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Bridging Theory and Practice”**

**«Тілдерді оқытудың инновациялық тәсілдері: теория мен
практиканы ұштастыру» атты II көктемгі халықаралық
ғылыми-практикалық конференция**

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конференция «Инновационные подходы преподавания
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«Тілдерді оқытудың инновациялық тәсілдері: теория мен практиканы ұштастыру» атты ІІ көктемгі халықаралық ғылыми-практикалық конференция материалдар жинағында шетел тілдерін оқыту саласындағы озық тәжірибелермен алмасуға, мәдениетаралық қарым-қатынасты нығайтуға, цифрлық дәуір жағдайында шетел тілдерін оқытудағы инновациялық технологияларды таратуға, сондай-ақ халықаралық ғылыми-академиялық ынтымақтастықты кеңейтуге бағытталған ғылыми-практикалық зерттеулердің нәтижелері енгізілген. Материалдарда білім алушылар мен жас ғалымдардың осы бағыттағы зерттеулерге белсенді қатысуын ынталандыру мәселелері қарастырылған.

В сборник материалов ІІ весенней международной научно-практической конференции «Иновационные подходы преподавания языков: слияние теории и практики» включены результаты научно-практических исследований, направленных на обмен передовым опытом в области преподавания иностранных языков, укрепление межкультурной коммуникации, распространение инновационных технологий обучения в условиях цифровой эпохи, а также расширение международного научно-академического сотрудничества. В материалах рассматриваются вопросы стимулирования активного участия обучающихся и молодых ученых в исследованиях в данной области.

The proceedings of the ІІ Spring International Scientific and Practical ONLINE Conference “Innovative Approaches of Language Teaching: Bridging Theory and Practice” include the results of scientific and practical research aimed at sharing advanced experience in foreign language teaching, strengthening intercultural communication, disseminating innovative teaching technologies in the digital age, and expanding international scientific and academic cooperation. The materials also address issues related to encouraging the active participation of students and young researchers in this field.

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NJSC “The L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University”
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The Main Themes of the Conference:

1. Teaching foreign languages for professional and interdisciplinary purposes.
2. Innovative technologies in foreign language teaching methodology.
3. Language training in the context of multilingualism and lifelong learning.
4. Language education based on digital technologies and artificial intelligence.

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TRILINGUAL EDUCATION SYSTEM IN KAZAKHSTAN: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

The goal of Kazakhstan's "trinity of languages" policy is to create a cohesive trilingual education system that fosters functional competence in English, Russian, and Kazakh. This study employs a combined-methods approach, combining original survey data from 49 respondents and a review of scientific literature. The theoretical foundation is derived from contemporary theories of foreign language proficiency (Bardel and Sanchez), cognitive approaches to multilingualism (Cummins; Jessner), and classical language contact concepts (Weinreich). Empirical research on Kazakhstan's policy implementation is also included (Sarmurzin et al.; Trichik and Radchuk).

The findings demonstrate that Kazakhstan's historically multilingual environment provides a genuine foundation for trilingual development; however, practical implementation is hampered by four interconnected core issues: a significant typological gap between the three languages, an inadequate English-language environment outside of schools, a severe lack of qualified teachers, and institutional asymmetry that marginalizes Kazakh despite its official state status.

Introduction

The "trinity of languages" policy is one of the most ambitious language-planning projects in Central Asia, which was officially announced in Kazakhstan after President Nursultan Nazarbayev's speech to the nation in 2007. According to this doctrine, the state promised to help people learn how to speak three languages at the same time. "Kazakhstan should be perceived around the world as a highly educated country whose population speaks three languages. These are the Kazakh language, the state language; the Russian language, the language of interethnic communication; and the English

language, the language of successful integration into the global economy" (Nazarbayev, 2007). The State Program for the Development and Functioning of Languages (2011–2020) and the Concept of Foreign Language Education in Kazakhstan (2006) made the idea official. The policy is important for more than just language teaching. The Trilingual Education Policy (TEP) is a strategy for culture, politics, and the economy in this sense. Its goal is to make Kazakhstan a competitive country in the world of globalization.

It's clear that stated goals and actual execution are diverging. The viability and internal coherence of simultaneously developing three typologically disparate languages within a single educational system have been seriously questioned by academics and educators. The policy has not yet addressed the structural, pedagogical, and sociolinguistic barriers identified in the literature. The study intends to: (1) review key theoretical frameworks relevant to trilingualism and third language acquisition; (2) examine the sociohistorical foundations of multilingualism in Kazakhstan; (3) identify and analyze systemic challenges met in implementing TEP using both literature and survey evidence; and (4) formulate evidence-based recommendations for policy and pedagogy.

