

Implementing Multilingual Education in Kazakhstan: Students' Perceptions and Attitudes Towards the Status of English

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Abstract—The present study seeks to contribute to the ongoing discussion of multilingual education by showing how students understand the role of the English language in multilingual classrooms in the Expanding Circle context. It examines the perception and assessment of the status of English by university students in the context of the trilingual policy currently being implemented in Kazakhstan. The purpose of this study is to determine how the new language policy is implemented in university multilingual programs from the point of view of the functioning of English. The quantitative study utilizes a sociolinguistic questionnaire distributed between undergraduate students of multilingual programs offered by four major universities in the western area of Kazakhstan. The findings suggest that despite the increasing importance and prestige of studying English, it is not used on equal ground with the Kazakh and Russian languages, and its level of proficiency remains relatively low. The statistical analysis of the respondents' answers allowed identifying gaps in the implementation of the language policy due to the lack of understanding of the specificity of multilingual education by both students and teachers.

Index Terms—multilingual education, English, students' perceptions, attitude, Kazakhstan

I. INTRODUCTION

The educational sphere of society has been significantly affected by the processes of integration and globalization. Recently there has been an unprecedented growth in studies on multilingualism in English as second language (ESL) and English as foreign language (EFL) classrooms (Burner & Carlsen, 2023). For multilinguals, advanced English proficiency has become essential for global competitiveness (Brutt-Griffler, 2017). Official policies have been developed in many countries of the world aiming to realize the emerging demands for linguistic diversity and language learning, one of them being the state program “Trinity of Languages” in Kazakhstan (Delovarova & Gaipov, 2019). According to this program, the people of Kazakhstan must become fluent in the Kazakh, Russian, and English languages, and education must serve as “a conveyor belt” to build a multilingual society (Agbo et al., 2022). In connection with the active entry of Kazakhstan into the globalization space and the expansion of the scale of international relations, there is a need for a more attentive attitude to the role of languages in the Kazakhstani society.

A number of recent investigations into the modern language situation in Kazakhstan have explored the features of multilingualism in the country. Thus, several studies have characterized the ambiguous language situation in modern

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Kazakhstan, where the state language does not yet fully function as the state language (Azimbayeva, 2016), whereas the Russian language dominates in most communicative situations (Nurtazina et al., 2019; Terlikbayeva & Menlibekova, 2021). Although the area of the active use of the English language is reported to be rapidly expanding (Djuraeva, 2022), the annual report by “Education First” shows that in 2023 Kazakhstan ranks very low among other countries in terms of the English proficiency level, being 104th in the English Proficiency Index list among 113 countries around the world (Education First, 2023). Such a situation seems somewhat contradictory, since multilingual education is one of the most prioritized areas in the country’s education policy and the language policy consists in promoting the acquisition of three languages – Kazakh, Russian and English – by its population.

English in Kazakhstan is classified as belonging to the Expanding Circle (Kachru, 1986) because it has no official status and is taught as a foreign language. In the last decade, special attention has been given to the development and spread of English at the state level. English is promoted as the main language of instruction and acts as a mediator of international scientific communication, ensuring access to a vast array of academic literature and events, and allowing for constructive communication with academics representing other countries and cultures (Meyerhöffer & Dreesmann, 2019; Aleshinskaya, 2023). As there is a great demand for professionals with knowledge of English, multilingual education has been introduced to the leading universities in Kazakhstan, where emphasis is put on training competitive specialists who are professionally fluent in Kazakh, Russian and English (Zhumay et al., 2021). Multilingual education is aimed at the internationalization and successful adaptation of university graduates to the international labor market (Zharkynbekova, 2017).

