

# The Phenomenon of Multilingual Education

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## Introduction

Multilingual education (MLE), a type of education starting with the mother tongue of the learners, and then gradually introducing one or more additional languages as a medium of instruction policy in teaching, has gained considerable attention around the globe as a means of linguistic proficiency, cultural awareness, and academic success in a rapid-changing globalized world. Multilingualism, typically referring to two or more language acquisitions, involves different aspects of language, culture, and education, making it an important topic to discuss and analyze. The aim of this critical review is to explore multilingual education, its historical development, diverse models, impact on student achievement, social and cultural implications, and most significantly MLE challenges (their description, risks, influence) that teachers and learners might encounter in its implementation in an educational system. All of the key features regarding MLE's merits and negative points will be clearly analyzed with the help of actual existing scientific literature, and a reasoned conclusion with the recommendations will be summarized and shared. Understanding the potential prospects, complexity, and implications of the subject is unquestionably significant for scholars, authorities, and educational policymakers since they are the ones who take the responsibility of examining and sharing the subject's condition and perspectives, shape the current and future models of learning programs, and its implementation.

The use of multiple languages in education has been a common practice in many societies throughout history. Multilingual education's rich history has been related to various human factors such as politics, economics, and social issues. Besides, the first attempts of teaching in more than one language can be traced back to ancient civilizations of Greece, Rome, and Egypt, where multilingualism was a common practice due to the fact of these civilizations huge area, number of tribes living together, and different socio-cultural aspects of that time.

Meanwhile, in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the first emergence of bilingual schools in the United States began as result of enormous immigration from Europe to the United States resulting in the rapid growth of the US population to over 17 million people (Lambert, 2021). Later, at that period of time there was an opposition both from some parts of community and authorities of the United States causing the restriction

and dismissive attitude towards the education in two or more languages. Despite some opposition and banishment, in 1980s there was a resurgence of interest and advocacy for bilingual education, and increased funding and support for bilingual programs. In modern times, multilingualism has become more common due to different historical, political, and economic factors leading to the recognition of the importance of multilingual education, where UNESCO and well-known scholars, such as Nancy H. Hornberger, Joshua Fishman, and Maria Torres-Guzman established the term 'multilingual education' and published several works on its benefits, challenges, principles, and guidelines. To conclude, multilingual education has a long history and has been influenced by different factors; the historic roots of multilingual education are deeply interconnected in the evolution of educational paradigms, changing societies, and its cultural values.

The official statement of UNESCO on multilingual education: "Multilingual education is a treasure filled with culture, history, values, and knowledge and is essential for transforming education." (Challenges and opportunities to advance multilingual education through literacy, 2023, para. 2). In other words, multilingual education is special and important because it helps learners to develop their linguistic and cognitive abilities, as well as their intercultural competence and global citizenship. The main aim of multilingual education is to use more than one language in the teaching-learning process, so that students can develop linguistic and academic proficiency in multiple languages.

There are several benefits of a multilingual education that make it a worthwhile investment for students of all ages. Following the UNESCO's reports, many merits in cognitive, linguistic, and social perspectives have been found in MLE. Linguistic diversity, intercultural communication, and respect for different languages and cultures are one of the major characteristics of the promotion of multilingualism in education.

## Potential Benefits of Multilingual Education

In MLE understanding a different culture is crucial and considered as the "top" priority. As the world evolves, it is vital to learn and appreciate different cultures, and a multilingual education plays a significant role in achieving this goal. A multilingual education exposes students to different cultures, people, and ways of life. Consequently, this exposure develops cross-cultural appreciation and adaptability, which is

essential in today's diverse global world. It helps children to develop an understanding of different perspectives, promotes a sense of empathy, and better equips them to navigate cultural differences in their future lives. In this regard, multilingualism enhances an automatic understanding and appreciation of cultural values of the societies that are contained in the concerned languages. The experiences gained from learning different languages automatically tend to change the attitudes, skills, beliefs of the people, and society, and create an expansion of world view (Okal, 2014). Language relies on society, culture and mind, so it is recommended that language is taught in classroom and informally in the daily communication outside classroom.

The second advantage of MLE is through academic success. Multilingualism practices enhance intellectual flexibility and creativity. Enhancement of intellectual flexibility is corroborated by various viable findings. Studies, conducted by speech and language therapist Dr. Elsie Naude (King, 2007, as cited in Okal, 2014), have indicated that children who grow up in a supportive environment speaking more than one language from an early age are more perceptive and intellectually flexible than those who speak one language. Students who receive a multilingual education generally perform better academically. A multilingual education can improve their memory retention, reading skills, and test scores. In a multilingual environment, where "different aspects such as support, collaboration, and mainly learning are enriched" (Kirss, 2021), students learn to understand complex language concepts better and quicker, leading to better academic results. Thus, it can be assumed that many children who are fluent in more than one language are superior lateral thinkers, having a greater social adaptability, thinking and reasoning skills, and cognitive abilities.