Methods

This study employs a mixed-method research design. It combines a systematic literature review with a quantitative and qualitative analysis of original survey data. This dual approach allows theoretical insights from the literature to be compared with stakeholders' empirical perceptions and experiences in Kazakhstan's trilingual education system.

Literature review

Sources for the systematic review were selected based on three criteria. First, they had to directly relate to trilingualism, L3 acquisition, or multilingual language policy. Second, they required research thoroughness, defined as peer-reviewed academic articles, scholarly monographs, or official policy documents. Third, sources needed to be especially relevant to Kazakhstan's linguistic context or to frameworks transferable to that context. The final corpus covers eight thematic clusters: (a) classical language contact theory (Weinreich, 2011); (b) cognitive models of bilingual and multilingual development (Cummins, 2001; Jessner, 2008); (c) modern L3 acquisition theories (Bardel & Sanchez, 2020); (d) psycholinguistic and dynamic models of multilingualism (Grosjean, 2001; Aronin & O Laoire, 2004; Anastassiou et al., 2017); (e) empirical studies on trilingual education in Kazakhstan (Sarmurzin et al.; Trichik & Radchuk, 2020; Dyusenbi, 2021); (f) sociohistorical analyses of multilingualism in Central Asia (Dzhusupov); (g) pedagogical frameworks for multilingual instruction (Alekseeva et al., 2021; Likhacheva, 2020; Menken & Garcia, 2010); and (h) state language policy documents (Nazarbayev, 2007, 2012; State Program 2011-2020).

Survey instrument and data collection

In addition to the literature review, original data were collected through a formal questionnaire with 25 items in six thematic sections: (1) respondent profile, (2) self-assessed language proficiency, (3) attitudes toward the trilingual education policy, (4) perceived implementation challenges, (5) language and identity, and (6) open-ended reflections on personal experience. Section 3 used a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). Section 4 included multiple-choice items allowing several selections. The questionnaire was distributed digitally in March 2026. Forty nine respondents completed the survey. The sample included pupils, university students, parents of school-age children, and graduates, with one respondent in another category. Most (73.5%) had attended or were attending mixed/multilingual schools; 12.2% were associated with Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS), the flagship institutions of Kazakhstan's trilingual education initiative.

Analytical procedure

There were some phases to the analysis. We started by reading and annotating every piece of literature, making note of important ideas, conclusions, and theoretical assertions. Then, we carried out a cross-source integrative analysis, utilizing survey results to bolster or expand on the findings of the literature review. We concentrated on the relationship between respondents' lived experiences and theoretical predictions.

Results

1. Theoretical foundations of trilingualism

Four groups of findings emerged from the theoretical literature review.

First, the essential vocabulary for comprehending interlingual influence is provided by classical language contact theory. According to “Languages in Contact” (Weinreich, 1953), borrowing, convergence, code-switching, and phonetic, lexical, and morphosyntactic interference are the primary ways that languages in contact influence one another. Additionally, he noted that the degree and direction of interlingual influence are shaped by social factors, language prestige, community standing, and dominant linguistic behavior. In the Kazakhstani context, these mechanisms function.

Second, conditions for successful language acquisition are made clear by cognitive approaches to multilingual development. Cummins, in his book “Language, power, and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire” (2000), makes a distinction between cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) and basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS). He contends that academic literacy deficiencies required for content-based instruction may be concealed by surface conversational fluency. According to his hypothesis, learning L2 and then L3 is aided by the development of academic literacy in L1. The Threshold Hypothesis, on the other hand, maintains that the cognitive advantages of multilingualism do not materialize until a critical level of proficiency in each language is attained. Multilingual education may hinder cognitive development below this threshold.

