

## Educational Borrowing in Kazakhstan

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This article aims to analyze Kazakhstan's experience with educational policy borrowing, focusing on language reforms implemented since its independence in 1991. It reviews existing literature on this topic to examine the three stages in the policy adoption process: passive policy borrowing, haphazard policy transfer, and institutionalized transfer of traded international policies. Moreover, it delves into the reasons behind Kazakhstan's engagement in policy borrowing, highlighting the influence of globalization, modernization, and neoliberalism. Despite the government's aspirations to enhance global competitiveness, the article underscores the problematic aspects of policy borrowing, emphasizing the importance of contextual considerations. The challenges in implementing trilingual education, English medium of instruction (EMI), and Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) are explored, revealing a predominantly top-down approach that sidelines teachers. To address these issues, the article proposes recommendations, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive understanding of the local context, promoting multilingualism, and fostering collaboration between policymakers and educators. The goal is to create a more inclusive, context-sensitive, and sustainable approach to educational reform in Kazakhstan. A key limitation of this review is that it does not cover more recent policies beyond the fall of 2023.

### Introduction

Kazakhstan has undergone significant educational reforms since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. These reforms, guided by the goal of establishing a market economy, were focused on transforming the educational system from government-controlled and funded to a system adaptive to a constantly changing market economy (Kuzhabekova et al., 2018; Yakavets, 2014). As a result, several education-related laws have been introduced, and various international policies and practices have been adopted to underpin this significant transformation (Tlepbergen et al., 2022). This practice of adopting policies is commonly referred to as policy transfer or policy borrowing, defined as the "conscious adoption in one context of a policy observed in another" (Phillips & Ochs, 2004, p. 774). It involves the deliberate transfer of knowledge, ideas, and practices from one context to another (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000). Thus, recognizing and understanding the local context is crucial for successful policy borrowing, particularly in education, where "less developed" countries borrow "tested education reform solutions" (Ali, 2012, p. 1) from "more developed" countries. Educational policy borrowing practices in Kazakhstan particularly impacted language policies. However, these practices are problematic due to significant drawbacks in their planning, enactment, implementation, and evaluation. These language policies were borrowed from various sources with diverse cultural backgrounds and sociopolitical contexts under extreme time limitations (Bridges et al., 2014; Kuzhabekova et al., 2018), making proper interpretation according to the local context challenging. In order to support our claim, this article aims to critically examine Kazakhstan's experience with educational policy borrowing, focusing on language reforms implemented since its independence in 1991. It is structured into five sections: 1) stages of policy borrowing; 2) reasons for borrowing educational policies; 3) reasons why educational policy borrowing is problematic; 4) evidence of implemented educational policies (trilingual policy, EMI, CLIL); 5) recommendations for improvement and implementation.

### Stages of Policy Borrowing in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan has adopted a widely accepted and globally influential political-economic system; hence, many educational reform strategies have emerged outside the country (Silova & Steiner-Khamsi, 2008). The Soviet education system effectively achieved its goal of instilling in students a set of shared political beliefs, values, and knowledge adapted for success in a stable political and economic environment (Kuzhabekova et al., 2018; Silova, 2004; Smolentseva, 2017). On the other hand, Kazakhstan's new educational system aims to produce competitive graduates capable of lifelong learning, critical thinking, and analysis of different points of view and perspectives on economic and socio-political aspects (Karabassova, 2020a). This new system is different from the Soviet-period system, where teachers were expected to be authority figures instilling knowledge, while the reforms now expect teachers to embrace ideologies such as globalization and student-centered learning (Yakavets, 2014; Yakavets et al., 2023).

To achieve its new goal, Kazakhstan sought international solutions to local conditions (Silova, 2004). However, to draw meaningful lessons from other countries, it is crucial to comprehend the processes that take place at each stage in the transfer of policy from one setting to another. For policy-making to be effective, it is essential that the evidence on educational performance is accurately and comprehensively understood within its context because "difficulties ... arise when policy borrowing takes place with no apparent thought to the lending or borrowing context" (Burdett & O'Donnell, 2016, p. 118). As a result, it is important to shed light on the policy borrowing stages in Kazakhstan to understand the implications this holds for schools, but more particularly for teachers who have their own values and beliefs that could be close or far removed from the ideologies underpinning policy borrowing. The process of policy borrowing in Kazakhstan underwent several stages coined as passive policy borrowing, haphazard policy transfer, and institutionalized transfer of traded international policies (Kuzhabekova et al., 2018).

