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The Role of Language Policies in Developing Plurilingual Identities in Kazakhstan

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Kazakhstan is a multicultural country that conducts democratic policy towards every ethnic group living there; therefore, major language policy documents raise the importance of maintaining and developing all languages in Kazakhstan. Moreover, raising Kazakh, Russian and English speaking plurilinguals is seen as a key factor for establishing peace and reciprocity among all nations. This paper reviews how language policies contribute to the development of plurilingual individuals in Kazakhstan, and analyzes their role as major drivers for promoting a multilingual society. It also focuses on language policies along with ensuing initiatives through the lenses of historic roots, socio-political context, and outcomes.

Keywords: plurilingual identities, language policies, multilingual society, multicultural society

Introduction

Kazakhstan is a multi-ethnic state, and therefore the rights and interests of all ethnic representatives are protected and embedded in the main state document—the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan (1995). The linguistic plurality and cultural diversity of the country are also regulated and supported by various policy documents. Moreover, learning Kazakh as a state language, Russian as a language for interethnic, and English as a language of international communication is widely promoted. Therefore, the role of language policies in developing plurilingualism, a characteristic of individuals (Liddicoat, 2013), in the Kazakhstani context should not be overlooked. The Council of Europe defines plurilingual competence as an “ability to use languages for the purpose of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person, viewed as a social agent, has proficiency of varying degrees, in several languages, and experience of several cultures” (Coste, Moore & Zarate, 2009, p. 11). The role of language policies in developing plurilingual competence of Kazakhstani people will be central to this paper.

Many scholars debate the role and efficacy of language policies. While some recent studies (e.g., Aryn, 2009) point out that language policy plays an important role in establishing political stability in the polyethnic nation of Kazakhstan, others (Makhmutova & Sagitova, 2014) argue that it is not an effective means for the integration of national diasporas into Kazakhstani society.

Historic Roots

In this section, I will explore the historical grounds of the policy documents that report language issues of Kazakhstan. An analysis of its historical roots can assist in gaining an in-depth understanding of Kazakhstan’s multiculturalism.

Language related issues are embedded in these state documents:

- *The Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan* (1995);
- *Strategies 2030 and 2050*;
- *The State Program of Languages Development and Functioning for 2011-2020* (MES, 2010);
- *The Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Languages* (1997);
- *The Order of the President of Kazakhstan on the Concept of Language Policy* (1996);
- and the cultural project called *Trinity of Languages*.

In the Soviet Kazakhstan era when the Russian language dominated in all domains, only in 1987 for the first time, the Kazakh language saw some progress towards gaining more importance in an official document called *On Improving the Study of the Kazakh Language*, followed by the next important document called *Law on Languages* in 1989. After the fall of the USSR, Dadabayeva and Adilbayeva (2010) identified three parties pursuing different positions in language policy. First, Russians willing to keep the Russian language’s leading position; second, Kazakhs wanting the Kazakh language to be the only state language; and third, the state trying to attain equilibrium in a diverse society. After Kazakhstan’s independence, the Kazakh language was proclaimed the sole state language, and every citizen was called upon to learn Kazakh, whereas Russian was given the status of interethnic language in the Constitution of Kazakhstan (1993), and then shortly thereafter in the amended constitution (1995), it was granted official status. By redefining the position of the Russian

language, it gained the position to be used equally with the Kazakh language in official documents. This shift enabled the country to minimize possible conflicts between nations.

After independence, there was a need for change that would steadily lead to prosperity and development of the state and its citizens. In his annual address to the nation, President Nazarbayev (2012) declared that Kazakhstan seeks to join the thirty most competitive countries in the world, and then elaborated on how to achieve this goal. Bearing in mind that unity, tolerance, and peace in the country are the main values in this sovereign state, he strongly emphasized that as a multicultural society Kazakhstan needs to develop and foster pluralism and cultural awareness in younger generations. This goal is reflected in the various initiatives, reforms, laws, and programs. Encouraging trilingualism is seen as a key factor for developing individuals who respect and value plurality. The State Program of Languages Development and Functioning for 2011-2020 (MES, 2011) aims to increase the number of Kazakh (95%), Russian (90) and English (20%) language speakers. According to Kydyralina (2014), Doctor of Historical Sciences, tolerance and loyalty appear to be the key for building such a nation, and that requires much time and effort.

These policy documents have set the path towards forming plurilingual and multicultural individuals that possess their own cultural features, along with having raised cultural awareness of and respect for neighboring cultures.

Socio-Political Context

Taking into account the diverse cultural and ethnic situations in the country, Kazakhstan is confidently moving forward to achieve its ambitious goal of becoming an intellectual multilingual nation. The implementation of language policies took place in the country's education, media, social, economic, and political spheres. In this section, I will be analyzing how the language policies on developing plurilingual individuals were implemented in the educational and socio-political contexts.

It is true that "language can be used as a symbol of ethnic and cultural identity, a key element of 'nation building' that can lead to both the consolidation of the society and the ethno-cultural confrontation inside the community" (Makhmutov & Sagitova, 2014, p. 103).

Developing multilingualism in Kazakhstan is not only vital for the consolidation of the nations living here, but it is also necessary to develop the country's education system. The country's attitude toward the development of a multilingual community is reflected in all main education documents. The orientation of these documents in the learning of foreign languages is primarily directed to the students' development of intercultural competence. In all schools, students learn Kazakh, Russian and English languages. In fact, speaking more than one language has become the norm for Kazakhstani children. Moreover, minority language children are schooled in their native language as a medium of instruction (MES, 2012). Trilingual education was experimented in pilot schools, in Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS) and in some higher education institutions (MES, 2012). In the process of implementing trilingual education in schools, students become acquainted with the foreign cultures, and at the same time can reconsider their development as plurilinguals.

Research conducted by Yeskeldiyeva and Tazhibayeva (2014) shows that university and secondary school students in the northern and southern parts of the country support trilingual education. Data collected from their sociolinguistic study indicate that students would like to learn through three languages. Another study conducted by Zharkynbekova, Akynova, and Aimoldina (2013), by employing document analysis, questionnaires and interviews, revealed that the majority of their participants were in favor of trilingual education policy. They believe in the importance of English as a means to be competitive. However, as stated in Nazarbayev University's *Diagnostic Report* (NUGSE, 2014), there is a need to better define the levels of fluency in the English language, and to increase knowledge about trilingual education and stakeholder cooperation. Although the Kazakhstani education system allows minority children to learn in their native language, it is detrimental for them when taking the UNT. All these factors complicate the development of multilingual education.

The next level where multilingualism was implemented is the social area. The status and use of Kazakh was expanded in many institutions, in television and in radio broadcasting (Aryn, 2009). Every year, within the scope of the cultural project *Trinity of Languages*, the regional departments for developing languages conduct a trilingual Olympiad called *Tildaryn* among the people between ages 18-25. This trilingual Olympiad is a good example of successful implementation of trilingualism in our society where plurilingual competence is highly encouraged and given an incentive to develop. Another trilingual project organized specifically in Pavlodar region is *Reading Abai in Three Languages* (MES, 2014). During the summer break, high school students read the words of Abai in Kazakh, Russian and English. These projects address the issue of developing multilingualism

outside classroom settings. In addition, there are 130 centers for learning both Kazakh and English. Also, 30-volume specialized Kazakh-English dictionaries are being developed (NUGSE, 2014).

Finally, multilingual development finds support in the political context too. Top civil servants should speak Kazakh, and the knowledge of English is regarded as an asset. However, in reality there are cases when even the person in the highest civil servant position does not speak Kazakh (Aksholakova & Ismailova, 2013). In spite of the fact that plenty of support is provided to learn Kazakh in language centers, and then to take the national KAZTEST, there is still a large number of people who do not speak Kazakh (Aksholakova & Ismailova, 2013).

Although the government is very ambitious and determined to develop a multilingual society, some parties do not share the same vision. There is a debate about the belief that the use of different languages can harm the literary norms of Kazakh language. Rsalieva (2014) studied how the use of Russian and English is influencing the Kazakh language in terms of deviation of lexical and grammatical norms. Fishman (1991) also stated that the shift of languages simply means a decrease in the use of the language. Nevertheless, the status and acquisition planning of the Kazakh language is more powerful than ever before (Aksholakova & Ismailova, 2013).

It is evident that Kazakhstan is more than suitable for the flourishing of a multilingual and multicultural society. The initiative to develop plurilinguists was implemented and is being implemented in schools, in societies and in the media. In other words, as Munday (2010) writes, “the sense of learning from other cultures and mutual enrichment is demonstrated in Kazakhstan” (p. 6).

Outcomes and Impact

The problem of multicultural identity forming has emerged because of growing globalization (Tamirgaliev, Dzhamaliev, & Abdrasheva, 2014). In the Kazakhstani context, the term *multicultural identity* is not only attached to the English language and globalization, but to the inner multi-ethnicity of the country. However, there is a lack of empirical research on how multicultural identities form in Kazakhstan. This issue has been studied only implicitly (Tamirgaliev, Dzhamaliev, & Abdrasheva, 2014). Consequently, we can look to no direct data or statistics on this issue. Nevertheless, we can speculate about the potential outcomes and discuss the role of language policies in developing multicultural identities.

