

English language choices in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract

This article examines English language choice amidst dynamic social and linguistic change contexts in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Kazakhstan has formally committed to an official trilingual language policy – Kazakh, Russian, and English. In comparison, Kyrgyzstan has a dual language policy – Kyrgyz and Russian. However, its Ministry of Education and Science has demonstrated an informal commitment to developing English competency in-country through various English language teaching/learning initiatives. Using data collected between 2014 and 2017 in both countries, this article explores how English language teaching/learning is positioned differently in these two Central Asian Republics, while also aiming to understand how participants' language choices were informed both by the particularities of their contexts and the intersectional nature of language choice.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Since becoming independent in 1991, the five Central Asian Republics – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – have been undergoing dynamic processes of socio-cultural-political change, which have informed a number of policies that have been produced, including their language and education policies. In all five republics, the language of the titular nationality is the official language and Russian is often the *de facto* language of wider communication. Moreover, as the countries look to develop deeper ties to the global economy, English has increasingly come to represent moves toward modernisation and/or internationalisation.

In Kazakhstani policy domains, this was reflected in the explicit inclusion of English into its language policies – Law on the Languages in the Republic of Kazakhstan and later the Trinity of Languages policy (Republic of Kazakhstan, 1997/2006). The explicit incorporation of English into the country's national language policy, the goal to increase the percentage of the population who speak English between 2011 and 2020 (MoES, 2011, 2010), and the government's stated aspiration to become one of the top 30 global economies by 2050 (OECD, 2015) closely links the country's

economic and linguistic aspirations. In contrast, in Kyrgyzstan – Kyrgyz Republic – while English is not formally a part of the country's official language policy there is a general acknowledgement regarding the value of English language competency. However, because of a different socio-demographic dynamic in comparison to Kazakhstan and the strength of the country's remittance economy, such factors have mitigated the primacy of English to being one of several languages which are seen as international languages. And while English is formally and informally acknowledged as being valuable for the citizenry of both countries, among researchers, the positionality of English has not been closely examined. Put another way, in scholarship around language policy and planning efforts in Central Asia broadly, English as both a site as well as means for understanding things like power asymmetries, has not been problematised in the scholarship. This is because language policy and planning research regarding Central Asia broadly – or what Pavlenko (2013) referred to as first and second wave post-Soviet sociolinguistics and sociology of language research – has largely fallen into two main categories. The first category of research focuses on macro-level language policy, politics, and planning efforts (Bahry et al., 2008, 2017; Landau & Kellner-Heinkele, 2001). The second category focuses on language revitalisation processes which emerged following the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Smagulova, 2016a, 2017). While these scholarly works have contributed to sociolinguistics, sociology, education, and political science research about language shift and change in the region, theorizing around the role of English specifically (and in the post-Soviet space writ large) remains under-researched. Subsequently, despite differences in how the two Central Asian Republics have approached national-level language policy making, this article demonstrates how participants from both countries imbued English with what Park (2015, p. 454) calls the 'ideology of pure potential,' whereby language is construed to be a 'medium of pure potentiality that allows a speaker to achieve anything' they wanted. However, when looking then at the broader socio-economic context in which the participants were situated, it is clear that the economic trajectories of the two countries are creating different conditions in which that potentiality may (or may not) be realised.

Drawing from field work data collected in Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic between 2014 and 2017, this article explores: (1) how the ideology of pure potential underpins the positionality and value of English – and other languages – as seen in the participants' attitudes; and (2) how those attitudes reflect the structural-institutional-economic constraints in which they were situated. Conceptually, this article explores the argument that scholars like Tupas and Rubdy (2015) have articulated regarding the need to move beyond the colonial/post-colonial structure that underpinned and ultimately constrained the world Englishes (WE) paradigm to considering concepts like 'unequal Englishes' in the Central Asian context. For Tupas and Rubdy (2015, p. 3), using the concept of unequal Englishes is situated against the backdrop of the 'colonial present' where 'English continues to be deployed across unequal learning and multilingual spaces.' To better understand the unequal in 'unequal Englishes,' the article also draws from Park's (2015) notion of 'language as pure potential' and the way neoliberalism deploys language ideologies as ways of providing a vision for how people can realise their whole potential in a global economy.

2 | BACKGROUND

This section provides a general overview of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, their language policies, and the relationship of English both formally and informally at the macro and micro-levels.