The initial stage, passive policy borrowing, is described by the passive role of the Kazakhstani government in conceptualizing educational policies and borrowing reforms (Silova & Steiner-Khamsi, 2008, as cited in Kuzhabekova et al., 2018). It emerged in the post-Soviet era, marked by a significant reduction in government spending on education in the 1990s. This decline resulted in adverse effects such as declining enrollment rates, increased absenteeism, and a deterioration in the overall quality of education, including factors such as a decrease in the number of qualified teachers, insufficient teaching materials, outdated curricula, and physical deterioration of school infrastructure (Chapman et al., 2005; Silova, 2004). To prevent further deterioration, the government borrowed educational policies and obtained loans from international agencies, predominantly guided by the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (Bridges et al., 2014). Thus, in the early years of independence, marked by the economic crisis and public resource deficits, Kazakhstan's "quest for quality" (Chapman et al., 2005) led to the passive adoption of a donor-offered package known as 'traveling reforms' (Silova & Steiner-Khamsi, 2008, p. 2). Notably, the conceptualization of these educational policies played a secondary role during this phase.

The second stage, haphazard policy transfer, characterized the post-1999 era when Kazakhstan aimed for more donor independence. During that period, Kazakhstan took more significant authorship of policy solutions by "developing its own national agenda for change" (Bridges et al., 2014) and was considered the most donor-independent country in Central Asia (Kalikova & Silova, 2008). Despite this, the government continued to rely on international approaches as it sought to create education systems that met the 'international standard,' symbolizing "Kazakhstan's movement towards" new "European education standards" (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2006, p. 235). However, problems remained with this policy approach to borrowing, contributing to haphazard implementation. The government's involvement was usually limited to high-level tasks such as defining the agenda, assigning responsibilities, and setting deadlines. The critical details of how to implement these policies were left in the hands of educational practitioners. This approach resulted in a lack of specificity, meaning that policies were not clearly and comprehensively defined, requiring each participant to independently navigate and interpret international experience. In response, practitioners sometimes adopted only superficial formulations of reform or selectively transferred and adapted approaches, often deviating significantly from the original (Bridges et al., 2014; Steiner-Khamsi, 2005; Yakavets, 2014).

Describing this period metaphorically, Steiner-Khamsi (2005) likened policymakers to an "octopus, grabbing the first floating international solution to a domestic problem and attaching local meanings to global policies" (p. 156). Meanwhile, Merrill (2011) characterized the outcome as "kasha" - in Russian, "porridge" - due to many ill-conceived and incoherent reforms (Merrill, 2011, p. 6).

The third stage, the institutionalized transfer of traded international policies, emerged after 2008 when Kazakhstan responded to the perceived inefficiency of the Ministry of Education by establishing a parallel system for educational reform. This led to a more systematic and institutionalized approach to international borrowing (Fimyar et al., 2014). This parallel system, created between 2008 and 2011, includes various organizations and agencies tasked with identifying, translating, piloting, adapting, modeling, and disseminating international best practices in the education system. Three organizations play a vital role in this parallel system: Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS), responsible for a network of schools and organizations teaching in three languages (Kazakh, Russian, English) for gifted children; Kasipkor Holding, a non-profit, joint stock company overseeing reforms in vocational education; and Nazarbayev University (NU), an English-medium university striving for world-class status (Kuzhabekova et al., 2018). The government provided these flagships with modern equipment, significant financial resources, autonomy from the Ministry of Education and Science, and access to Western partners' expertise (Fimyar, 2014).