The next MLE merit regards the ability of succeeding in high-competition for jobs. A survey by the American Council on Education (ACE) (Okal, 2014) realized that it is somewhat important to speak another language so as to compete successfully in the global economy. Besides the academic and professional credentials, employers also look for fluency in the desired languages as an added advantage. In the current global marketplace, knowing more than one language is increasingly valuable, and being multilingual can give individuals an edge when it comes to job opportunities. Multilingual employees can better communicate with clients, customers, and colleagues in different parts of the world. In this case, development of many language skills therefore contributes to economic adjustments of the individual.

During the learning process establishing and enhanc-

ing language awareness is essential because this competence enables individuals to communicate effectively, understand written and spoken language, and navigate the intricacies of language in various contexts. Language awareness programs are designed to equip students with the tools to critically analyze and appreciate language. The purpose of the program is to provide them with the skills to critically analyze and appreciate. More effective communicators will be able to learn language, by developing language awareness students can better understand the nuances of texts, and navigate intercultural communication with greater sensitivity.

In addition, cultural and sociolinguistic awareness is also another dimension of language awareness. It requires understanding how language is shaped by cultural contexts, social norms, and power dynamics. The presence of this awareness helps individuals understand the social implications of language choices, such as issues of integration and inclusivity. This is also encouraged by the idea of an acceptance for linguistic diversity and the importance of preserving minority languages. In summary, language awareness is a multifaceted concept that encompasses linguistic competence and reflection, and socio-cultural understanding. In a globalized world, language awareness plays a vital role in navigating cross-cultural communication, and fostering respect and empathy for linguistic and cultural differences.

### **Potential Challenges of Multilingual Education**

However, the concept of multilingual education has several potential challenges, including difficulties with the policy itself, and language proficiency.

First of all, development of language policy in multilingual education poses numerous difficulties. Among them are issues of the conflict of priorities, lack of cohesion in policy implementation, and the need for systematic approaches to promote multilingualism. The lack of systematic approaches to promote multilingualism can lead to a misunderstanding of language policies among teachers (Forbes, 2023).

Secondly, a multilingual education program aims to develop cognitive, language, and literacy skills in the first language and additional language by using the students' first language as the medium of instruction for part of the curriculum. Thus, according to USAID (United States Agency of International Development) report publication, there is a basic level of language acknowledgement required for children to benefit from education using a new language as a medium of instruction. While the specific level of language profi-

ciency is necessary for children to benefit from education in a new language, it may depend on various factors such as the educational context and the aims of the multilingual program. It is therefore clear that a certain level of proficiency is necessary to ensure that students can fully engage and benefit from instruction in multiple languages (van Ginkel, 2014).

Despite these challenges, multilingual education can provide numerous benefits, such as promoting social justice, ensuring quality education for all, and preparing students to face challenges and chase opportunities on a global basis. Understanding the challenges involved requires cooperation between teachers, researchers and policymakers to develop effective policies that match and provide expected results and outcomes of learning in the multilingual classroom. Furthermore, the recruitment of qualified teachers, resource allocation, and the design of language policies are crucial aspects that need to be considered. By figuring out and then solving the challenges, it is possible to overcome them, and ensure the successful implementation of multilingual education programs.

### **The Application of Multilingual Education**

There are several models of multilingual education, each with distinct characteristics: bilingual education which entails instruction in two languages providing students with proficiency in both; immersion programs fostering language acquisition in a non-native language environment; dual language programs promoting bilingualism by integrating language-minority and language-majority students in the same classroom, and etc.

Mother tongue-based learning (MTB-MLE) refers to an educational approach where instruction and learning activities are conducted in a student's native language. Student's first language acts as the medium of instruction in the early stages of education gradually introducing the second chosen language in following stages of learning. The inclusion of the program intends students to be familiar with their native language. Essentially, the mother tongue-based learning model also envisions the acquisition of suitable cognitive and rational abilities, helping children to adapt and respond in different vernaculars - beginning with the native language of the child (Tajolosa, 2022).

Similarly, bilingual education (BE) is a form of multilingual education that involves instructing students in two languages. This educational model aims to develop proficiency in languages, typically the student's native language and a second-chosen language. The ma-

ior aspects that differentiate bilingual education from MTB-MLE are: two languages that are used equally in learning in BE, the BE's target of acquiring the second language in an advanced level as the first language of the learner. The success of bilingual education often depends on several factors, such as the quality of instructional materials, teacher training, and the level of support for the learner. The quote "the school does not make the bilingual program effective; neither does the program make the school effective." by Carter and Chatfield (Carter & Chatfield, 1986, as cited in Kirss et al, 2021) supports and highlights the importance of human factors in the learning process.

On top of that, another important component that contributes to the success of the bilingual education model is language immersion. Language immersion is a multilingual education model that involves surrounding students with a target language to facilitate their natural acquisition of that language. Language immersion often uses the target language as the content and medium of instruction and the goal here is to develop bilingual or multilingual proficiency, along with academic achievement. By creating an immersive environment, this approach not only fosters language proficiency but also promotes the effectiveness of cognitive development and intercultural understanding, the factors that were described previously.

### **Multilingual Education in Kazakhstan**

As we navigate the complexities of an evolving global society, embracing multilingual education is not just a choice, but a necessity. In further sections, I would like to describe a country where multilingualism is a wide-spread phenomenon, the Republic of Kazakhstan. Hence, the history of MLE, educational policies, and its prospects will be discussed.

Kazakhstan is a great example of a multilingual country, where individuals can speak more than one language. Multilingual education, which is processing using mother-tongue and one-two targeted language, has gained considerable attention as a means of fostering linguistic proficiency, cultural awareness, and academic success in Kazakhstan, a country where speaking two or more languages is normal. The main goals of the multilingualism policy are to enhance the competitiveness and mobility of the Kazakhstani people, to strengthen the national identity and unity, and to foster cultural diversity and tolerance.

The start of promoting multilingualism in Kazakhstan was the "Trinity of Languages" (2011-2020) program. The First President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, proposed the "Trinity of Languages" (2011-

2020) (Nazarbayev, 2007) program in Kazakhstan in 2007 as an ambitious national initiative aimed at promoting the use of three languages (Kazakh, Russian, and English respectively) in the country with its phases and with the goal of positioning Kazakhstan as a highly educated country. The "Trinity of Languages" (2011–2020) policy in Kazakhstan emphasizes proficiency in three languages: Kazakh, Russian, and English. It was stated by Gulnar Omarbekova that Kazakh as a state language will be used predominantly in all fields of human life including education, Russian language will be considered as a lingua franca, the common language used to communicate between people from different origins, and English Language will be implemented in various spheres as a tool and key to successful integration into the world economy. The major tasks of the "Trinity of Languages" policy were: integration of our country into the world economy and global society, improving the quality and effectiveness of language education with necessary conditions, and optimal balance and harmony of languages in all spheres of public life.

Kazakhstan has been actively working on developing a multilingual education system that reflects the country's linguistic diversity. The government has implemented several programs and initiatives to promote multilingualism in the education system, such as the State Program for the Functioning and Development of Languages for 2011–2020, the National Program for the Implementation of the Language Policy for 2020–2025, and the Trilingual Education Program. Besides, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan is increasing the number of institutions providing e-learning to achieve language policy goals, creating special language knowledge examinations (KA3TECT) and etc. A number of changes are expected by 2025. They are: using Kazakh language in governmental places, increasing the schools with Kazakh language of instruction, and lastly popularizing the Kazakh language. As we can see, these efforts contribute to broader ambitions of integrating Kazakhstan's national education system into the global economic and educational space.

### **The Challenges of MLE in Kazakhstan**

In general, the challenges described earlier in this review are similar to the implementation challenges of multilingual education in Kazakhstan as well since the MLE program both in The Republic of Kazakhstan and the whole world is similar; however, there are certain tasks which relate only to Kazakhstan in this context. Some of the potential challenges Kazakhstani MLE may include: lack of qualified teachers, translation of scientific materials both to and from Kazakh

Language, increase of the native, Kazakh Language interest among the learners, and citizens of Kazakhstan.

The lack of qualified teachers is a significant challenge in Kazakhstani multilingual education. This issue can be attributed to several factors, such as low income of the teachers, absence of qualification trainings, and consequently shortage of trained teachers and etc.

In addition, there are a small number or even inadequate learning materials in Kazakh Language, textbooks and workbooks, can also be a crucial issue in establishing MLE in Kazakhstan. The study by the ENU (Eurasian National University) professors (Zhumay et al, 2021) found out that there is an increasing number of learning materials (school materials, academic works) in Kazakh Language. Providing learning material in native language is significant due to the fact that Kazakh Language represents the Republic of Kazakhstan in international sphere. According to these scholars, it is recommended to create:

a coordinating scientific and methodological Republican centre (institute) for the development of multilingualism, the tasks of which will become: analysis of the language situation in educational institutions; development of the conceptual foundations of multilingual education and training of multilingual staff; organisation of a pedagogical experiment to improve teaching in three languages, as well as dissemination of the results of the experiment and the use of e-learning for effective training of multilingual staff.

To conclude, multilingual education stands for diversity, flexibility, and intellectual richness in the global landscape of learning. Its importance is far beyond the concept of languages acquisition; rather, it fosters cultural understanding, opens avenues for effective communication, and equips individuals with the skills needed to navigate our interconnected world. Giving students a multilingual education is an investment in their future, equipping them with valuable skills to navigate the diverse world with solid human capital.

Multilingualism is a trend in modern Kazakhstan; it is a dynamic force fostering social cohesion and economic progress in the country. Kazakhstan serves as a compelling example of a nation that recognizes and harnesses the power of multilingual education. With its diverse ethnic and linguistic tapestry, Kazakhstan has embraced a comprehensive approach to education that celebrates and integrates the languages spoken by its population. The Kazakh example demonstrates that investing in multilingual education is an investment in

a nation's cultural resilience, economic prosperity, and global influence. This valuable asset that enriches the identity of Kazakhstani people needs to be properly managed, adapted, and modified in education with its full potential. <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4635-4519>

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