Essay: The challenges of trilingual education in Kazakhstan

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Introduction
Language preserves the spirit of a nation, it is a bridge connecting stages of historical development and connecting generations to generations. It is very important for the Kazakh nation to preserve native Kazakh language. However, the question of implementation and development of the state language in Kazakhstan is still not fully resolved. Kazakhstan is located between Russia and Chinese and it was part of the Soviet Union. Even Kazakhstan separated from Russia, however Russia influenced to Kazakhstan politically and economically. Why? What is the problem? According to the Kazakhstan constitution, Kazakh is the official language, yet Russian language has an equal status. The Kazakh and Russian languages are the main languages in the Kazakhstan schools. Based on 2009
Census results by the Agency on Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 23.07 % of the Kazakh population is Russian and 13.2% is a smattering of other nationalities. In Russian Kazakh schools, Kazakh is taught as a foreign language, and vice versa in traditional Kazakh schools. Despite 25 years of Kazakh independence, the Russian speaking population(1/3 of population) refuses to learn and speak the Kazakh language. According to the Government website (2016), the Kazakh government recently decided to include the English language as a third language in Kazakhstan schools. English is an international language, so learning it may give Kazakhstan citizens many opportunities. Kazakhstan has recently adopted The State program for the development and functioning of languages in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2011-2020 trilingual education policy aimed at development among the Kazakhs of fluency in three languages: Kazakh, Russian and English. The program aims to achieve the followings:

- increase of the share of adult population that speaks the state language according to “Kaztest” results: to 20 % by 2014, to 80 % by 2017, to 95 % by 2020;
- increase of the share of school graduates that speaks the state language at B1 level to 70 % by 2017, to 100 % by 2020;
- increase of the share of Kazakh language content in state-owned mass media to 53 % by 2014, to 60 % by 2017, to 70 % by 2020;
- increase of population’s satisfaction with the activity of onomastic commissions regarding observance of principles of transparency and public access to discussion of decision-making process to 60 % by 2014, to 75 % by 2017, to 90 % by 2020;
- increase of the share of arranged terminological fund of the Kazakh language to 20 % by 2014, to 60 % by 2017, to 100 % by 2020;
- increase of the share of republic’s adult population that speaks Russian language to 90 % by 2020;
- increase of the share of ethnic groups embraced by native languages courses at national-cultural associations to 60 % by 2014, to 80 % by 2017, to 90 % by 2020;
- increase of the share of republic’s population that speaks English to 10 % by 2014, to 15 % by 2017, to 20 % by 2020;
- Increase of the share of population that speaks three languages (state, Russian and English) to 10 % by 2014, to 12 % by 2017, to 15 % by 2020. (Retrieved from http://www.akorda.kz/en/official_documents/strategies_and_programs)

For the first purpose of this paper

The linguistic dictionary of T. Zherebilo (2010) defines “trilingual” as following: “The operation of the three languages in a territorial community: state, region, city, town, where each of the languages is correlated with a specific area of communication. Possession by the individual of three languages at the level necessary to satisfy his communication needs.”

In addition, B. Khasanuly (2007), in his article, “Language of the Kazakh Nation” provides the following definition of trilingualism: “alternating use of three languages in a heterogeneous society by members of the same ethnic group” (p.356).

This paper aims to analyze the status of Kazakh language. Also discusses analysis of the intended and unintended outcomes of trilingual education reform in Kazakhstan. The Soviet Union left its negative print on Kazakh history and on its language; because of these issues, the Kazakh language is under threat. For these reasons, it is hard to tell whether trilingual education will benefit the Kazakh language in the future. (thesis statement)

Reviewing Trilingual Education (Professional literature)

The review existing sources revealed that there are other countries that are using trilingual education systems in their schools. One of them is Finland.

Siv Bjorklund (2005), in his article, “Toward Trilingual Education in Vasa, Finland,” discusses trilingual education in Finland, which includes Swedish, Finnish and English. The immersion schools used the content-based approach for English or German. The research compared students’ speaking and writing ability in English in the immersion and non-immersion schools. The study found that immersion students’ English speaking abilities were more advanced than non-immersion students.