Recently, research interest has shifted mostly to the attitudes of teachers to the language policy and its implementation at different levels of education in Kazakhstan. Thus, Akynova et al. (2021) claim that attitudes towards the promotion of English in higher education are characterized as largely positive and promising, and this allows them to conclude that the multilingual policy in Kazakhstan proves to be effective. However, some problems have been identified at the levels of primary and secondary education. Most researchers note that due to the excessive speed of the language reform in the educational space, most teachers have not yet made a transition to the organized system of teaching English, not being provided with sufficient methodological and teaching tools to implement change both in primary (Zhetpisbayeva et al., 2016) and secondary school (Karabassova, 2021). Among other problems preventing secondary schools from a successful implementation of the trilingual system are a low level of English knowledge of pupils and inadequate English environment (Tlemissov et al., 2020), as well as different English language levels among teachers (Gómez-Parra & Abdiyeva, 2022).

Despite the growing interest in multilingual education in different contexts, this domain of the functioning of trilingualism, especially in higher education, still remains poorly studied in relation to Kazakhstan. Moreover, insufficient attention has been paid to students’ opinions regarding the implementation of language policy in the context of Kazakhstan as an Expanding Circle country. Following previous studies in the field of multilingual education, we take the view that being aware of students’ attitudes and perceptions can account for their linguistic and academic achievements (Baa et al., 2023) and allows for better understanding of how they can be sustainably supported to adjust and succeed in multilingual education (Moorhouse & Wan, 2023). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the role and status of the English language in the field of multilingual higher education in Kazakhstan based on the analysis of students’ perceptions of how the new language policy is implemented in university multilingual programs. In this respect, the present paper enables a better understanding of multicultural education within the Expanding circle context.

II. MULTILINGUAL HIGHER EDUCATION IN KAZAKHSTAN

Today, the higher education system is characterized by increasing diversity, interconnectedness and international mobility. Language learning and teaching policies around the world are slowly but steadily undergoing a paradigm shift called “a multilingual turn” by Piccardo and Galante (2018). The goal of multilingual education is to develop language skills and repertoire in different languages. As part of the new paradigm, learning and teaching English as a second (foreign) language should build on and expand students’ multilingual repertoire in order to prepare them for communication in a variety of multilingual and multicultural settings (Duarte, 2022; Yanaprasart & Lüdi, 2017).

Researchers in the field of multilingual education often focus on the dominance of English as a foreign language and as the sole or dominant language of instruction. Unlike many foreign countries, the Republic of Kazakhstan does not have the conditions for the natural development of mass multilingualism with knowledge of an actively functioning English language. The main feature of multilingual education in Kazakhstan is that in the same language arena there are three languages with different statuses, with the dominant languages being Kazakh and Russian. This specificity in the field of education in Kazakhstan necessitates the creation of a new model of education that will contribute to the formation of a generation that knows the language culture and is competitive in the context of globalization. The knowledge of the Kazakh, Russian and English languages for young people will give the key to world markets, science and new technologies, and is believed to create conditions for the formation of an ideological orientation towards constructive cooperation based on familiarization with ethnic Kazakh and world culture (Nurlanova et al., 2022).

In 2009, on behalf of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the “Concept of Language Education of Kazakhstan” and the State Educational Standard of the Republic of Kazakhstan “Trinity of Languages” were developed as a single universal system for managing multilingual education in the country

(Mikhailova & Duisekova, 2020). In 2011, based on the approved State Educational Standard for Languages, educational programs in target languages were developed and put into practice in order to control and methodologically coordinate the teaching of Kazakh, Russian and English languages at universities in Kazakhstan. Higher educational institutions of Kazakhstan that implement trilingual education programs plan and organize educational activities in three languages: the language of instruction, a second language and English. In accordance with trilingual education programs, 50% of subjects are taught in the first language (Kazakh or Russian), 20% of subjects in the second language (Russian or Kazakh, respectively) and 30% of subjects in English.