2.1 | Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is a country of approximately 18.2 million people (World Bank, 2020a). Following a significant population slump in the 1990s after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there has since been a gradual increase in the overall population. In terms of ethnicity, 68% reported being Kazakh, 19.3% Russian, 3.2% Uzbek, and 10% other (CIA, 2020a). In total, there are over 100 different nationalities represented in the country. In terms of land area, it is the ninth largest country in the world. The juxtaposition of these two things foregrounds the low population density in-country



FIGURE 1 Map of Kazakhstan [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Source: <https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/commonwealth/kazakhstan.jpg>

in general, certain urban areas – Almaty (former capital) and Nur-Sultan (capital) have been steadily growing due to factors like changing labor markets and greater access to education opportunities (Figure 1).

Economically, Kazakhstan is considered an upper middle-income country with a gross domestic product of US\$170.9 billion in 2019 (World Bank, 2020a). While its primary industry remains in oil and natural gas, efforts to diversify its economy have included increased investment in its higher education infrastructure and growing interest in areas like medical technologies, artificial intelligence, and information technology. These initiatives started by the first president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, have been further developed by his successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. It is worth noting that since 1991, Kazakhstan has had only two presidents and experienced little socio-political unrest. Although there have been protests and seasons of unrest – for example, the 2011 Zhanaozen oil field protests – Kazakhstan has avoided mass civil unrest that was ethnically-motivated or informed due to various efforts to mitigate potential secession-type activities, for example, the moving of the capital city from Almaty to Akmola (now Nur-Sultan) in 1997, along with significant shifts in the socio-demographics of its population with steady increases in the titular group – Kazakhs – and decreases in others.

The official language of the country is Kazakh as per Kazakhstan’s Constitution, with Russian holding the status of language of wider/interethnic communication, and English as an international language (Beisenova, 2013). In terms of language reporting, 83.1% of people report they can speak or understand Kazakh, 22.3% state that they are trilingual in Kazakh, Russian, and English, with 94.4% noting that they can understand spoken Russian (CIA, 2020a). The distinguishing of Kazakh, Russian, and English is in relation to the government’s trilingual policy – the *Trinity of*

Languages policy – which formally prioritises these languages in various domains (Republic of Kazakhstan, 1997/2006). According to the Kazakhstani Constitution and the Law on Languages, access to free public education is a right for all Kazakhstani citizens and the language of instruction (LOI) is Russian or Kazakh, with English taught as a foreign language and/or a content-specific language as aforementioned (Republic of Kazakhstan (RoK), 1993/2017, 1997/2006). This policy began to be operationalised in the Ministry of Education and Science's (MoES) (2011) (2010) education strategy and increased implementation starting in 2015 (MoES, 2015). In terms of English, language planning activities have included teaching STEM classes in English in primary and secondary schools and support for greater English language capacity for teachers. This targeted English LOI approach being incorporated into different areas of schooling is situated within a broader education landscape.

2.2 | Kyrgyz Republic

With a population of 6.5 million people, the Kyrgyz Republic is a landlocked and mostly mountainous Central Asian country that neighbors Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and China (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2016). While most of the country is mountainous, urban areas like Bishkek and Osh are densely populated. In terms of the ethnic make-up of the country, the largest nationalities are the Kyrgyz (73.5%), Uzbek (14.7%), Russian (5.5%) and others (6.3%) (CIA, 2020b). Different ethnolinguistic groups have historically resided across current nation-state boundaries, for example, the Ferghana Valley spans across Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan in the southern part of Kyrgyzstan and has concentrations of Uzbeks. This is compared to the majority of ethnically Kyrgyz residents in northern oblasts (or areas) like Naryn, Talas and Chuy (Figure 2).

In terms of its economy, Kyrgyzstan is a lower middle-income country with a GDP of US\$8.5 billion in 2019 (World Bank, 2020b). While there is a strong agriculture sector in-country (produce, cotton, wool, and meat), there has been investment in its green energy and tourism sectors as well. However, in contrast to Kazakhstan, anywhere from 25 to 38% of the Kyrgyz Republic's GDP comes from labor remittances and the government receives between 3 to 5% GDP from donor agencies to support areas like education, social welfare programs, and infrastructure development. Also, unlike Kazakhstan – which is less densely populated and does not have a geographically dense concentration of non-Kazakh ethnolinguistic groups – the combination of a statistically significant Uzbek minority and geographic concentration in the south, has created a different dynamic between the titular groups and others. There have been historical conflicts between different Kyrgyz and Uzbek populations, most recently in 2010, which resulted in outbreaks of violence throughout the country. Because of this tension, the Kyrgyz government in partnership with international non-governmental bodies like the UN Peace Building Fund, has worked to invest in different areas that would foster greater dialogue and mitigate discontent by providing access to linguistic capital and education opportunities (Ahn, 2016).

