Azamat Akbarov[1]

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BILINGUALISM IN TERMS OF THE KAZAKH AND RUSSIAN LANGUAGES IN RELATION TO ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Abstract: *In this study, the author tries to to shed light on the specific bilingual context in Kazakhstan. The sample consisted of 148 students (mostly females) from a Kazakh university, whose average age was M = 18.89 (SD = 1.06). The questionnaire designed especially for the purposes of the present study was applied. Results revealed that a greater number of students speak Kazakh more frequently than Russian when they are at home. However, during the school time and time spent interacting with peers, Kazakh and Russian are spoken almost equally. Moreover, a vast majority of the participants reported they liked them both. Other findings pointed to the students' similar levels of Kazakh and Russian proficiency. Russian was perceived as more similar to English than was Kazakh. Lastly, most participants considered bilingual persons more capable of learning another language when compared with monolingual people. The results were discussed in the light of the modern trends in Kazakhstani's language speaking habits and attitudes towards Russian and Kazakh.*

Keywords: *Kazakh, Russian, bilingualism, English as a foreign language.*

Introduction

The phenomenon of diversity has held an important part in the reflection of language for a long time. How there are so many languages in the world is a common question. For centuries, the explanation of linguistic diversity has been looked at in mythology and religion, where it is usually connected to the origin of language and the first common language of humankind (Akbarov, 2018). Bilingualism or bilinguality include proficiency in speaking two languages wherein both of them have a substantial communication function in one's social environment. Bilingualism also means having two linguistic symbols for the same referent/concept (Sugunasiri, 1971). In other words, bilingual persons express a mental representation (i.e. concept)

[1] Full-professor, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Almaty, Kazakhstan.

that they have in mind in two different linguistic codes (i.e. as two words with the same meaning, within the two languages they speak).

There is a large volume of published studies describing and explaining cognitive and social aspects of bilingualism especially in developmental and cognitive psychology as well as in neuroscience. Within these two disciplines, it was found that bilingual children can better adjust to changes in their environments, while bilingual adults are less prone to cognitive decline. In addition, the task-switching, attention and executive control capacities and skills of bilingual persons are better compared to those of monolingual people (Bialystok, Craik, & Luk, 2012; Marian & Shook, 2012; Yow & Li, 2015). Bilingualism was also studied in psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, neuropsychology, anthropology, ethnology, education, as well as in political and economic sciences (Hamers & Blanc, 2000).

Bilingualism is related to biculturalism and the problem of a first language (L1)/second language (L2) cultural identification. Research showed that thereinforcement of L2 usage in family context had a negative effect on an L1 cultural identification, whereas an L1 proficiency level was positively correlated with the cultural identification linked to that L1 (Schroeder, Lam, & Marian, 2017). In the same study, it was also found that participants' fear of being perceived as foreigners because of their L2 accent was negatively linked to the L2 cultural identification.

Various efforts were made to operationalize the hypothetical construct of bilingualism. The most comprehensive one is probably the instrument proposed by Li, Sepanski, and Zhao (2006), which is called L2 language history questionnaire. This tool comprises two parts: the first part includes general questions (participants' age, country of origin and residence, gender, etc.), while the second one encompasses questions on learners' language environment, language use (e.g. the percentage of time communicating in language A and B), and specific bilingual habits/preferences (Li, Sepanski, and Zhao, 2006). Additionally, there is the third part of the electronic (digital) form of this questionnaire, within which researchers can submit their own questions.

Bilingualism can be regarded as a multidimensional construct. The following dimensions of this concept were

identified: L1 and L2 age of acquisition, competence, the social status of the two languages, the cognitive organization that is beyond the usage of a particular pair of languages, group membership and the usage of these two languages in a community (Hamers & Blanc, 1989).

The main objectives of the present study were 1) similarities between the Kazakh and Russian language, as well as 2) students' habits related to these languages (such as the frequency of their usage in various social contexts). Furthermore, it also focused on students' experience with learning English as a second language (ESL).

In Kazakhstan, which is an Eurasian country where our study was conducted, three languages are actively studied at different educational institutions. These are Russian, Kazakh, and English (Zhumanova et al., 2016). Thus, it is a multilingual environment, or a bilingual one when the usage of English is considered to be a consequence of the internationalization and globalization imperative. Moreover, the Kazakh and Russian languages are the two official languages in this country (Zhumanova et al., 2016). Studies showed that 50% of the Kazakhstan population is able to speak Kazakh, 88% of it speaks Russian, and 2% of the people can speak English (Aminov et al., 2010). The authors of the same study recorded that Russian is used more frequently than Kazakh while speaking with friends, family, colleagues at work, watching TV and reading newspapers. On the other hand, Kazakh training courses are delivered for free in all public educational institutions (Aksholakova & Ismailova, 2013). Moreover, contemporary trends include switching from the marginalized role of Kazakh to its revival hand in hand with Kazakh ethnical identity (Smagulova, 2017). Before the independence of Kazakhstan, people rarely admitted speaking Kazakh because of the Soviet Union control and also speaking Kazakh was seen as a non-urban manner (Matuszkiewicz, 2010).

As for English, it is widely taught in Kazakhstan but students face learning obstacles in regard to the English sound structure, stress and intonation (Sultangubiyeva, Avakova, & Kabdrakhmanova, 2013). It was observed that Russian is a mediator language between English and Kazakh when trying to translate from English into Kazakh, and vice versa (Zhumabekova & Mirzoyeva, 2016). Contemporary education has to go hand in hand with the global development in various areas of human

activity (Akbarov, Gönen & Aydoğan, 2018). Hence, there are significant connections between these three languages in Kazakhstan.

The following research questions were listed:

1. What is the predominantly used language by Kazakh families, at schools, and in interactions with peers (Russian, Kazakh, or another language)?
2. What language do students like more, Kazakh or Russian or another language ?
3. What is students' level of proficiency with regard to Kazakh, Russian and English?
4. What is the degree of similarities between Russian and Kazakh, Russian and English, and Kazakh and English?
5. Do students think that bilingualism facilitates the learning of other languages?

Methods

Participants

The study was conducted on Kazakh students who were at the tertiary level of education (N = 148). Their average age was M = 18.88 (SD = 1.06) and there were 113 females (or 76.35% of the total sample) and 16 males (10.81% of the whole sample), whereas 19 (12.84%) participants did not provide information on their gender. Sample structure with regard to the students' mother tongue is shown in Figure 1.

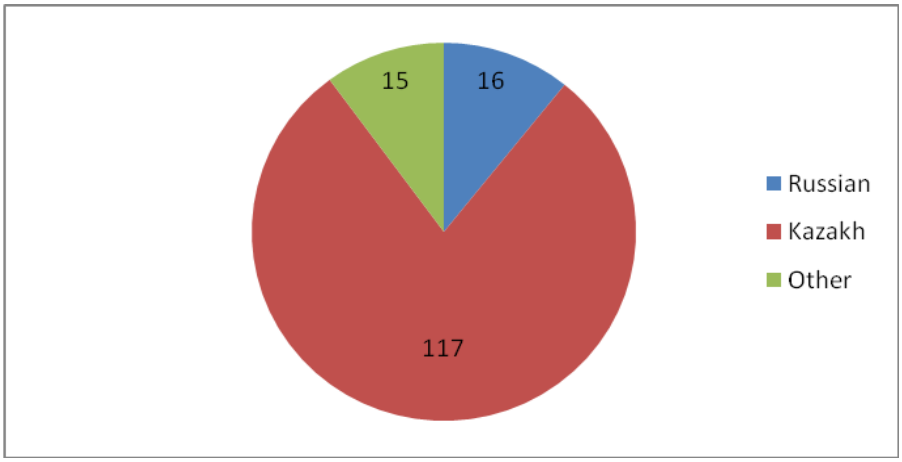

Figure 1. Sample structure by participants' mother tongue

As displayed in Figure 1, the mother tongue of the vast majority of our participants is Kazakh (N = 117, i.e. 79.05%). Russian is the mother tongue of 16 participants (10.81%) whereas 15 participants (10.14%) reported that their mother tongue is neither Kazakh nor Russian.

In addition, the parameter *years of learning* shows that English is the first and most important foreign language in Kazakhstan (Figure 2).

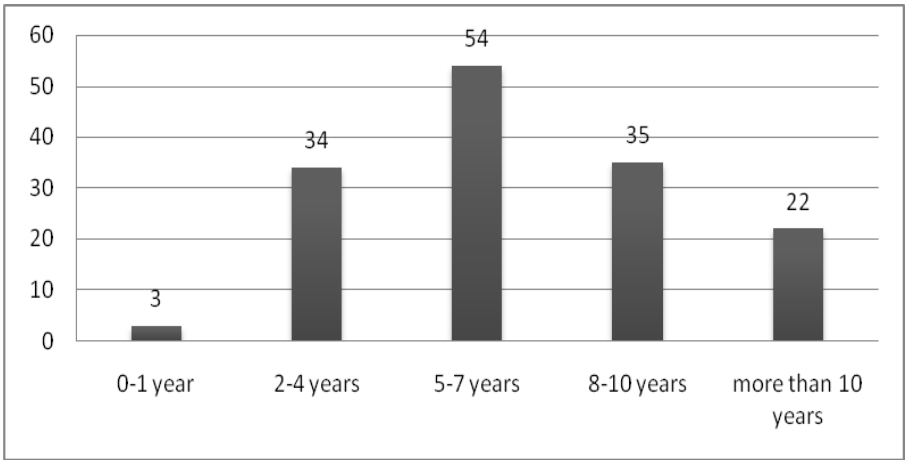

Figure 2. For how many years have students been learning English?

As shown in Figure 2, most participants have been learning English for 5-7 years (N = 54, i.e. 36.49% of the total sample), 35 participants (23.65%) have been learning this language for 8-10 years, and 34 (22.97%) of them for only 2-4 years. There were also 22 students (14.86%) who reported that they have been learning English for even more than 10 years. Finally, only three participants (2.02%) have been learning it for a year or less.

Instruments

Participants were asked to provide answers to 14 questions, which included sociodemographics (age and gender), communication frequency and habits with regard to Russian and Kazakh (e.g. what language(s) participants speak at school, home and with friends), and English as a second language in comparison with Russian and Kazakh (e.g. determining the degree of similarity between Russian/Kazakh and English). The

questionnaire is enclosed at the end of this article (see Appendix).

Research Procedure and Data Processing

It took the participants approximately 20 minutes to answer all the questions from the administered instrument. After the data collection, the participants' results were entered into SPSS for Windows (version 23.0), where the database was created.

The obtained data were summarized in tables and figures (charts). Frequencies and percents were calculated and shown along with the results of the chi-square test conducted multiple times. This test indicated whether or not the differences in the analyzed frequencies were statistically significant.

While carrying out the study and displaying the obtained data, the researchers followed ethical rules established within educational and psychological sciences, i.e. they tried to maintain the standards of the profession as much as possible.

Findings

The findings are displayed in the same order as the research questions. Firstly, the language dominance in the students' families, at school, and during their interaction with other peers was displayed.

As can be noticed in Table 1, more participants said they speak Kazakh at tome (85 of them, which is 57.43% of the whole sample) and 51 participants (34.46%) usually speak Russian at home. The rest of them (12 students, i.e. 8.11%) speak some other language(s).

Language	**f**	**%**	**χ^2**	**p**
Russian	51	34.46		
Kazakh	85	57.43	8.500	.004
Other	12	8.11		

Table 1. What language do students speak at home?

The difference between the number of those who speak Kazakh and those who speak Russian at home was statistically significant ($\chi 2 = 8.500$, $p < .01$). Hence, Kazakh is spoken more at home compared to Russian.

Language	**f**	**%**	**χ^2**	**p**
Russian	53	35.81		
Kazakh	82	55.41	6.230	.013
Other	13	8.78		

Table 2. What language do students' parents usually speak to each other at home?

Similarly (Table 2), Kazakh is the predominant language in communication between the students' parents at home (82 of them, i.e. 55.41% reported Kazakh is usually spoken when their parents want to communicate with each other). Russian is usually spoken at home by the parents of 53 participants (35.81%). As in the previous case, this result was also statistically significant ($\chi 2 = 6.230$, $p < .05$). There are other languages spoken by the parents of our participants as well (13 students or 8.78 reported such habits in their families).

Language	**f**	**%**	**χ^2**	**p**
Russian	67	45.27		
Kazakh	65	43.92	0.030	.862
Other	16	10.81		

Table 3. What language do students speak at school?

However, as can be noticed from the figures in Table 3, Russian is spoken slightly more at school (67 participants or 45.27% of them indicated it is the most frequently used language at their university), compared with Kazakh (65 participants or 43.92% of them indicated this language was used in their formal teaching and learning environment). The difference between those who speak Russian and Kazakh at school was not statistically significant ($\chi 2 = 0.030$, $p > .05$). On the other hand, 16 participants (10.81%) answered that they spoke some other language(s) at school.

Similar to the case of the language spoken at school, the participants also speak Russian more than Kazakh with their friends and peers (73 vs. 66 students, i.e. 49.32% vs. 44.59%, see Table 4).

Language	f	%	χ^2	p
Russian	73	49.32		
Kazakh	66	44.59	0.353	.553
Other	9	6.08		

Table 4. *What language do students speak with their friends/peers?*

The difference between these numbers was not statistically significant ($\chi 2 = 0.353$, $p > .05$). Nine participants (6.08% of the total sample) reported they speak some other language(s) while interacting with their peers and friends.

Language	f	%	χ^2	p
Russian	19	12.84		
Kazakh	19	12.84	35.027	<.001
Both	110	74.32		

Table 5. Which language do students like more, Russian or Kazakh?

As was shown in Table 5, 110 participants (74.32% of the whole sample) liked both Russian and Kazakh and only 19 of them (12.84%) liked either Russian or Kazakh. Furthermore, the difference between the number of participants who liked both of them and only one of them was statistically significant ($\chi 2 = 35.027$, $p < .001$).

Level of proficiency	Kazakh	Russian	English
Beginner	2 (1.35%)	6 (4.05%)	0 (0%)
Elementary	2 (1.35%)	2 (1.35%)	2 (1.35%)
Pre-intermediate	14 (9.46%)	5 (3.38%)	5 (3.38%)
Intermediate	13 (8.78%)	15 (10.14%)	43 (29.05%)
Upper-intermed.	31 (20.95%)	23 (15.54%)	75 (50.68%)
Advanced	34 (22.97%)	44 (29.73%)	20 (13.51%)
Proficient	52 (35.14%)	53 (35.81%)	3 (2.03%)

Table 6. Participants' levels of proficiency of Kazakh, Russian, and English

Taking into account the levels of proficiency of these three languages, a similar trend was observed in speaking Kazakh and Russian languages (e.g. similar percentage of those who proficiently spoke Kazakh and Russian, 35.14% and 35.81%, respectively). However, it seemed that the students from our

sample were slightly better Russian speakers (despite the fact that the obtained difference is very small). To test this notion, they were divided into two groups (from beginner to intermediate and from upper-intermediate to proficient) – the difference between Kazakh and Russian proficiency was not statistically significant ($\chi 2 = 0.190$, $p > .05$).

On the other hand, they are less proficient regarding their English speaking skills (e.g. only 2.03% reported they spoke it proficiently). Accordingly, the results of the chi-square test revealed that the differences between the participants' Kazakh and English proficiency as well as their Russian and English proficiency were statistically significant ($\chi 2 = 6.136$, $p < .05$ and $\chi 2 = 8.426$, $p < .01$, respectively).

	The degree of similarity				
Similarity between...	***0-20%***	***21-40%***	***41-60%***	***61-80%***	***81-100%***
Russian and Kazakh	68 (45.95%)	28 (18.92%)	20 (13.51%)	12 (8.11%)	20 (13.51%)
Russian and English	79 (53.38%)	30 (20.27%)	21 (14.19%)	11 (7.43%)	7 (4.73%)
Kazakh and English	108 (72.97%)	23 (15.54%)	8 (5.41%)	3 (2.03%)	6 (4.05%)

Table 7. The degree of similarity (in %) between Russian, Kazakh, and English, according to students

Looking at the figures shown in Table 7, it seems that Russian and English are more alike compared to Kazakh and English. Of course, these were students' estimates. With the help of the chi-square test, it was determined that this difference in the similarity between the two languages was statistically significant ($\chi 2 = 15.898$, $p < .01$). When participants compared the similarity degree of Russian and Kazakh and the similarity of Russian and English, statistically significant difference was not reached ($\chi 2 = 7.220$, $p > .05$). Unlike this case, Kazakh and Russian were, in the participants' opinion, significantly more alike than Kazakh and English ($\chi 2 = 27.662$ $p < .001$). For example, 13.51% of the participants thought the similarity between Russian and Kazakh was 81-100%, whereas only 4.05% participants indicated this degree of similarity between Kazakh and Russian.

The students' opinions about the benefits of bilingualism were clear. They looked at those who successfully mastered the

two languages as having a better chances to learn a new language (122 participants or 82.43% of them picked this answering option, see Table 8). On the conterary, 23 participants (15.54%) thought bilingual persons were equally able to learn a new language similar to those who were monolingual.

Answers	**f**	**%**	**χ^2**	**p**
Yes, they are more successful than those who have acquired only one language.	122	82.43	62.270	< .001
No, they are less successful than those who have acquired only one language.	3	2.03		
No, they are as successful as those who have acquired only one language.	23	15.54		

Table 8. Are people who since their early age have acquired two languages better and more successful in learning a new language(s) later (students' opinions)?

In addition, there were three participants (2.03%) who considered bilingual people being less able to learn a third language, compared to monolingual people.

Discussion

Despite the increasing number of students speaking Kazakh within their families (and who report their parents also speak it when interacting with each other), they somehow hesitate to use this language at school or with their peers/friends. This is probably due to the social status dimension of bilingualism, as pointed out by Hamers and Blanc (1989). Kazakh has been seen as a less rustic language, unlike Russian, which has been considered as more urban (Matuszkiewicz, 2010). Our results went in the same direction with those obtained by Aminov and his colleagues (2010) when taking into account the prevalence of the Russian language at schools (universities) and in students' conversations with their peers/friends. These authors highlighted a frequent usage of Russian in families; however, our study did not yield such a result. We obtained the opposite result, which indicated some changes in cultural identification within the specific bilingual context in Kazakhstan. This finding was in line with Smagulova's (2017) notion about

the revival of Kazakh in modern times. In addition, younger people (i.e. adolescents/students) reported they speak Kazakh more frequently than was the case when Aminov and his colleagues conducted their study (2010).

Our participants usually like both languages. A minority reported likeness of either Kazakh or Russian. Hence, the emotional component of their attitudes toward the two languages is developed to its positive pole. Indirectly, this indicated the students' satisfaction with the bilingual aspect of the Kazakh socio-cultural environment.

The research revealed that the levels of Kazakh and Russian proficiency were similar to each other. Therefore, there is no such a thing as a significant predominance of Russian among Kazakh students. Both of these languages are spoken with almost equal levels of proficiency.

As English is widely taught at educational institutions in Kazakhstan (Sultangubiyeva et al., 2013), the students' English proficiency, as revealed by our study, was satisfactory and comparable to the English competencies of students in other developing countries.

Participants perceived Russian (compared with Kazakh) as more similar to English. This is not surprising because Russian usually serves as a mediator between Kazakh and English in the process of translation (Zhumabekova & Mirzoyeva, 2016).

Finally, the vast majority of the participants mentioned that bilingualism was a facilitator to learn other languages. Learning another language is a cognitive, social and cultural activity. Bilingualism's beneficial role in improving and maintaining cognitive abilities was mentioned in lots of previous studies (e.g. Marian & Shook, 2012; Yow & Li, 2015). Hence, the students' subjective opinions and estimates were in accordance with the relevant research findings in cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics. Apart from it, social and cultural factors determine one's adaptation to social norms and cultural attitudes of a particular society.