In addition, at this stage, unlike earlier stages characterized by passive or haphazard borrowing, Kazakhstan is actively positioning itself as a discerning "buyer" of international decisions and policies (Kuzhabekova et al., 2018). They invest significant amounts of money in consulting and partnerships to obtain what they perceive as "exclusive" and "high-quality products" from respected international partners (Kuzhabekova et al., 2018). Thus, Kazakhstan's path to policy borrowing for education reform has gone through separate stages, each of which reflects the developing dynamics of the national approach, from passive adoption to "buying" a policy suitable for Kazakhstan. In the next section, we delve into the reasons for adopting education policy in Kazakhstan, shedding light on the motivations and objections.

### Reasons for Borrowing Educational Policies

In order to understand the policy borrowing processes, it is essential to examine the rationale behind Kazakhstan's engagement in educational policy borrowing and borrowing English policies in particular. Kazakhstan's decision to engage in borrowing educational policies was affected by a number of factors, including globalization, modernization, and neoliberalism (Agbo et al., 2022; Agbo et al., 2023; Sayer, 2019). Globalization involves a process of standardization that makes all communities similar, but with less developed societies aligning more closely with developed societies than the other way around (Agbo et al., 2023).

According to Steiner-Khamsi (2014), in the age of globalization, borrowing policies is rather a norm than an anomaly. The policy stream becomes accessible to political figures and those making decisions in the shape of global benchmarks, the best practices, or takeaways from the educational systems of other countries (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014). Thus, developing countries engage in policy borrowing out of a desire to reach the same level of development and prosperity as 'international benchmark' societies (Graves, 2008).

In Kazakhstan, globalization can be considered a key catalyst for borrowing educational policies and obtaining English programs in particular (Robertson & Dale, 2015, as cited in Agbo et al., 2023).

Moreover, countries like Kazakhstan, which are on the receiving end of policy transfer, believe that English programs symbolize modernization (Sayer, 2019) and lead to the increase of citizens' human capital. For example, the early introduction of English in primary schools reflects the pressure from larger neoliberal forces in that (Sayer, 2019) the governments believe that the productivity of human resources can be increased through proper education (in English) and training (Becker, 1993; Tan, 2014). Overall, it can be assumed that the main reason for adopting English programs in Kazakhstan was to enhance its global competitiveness.

### **Evidence of Implemented Educational Policies (Trilingual Policy, EMI, CLIL)**

There are various examples of borrowed educational policies in the Kazakhstani context (Karabassova, 2020b). In this section, we emphasize the implementation of Trilingual policy, English medium of instruction (EMI), and content and language-integrated learning (CLIL) as the most significant evidence of educational policy borrowing. Karabassova (2020b) pointed out that Kazakhstan was a pioneer among Central Asian nations and post-Soviet countries that utilized three languages as a medium of instruction for various educational disciplines. Thus, this progressive initiative was integral to the country's ambitious language-in-education policy. Trilingual education is the primary educational reform in Kazakhstan that encompasses all educational levels ranging from pre-school to graduate studies. The former president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, stated that the rationale of this new language ideology was a cultural project named 'Trinity of languages.' In addition, he argued that Kazakhstan can learn from indicated other European countries where multilingualism is seen as a norm; and Asian countries, namely China, India, Singapore, and Malaysia, where English is enthusiastically learned (Karabassova, 2020a). The Kazakh government adopted and mandated the use of three languages, namely Kazakh as a state language, Russian as the primary mode of interethnic communication, and English employed as the fundamental medium for assimilation into the global economy. The Government implemented various measures to promote extensive proficiency in Kazakh, Russian, and English from the commencement of the project. Numerous educational institutions, such as 29 Bilim-innovation lyceums (BIL), 33 trilingual 'Daryn' schools, and 20 Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS), were designated or established explicitly as trilingual schools (Manan et al., 2023).

However, Shamshidinova et al. (2014) found that the schools referred to as 'trilingual' did not result in the realization of advanced proficiency in the three languages among the student population. Even though the policy was unsuccessful, the Ministry of Education (MoES) suggested expanding the number of trilingual schools from 110 to 700 (Karabassova, 2020a). Thus, former President Nazarbayev suggested implementing trilingual education in mainstream schools, teaching Kazakh culture, history, and literature in Kazakh language and Russian as a subject. Furthermore,

teaching science subjects in English in high school and this shift to English medium instruction (EMI) in upper-secondary schools and educational institutions was one of the steps indicated in the policy document 'The Plan of the Nation: The Path to the Kazakhstan Dream' (Karabassova, 2020a).