Third, learning a third language differs qualitatively from learning a second language, according to contemporary L3 acquisition theory. According to Bardel and

Sanchez (“Third language acquisition. Age, proficiency and multilingualism”, 2020), the multilingual mind is a dynamic system where age, language typologies, learning histories, and proficiency levels all interact at the same time. Three competing models of cross-linguistic influence (CLI) are identified: the L2 Status Factor, which predicts privileged transfer from L2 owing to the similar formal learning conditions under which L2 and L3 are typically acquired; the Typological Primacy Model (TPM), which predicts transfer from the language most typologically similar to L3 regardless of acquisition order, and the Cumulative Enhancement Model (CEM), which holds that any previously acquired language can exert a positive influence on L3 wherever structural matches exist. In the Kazakhstani configuration (Kazakh L1 / Russian L2 / English L3), both the L2 Status Factor and the TPM predict that Russian will serve as the dominant source of transfer in English acquisition, given the greater typological proximity between Russian and English than between Kazakh and English. This carries implications for both facilitative effects and systematic interference.

Fourth, the integrated, non-additive nature of multilingual competence is emphasized by dynamic and psycholinguistic models. As a unique cognitive resource of trilinguals, Jessner (2008) notes that heightened metalinguistic awareness emerges from the ongoing management of multiple interacting language systems. According to Grosjean (2001), multilingual people use languages as a single toolkit rather than keeping them apart in their minds. According to Aronin and O. Laoire (2004), the Dominant Language Constellation is the distinct personal arrangement of languages that every multilingual person possesses, with each language serving distinct roles in identity, communication, and cognition.

2. Sociohistorical context of multilingualism in Kazakhstan

The review of historical and sociolinguistic sources reveals that multilingualism in Kazakhstan is not a recent political invention but a strongly embedded cultural phenomenon.

Dzhusupov documents three broad historical phases: pre-twentieth century natural trilingualism involving Arabic (the language of Islamic scholarship), Persian (the language of statecraft and literature), and Turkic languages (the medium of everyday life); the Soviet era, which produced systematic and near-universal Kazakh-Russian bilingualism through deliberate institutional promotion of Russian across education, administration, and media; and the post-independence period, characterised through efforts to restore Kazakh's functional status and, from 2007 onwards, by the incorporation of English as a third pillar of language policy.

There are two main implications of this multi-layered history. One cultural advantage that makes it easier for a trilingual education policy to be accepted is the psychological preparedness and social normalization of multilingual life that the Kazakhstani people have historically shown. However, the Soviet legacy produced a profound institutional asymmetry that continues to influence language use and prestige: Kazakh's functional expansion into urban professional, academic, and administrative domains is ongoing but not yet complete, while Russian continues to dominate these

domains. One of the TEP's declared objectives is directly contradicted by the empirical data reviewed, which shows that the percentage of citizens who speak Kazakh as their first language has decreased rather than increased in recent years.

3. Systemic challenges in the implementation of TEP

Four interrelated categories of comprehensive challenges are identified by the empirical literature, which is based on the systematic analysis conducted by Sarmurzin et al. For each, survey data offer direct empirical support.

Reform overload is the first. Resource fragmentation and conceptual inconsistency resulted from the introduction of TEP concurrently with the shift to a 12-year educational system, curriculum modernization, and updated state standards. TEP's foundational idea has undergone numerous revisions in response to shifting political priorities. The ensuing discrepancy is confirmed by survey participants, who pointed out that promises of English-medium instruction in upper secondary school were not met and that not all subjects were taught in English despite official policy requirements (for instance, "biology was in English, but chemistry was not", survey, 2026).

The lack of teachers is the second. “31,000 teachers are needed to provide medium instruction four subjects in English, including in small schools” (Sagadiyev, 2018). According to survey data, only 12.2% of respondents thought that most teachers were well-prepared, while 83.7% of respondents thought that teachers were either unevenly prepared (36.7%) or inadequately prepared (46.9%). Additionally, 89.8% of respondents said that during lessons that are supposedly taught in English, teachers switch to Russian or Kazakh at least occasionally, and 32.7% said this occurs frequently or nearly always. One student respondent stated that it was challenging to acquire real oral comprehension skills in English due to the teachers' strong accents and simple vocabulary.

The lack of a social environment in English is the third. Kazakhstan is ranked 103rd out of 116 countries in the English Proficiency Index (EF EPI, 2024). Although there are some subtleties, survey results generally support this picture: only 38.8% of respondents said they regularly use English in daily life, compared to 87.8% who said they do so at least occasionally. More importantly, open-ended responses show that many respondents attained meaningful English proficiency through private tutoring and extracurricular activities rather than through school instruction: "I learned English only through a private tutor"; "the school gave me no real benefit, I learned the language by extracurricular courses." This suggests that, in the current context, school-based English instruction alone is insufficient to produce functional proficiency.

