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PROBLEMS OF IMPLEMENTING MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION IN KAZAKHSTANI SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Annotation

The study was conducted to investigate problems of implementing multilingual education in Kazakhstani schools. The study considered aspects of multilingual education, such as teachers' attitudes towards multilingualism and the use of a foreign language as a medium of instruction in secondary school classrooms. These issues were analyzed from the secondary school teachers' point of view; therefore, the sample consisted of 24 teachers from two trilingual secondary schools in the Almaty region. Semi-structured interviews were conducted as instruments of qualitative data collection. The thematic analysis showed that teachers had a positive attitude toward multilingualism in secondary school classrooms, as long as they placed high importance on first language development. However, it turns out that in practice, teachers use mostly students' first language rather than second and foreign languages as a medium of instruction. The lack of knowledge and experience of moving from monolingual to multilingual practice was stated as a reason for such a situation. The conclusions suggest that pre- and in-service teachers should get special preparation or mentorship to tackle the mentioned problems.

Key words: multilingualism, medium of instruction, teachers' attitudes, secondary school classroom, foreign language, first language, code-switching.

Introduction. The Kazakh language policy, aimed at promoting proficiency in the state language (Kazakh), the language of interethnic communication (Russian), and a foreign language (English), becomes the key to the personal competitiveness of the country's citizens. The benefits of multilingualism are crucial, since under this concept lies not only the ability to speak three languages, but also the ability to accept the cultural values of different peoples, which makes a dialogue of cultures possible.

For several decades, the government of Kazakhstan has been moving in the direction of multilingualism, aiming to create a developed system of distance learning, training teachers capable of teaching academic subjects in a foreign language, and introduce English instruction from the first grade in Kazakhstani schools. Zhikeeva (2011) argued that if bilingualism in Kazakhstan, which covered almost the entire population of the country, was the result of a natural communicative process, then "trilingualism as a process implanted "from above" was not yet accepted by the entire population" [1]. Thus, according to her, a decade ago it was too early to talk about trilingualism in the Republic of Kazakhstan.

As such, the purpose of this study was to find out what has changed in ten years of language policy and to investigate Kazakhstani trilingual schoolteachers' attitudes to multilingualism and the use of foreign language as a medium of instruction in secondary school classrooms.

The term *multilingualism* is understood as a concept of using more than three languages at the individual, institutional, or societal level. The concept of trilingual education (Kazakh, Russian, and English) in the context of Kazakhstan is used as an institutional form of multilingual education and, therefore, is treated as policy-driven reform in the country. To implement this reform, the government stimulated and provided funding for the development of advanced innovative methods of multilingual education, a model for the implementation of multilingual education through distance, e-learning, a system for improving the qualifications of instructors, teaching core and specialized subjects in foreign languages in trilingual schools, and programs for publishing educational and methodological materials for multilingual education. Moreover, universities supported the

development of multilingualism by opening new specialties to train specialists in line with the trilingual educational policy.

Multilingualism is a complex phenomenon that gives many benefits to its possessors. So, Higby et al., neurolinguist and psycholinguist investigating the phenomenon of multilingualism, stated that there are “certain unique properties of multilinguals are beginning to be noticed, particularly regarding early language representation, gray matter density, and speed of lexical retrieval”, which distinguishes multilinguals from monolinguals and even bilinguals [2].

Multilingualism has been studied by many foreign scholars (Hammarberg, 2001, 2009; Jessner, 2002; Franz-Joseph Meißner, 2003; Larissa Aronin and Muiris Ó Laoire, 2004; Gabryś-Barker, 2005), as a result variety of theories have been developed trying to give explanations to the conceptual base of multilingualism and its peculiarities. Multilingualism models were introduced by the researchers to give “theoretical explanations of language contact, alternation and code-switching, interference, diglossia, bilingual speech processing (e.g. Levelt’s 1989 speaking model), social meaning and language structure, etc.” [3] Moreover, abovementioned models, except describing and expounding the nature of multilingualism, made an attempt to differentiate between bilingualism and multilingualism. All multilingualism models maintain that interconnections between the systems of language of multilinguals are principal, and all the involved systems are employed collaterally (either actively or passively). All models confirm the active role of preliminarily learned languages in acquiring a new one [3, p.24].

Multilingualism, being a global trend, marked the beginning of an active study of this phenomenon not only abroad, but also by Kazakh scientists. Well-known researchers who have studied bilingualism and multilingualism from a theoretical point of view are Dijkstra, van Heuven, Costa, Santesteban, Piske, Hernandez, Marion, Geva, Siegel, as well as domestic scientists B.A.Zhetpisbayeva, A.N. Sadykova, E.D. Amanbekova, G. Aldabergenova, E.D. Suleimenova, D.E.Gaipov and others.