The main practical implication of our findings was the idea that Kazakh is becoming more popular than it was in the past. The second implication and insight was the growing popularity of English, indicated by the high levels of its proficiency among Kazakh students. English skills and knowledge are considered

one of the essential preconditions of socioeconomic development of countries where this language is not the mother tongue.

This research has its limitations as well, such as the small number of the students who speak Russian in our sample, the self-reported estimates of Kazakh, Russian, and English proficiency and the issue of generalization, typical for studies conducted in social sciences – that is, the participants belonged to the specific age group and all of them went to the same university.

Some recommendations are listed below for the benfit of future research that might be interested in the same topic. These were beyond the scope of the present study; however, they can be regarded as a benchmark and initial points for future research. The first is determining age and gender-specific differences in speaking Kazakh and Russian. The next is an investigation on how Kazakhstanis perceive language-related questions: as relatively neutral or socially sensitive. The last recommendation encompassed refers to carrying out a study into the relationships between the students' intercultural sensitivity, their cultural identity and bilingualism.

Conclusion

The interaction of lots of internal (cognition, personality, and motivation) and external (culture, economy, politics and society) factors tailors a complex context of learning two or more languages. These languages are in mutual interaction and can undergo some changes (especially when there is an impact of another important international language, that is, English).

In view of all that has been mentioned, some rational and evidence-based predictions can be drawn. Kazakh is more likely to become present at educational institutions and in peer-to-peer communication. It probably is not going to be associated with a lower social status anymore. Despite its growing presence, Kazakh will presumably be followed and accompanied by Russian because bilingualism is one of the most common cultural features of Kazakhstan. The importance of English as a second language (ESL) learning should be accentuated as well.

Indeed, these sociolinguistic patterns and phenomena need to be explored further, not only within the quantitative context but also within the qualitative studies (e.g. conducting interviews with Kazakhstan, organizing focus groups, and

carrying out observational studies of the interaction between people who speak Kazah, Russian or both of them).

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Appendix
Questionnaire onthe Russian/Kazakh bilingualism

Your gender: male/female
Your age: _____

1. *What is your mother tongue?*
a) *Russian*
b) *Kazakh*
c) *Other (please specify) _____*

2. *What language do you usually speak with your friends/peers?*
a) *Russian*
b) *Kazakh*
c) *Other (please specify) _____*

3. *What language do you usually speak at school?*
a) *Russian*
b) *Kazakh*
c) *Other (please specify) _____*

4. *What language do you usually speak at home?*
a) *Russian*
b) *Kazakh*
c) *Other (please specify) _____*

5. *What language do your parents usually speak to each other at home?*
a) *Russian*
b) *Kazakh*
c) *Other (please specify) _____*

6. *What language do you like more?*
a) *Russian*
b) *Kazakh*
c) *I like both of them equally*

7. *What is your level of proficiency with regard to Russian:*
a) *Beginner*
b) *Elementary*
c) *Pre-intermediate*
d) *Intermediate*
e) *Upper intermediate*
f) *Advanced*
g) *Proficient*

8. *What is your level of proficience regarding Kazakh?*

a) Beginner
b) Elementary
c) Pre-intermediate
d) Intermediate
e) Upper intermediate
f) Advanced
g) Proficient

9. In your opinion, what is the degree of similarity between Russian and Kazakh (please, enter percentage, where 0% means ''totally different'' and 100% - ''identical''):
_____ %

10. What is the degree of similarity between Russian and English (please, express it as a percentage): _____ %

11. What is the degree of similarity between Kazakh and English (please, express it as a percentage): _____ %

12. What is the level of your English proficiency?
a) Beginner
b) Elementary
c) Pre-intermediate
d) Intermediate
e) Upper intermediate
f) Advanced
g) Proficient

13. How many years have you been learning English?
a) 0 – 1 year
b) 2 – 4 years
c) 5 – 7 years
d) 8 – 10 years
e) More than 10 years

14. In your opinion, are people who since their early age have acquired two languages better and more successful in learning new language(s) later (compared to those who have acquired only one language)?
a) Yes, they are more successful than those who have acquired only one language.
b) No, they are less successful than those who have acquired only one language.
c) No, they are as successful as those who have acquired only one language.