We discussed earlier how language policies could contribute to the formation of identity; however, its characteristics will depend on many factors. As identity formation builds in many domains—for instance education, society, media, politics—and at different degrees, it is hard to predict what the outcomes will be. In Kazakhstan, the Law on Languages (1997) and the State Program of Languages Development and Functioning for 2011-2020 (MES, 2011) are considered the most important language policy documents. The question is what outcomes we can see today from the very start of launching these documents. There is a common belief that identity is formed at an early stage. Therefore, it would be reasonable to consider only those individuals who were affected by those language policy initiatives from the younger age. To analyze outcomes and impacts of identity formation, I would divide it into two periods; first, identity formation before inserting the English language into various projects and reform initiatives; and second, after the time when English language started to find a place in Kazakhstani language reform documents.

After the country gained its independence, “Kazakhization aimed at establishing Kazakh as the state language of independent Kazakhstan” (Smagulova, 2008, p. 448). The Decree on Expansion of the Usage of the State Language in State Bodies (1998) and the Decree on Requirements for Placing Information in Kazakh and Russian on Product Labels (1999) enabled the Kazakh language to be revitalized. Statistically, sixty per cent of all students go to Kazakh schools (MES, 2014). In a couple of decades, we can expect to have a new generation of adults who are proficient in the Kazakh language (Belova, 2013).

It is quite possible that in several years we will be witnessing outcomes that we do not expect now. According to Smagulova (2015), if we consider international experiences, we see that South Korea faced the problem of teacher shortage while implementing multilingual education with substantial budget allocation. We understand that even a developed country like South Korea did not succeed in this. Therefore, it is quite difficult to predict whether Kazakhstan will be developing multilingual education further. If Kazakhstan retrains schoolteachers to learn English, this may have another negative impact. Smagulova (2015) anticipates that schoolteachers will leave their jobs for ones that are more lucrative. Her predictions are based on international experience showing that Indonesian and Korean teachers left their teaching positions after course completion. Another example is the case of China that tried to implement teaching content subjects through English long ago. In this case, the new policy raised serious debates among the main stakeholders and eventually the program

was closed. From the experiences of these countries, one can be doubtful about successful implementation of trilingual education. Consequently, mistrust for the Kazakhstani education system might arise and most importantly, if the trilingual policy is implemented inappropriately, it might lead to the academic retardation of students.

Next, there is a threat to the role of Kazakh language and its use. Rsalieva (2014) stated that the Kazakh language is already undergoing some changes in its literary norms. We can only speculate that if this tendency continues, Kazakhstan may lose its regained language.

Nevertheless, much effort is being put to implement this initiative. Despite the fact that some researchers define Kazakhstani initiatives as too ambitious, we are now seeing the first results. For instance, universities with trilingual education have launched university-based centers for multilingual education. According to the article on the Pavlodar State University's website (PSU, 2015), the University's center for multilingual education sees the academic mobility for students as its main priority so that students can develop multicultural identities. Additionally, every year the students participate in international scientific conferences. PSU conducts its own annual international conference, *Education and Science: Without Barriers*. At the secondary education level, in schools where trilingual education was implemented in 2006, we can see the first results. According to a website report of specialized gymnasium for gifted children in Pavlodar region (Tuleubayeva, 2013), which is one of the first 33 schools which started to implement trilingual education, their graduates are students of world-class universities, and winners of international intellectual competitions. We can expect that these young people will contribute to the development of their own country.

Moreover, schools are disseminating their best practices and sharing ideas in different seminars and workshops. They discuss the problems they face and learn from one another. International experience shows that schools that do not have subject teachers who are proficient in English collaborate with English language teachers. This practice is encouraged in many multilingual schools (Kelly, 2014).

Conclusion

The analysis shows that language policies in Kazakhstan strongly support diversity in society. The major language policy documents and the laws serve as a basis for the promotion of individual plurilingualism in Kazakhstan. Learning languages other than native language can help raise linguistic and cultural awareness of the Kazakhstani people. The initiatives, programs and many other facilities to learn and maintain languages of all ethnicities living here are promoted and regulated by these policies. From the review, it is clear that this language policy was developed due to historical, social and cultural situations formed in Kazakhstan. The incorporation of the English language into the long-term plans of the policy documents reinforces the development of plurilingual and pluricultural identities. Thus, this policy is seen as a right one for modern Kazakhstan in the modern world.

The existence of debatable issues indicate the areas for future research. For example, more research is needed to explore the potential obstacles in implementing trilingual education. The investigation of local and international contexts would help learn the immediate needs and world experience respectively. A holistic approach that would address linguistic, cultural, social, economic and ethnic concerns of developing plurilingual identities would enable this ambitious goal to be achieved. At this stage, it can be safely presumed that Kazakhstan is moving towards realizing its goal of becoming an intellectual multilingual and multicultural nation.

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