After 1991, Kyrgyz became the official language of the country and remains its *de jure* state language (Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, 1993/2007/2010). As the state language, Kyrgyz is a requirement for public service, official government communication, and is essential for participating in public life. Additionally, in the 2010 amending of the Constitution, Russian was made an official language along with Kyrgyz (Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, 1993/2007/2010). Prior to 2010, while Russian was recognised as a language of wider communication, it was only later approved as an official language (Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2004). In terms of language reporting, 71.4% stated that they speak Kyrgyz, 14.4% Uzbek, 9% Russian, and 5.2% other (CIA, 2020b). In terms of education language of instruction (LOI), schools may be Kyrgyz, Russian, or minority languages (when numbers warrant). To provide a snapshot of the LOI of schools, in the 2009–2010 academic year (AY), the LOI of schools was as follows: 1,379 Kyrgyz; 162 Russian; 137 Uzbek; seven Tajik; and 449 mixed LOI schools, with two or more LOIs (Bahry et al., 2017). In AY 2011–2012, the makeup of the mixed schools shifted so that Kyrgyz–Russian, Kyrgyz–Uzbek, and Kyrgyz–Uzbek–Russian LOI schools made up 19.7% of all schools (Bahry et al., 2017). In the Kyrgyz context, English is usually taught as a foreign language and not as a primary language of instruction.



FIGURE 2 Map of the Kyrgyz Republic (Retrieved from http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/commonwealth/kyrgyzstan_trans-2005.jpg) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

From a broad perspective, the language policies of Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic are situated in a socio-economic context in which both countries are also experiencing broader demographic shifts due to myriad factors. Factors include: outbound migration of Russians and other non-titular nationalities, declining marriage rates, drastic drop-offs in birth rates, and urbanisation, along with facing the monumental task of building new socio-political-economic systems for the nascent nation-states (Koenig, 2000; Kuznetsova, 2001; Smagulova, 2016a; Wright, 2000). Although both countries’ educational policies and institutions still exhibit vestiges of a Soviet legacy, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have followed different structural socio-economic reform paths since the 1990s. Shaping these paths included differences in their socio-economic-political positioning in the global economy, as well as the reality of population distribution, country size, and inequity that disproportionately impacted statistically significant ethnolinguistic minorities. It follows then that as macro-level structural changes were being implemented – the economy, (im)migration policies, (higher) education system reform, politics – this then had downstream impacts for young people regarding what they could have access to both in terms of schooling but also more longer-term regarding their career aspirations.

3 | THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Language policy and planning research situated in Central Asia has largely focused on macro-level language policy, politics, and planning efforts, along with research focusing on language revitalisation processes following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Examples of this type of research include Bahry et al. (2017), which provided an overview of the ideological underpinnings that guided language policy-making processes in Central Asia during the Soviet period and

into the early years of the nascent post-Soviet republics. As Bahry et al. (2017) noted, during the Soviet period there was promotion of the languages of different ethnolinguistic groups. However, in the later years, the policies were characterised by processes of *sblizhenie* ('getting closer') and *sliianie* ('merging') of ethnolinguistic groups for the purpose of merging differences within the primarily Russian-speaking Soviet population and creating a singular Soviet identity (Raby, 1996; Smagulova & Ahn, 2016). However, the vestiges of these ideological underpinnings may be seen in the privileging of the 'one language, one nation' concept in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan which has served to privilege each country's respective titular languages. Thus, language policy and planning in the post-Soviet context has largely focused on scaffolding and privileging titular languages as part of their process of constructing new nation-state narratives (Smagulova & Ahn, 2016).

Not only can evidence of Soviet language ideologies be seen in status quo language policies but they continue to be realised in and through schools as well. This is particularly true in the maintenance of the Soviet approach toward 'multilingual education' whereby partitions are created within schools by separating grades into different language of instruction 'tracks.' On the one hand, this has allowed minorities like Uzbeks (outside of Uzbekistan) to provide schooling in the Uzbek language. However, this also meant that the lack of access to the majority language(s) could constrain their opportunities in public life. This then begs the question 'What if the facilitation of minority languages actually constrains those communities from having access to the state language?' This is an example of how privileging of linguistic rights may lead to being 'multiply marginalised,' that is, where one is a member of an ethnic minority and whose home language as well as LOI is their titular language, and subsequently experiences varying degrees of socio-economic discrimination or inequitable access to different social services (May, 2018).

Through the privileging of the titular languages, both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan exemplify what May (2008, 2018) refers to as 'public nationalism' concurrently promoted with 'public monolingualism,' where a particular (rather than pluralistic) linguistic identity is indexed to a civic identity. Regardless of the provision of minority language education, as de Varennes (1996, p. 86) argued, by 'imposing a language requirement, the state shows a definite preference towards some individuals on the basis of language' because ultimately, the state language becomes the condition for full participation and access to public services and benefits. Alternatively, May (2008) argued that constructing a 'public multilingualism' would in fact allow minorities to speak their languages both in public and private. Concomitantly however, minorities also need access to the majority language because 'access to standardised language varieties is pivotal to educational and wider social mobility, all the more important for those who are linguistically (and educationally) marginalized' (May, 2018, p. 70). Underlyingly, the premise for these arguments was the idea that '[L]inguistic identities – and social and cultural identities more broadly – need not be constructed as irredeemably oppositional' (May, 2008, p. 26). This moves beyond the appeal to an acontextual entitlement of individual linguistic rights to an institutionalisation of the acknowledgement that the material realities in which language speakers are situated impact their lived experiences. While May (2008, 2018) provides theoretical considerations that could be applied to policy-making processes, scholars like Stroud (2018a, 2018b) and Wee (2018) have argued that focusing on systems and macro-level language policy and their constraints ignores the creativity and individual agency that speakers exercise in their everyday lives. Drawing from the work of Fraser (1995), Stroud (2018b, p. 21) posited that by moving past the notion of linguistic human rights and toward the idea of linguistic citizenship, this shifts the location of agency and voice and helps re-form/reconstruct social relationships in a more emancipatory manner.

Theorizing language policy, planning and practices in the Central Asian context using these -isms – public nationalism, public monolingualism, public multilingualism – and linguistic citizenship helps create an analytic framework. However, while this helps understand the ideologies informing the policies and practices that are emerging around titular and heritage languages, what it does not explain is the rise of English in the region. While Russian does remain an essential language of wider communication throughout the FSU countries, in the past 30 years, English has emerged as a key policy priority at the macro-level and aspirational objective at the micro-level in the region. While Kazakhstan is the only country to have its trilingual policy which includes English, in 2020, Uzbekistan launched its 'English Speaking Nation' policy, which articulated a path for Uzbek citizens to develop English language competencies through the compulsory education system through university. While the governments of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and

Kyrgyzstan have not instituted English as an official language, all three governments have permitted English language education through organisations like the British Council, American Councils for International Education, the US State Department's American Corners and English Language Fellows programs, as well as through US Peace Corps volunteers (Bolander, 2015; Hasanova, 2007a, 2007b; Tyson & Abdysheva, this volume).

When applying the world Englishes (WE) paradigm to the Central Asian context, the republics may be considered Expanding Circle countries with their move toward institutionalising the teaching of English in compulsory education. In addition to examining different English language contexts with its concentric circles heuristic, WE scholarship also introduces the idea of linguistic agency into the study of different varieties of English and the relationship between that linguistic agency and structures of power. This article builds on WE scholarship and the acknowledgement of linguistic agency and creativity as evidenced in the emergence of different varieties of English in colonial/post-colonial contexts (Tupas & Rubdy, 2015). However, the article also adopts the argument set out by Tupas (2019) and Tupas and Rubdy (2015) who have argued that there is a need to study English in the contexts in which it is emplaced and also posit a shift from world Englishes to unequal Englishes. This is similar to what Shohamy (2010, p. 183) argued, that language '[P]olicies cannot be limited to certain agents and stakeholders but must be contextualised within a broader sociopolitical and economic ecology.' Looking at the 'Philippine English' context, Tupas (2019, p. 4) outlined six factors that characterise the 'Philippine' in Philippine English. This includes: inequalities of multilingualism; robust regional ethnolinguistic loyalties; the enduring legacy of colonialism; a globalised political economy; cultural dispositions; and the country's class-based social structure. The driving argument behind moving from WE to unequal Englishes is then to widen the aperture of the study of English beyond the linguistic and the speaker to the broader context in which both the speaker and the language are located and the material implications of that reality (Tupas, 2019). Of particular interest in this article is examining how access to English, as well as language ideologies, reveals socio-economic inequalities which are emerging in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. This is underpinned by Tupas and Rubdy's (2015, p. 15) position that the 'focus on inequalities could bring our attention back to why Englishes and agency can empower us only if we locate them in the colonial present.' The concept of the colonial present then creates space to problematise how the vestiges of colonial histories – and not ones that were in the Inner Circle – then continue to reproduce socio-economic inequities in countries through 'new' means like access to English language education.