Typological complexity is the fourth. The phonological, morphological, and syntactic systems of English (analytic, strict SVO, no grammatical gender), Russian (fusional, relatively free word order, grammatical gender), and Kazakh (agglutinative, SOV word order, vowel harmony) differ significantly. Building separate grammatical representations for every language requires a significant amount of cognitive effort. The simultaneous study of three languages was frequently mentioned by survey participants as a significant challenge (59.2%), and a number of open-ended comments

characterized the cognitive load as excessive: "the workload felt colossal - all time went to learning material."

4. Survey findings: language proficiency, attitudes, and perceived challenges

The online survey provided quantitative information about respondents' views regarding TEP and self-assessed language skills, which directly expands and enhances the literature-based analysis.

According to self-reported language proficiency, Russian had the highest mean score (M = 4.12 on a 1-5 scale), followed by English (M = 3.51) and Kazakh (M = 3.06). Unexpectedly, 28.6% of respondents, including some who identified as ethnically Kazakh and attended mixed-language schools, rated their level of Kazakh competence as basic or elementary (scoring 1-2). This result directly supports Cummins' threshold hypothesis: the cognitive requirements for successful trilingual learning cannot be built in the absence of a suitably developed L1 foundation.

Table 1. Self-assessed language proficiency of survey respondents (n = 49)

Language	Mean (1-5)	Score 1-2 (%)	Score 4-5 (%)
Kazakh(L1)	3.06	28.6%	40.8%
Russian(L2)	4.12	2.0%	85.7%
English(L3)	3.51	12.2%	55.1%

Attitudes towards TEP revealed a characteristic internal tension. Survey participants expressed strong agreement with the potential of trilingual education for professional advancement (M = 4.47) and cognitive development (M = 4.47) and broadly endorsed the importance of the trinity-of-languages policy (M = 4.18). However, they simultaneously expressed concern that English occupies too large a place relative to Kazakh (M = 4.18). They critically assessed the support for the Kazakh language in the policy (M = 2.63), the only item falling below the neutral midpoint. The realism of simultaneous trilingual study received more moderate endorsement (M = 3.71).

Table 2. Mean Likert scores for attitude statements (n = 49; scale 1-5)

Statement	Mean	Interpretation
Knowledge of three languages opens better professional opportunities	4.47	Strong agreement
Trilingual education positively affects cognitive development	4.47	Strong agreement
The trinity-of-languages policy is important for Kazakhstan's development	4.18	Agreement
English occupies too large a place compared to Kazakh	4.18	Agreement
Simultaneous study of three languages is a realistic task	3.71	Moderate agreement

Kazakh receives adequate support within the trilingual policy	2.63	Disagreement
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The overwhelming majority of respondents reported perceived implementation challenges. The most frequently cited difficulty was insufficient English-language learning materials (69.4%), followed by teacher shortage (65.3%), difficulty of simultaneous trilingual study (59.2%), absence of an English-speaking environment outside school (59.2%), and reduced quality of subject-matter learning (55.1%). Only 4.1% reported experiencing no difficulties.

5. Pedagogical models relevant to trilingual education in Kazakhstan

A number of frameworks that are extremely pertinent to the Kazakhstani context are found in the review of pedagogical literature; the survey results further emphasize the importance of these frameworks.

Translatological trilingualism, as proposed by Alekseeva et al. (2021), is a three-vector methodological complex that combines cultural mediation, translation practice, and language instruction. This approach fosters the metalinguistic and cross-cultural skills necessary for successful trilingualism by treating the three languages as connected instruments for intercultural communication rather than as separate subjects.

Three pedagogical conditions for trilingual learning are outlined in Likhacheva's (2020) framework: control-evaluative (metacognitive self-monitoring of language development), content-operational (explicit cross-linguistic comparison and interlingual transfer), and motivational-targeted (developing awareness of purpose). The cognitive mechanisms of L3 acquisition found in the theoretical literature are directly correlated with these conditions.

The "pedagogy of the possible" approach developed by Menken and Garcia (2010) highlights the mediating role that instructors play in putting language policy into practice. Instructors make pedagogical decisions that impact whether or not students' multilingual repertoires are viewed as resources. Target-language learning is supported rather than hindered by the related process of translanguaging flexible cross-linguistic meaning-making in the classroom, which has been demonstrated in a variety of international situations. Respondents to the survey who attended specialized schools (NIS, KTL) consistently reported better experiences, indicating that real multilingual education at the school level has a discernible impact on results.