Current research in the field of multilingual education in Kazakhstan mainly addresses the problems associated with the implementation of the trilingual education program in the state (Gómez-Parra & Abdiyeva, 2022) and, based on the experience of European countries, offers various alternatives for the further development of multilingual education in Kazakhstan (Aubakirova et al., 2019). Some authors study students' attitudes towards the development of a multilingual educational environment in the country (Zharkynbekova, 2017; Yeskeldiyeva & Tazhibayeva, 2015) or students' language preferences and motivation to learn English (Polatova et al., 2020). Despite the growing interest in the peculiarities of the implementation of the trilingual policy in the field of multilingual education, not enough attention is paid to the status of the English language in Kazakh society, which, on the one hand, determines the specificity of the linguistic and ethno-linguistic situation in Kazakhstan, and on the other hand, allows us to see the real picture of the implementation of the accepted model of trilingual education.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Design of the Study

This study draws on quantitative methodology, utilizing a sociolinguistic questionnaire to explore the role of English in multilingual education for university students. We conducted this study in four universities located in four regions of the western area of Kazakhstan. All these higher educational institutions offer multilingual undergraduate programs leading to bachelor's qualifications in Biology, Chemistry, Computer science, Kazakh language and literature, Mathematics, Physics, Preschool education and upbringing, Restaurant business, Russian language in schools with non-Russian language of instruction, Tourism, and Two foreign languages. We purposefully selected the universities based on the integration of English as the language of instruction in their teaching and learning programs along with the Kazakh and Russian languages.

B. Research Sample

The participants of the study are 400 undergraduate students from K. Zhubanov Aktobe Regional University (located in Aktobe, Aktobe region), the Caspian University of Technology and Engineering named after Sh. Yessenov (located in Aktau, Mangistau region), Kh. Dosmukhamedov Atyrau State University (located in Atyrau, Atyrau region) and M. Utemisov West Kazakhstan University (located in Uralsk, West Kazakhstan region) studying in multilingual groups in the 2nd-4th years. In terms of place of residence, survey participants represent four regions of the western region of Kazakhstan: West Kazakhstan, Aktobe, Atyrau and Mangistau. The average age of survey participants is 19.24 years. The vast majority of respondents (96.6%) study in the 3rd and 4th year, when training takes place in three languages. By gender, the number of female participants is almost twice as large as the number of men, which corresponds to the general situation in the universities under consideration for most of the specified specialties of multilingual education. Table 1 demonstrates the frequencies (percentages) of the variables distributed among the research sample.

TABLE 1
DISTRIBUTION OF THE RESEARCH SAMPLE

Variables	Groups	Frequency	Proportion
Age	18	40	10%
	19	225	56.2%
	20	135	33.8%
Gender	Male	135	33.8%
	Female	265	66.2%
Place of residence (region)	West Kazakhstan region	135	33.8%
	Aktobe region	63	15.8%
	Atyrau region	101	25.2%
	Mangistau region	101	25.2%
Year of study	2	14	3.4%
	3	299	74.8%
	4	87	21.8%
Place of study (university)	K. Zhubanov Aktobe Regional University (Aktobe)	100	25%
	The Caspian University of Technology and Engineering named after Sh. Yessenov (Yessenov University, Aktau)	100	25%
	Kh. Dosmukhamedov Atyrau State University (Atyrau)	100	25%
	M. Utemisov West Kazakhstan University (Uralsk)	100	25%

We were also interested in how students from multilingual groups assess their level of English based on the international system for assessing language proficiency. According to Figure 1, the majority of respondents studying in multilingual groups (37%) define their level of English as Intermediate. Further, 23% of respondents characterize their level of English proficiency as Beginner or below intermediate (Pre-Intermediate). Only 12% of respondents consider their English proficiency to be above average, and 5% read that they have an advanced level. Thus, in general, students from multilingual groups do not rate their level of English highly. This point is especially important for us in the context of promoting the status of English as an international language and the implementation of the trilingual policy in Kazakhstan.