Further exacerbating inequalities in the region, we adopt Park's (2015, p. 454) argument regarding the 'language as pure potential,' which is a 'view of language as a completely neutral tool for conveying messages in an unadulterated way, a pure medium of potentiality that allows a speaker to achieve anything she wishes to.' Within his argument, Park (2015, p. 455) posits that language – English – may 'be seen as a powerful means of fully realizing the potential ability of individuals in the global stage.' In this way, a particular type of multilingualism then:

is seen as facilitating [the] full realization of the speaker's potential ability by allowing the speaker to move beyond the constraints of her culture and community, reaching many people and traversing multiple markets to explore greater opportunities, no longer stifled by the boundaries imposed by [an] essentialized identity and becoming whatever she needs to be. (Park, 2015, p. 455)

The Central Asian Republics – specifically Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in this article – contribute to the expansion of the scholarship about English in the world by examining how language attitudes and ideologies among the various participants reveals the dominance of the ideology of language as potential, the growing inequalities that are evidenced by issues of access and accelerated by the shift toward market economies, and the diffusion of neoliberal ideologies.

4 | METHODOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

This article draws from data that was collected as part of studies conducted between 2014 and 2017 focusing on language change, policy, and planning in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Although the priority objectives of the

studies varied, they were all underpinned by the aim to examine issues of access, equity, and identity through the lens of language and education. Survey data for the earliest study was collected in spring 2014 from 29 schools in seven districts in the city of Almaty, Kazakhstan. The surveys were distributed in Russian and Kazakh – participants were given the survey in the formal language of their classroom. The surveys were designed based on similar exploratory language and education-focused projects conducted in urban environments (Ahn & Smagulova, 2020; Extra & Yağmur, 2004; OECD, 2014; Smagulova, 2008). Interview data was collected between 2015 and 2017 among two Kazakhstani minority groups – Dungans and Koreans – to explore their language attitudes and ideologies within the broader and dynamic socio-cultural-political context they were situated in (Ahn, 2019; Smagulova, 2016b). In the Kyrgyz context, data was collected as part of a program evaluation for the multilingual component of a UN-funded program to foster social cohesion following the in-country ethnic conflicts in 2010. Survey, key stakeholder interviews, and focus group data were collected from 14 schools across six regions (oblasts) in four languages – Kyrgyz, Russian, Tajik, and Uzbek.

4.1 | Participants

In the survey that was conducted in Almaty schools, there were a total of 2,954 respondents. Across the two studies looking at Kazakhstani minority experiences, there were a total of 50 interviewees. And in the survey and focus group data collected across Kyrgyzstan, there were 673 respondents to the survey and 382 participants in the focus groups and key stakeholder interviews. To provide a cross-section of the linguistic repertoires of the participants, people reported their native language in similar (and different) ways. In the case of Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek participants, they often reported their native language as their titular language. However, in the case of Russian and Korean participants, they all reported their native language as being Russian.

4.2 | Eliciting English language-related data

As aforementioned, while the express focus of the studies that this article drew from was not around English language usage or language ideology, the data collection instruments were designed to include questions that provided cross-sectional glimpses into language attitudes and use which included English. Examples of relevant questions which were asked on surveys distributed in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan included:

- Please check the official language used at the different levels of education you have finished.
- Do you participate in education activities outside of school (for example, tutoring, programs, test preparation, IELTS/TOEFL class)? If yes, what domains (tutoring, state examination preparation, IELTS/TOEFL, other)?
- How many hours per week do you attend additional lessons?
- Please evaluate your level of proficiency for all the languages you know in speaking, reading, and writing (range: fluently, with difficulty, not fluent).
- How did you primarily learn the languages you know? Formally? Informally? Other?

In the studies with interviews and focus groups, participants were also asked questions that were designed to broadly explore their language attitudes and ideologies. Questions included ones like ‘What do you consider your mother tongue?’ as well as:

- What language should children learn as a secondary language? *Какой язык должны дети учить во вторую очередь?*

- If you could choose which language your child will study at school, which language would you choose? Why? You can choose several languages: *Если бы Вы выбрали, на каком языке ребенок будет учиться в школе, какой язык вы бы выбрали? Почему? Вы можете выбрать несколько языков:*

Although the data for this article was collected as parts of different studies, and subsequently, the sampling methods varied, one of the limitations of this article is the generalisability of its findings and conclusions to a broader population of language speakers and users in the region. However, this limitation is mitigated by the use of similar questions across the studies. While the conclusions drawn from this article may not subsequently be generalisable, they do provide empirically based insight into a cross-section of language attitudes, ideologies, and practices within a proximal time frame.

5 | FINDINGS

For coherence sake, this section was organised by country and study to provide more focused ‘snapshots’ of language attitudes related to English.

5.1 | English access, opportunities, and engagement in Kazakhstan

Considering that the data for this study was collected before the Kazakhstani MoES's (2015) substantive initiative to more aggressively implement the trilingual policy in schools, there was a relatively high percentage of survey respondents who reported that they had some interaction with English language education. The majority of the participants reported their native/mother tongue as aligning with their stated nationality; however, 13 students did indicate their mother tongue was English. In terms of English MOI schools, very few respondents had attended English MOI schools at any grade level (less than 10). Given that the surveys were distributed at public institutions and not private, international, or Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools, this finding is unsurprising. However, out of 2,952 respondents, 1,626 (55%) reported participating in some type of English language-related extracurricular activity. Of this 55%, the majority indicated that they were participating in IELTS/TOEFL preparatory courses (23.5%) with the mean amount of time being one to five hours per week in such activities. Other English language-related activities included general language tutoring (4%) and IELTS/TOEFL tutoring (14%). The survey instrument did ask certain questions at different points in order to gauge respondent reliability regarding their own language perceptions and behavior. In the case of English language familiarity, the mean was 1,633 between the three relevant questions ($n = 1,626; 1,516; 1,757$). In response to the language interaction question, 1,516 re-stated that they knew English in some capacity (77.7%). The majority of those who stated that they knew some English reported learning it formally (75.8%) versus informally/formally-informally (24.2%). Compared to the large numbers of participants who self-reported English language proficiency in some capacity, in terms of specific interactions, respondents reported using English in a more limited fashion (Table 1).

What the data suggested was that although the majority of participants responded that they had some familiarity with English and engaged in English language learning activities, few reported specific contexts in which they saw themselves using English in quotidian interactions. However, this may imply that while the MoES's implementation of the trilingual policies has yet to produce a critical mass of graduates who have trilingual competency, there is a growing plurilingual competency that reflects the ‘new’ linguistic diversity and repertoires that students are being exposed to both in terms of school curricula and more broadly transmitted via social and education policy discourses (Ahn, 2018). Moreover, in urban Kazakhstan, there seemed to be easier access and opportunity to receive English language exposure or engagement (given the number of participants who stated having some type of instruction (whether formal or informal) per week.

TABLE 1 Kazakhstan survey: reported uses of English

Interaction (language use with/at...)	N
Parents	5
Grandparents	2
Siblings	21
Friends	24
Neighbors	5
School	26
Store	4
Public transportation	4
Hospital	5
Reading (entertainment)	84
Reading (academic)	65
Radio	134
Television	117
Social media	164

5.2 | Examining the intersection of access, identity and opportunity in Kazakhstan

Beyond seeing the impact of formal language policies on a potentially growing plurilingual competency through the implementation of the trilingual policy in Kazakhstani schools, language reveals complex internal dynamics for Kazakhstani minorities as seen by PS1's response. However, English was not straightforwardly seen as a means to gaining access to the global economy in the Kazakhstani context; rather, this then is situated against the backdrop of increased access to socio-cultural-economic capital in-country – this option itself is posed as a viable alternative to not being a member of the majoritarian population. Interview participants frequently referenced the utility of the English language in reference to work in-country.

In this excerpt, PS1 was asked how they saw themselves by the interviewer (I), they responded:

PS1: It is a very difficult question. I don't consider myself a pure Korean. I'm Kazakh. As my friends call me, Korean Kazakh. Among Koreans I feel myself Korean. Since I know a lot of languages, my identity has also changed. It is a mix of identities: Kazakh, Korean, not Russian, a little bit Turkish, English also.

I: Do you think it is important to preserve one's native language?

PS1: I will contradict what I [just] said. I think yes, because we already look like, and our mentality has also gained from Kazakhs because we have been living together for about 70 years. If we forget our language, there will be very few differences left.

For a number of interviewees, there was a tension between primordial notions of language and identity (that is, as a Korean, they felt that there should be some innate ability and interest in learning some variety of the Korean language) but also a pragmatic sense that language was a tool which could be used for more career-oriented purposes. This later point was illustrated by another participant, who said:

I think it's a waste of time to try to teach an adult a new language. I like to argue with my friends that there are no working methods in Kazakhstan on how to learn Kazakh and that even Kazakhs don't know

their language. It'd be better to create such a program, like intensive English for two months, rather than translating words like internet and plane. (PS3, interview, August 23, 2015)

The idea of 'usefulness' featured prominently as a thread throughout the Kazakhstani interviews, both in connection to pragmatic concerns regarding language learning ('it's a waste of time') and in seeing English as a way of scale jumping, that is, seeing past the national to the global economy.