However, the implementation of trilingual education, although intended to be effective, fell short of expectations and became a mere formality. The primary concern was the insufficient English language proficiency among the faculty and the students (Karabassova, 2020a). The creation of suitable educational programs and teaching and learning resources in the English language would accompany the introduction of EMI. In the 2017-2018 academic year, it was anticipated that within major universities preparing personnel for the State program of industrial-innovation development, six areas of study would transition to utilizing English as the primary medium of instruction (Karabassova, 2020a). The teacher programs in mainstream schools in Kazakhstan emphasize and prioritize the importance of English proficiency rather than the focus on the pedagogy of CLIL. Consequently, the trilingual policy faced significant challenges in implementation, particularly due to the lack of emphasis on effective teaching methodologies. The second policy borrowing example was the use of English in STEM subjects referred to as CLIL. CLIL is an educational methodology wherein an extra language is utilized for teaching curriculum disciplines. This methodology's justification is that students acquire a profound familiarity with the desired language by studying meaningful subject matter facilitated by it (Muñoz, 2002). The findings of previous studies revealed that the challenges that arise in implementing CLIL include the acceptance and incorporation of the integrated nature of the curriculum, inadequate training in methodology, scarcity of teaching resources, and teachers' linguistic proficiency (Karabassova, 2020a). Meanwhile, Karabassova's (2020b) findings demonstrated that teachers must possess a proficient mastery of the desired language, increasing their confidence in delivering content instruction.

It is imperative to establish more precise criteria for the linguistic capabilities of CLIL teachers, drawing from their personal experiences and incorporating them into their professional development. Thus, implementing various policies in Kazakhstan highlighted a predominantly top-down approach, sidelining teachers from the policymaking process as they were not consulted during the execution of these measures. Consequently, teachers faced numerous challenges in implementing these policies, finding them neither rational nor meaningful. As a result, the Kazakhstani context has not witnessed the successful outcomes intended by these implementations.

### **Reasons Why Educational Policy Borrowing is Problematic**

While Kazakhstan has actively implemented various borrowed educational policies, their effectiveness is challenged by deeper structural issues. More specifically, engaging in policy borrowing is problematic if the contextual factors at the local level are not considered (Burdett & O'Donnell, 2016; Steiner-Khamsi, 2013). According to the dependency theory, when 'Third World' nations are

subjected to the values, socioeconomic and political impact of industrially developed nations, they yield to the exploitation of these countries and remain poor (Frank, 1972; Santos, 1973, as cited in Agbo et al., 2023). For example, developed nations use less developed countries by extracting their resources through colonial ties (Agbo et al., 2023). In Kazakhstan, we can see a move from the Soviet ties to Western ones with the early introduction of English and EMI, which might result in brain drainage to more developed English-speaking countries. However, only students with exceptional academic achievements, who usually come from more affluent layers of society, leave. The chances of less affluent students to receive quality education in English are limited by the hidden curriculum of English, suggesting that “the inclusion of English in early grades in public schools does not, in and of itself, change the underlying educational processes that remain heavily stratified along class lines” (Sayer, 2019, p. 38). This challenges the “myth of international English” (Pennycook, 2007, p. 90), which refers to the “misconception that widespread learning of English can help alleviate poverty” (Sayer, 2019, p. 57). Thus, the early introduction of English to all students without considering their language proficiency and socioeconomic background might limit the students’ rights to develop literacy and critical thinking in their mother tongues because their parents might prioritize education in English, driven by a false hope for a more successful future. When the borrowed policy does not fully fit the context, the correct implementation can improve the situation.