Kazakhstan can learn a lot from Finland because it shares similar aspects of history and language. Finland’s
history is similar to Kazakhstan’s history in terms of being occupied by other nations. Finland belonged to Sweden until 1809 and then to Russia until 1919. After Finland gained its independence, Swedish became the official language, according to the Finland constitution. The Finnish population supported bilingualism despite Swedish being the language of the minority. For the Finnish students it was mandatory to choose one of the official languages. In 1987, Swedish immersion program started in Vasa city with children who only spoke Finnish. Gradually, these immersion schools required students to take another additional widespread language like English. Non-immersion and immersion schools started to teach English from the 1st grade. Immersion students had an opportunity to learn Swedish from kindergarten while non-immersion students didn’t have a chance to learn other new languages. However, both schools used the same content oriented teaching style for learning English. In 2001 Bjorklund studied students’ writing abilities in English and he found that immersion students were more advanced users of English than their non-immersion counterparts. In 1997 and 1998, 119 immersion 3-6 graders participated in a questionnaire where they were asked which languages they use in different situations. Students reported that they use all of the three languages during their class time. Most of the time, students spoke Finnish and Swedish outside of their classroom. 41 immersion students from 2nd and 6th grades were asked “what languages they preferred to speak.” 77% of 2nd graders chose Swedish, 46% of 6th graders chose Swedish and 27% of them chose English. In addition, the questionnaire asked about the future language needs of the students. 49% of 2nd graders didn’t know, whereas 29% of them reported that they will need English more than Swedish. The other 20% of them chose Swedish.

It was interesting to find out that 46% of the 6th graders didn’t know what their future language needs would be whereas 29% of them predicted that they will need English and 24% vice versa. In 1996, Heinonen, in his article “Non-native language influence on foreign language learning,” studied 17 immersion students in 4th grade, and he analyzed the cross-linguistic influence on the lexicon. He observed some significant difference. Students used some second language words and some altered spelling in Finnish. According to the article “Trilingual Primary Education in Europe,” the reading abilities of 3rd grade students in Finland were tested from 2003 to 2009 by the National Reading Test measuring language awareness in Finnish. The results showed that 37% of immersion students scored higher than the standard for their age group while only 23% of national school students scored higher. Another 17% of the immersion students scored lower than the standard for their age group whereas 23% of the national students scored lower.

Positive and Negative effects of Trilingual education in Finland.

The beneficial side of this trilingual experiment in Finland is that students from immersion classes reached advanced level of English and they learned to have a positive attitude for learning languages and they became aware of didactic approaches that were used in the classroom. The challenge of this program is that if they devote more time English it might impact negatively the level of Swedish. Bjorklund states that if the program is not implemented correctly, a well known language can obscure the minority language which we can see from the test results where some of students preferred English than their mother tongue language. Another big issue was that the introduction of Swedish immersion program lead to intense discussion of the idea. There were concerns about students’ ability to improve mother tongue and comprehend subjects like science, geography, mathematics and etc. that used Swedish as the medium instruction. Besides, the program implemented for all students despite their academic proficiency and language abilities. Moreover, there are constant challenges to boosting the program’s effectiveness and productivity. To implement the program properly, teachers need to receive professional training that will help them to trust and interact with each other beyond their respective languages and subjects.

Next, Zhang, Wen and Li, in their article, “Trilingual Education in China’s Korean Communities,” state that Korean communities located in northern China had bilingual education with many positive results. Bilingual education in these communities successfully transformed into trilingual education. The study was conducted in the Korean community schools and found that stakeholders were supportive of trilingual education. Korean schools in the Yanbian prefecture started to promote the trilingual education of Korean, Chinese and English in the primary and middle schools. The Korean language were used as the medium instruction. Even students become familiar with Chinese language from 1st grade, it was used as the medium instruction from junior secondary school (Piao 2004).
English became a very important part of the curriculum because it is the language of the 21st century. Most Korean schools offered English starting in 1st grade and some of them from third grade. However, after offering English from 1st grade, an education authorities found challenging for 1st graders to learn three languages and they adapted their program. After that they offered English from third grade. The study surveyed stakeholders’ views on trilingual education and the interconnectedness of the three languages; and students’ views on their language teachers.

The researchers surveyed 196 high school Korean students, 96 teachers, 6 parents and 3 policy makers from August to September, 2007. 40.74% of Korean students reported that they have to acquire three languages and 93.85% of them valued learning three languages. However, 6.15% of the students couldn’t tackle class assignments in all three languages and they had negative feelings towards trilingual education.

The parents and policy makers supported trilingual education. 45.59 % of the teachers informed the researchers that learning Korean is beneficial for learning Chinese. 32.35% of teachers thought that students’ knowledge of their native language would likely benefit the learning of Chinese and only 5.88 % of them thought it has a negative effects on the students. 82.09 % of the teachers believed that knowing L1 and L2 can affect learning L3.

Positive and Negative effects of Trilingual education in the Korean community.

The challenge of the trilingual education in Korean community is that more assessments and research are needed for multilingual learning (Hoffman 2001). Furthermore, adding class hours shared by the three languages created resistance and the concern was that too many language studying classes may significantly increase the workload for students decreasing the general level of academic performance. In addition, one of the consequences of adapting trilingual education might be dissonance between pre- service and in -service teachers’ training. Moreover there are concerns about improper distribution of financial resources (Li 2004; Che 2006).

According to Bialystok and Zhang (2011), some research confirmed that learning more languages can positively impact creative thinking and metalinguistic awareness with more research needed in the Chinese context.

Overall, trilingual education in the ethnic Korean schools had a positive effect on students learning abilities.

Priorities of the Trilingual Education Reform in Kazakhstan

Many Kazakh teachers do not know English. According to Government website (2016), the Nazarbayev University and other 15 higher institutions offered 4-month courses for 675 teachers of biology, chemistry, physics and computer science from all regions. According to the Ministry of Education, in the 2016-2017 school year, all first grade students will study in the three languages. If the project is successful, in the 2017-2018 school year, grades 2,5 and 7 will use this teaching model, progressing to grades 3,6,8 and 10 starting 2018-2019 and grades 4,9,11 and 12 in 2019 to 2020. By 2020, 100% of schools will study the Kazakh, Russian and English languages. Also by 2020, all schools, regardless of teaching language, will teach 5th graders and above the History of Kazakhstan in Kazakh and English , and World History – in Russian. Subjects like Physics, Chemistry, Biology and Computer Science will be taught in English. Each subject will be taught simultaneously in the Kazakh, Russian and English. According to NewTimes.kz (2016 ), in the summer of 2016, 73 000 first grade teachers will be trained for the implementation of trilingual education. The Ministry of Education will prepare 80 experts from Nazarbayev intellectual schools and these experts will teach the 73 000 teachers in English.

During the Soviet Union, the Russian language played a very important role in the post –soviet countries. Knowing this language gave bold opportunities like career ladder, education and authority. The Russian languages belongs to the Slavic language and it has different a language structure while the Kazakh language belongs to the Turkic language.

In 2010, the Minister of Culture Kul Mikhammed said that by 2020, 95% of the Kazakhstan population will acquire the Kazakh language.

According to a national census of the population of Kazakhstan in 1999, 75% of Kazakhs know Russian and 0.7% know English. 48.4 % of the Russian population in Kazakhstan know Kazakh and 0,9% know English. Supposedly, all Kazakh people speak Kazakh but this information has never been confirmed by official sources. Based on the results of a 2009 Census, 98.3 % of Kazakhs age 15 and older stated that they understand Kazakh, 95.4% can read Kazakh and 93.2% of them can write in Kazakh. 25.03% of Russians
According to EF English Proficiency Index in 2015, Kazakhstan took 54th place out of 70 countries.

Current Situation.

According to the Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools 2015 Annual Report, trilingual education is an important part of the realization of the Integrated Education Program (IEP), which adheres to the Policy of Trilingual Education by using team teaching and subject-integrated learning (CLIL). According to the report, during 2015, over 2,329 pupils in the Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools participated in 40 national and international competitions and contests of scientific projects. Of these, 1,321 students won.

The report also monitored subjects for their grasp on “Kazakh as a second language,” “Russian as a second language” and English. In April 2015, 16 Intellectual Schools monitored 7th grade students’ achievements. This was first conducted in language classes, attended by 1,774 students. They also experimented with tests for 8th graders.

Monitoring is aimed at checking the 4 types of speech activities: “Reading,” “Listening”, “Letter” and “Speaking”. Assignments are designed in accordance with the levels of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). They divided students into four levels.

- **Beginner** – the student understands and can use familiar everyday words and phrases about everyday topics and has a limited vocabulary.
- **Basic** – the student understands the general idea of short texts on familiar topics, information on everyday topics, participates in the conversation if the person speaks slowly and distinctly, can compose short texts (letter, announcement, statement, etc.), but has a limited vocabulary, difficulty when expressing their thoughts, grammatical and punctuation errors.
- **Good** – understand the overall content of the texts on various topics with complex sentence structure, is able to identify the main idea, purpose and structure of the text, the target audience understands the contents when slowly and clearly stated, understands their conversation partner. Has a sufficient vocabulary for writing, can articulate their thoughts in a conversation on familiar topics, admits some mistakes.
- **Advanced** – understands the contents of complex texts on various topics, determines the structure of the text, can write a text where the target audience recognizes the meaning in the hidden details. Understands dialogue at a rapid pace and determines the views of the speaker. Able to differentiate between different types and styles of speech.

Analysis of the results showed that a majority of the 7th grade students have a basic or good level of knowledge of all the languages.

On the subject of “Kazakh language as a second language,” the share of students who reached a good or advanced skill level is: reading – around 40%, listening and speaking – more than 50%, writing – 60%.

On the subject of “Russian as a second language,” the proportion of students with skills from good to advanced levels were: reading – around 60%, listening – more than 80%, speaking – more than 60%, writing – over 50%.

On the subject “English,” the share of pupils with skills from good to advanced levels were: reading – 50%, listening – about 40%, speaking – about 50%, writing – more than 60%.

History of Bilingualism Education in Kazakhstan

According to Atayev (2008), before 1917, Kazakh people didn’t know the Russian language, and the writing system used at the time was Arabic script. Under Arab-Muslim influence, Kazakhstan began to use Arabic script and the first Kazakh language was written using the Arabic alphabet. Representatives of Kazakh intellectual elite rightly opposed the Russification of the Kazakh language, including the excessive amount of borrowing from the Russian language, suggesting instead to borrow from other languages, particularly Turkic. Many national issues that are now under discussion were raised in the environment of the Kazakh intellectual elite in the early years of Soviet power. Because of their opposition to Russification the Kazakh intellectual elite was repressed. The Soviet Union replaced Arabic charters with Cyrillic and it hugely impacted the Kazakh literacy and national culture. This made studying foreign languages harder, because the materials were all translated from the foreign language into Russian, not Kazakh. For the study of foreign languages in the Soviet times, the Soviet Union did not create databases, dictionaries or textbooks in the Kazakh language. Nobody taught in Kazakh. Similarly, when I first learned English, I needed to learn it through Russian, because
the teachers who taught English, taught it in Russian, with text books in Russian and translations through Russian, which made it harder.

Perhaps for these reasons, the majority of the Kazakh creative intelligentsia did not speak foreign languages. That in turn affected the quality of Kazakh literature, journalism and science. This process impacted Kazakhs’ life, psychology and education. The Russian government opened many schools and universities in Kazakhstan with the Russian language and Soviet ways of teaching. The Soviet Union massively closed Kazakh language schools. There was just one school and university with Kazakh language teaching in the capital of Kazakhstan. I remember how my mother told me that around 1976, their Kazakh school in the village was closed and they transferred all the students to the Russian school. They didn’t learn Kazakh subjects in the class because the Soviet Union didn’t recognize the Kazakh language.

Gradually, the role of the Russian language has increased as an international communication language. Besides Russian, the Soviet Union didn’t allow other languages to flourish. Degree possession in other languages did not help one’s career or promotion. The Russian influence on the Kazakh language graphically, lexically, and stylistically, changed some of the Kazakh vowels etc., leading to its erosion.

Even though Kazakh people had access to the Russian literature, they were at a huge risk of losing their identity as a nation. As Russia’s people colonized our country (Kazakhstan), they belittled and degraded our nation the same way as our language.

When I was a Kazakh language teacher in a Russian school, I taught the Russian students four or five times a week. Despite the fact that we got our independence 25 years ago, we are still struggling with the balance of Kazakh and Russian. According to our constitution, Kazakh citizens have to know two languages: Kazakh as an official language and Russian as an international communicative language. However, most Russian people within Kazakhstan refuse to learn Kazakh.

Switching schools from the Russian language based Soviet Union Educational system to new Balogna system in Kazakh language hugely impacted the curriculum and our identity. I think it is strange that we have been teaching Kazakh language as a foreign language.

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