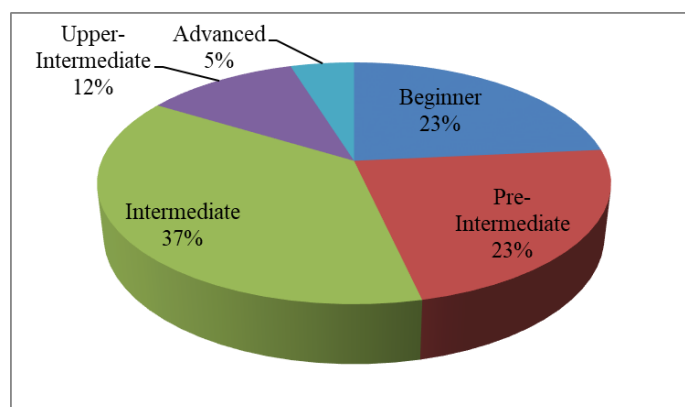


Figure 1. Level of English Language Proficiency

C. Data Collection

To clarify to what level the trilingual language policy is implemented in higher education, a sociolinguistic questionnaire was conducted among students of multilingual groups studying at four leading universities in the western region of Kazakhstan. The questionnaire was conducted in the spring of 2023. The questions were distributed online using Google Spreadsheets. The questionnaire contained closed-ended questions divided into three parts. The first part of the questionnaire was devoted to the role and status of the English language and how its promotion could affect the status of the state language. The next part was related to learning English as a foreign language and challenges connected with it. The third part of the questionnaire was related to the peculiarities of the functioning of the English language in a multilingual classroom. Informed consent was obtained from the respondents to take part in the study and to process the responses received.

D. Data Analysis

Data analysis was based on the statistical results of the questionnaire. The interpretations of the participants' answers to the majority of questions were based on a Likert scale, which measures judgment as follows: 1 (I strongly disagree, or Never), 2 (I disagree, or Rarely), 3 (I neither agree nor disagree, or Sometimes), 4 (I agree, or Often), 5 (I strongly agree, or Always). The quantitative analysis of the questionnaire data was carried out using IBM SPSS Statistics, which enabled obtaining frequencies and percentages for all the categories and subcategories in the three parts of the questionnaire.

IV. RESULTS

A. Status of the English Language

The first part of the questionnaire was devoted to the role and status of the English language and how its promotion could affect the status of the state language. The respondents were asked to express their views on the policy of promoting English in education. The majority of respondents expressed their approval of the policy of promoting English in the educational sector and the policy of promoting multilingual personnel to a large extent. They expressed their belief that learning English improves their competitiveness, which is why it should be the language of instruction at university. Also, according to the majority of respondents, learning English allows them to join the global academic community and opens access to world scientific research literature. As regards the role of English in the Republic of Kazakhstan, the majority of surveyed students from multilingual groups agree (62,3%) and completely agree (18,8%) that English is becoming increasingly popular in the country. Also, the overwhelming majority of respondents agree with the statements that knowledge of English is prestigious, brings economic benefits, provides an opportunity to get a good job and join the world community. Also, the majority of respondents did not agree with the statement that knowledge of English is not important to them. On the other hand, in questions about whether the English language is a threat to the development of the Kazakh language and Kazakh national identity and to the future of the Kazakh

language and culture, respondents' opinions were divided: almost half of the respondents do not see a threat from the English language, while about a third of the respondents agreed with these statements.

In response to the question which language they consider the most prestigious, many respondents (41%) named English. The second most common answer is the Kazakh language (37%). Only 19% indicated the prestige of the Russian language. It is interesting that in the region that borders Russia, the prestige of the Russian language among students of multilingual groups is significantly lower than that of international English and state Kazakh. Perhaps this result is largely due to the direction of modern government policy towards strengthening these two languages in Kazakhstan.

The questionnaire participants were also asked what they considered to be an obstacle to more successful functional strengthening of the English language in Kazakhstan. The majority of respondents (40%) named the lack of textbooks, teaching aids and methodological literature in secondary schools, colleges and higher educational institutions as the main obstacle. The following significant obstacles (15%) were identified by the respondents as ignoring the lack of real trilingualism in plans to further strengthen the promotion of the English language, as well as the lack of specialists among civil servants who speak English at the level necessary to carry out official functions. 14% of the respondents chose the low level of scientific, methodological and expert support for the English language as an obstacle to more successful functional strengthening of the English language in Kazakhstan. 10% pointed to the small number and low quality of television and radio programs, magazines, feature and animated films produced in English. 6% of respondents saw the behavior of the political and managerial elite as an obstacle, which does not contribute to the active introduction of English into the political process and public administration. The answers to this question are presented in Figure 2.

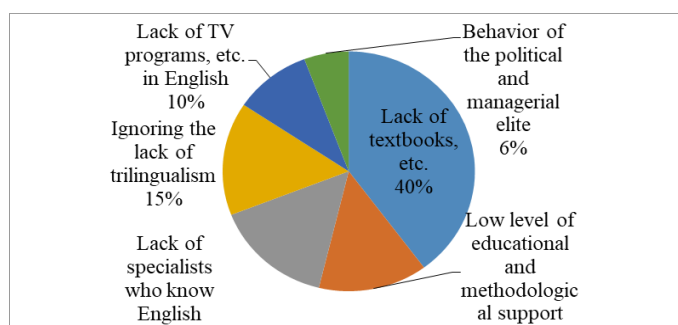


Figure 2. Obstacles to Strengthening the English Language

B. Learning English as a Foreign Language

The questions in this block are related to learning English as a foreign language. In response to the question about who they need to communicate with in English during their studies, the majority of respondents pointed to teachers (37%). Less common, but fairly evenly distributed, responses were co-workers (22%), friends (21%) and native speakers (18%). This indicates that during the learning process, students' social circle is quite diverse, which should contribute to more successful mastery of such types of speech activities as speaking and listening. In response to the question about the importance of knowing English for further professional advancement, more than half of the respondents (58%) chose the "important" option and one third (33%) chose the "very important" option. This confirms the motivation of students from multilingual groups to learn English as a foreign language, since knowledge of English contributes to career growth.

Next, students were asked to select an important type of activity in English. The majority of respondents chose such speech skills as speaking (39%) and reading (35%). Interestingly, listening and writing were chosen significantly fewer times (16% and 10%, respectively). Based on this, we can conclude that speaking English is of great importance for professional activities (for example, the ability to give a report or presentation in English, etc.), and reading is one of the important aspects of speech activity in a foreign language (for example, reading news reports, newsletters, articles in magazines or newspapers, etc.).

In the following question, the respondents were asked whether they considered it necessary to improve their current English language skills. The vast majority (93%) of the respondents responded that they need to improve their English language skills. And only 7% of the respondents believe that their level of English is sufficient for study and work. In the next question, we asked the questionnaire participants why they needed to learn a foreign language. The most common answer (64%) was the opinion that the English language provides new information and contributes to the broadening of horizons. 26% of the respondents were confident that learning English is necessary to increase personal prestige and a sense of self-confidence. 10% answered that learning English contributes to their intellectual development.

The next question was devoted to the challenges that arise when learning English as a foreign language. When asked if they had ever experienced difficulties due to insufficient English language proficiency, 17% of the respondents answered "always", 37.8% chose the answer "often", 32% chose the answer "rarely" and 4% - "never", while 9.3% found it difficult to answer. Figure 3 presents the respondents' clarifications of what difficulties and to what extent they

encountered while learning English. Reading, according to the respondents, is the easiest type of speech activity, in which the least difficulties arise. This answer option was chosen by 28% of the respondents. Moreover, about a third of the survey participants described reading and listening in English as not difficult aspects, and the largest number of the respondents classified speaking in English as a rather difficult (51.7%) and very difficult (28.5%) type of speech activity. Writing caused significant difficulties for 44% of the respondents.

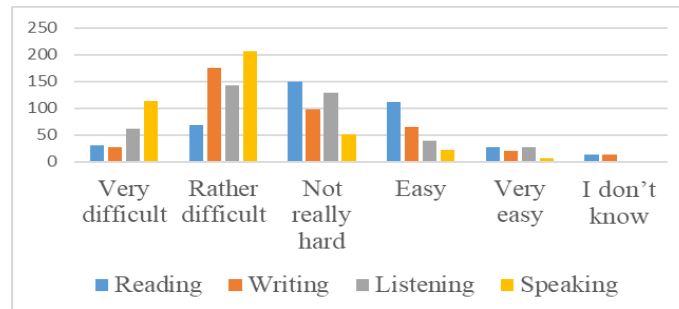


Figure 3. Challenges in Learning English as a Foreign Language

C. English in a Multilingual Classroom

The final part of the questionnaire was devoted to the specifics of the functioning of the English language and the related phenomenon of code switching. To begin with, we asked respondents how familiar they were with code switching as a form of multilingualism. Thus, 38% of the respondents answered that they agreed with the statement that the transition from Kazakh/Russian to English and vice versa is familiar to them, that is, they use it in their speech. At the same time, 46% expressed disagreement with this statement, that is, code switching in speech is not common for them. Consequently, many students of multilingual groups, in their opinion, are not yet familiar with the phenomenon of code switching as a form of multilingualism for them to use it in speech as a common phenomenon.

Conflicting responses have been received to statements about the impact of multilingualism on the status of languages. Thus, half of the surveyed students from multilingual groups (51%) agreed with the statement that the simultaneous use of Kazakh/Russian and English in speech leads to improvement of the English language. On the other hand, a significant number of respondents (28.5%) disagreed with this statement. More than a half of the respondents (65.3%) disagreed with the opinion that the simultaneous use of Kazakh/Russian and English in speech leads to a weakening of the English language. Nevertheless, 21% of the respondents still agreed with this statement. 35.3% of the surveyed students from multilingual groups agreed with the statement that the simultaneous use of Kazakh/Russian and English languages in speech leads to a weakening of the Kazakh/Russian language, while at the same time 45.8% of the respondents disagreed with this opinion. From these answers, we can conclude that in the perception of the majority of students from multilingual groups, mixing Kazakh or Russian with English in speech helps to strengthen the position of the English language. However, it is difficult to conclude how much the mixing of the languages can weaken the position of Russian or Kazakh languages. This point is controversial, but a slight preponderance is observed in favor of the fact that mixing languages does not negatively affect Russian or Kazakh.

In the next two questions, we wanted to clarify which format of classes suited the respondents more – classes using only English or classes using English and Kazakh/Russian languages. As the questionnaire results showed, the majority of students (60.3%) do not agree that classes should be conducted only in English, although 23% of respondents are not against this format of conducting classes. At the same time, three quarters of the surveyed students from multilingual groups agree (52.8%) or completely agree (25%) that classes should be conducted using English and Kazakh/Russian. It was also important for us to clarify the attitude of students from multilingual groups towards the use of multilingualism by other people in speech. As in the previous responses, in the answers to the questions whether the simultaneous use of Kazakh/Russian and English in speech is pleasant or annoying, there are differences of opinion. Thus, 42.8% of respondents like the simultaneous use of Kazakh/Russian and English languages in speech, while 30.5% of respondents indicated that they do not like mixing languages in speech. However, almost half of the respondents (47.5%) do not experience irritation when languages are mixed in speech. And also almost half of the respondents (46.3%) agree that they experience pleasure when they hear the Kazakh/Russian and English languages mixed in speech. But at the same time, a third (35.5%) of the respondents do not enjoy mixing languages in speech.

In the following five questions, the respondents answered whether the use of multilingualism affects the quality of their education at the university. More than a half (51.5%) of the surveyed students from multilingual groups agreed with the statement that mixing languages contributes to productive language acquisition. Almost a half of the respondents (48.3%) agreed that mixing languages helps them experience learning satisfaction. On the other hand, more than a half of respondents (54.8%) disagree with the statement that they feel less lost when switching from Kazakh/Russian to English or vice versa. At the same time, there is no clear opinion whether switching from English to Kazakh/Russian or vice versa helps to increase comfort in the learning process: 34.8% agree with this statement, while 35.5% disagree. A similar situation is observed with the response to the statement that switching from English to

Russian/Kazakh or vice versa reduces tension in the educational process: 47.5% of the respondents agree with this statement, while 40.5% of respondents disagree with it.

Regarding the influence of multilingualism on the quality of teaching English, students from multilingual groups demonstrated more unity of opinion. As shown in Figure 4, about a half of the respondents agreed that the simultaneous use of the Kazakh/Russian and English languages in speech helps them understand new words (44.3%) and difficult concepts (46.5%), comprehend English grammar (53%) and successfully complete the task given by the teacher (47.5%).

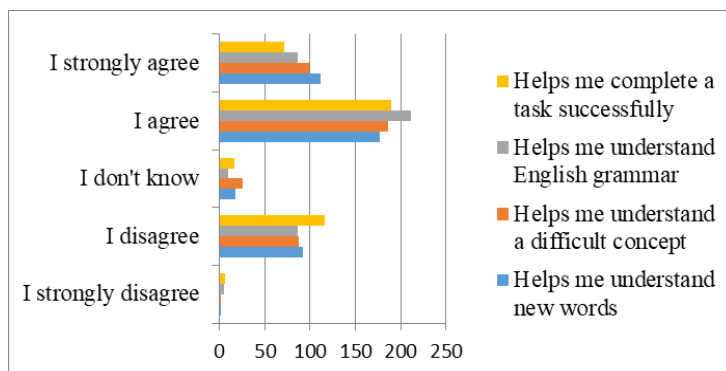


Figure 4. Influence of Multilingualism on the Quality of Learning English

Using the next group of questions, we were able to clarify the respondents' attitude towards the phenomenon of code switching as a form of multilingualism in education. We were primarily interested in how they felt about their teachers' use of code switching. The vast majority of respondents indicated a positive attitude towards the use of code switching when explaining grammatical (77.8%) and lexical material (69.3%) and, in general, towards the fact that teachers can use Kazakh/Russian and English languages simultaneously in speech. Almost a half (49.3%) of the multilingual students surveyed generally view code switching as a positive phenomenon. The majority of respondents (54%) indicate that they do not avoid code switching in speech. Still, there is an interesting observation. While almost a half (47.8%) would like classroom assignments to include switching from Kazakh/Russian to English and vice versa, the respondents do not have a consensus on the use of three languages in homework, demonstrating virtually the same ratings for and against code switching in home assignments.

To summarize, the quantitative study of the status of the English language in multilingual higher education in Kazakhstan showed that, despite the active policy of promoting English as a means of international communication in the country, in general the level of English language proficiency remains average and below average. Although many students believe that knowledge of English is prestigious and promotes career advancement, English is still not a widely used language in Kazakhstan. At the same time, students from multilingual groups have not yet taken advantage of the benefits that multilingualism provides in learning a foreign language, and seem to not even have a clear understanding of the essence of code switching as a form of multilingualism in the educational context. Although they generally view code switching as a positive phenomenon, in many cases they do not have a strong and clearly stated opinion regarding the possibilities it offers.