Discussion

Several significant conclusions about Kazakhstan's trilingual education system are supported by the findings of this research and survey. Trilingual education has a strong theoretical foundation. People who speak three languages acquire unique metalinguistic, cognitive, and intercultural benefits, as demonstrated by the convergence of cognitive science, sociolinguistics, and applied linguistics. A well-crafted trilingual strategy would benefit greatly from Kazakhstan's multi-layered multilingual past and the favorable transfer links between Russian and

English.

However, the implementation evidence from both the literature and the survey points to a lasting and serious difference between policy ambition and pedagogical reality. The four essential challenges identified are not independent obstacles but structurally interconnected and mutually reinforcing problems. A policy that mandates content-based English instruction without first ensuring sufficient teacher supply, adequate materials, and a beneficial language environment is unable to produce the intended outcomes. The finding that 55.1% of respondents perceive a reduction in subject-matter learning quality as a direct consequence of trilingual instruction is particularly alarming, suggesting that the policy may be incurring academic costs without delivering commensurate linguistic benefits.

Given the survey results, special emphasis should be given to the conflict between the three objectives of the trilingual policy: English development, Russian maintenance, and Kazakh revitalization. Together, the lowest self-assessed proficiency in Kazakh ($M = 3.06$), the highest concern regarding the policy's disregard for Kazakh ($M = 2.63$ for adequacy of support), and open-ended comments characterizing the loss of the native language as a direct result of the school's emphasis on English constitute a strong empirical signal that the revitalization goal is being compromised in practice. When L1 growth is not properly supported, the cognitive basis for effective multilingual development is weakened rather than enhanced, which is exactly what Cummins' threshold theory predicts.

The report also emphasizes how private educational alternatives may help address the shortcomings of school-based learning. A number of respondents stated that private tutoring, as opposed to classroom instruction, was the means by which significant English competence was attained. Families that can afford additional language training can get around the shortcomings of the public trilingual system, while others who cannot are left behind, creating a serious equality issue. Therefore, rather than implicitly depending on private markets to close the gap, a truly fair trilingual education policy must invest in the quality of public teaching.

Four evidence-based recommendations emerge from this analysis.

First, teacher education requires fundamental reform: pre-service university programmes must produce teachers genuinely proficient in their language of instruction, and in-service development must be continuous, intensive, and subject-specific.

Second, the English-language environment within schools must be actively constructed through digital resources, international partnerships, and meaningful extracurricular programmes.

Third, implementation must proceed in a staged and differentiated manner, with Kazakh academic literacy established as the non-negotiable foundation.

Fourth, didactic methods that validate students' full multilingual repertoires - including translanguaging and explicit cross-linguistic instruction should be systematically assimilated into teacher training and curriculum design.

This study should acknowledge limitations. The survey sample (n = 49), while diverse in composition, was not randomly selected and may over-represent urban and mixed-school contexts. Self-reported language proficiency data are subjective and may not correspond to independently assessed proficiency levels. Future research should include larger stratified samples, longitudinal assessments of student language development, and direct classroom observation studies to provide a more granular and representative picture of TEP implementation.

Conclusion

Kazakhstan's trilingual education policy represents a historically grounded and theoretically valid vision: a linguistically diverse and globally connected society in which citizens command the national language, the language of interethnic communication, and the language of international science and commerce. The present study, combining a systematic literature review with original survey data from 49 stakeholders, confirms that this vision enjoys broad popular legitimacy - respondents strongly endorse the potential of trilingual education for both cognitive and professional development.

At the same time, the distance between vision and reality remains considerable. The convergent evidence from the literature and survey data identifies four systemic challenges: inadequate teacher preparation, limited English-language environment, typological complexity, and institutional asymmetry among the three designated languages, which collectively explain why equally ambitious academic results have not yet matched ambitious policy declarations. Of particular concern is the survey finding that the Kazakh language receives the lowest proficiency scores and the most critical reviews of institutional support, suggesting that the revitalisation goal at the heart of the trinity-of-languages doctrine is being systematically undermined in practice.

Trilingualism in Kazakhstan is ultimately a question not only of language but of cognitive development, cultural identity, and social equality. The theoretical heritage of Weinreich, Cummins, Jessner, and Bardel and Sanchez, triangulated against the empirical evidence collected in the present study, provides a robust foundation for the next phase of policy development, one oriented not to formal compliance but toward genuine, equitable multilingual competence for all learners.

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