For the Kazakhstani participants, broadly, English language choice, access, and engagement is situated in a context where the government has been putting tremendous resources into selling the public on the trilingual language policy. This is combined with visible change in schools and teacher training programs, as well as increased trade and economic opportunity for those who do have linguistic repertoires which include English. Moreover, English provides an alternative for those who may not have access to the titular language – Kazakh – to be able to sufficiently advance in terms of career and life, which further incentivises learning English over other languages, particularly in more densely populated cities like Almaty.

5.3 | English access, opportunities, and engagement in Kyrgyzstan

In the Kyrgyz context, 76.3% of survey respondents indicated that they were learning English in some capacity ($n = 452$). Among those learning English, 91% reported learning English formally and 9% informally/formal-informally. In terms of number of hours, the mean was similar to the Kazakhstani data set – one to five hours per week. What was markedly different about the self-reported English language practices in the Kyrgyz data set was in relation to speakers' interactions. Only two people (out of 452 respondents) spoke English in any capacity in quotidian contexts – two people reported speaking English with siblings, grandparents, and friends. No one spoke English in public contexts, that is, with neighbors, at stores, on public transportation, in hospitals, with one person indicating that s/he spoke English at school. There were no forms of media consumption reported in English (radio, television, social media). This dearth of interaction data in comparison to the Kazakhstani case could be explained by the sampling method – while the Kazakhstani data was primarily collected in urban contexts, the Kyrgyz data was collected throughout the country in more rural contexts which have less access to different types of resources including easy access to the Internet, and so on.

5.4 | Examining the intersection of access, identity and opportunity in Kyrgyzstan

Among parent surveys, 35.4% stated that they felt that their children should learn English (among other languages). Parent respondents' reasons for learning English included:

- Intellectual capacity – 'If he knows the language, his capacity will develop.'
- Educational opportunities – 'To get a better education.'
- Future – 'For his future.'
- Values – 'It is good [important, valuable] to know the languages.'
- Future – 'security and wealth.'

Similar to the Kazakhstani interview data, there was a running theme both throughout these responses and the focus groups, that is, participant parents felt that learning a language like English was essential to: (1) developing as a good person; (2) a bright future; and relatedly, (3) future job opportunities. It was striking that the majority of parental respondents who specifically mentioned English as the language they felt their children should learn were

from more rural communities – Batken, Naryn, Osh, and Issyk-kol oblasts – whereas parents in Bishkek were more inclined to report their language preference for their children as Russian. Among Kyrgyz participants, issues of English language choice, access, and engagement in the Kyrgyzstan context were embedded in a system where the government – although committed to ameliorating the quality of education in-country – was limited in terms of its own budget (World Bank, 2020b). This meant that participants expressed more concern about having basic books, infrastructure issues, and teacher salary more than the country's language and education policy. Moreover, unlike in Kazakhstan, because of the conflicts that broke out in 2010 (Ahn, 2016, 2019), among participants, there was a general consciousness regarding the need for access to the majoritarian titular language – Kyrgyz – which was frequently referenced during the focus group interviews.

Finally, in slight contrast to the Kazakhstani case, among the Kyrgyzstani survey and focus group participants, while there was a high percentage of people who reported English language proficiency, few were able to name contexts in which they had English language exposure and/or engagement. Moreover, in the context of Kyrgyzstan, English was not the primary alternative language or the language that parents or students indexed to future success. While some parents made reference to this, numerous parents during the focus groups mentioned the usefulness of learning Kyrgyz (to have access to submitting government/official papers), Russian and Korean (because of how labor migration was changing when the data was collected), and then English. Again, English was not straightforwardly seen as a neoliberal means to 'global capital' in the Kyrgyzstani context; rather, it was situated against the backdrop of the reality that many Kyrgyz people were migrating to Russia and increasingly to South Korea for labor migration purposes. In the case of participants from Kyrgyzstan, language was referenced predominantly in relation to the need to have access to political life (such as signing and submitting official documents) and/or job prospects abroad.

6 | DISCUSSION

Despite changes in both Kazakhstan's and Kyrgyzstan's language policies since the 1990s, the ideological underpinnings of the language policies reflect residual Soviet ideologies including primordial notions of and linkages between language and nationality (Koenig, 2000). Comparing the data from both countries, it is clear that while the linking of language and labor markets and the underlying neoliberal ideology was prevalent among participants from both countries, they also had access to different global 'markets.' This variance in access to global markets then revealed the degree of socio-cultural capital English seemed to hold. In the case of Kazakhstan, participants generally prioritised English as being essential to connect to the global economy, whereas Kyrgyz participants displayed more ambivalence due to which markets were open for labor migration. What, this reveals, is the reach of the neoliberal notion of 'language as pure potential' – as evidenced in participant mentions of English in connection to aspirations and possibilities. Relatedly, the differing socio-economic-political realities of the two country contexts are then instantiations of the reality that 'social conditions for acquisition of a language are not equally distributed, and those conditions are in turn reproduced through the differing competencies that result from them' (Park, 2015, p. 457). The participants' responses illustrated how significantly the neoliberalising material contexts both create constraints and further reproduce and amplify existing inequities within which speakers lived (May, 2018).

The cases of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan then present interesting sites for studying spread of English beyond the usual post-colonial contexts. These two country contexts and the participant data presented in this chapter illustrate the complex interface between language practices and language policy. As shown in this article (and others in this special issue), state-driven top-down planning in Kazakhstan have not necessarily impacted language practices even when policies are widely implemented through education language reforms. English in Kazakhstan remains substantially accessible to a relatively small group of affluent middle class which has wider access to linguistic resources in English while remaining out of reach to the majority of the population. Moreover, despite state efforts, Kazakhstan is not far above Kyrgyzstan in the global English proficiency ranking, both countries are at the bottom of the list (Education First, 2020). So, while there are changes in the discourse around constructing linguistic order but the

question of agency also remains. 'Who are the sources of change? Does the state follow the public imagination or the public buys into the state vision?' In this way, because of the number of exogenous and endogenous factors that are informing and impacting change in Central Asia, it is a particularly interesting site to study emerging sources of agency and language change in contexts of conflicting national and post-national, post-imperial and globalising ideologies.

Finally, reflecting on Tupas's (2019) six factors characterising Philippine English, considering language change through a *longue durée* lens, one particularly salient factor that should be considered when thinking about unequal Englishes in the Central Asian context. Or perhaps maybe more appropriately, a factor that should be considered when seeing how English reveals and contributes to greater inequality – is whether the country chose a more globalised or regionalised political economy and the ramifications of seeing those choices through a path dependency lens. The multi-sector linking of the Kazakhstani economy to the international community, the establishment of the trilingual policy with the inclusion of English, and the political continuity resulting from almost three decades of the same political party and president in office provided decades-long reinforcement of the ideology of language as pure potential and provided Kazakhstanis with a particular vision and incentive structure in relation to English language learning. In contrast, the development of a remittance economy connected largely to Russia and more recently to places like South Korea, subverts a less explicit vision articulated by a Kyrgyz government that has regular changes in administration and more socio-political conflict in the same period.

7 | CONCLUSION

Looking at language change in Central Asia through the window of English language access, opportunity and engagement illustrates the dynamicity of this particular socio-economic-political context. On the one hand, languages that had previously occupied relatively peripheral positions within the Soviet Union – titular languages like Kazakh and Kyrgyz – became elevated as prestige languages as the national and official languages of their respective countries. With the prestige planning and accompanying legislative codification through official documents like Constitutions, these languages have now become imbued with symbolic capital. This symbolic capital, coupled with political power means that access to resources – from political office to various social institutions like schooling and/or mailing things via the post office – are connected to a particular type of language repertoire, that is, one that the state has privileged (de Varennes, 1996). This means that there are now material consequences for not having equitable access to learning languages with symbolic capital. On the other hand, languages of wider communication – Russian – and international or global communication – English – then provide an interesting lens into the linguistic landscape of these contexts. Because although having access to the majoritarian language does mean that within the country context the language is indexed to a certain type of person and/or citizen (Bourdieu, 1991), having access to languages like English (or Russian) allows for opportunities that 'scale jump' the state. People who find liminal spaces are then able to utilise the resources that they have to navigate those liminal spaces – for the Kazakhstani participants in this study, this meant having access to the global in the local *vis-à-vis* industry and for the Kyrgyzstani participants, this meant having access to global labor migration destinations like Russia and, more recently, South Korea.

Given the multifacetedness of this particular change context then, it is important to continue to think about how to translate the lived experiences of language speakers in the region into informed policy discussions, as well as impacting teaching practices and approaches in ways that will move society toward May's (2018) notion of a public multilingualism that would provide pivotal access to standardised or majoritarian languages to further mitigate broader social inequity. Moreover, by examining the shifting role and position of English in these two Central Asian republics, this article affirms Pavlenko's (2013) observation that there continues to be a need for more empirically grounded data in the post-Soviet context to provide a more intersectional understanding of language choices as they relate to local/national/global diffusion of different neoliberal ideologies, the (re)production of (in)equality, and changing labor markets.

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