V. DISCUSSION

Based on the results of the study, we see it necessary to discuss several issues regarding the role of the English language in multilingual higher education as a criterion of the effectiveness of the multilingual policy in Kazakhstan. The questionnaire data confirmed that in the field of higher education, as in other social spheres like popular culture (Gritsenko & Aleshinskaya, 2023) or language landscape (Utegenova et al., 2024), English has great prestige and is seen as a marker of professionalism (Gritsenko & Aleshinskaya, 2015) and a key to successful integration into the global educational space (Akynova et al., 2021). However, despite the generally positive attitudes towards the promotion of English in higher education (Kurmanova et al., 2023), we cannot conclude that the multilingual policy in Kazakhstan has been implemented successfully yet. In contrast to the conclusions drawn by Akynova et al. (2021), our study identified challenges that students from multilingual groups face in learning English as a foreign language. Apart from the lack of teaching and methodological materials mentioned by other scholars in relation to the primary and secondary education in Kazakhstan (Zhetpisbayeva et al., 2016; Karabassova, 2021), our respondents pointed to such essential reasons as the authorities ignoring the absence of real trilingualism in Kazakhstan and civil servants lacking the knowledge of English sufficient for conducting professional activities.

Another proof of the ineffectiveness of the current language policy in Kazakhstan is that, despite students' high interest and motivation due to its prestige, English has still not acquired the status of a traditionally spoken language, remaining significant as a factor for professional growth (Tuleubayeva et al., 2021). A parallel can be drawn here with the distinction between artefactual and natural languages suggested by Pickel (2013). According to the scholar,

artefactual languages refer to social symbols like scientific and technical competence. In the Expanding Circle context, English is an artefactual language and is not able to replace the Kazakh and Russian languages having long-established educational traditions, with Russian being the language of “upward mobility” and Kazakh being the natural language for a substantial number of Kazakhs (Agbo et al., 2022, p. 21).

Trilingualism in an educational setting should be treated with particular care, especially if the second languages are characterized by unequal positions. Nhongo and Siziba (2022) argue that code switching dominates in trilingual situations where there are linguistic inequalities in the educational process and teachers face problems of balancing between languages. The authors propose to distinguish between situations when students speak different second languages and when these languages have different statuses, which is also characteristic of the current language situation in Kazakhstan. Efforts should be made to promote harmony in the context of multilingual education (Abduh et al., 2023). In this regard, the role of English should be reconceptualized as an essential resource in maintaining the Kazakh and Russian languages and cultures, providing potential opportunities for literacy development across the three languages (Yang, 2023).

VI. CONCLUSION

The purpose of the present study was to explore the status of the English language in higher education in Kazakhstan as a criterion of the effectiveness of the trilingual policy adopted by the country’s leading universities. Using a sociolinguistic survey among students of multilingual groups, language preferences and features of the use of English in the field of multilingual education in Kazakhstan were studied; the role and status of the English language and the subjective attitudes of its use by students of multilingual groups were considered; and the features of the interaction of languages in the educational process were identified. The results of the study confirm the growing importance of the English language in the educational environment. The simultaneous use of Kazakh, Russian and English in the educational context is a reflection of the policy of trilingualism in education, aimed at training competitive specialists who are professionally fluent in the three languages. However, despite the active promotion of the English language by the government policy and students’ understanding of the importance and prestige of studying English, it is not used on an equal basis with the Kazakh and Russian languages and the level of its proficiency remains not very high.

Since multilingual groups are a relatively new phenomenon for Kazakhstan, the main area of using multilingualism remains the educational sphere. Moreover, many students learning in multilingual groups have not formed a clear attitude towards multilingualism and its impact on the educational process and the quality of language learning. As a result of the quantitative study of the specifics of the language situation in the field of multilingual education in Kazakhstan, gaps in the implementation of language policy were identified, primarily associated with an insufficiently clear understanding on the part of both students and teachers about the advantages and specifics of work in this area. As recommendations for improving the situation, it is possible to propose conducting training courses with teaching staff of universities involved in multilingual education to deepen their knowledge of teaching tools and proficiency in English. Furthermore, it is necessary to develop and implement into the educational process an automated system of multilingual online dictionaries and thesauruses containing terms of various branches of science in the three languages. This system should provide open access to a multilingual terminology database and ensure uniformity of terms across all industries, which is sure to contribute to the enhancement the English language proficiency.

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