Despite the fact that the multilingual approach has long become the norm of the educational system, scientists consider this phenomenon from different aspects. Thus, Aronin (2018) considers multilingualism as a social aspect, highlighting the coexistence of several languages in one society as the main characteristic of multilingualism [3, p. 29]. Other scientists (Bloomfield, Macnamara) defining multilingualism refer to the level of proficiency in several languages by individuals. In the conclusions of these scientists, the phenomenon of multilingualism ranges from native-like proficiency to having at least one language skills in several languages [4, 5].

In Kazakhstan, multilingualism was studied from the point of view of socio-pedagogical conditions and the theoretical foundations for developing continuous multilingual education. B.Zhetpisbayeva was a pioneer in this field. By “socio-pedagogical conditions”, Zhetpisbayeva (2013) refers to “the totality of the requirements for the education system from all levels of the structural hierarchy of the human community” [6]. She asserts that “the main vectors of the development of multilingual education are aimed at the formation of linguistic pluralism and linguistic tolerance within the multi-ethnic space and integration into the world community” [6, p.24], which reflects the core values of Kazakhstani multilingual society.

Tleuzhanova G. K. (2021), who studied multilingualism through educational prism on the example of some innovative educational institutions in Kazakhstan, states that effective integration of multilingual education develops language pluralism and tolerance in multi-ethnic society, members of which can easily access the global community [7].

But, in spite of the obvious advantages of multilingual education and governmental priorities aimed at its development, its implementation in schools is still experiencing difficulties. Golovchun (2017) explains these challenges by arguing that, by the fact that “multilingual education is mainly designed for teaching ‘different’ language users rather than for creating a population of multilinguals” [8].

To address the above problem, this study aims to answer two research questions:

1. What are the secondary school teachers’ perceptions of the multilingual context of language teaching?

2. What is the secondary school teachers’ attitude to the use of a foreign language as a medium of instruction in a multilingual context of foreign language teaching?

Methods and materials. This study aimed to investigate problems of implementing multilingual education in Kazakhstani secondary schools. The study examined aspects of multilingual education including teachers’ attitudes to multilingualism and the use of foreign language as a medium of instruction in secondary school classrooms. A qualitative research design was considered the most appropriate to address the research aims, as it was intended to understand teachers’ contextual views of their experiences in the multilingual context of education.

Semi-structured interview was conducted for 24 foreign language teachers in two secondary schools selected through simple random sampling. The schools were selected through convenience sampling, which means only available and willing ones participated. The participants included foreign language teachers of different ages and experience of service in the field of education. All participants gave their explicit consent to being anonymously interviewed and audio-recorded. Table 1 introduces the background data of research participants (Table 1).

Table 1. Background data of research participants

	School 1	School 2
Age	14 Range 23-51	10 Range 21-49
Gender	93 % female	70% female
Level of education	7% no degree in higher education 86% undergraduate degree 7% postgraduate degree	10% postgraduate degree 90% undergraduate degree
Teaching experience	Range 1- 28	Range 5-27

Source: developed by Shayakhmetova D.B.

Foreign language teachers were selected as participants to this study because they systematically work with multiple language codes: the students' native language, the target language, and, often, additional intermediary languages (e.g. Russian language for the Kazakhstani context). Although the primary goal of a foreign language teacher is to teach one specific language, real-life teaching conditions inevitably involve code-switching, parallel explanations, and comparisons of linguistic structures, making their professional work relevant to the study of multilingualism. Moreover, foreign language teachers demonstrate how multilingual resources can be integrated into learning process - consciously or unconsciously - even in settings where one language of instruction formally dominates.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Kazakh in the form of an informal discussion of the interview questions developed and sent to participants in advance. The interview questions aimed at learning about teachers’ background, identifying their attitudes to the development of multilingual education and its manifestation in the classroom, and exploring language choice for instructing students concerning their L1. During the interview, some questions were varied according to the answers of the participants, and additional questions were asked for clarification and further information. The answers were recorded and transcribed verbatim for further thematic analysis.

The sematic analysis of collected data followed a multi-staged procedure. After transcribing the data, the codes, reflecting main ideas related to teachers’ experience, attitudes and classroom language practices were generalized. At the next stage, the codes were grouped into broader categories, which identified possible challenges of implementing multilingual education into secondary school classroom. