuals, 50% of young respondents, and 13.3% of elderly individuals have the lowest level of language proficiency in Kazakh. Across all age groups, reading and writing in Kazakh present the most significant obstacles, although elderly individuals face fewer challenges compared to younger generations.

The assessment of heritage language proficiency levels among ethnic Kazakhs in Russia indicates that only 15% of them exhibit the skills of a proficient heritage language user (B2-C2), while up

to 40% have no or low proficiency (0-A0). This phenomenon aligns with Montrul's concept of ''incomplete acquisition'' (Montrul, 2002) and is also supported by Mellinger and Jiménez (2019), who note that heritage language speakers often do not achieve full parity between heritage and societal languages. This discrepancy may arise from receiving less input in the heritage language compared to the societal language, and many heritage language speakers may not undergo formal schooling in the heritage language.

The study underscores the different levels of language knowledge among ethnic Kazakhs abroad, necessitating more differentiated language planning and educational strategies. While Kolláth (2008) suggests that ethnic language acquisition for minority individuals requires distinct methods compared to those in the motherland, our findings diverge from the conclusions of Csire and Laakso (2011). Contrary to Csire and Laakso's assertion that heritage language students do not perceive their language learning as part of a cultural border-crossing process (acculturation or intercultural learning), our study suggests that ethnic Kazakhs abroad, unlike first language learners, may benefit from teaching strategies that emphasize aspects of interculturality, cultural differences, and methods rooted in the routines of oral communication specific to heritage-language learners.

The ethnic Kazakhs in Russia, across different age groups, express the importance of acquiring skills such as comprehending oral speech, interpreting information from mass media, understanding and appreciating the features and elements of Kazakh culture, participating in everyday face-to-face interactions using appropriate levels of Kazakh, and developing a broad vocabulary. This underscores the need to integrate authentic Kazakh texts, traditions, regional and cultural information, and real-life dialogic situations into heritage language learning courses. This approach aims to foster sociocultural competence, shape the understanding of the Kazakh mentality, and facilitate a rapid familiarization with Kazakhstan. These findings align with the findings of the study by Ivygina et al. (2019), who emphasize the significance of incorporating these elements for a comprehensive mastery of a language.

Regarding the heritage language proficiency of ethnic Kazakhs residing abroad, the study findings are consistent with observations made by Frese et al. (2015), who state that competence in the heritage language tends to decline in the second and third generations due to reduced usage and fewer opportunities for transmission. Additionally, Valdés (2005) highlights the phenomenon of "language shift" experienced by many linguistic minorities.

Previous studies emphasize the significance of family dynamics and the broader community in shaping language use in the second generation (Hinton, 1999). Furthermore, there is a positive relationship was reported between the maintenance of migrants' heritage language and the number of contacts within their social network who speak the heritage language (Hulsen et al., 2002). Recognizing the role of the broader environment, independent initiatives, heritage education, community groups, and volunteer organizations (Ebaugh & Saltzman, 2000) play a crucial role in supporting migrant families in preserving and developing their heritage language. These efforts are of great importance in maintaining the heritage language among linguistic minorities.

Conclusion

The primary objective of this study was to examine the specifics of heritage language use and proficiency among ethnic Kazakhs residing abroad. The focus was specifically on ethnic Kazakhs in Russia, aiming to elucidate their challenges in using the Kazakh language, identify their language skill needs, and understand the barriers to language acquisition. The study revealed a limited use of the Kazakh language among ethnic Kazakhs abroad, accompanied by a generally low language proficiency in a majority of the participants. Notable challenges in heritage language usage were identified, particularly in writing in Kazakh due to a lack of knowledge about grammar and spelling, as well as difficulties in reading and understanding books, newspapers, and magazines. Effective communication with Kazakhs from Kazakhstan also posed challenges due to insufficient knowledge of cultural peculiarities and communication subtleties. Language skills assessment, conducted through the authors' developed Kazakh language proficiency test for ethnic Kazakhs abroad, provided evidence that heritage language use and proficiency among young, middle-aged, and elderly ethnic Kazakhs abroad vary. Young individuals exhibit lower levels of heritage language proficiency and engage in less use of Kazakh compared to the elderly population, indicating a common decline in language skills and language use across subsequent generations. Despite the proficiency loss observed in the third generation, even when parents and/or grandparents are proficient speakers, language maintenance emerges as a challenge. Ethnic Kazakhs in Russia express a strong desire to acquire Kazakh language skills for various purposes, including understanding oral speech, interpreting information from mass media, engaging in daily face-to-face interactions using appropriate levels of Kazakh, studying

the history of the Kazakh people in the Kazakh language, and developing a broad vocabulary. These aspirations persist despite the barriers to acquiring Kazakh, such as a lack of time for language study, a shortage of communicators for practicing oral speech and writing, and the general unpopularity of Kazakh in their country of residence.

Limitations and Implications

The study has certain limitations, particularly related to the geographical scope of the sample, which exclusively consisted of ethnic Kazakhs in the Russian Federation. Future research endeavors may benefit from expanding the sample to include ethnic Kazakhs from various countries, allowing for a more comprehensive outline and comparison of their heritage language use and competencies.

The study's outcomes hold important theoretical, practical, and policy implications by not only contributing to advancements in the field but also providing valuable insights for interested stakeholders. The authors envision further exploration through the experimental implementation of a heritage language support program for ethnic Kazakhs abroad, with subsequent publication of the results. In response to the study's findings, the authors suggest the implementation of an online Kazakh language course tailored for ethnic Kazakhs abroad. This initiative aims to provide them with the opportunity to enhance their heritage language skills, deepen their understanding of ethnic culture, traditions, and realia, and engage in language practice with native speakers. The authors posit that such an intervention could potentially mitigate the risk of ethnic Kazakhs losing proficiency in their heritage language while living abroad.

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