However, in Kazakhstan, educational changes were mainly mandated, and the specialist approach to curriculum implementation has been used (Johnsons, 1989, as cited in Graves, 2006). Thus, teachers’ funds of knowledge (FoK), including their disciplinary knowledge and personal knowledge of the local context gained through experience, are being ignored (Banegas, 2022; Moje et al., 2004). This oversight leads to several issues: teachers’ readiness and English proficiency levels might be low, leading to reduced effectiveness of the new policy. In addition, policies are not discussed or negotiated, which could lead to the emergence of faulty maps of change (Fullan & Miles, 1992), when each stakeholder has a different idea of how policies should work. For this reason, teachers experience negative emotions because they are not provided with sufficient time and opportunities to comprehend a change before being required to put it into practice (Clement, 2014). As a result, mandated change often ignores the unprepared classrooms, and the differences in stakeholders’ views that could result in a policy-practice disconnect and limited implementation of new reforms in classrooms. Overall, borrowing educational policies can be problematic when the contextual peculiarities are not considered.

### **Recommendations for Improvement and Implementation**

The challenges associated with language policy borrowing in Kazakhstan highlight the need for a comprehensive and context-sensitive approach to educational reform. Recognizing the limitations of imposed changes and the potential disconnection between policy intentions and classroom realities, our proposed curriculum aims to

bridge these gaps and enhance the effectiveness of language education in Kazakhstan.

Firstly, understanding the local context is crucial. Our initial recommendation focuses on unpacking the lived experiences, beliefs, orientations, and Funds of Knowledge (FoK) of teachers who are leading adopters of educational change. Banegas (2022) emphasizes the significance of local FoK as a powerful resource for “educational transformation and growth” (p. 698). In a similar vein, Bedeker et al. (2023) advocate for creating a hybrid third space for teachers to reflect on their pedagogical beliefs and FoK and explore the ways to use their local practices to navigate the innovations. This approach could enable policymakers to understand and align the unique local context with policies, fostering a more inclusive, collaborative, and socially aware approach to policy-making and borrowing.

Furthermore, overlooking the readiness of teachers and students in terms of English proficiency in CLIL science classes and the constant pressure of benchmarking language skills against native English may impede the effective implementation of language policies. Therefore, the promotion of a multilingual curriculum, particularly through translanguaging pedagogies (Gorter & Cenoz, 2017), is crucial. Encouraging the use of a full language repertoire enhances both content knowledge delivery and language skills, aligning with the diverse linguistic landscape. Finally, recognizing how change works is crucial for all stakeholders involved in educational change (Fullan, 2002), not solely for teachers. Burns and Joyce (2007) suggest that when any innovation is proposed in educational contexts, the stakeholders may play different social roles, such as agents of change, adopters, or resisters. Therefore, for effective policy adoption, it is important to create incentives for teachers (Kuzhabekova et al., 2017). While teacher involvement is critical to successful educational change (Hargreaves, 1994, as cited in Graves, 2008), teachers cannot solely create and sustain curriculum changes. Numerous studies emphasize the significance of both top-down and bottom-up processes for curriculum development and innovation (Markee, 1997; Rice, 2007; Stoller, 1997; Wu, 2002, as cited in Graves, 2008). The stakeholders at higher levels, including the Ministry of Education, regional decision-makers, and school administration, should commit to change and promote comprehensive communication with the stakeholders at the grassroots level. These grassroots stakeholders, including teachers and students, should be provided with adequate time, resources, and professional development opportunities to adopt the innovations. Meanwhile, when new hybrid practices emerge they should be able to inform and propose changes at a policy level. Simultaneously, authorities should be responsive to guide, scaffold, and address emerging classroom challenges and practices for meaningful and sustainable educational change aligned with local realities.

Moreover, to ensure an even smoother transition, critical, project-based learning for pre-service teacher training (López-Gopar, 2016) is suggested, providing practical experiences for future educators.

To conclude, addressing the challenges of language policy borrowing in Kazakhstan requires a nuanced and context-sensitive educational reform. Our proposed curriculum strives to bridge gaps by prioritizing a deep

understanding of the local context, promoting a multi-lingual curriculum, and recognizing the dynamics of change.

However, this paper analyzes major language policies adopted in Kazakhstan since 1991, up until the fall of 2023. Thus, a key limitation of this review is that it does not cover more recent policies. Overall though, successful implementation depends on the commitment of stakeholders at all levels, from the Ministry of Education to grassroots teachers and students. Hence, aligning policies with local realities is crucial for meaningful and sustainable educational change in Kazakhstan.

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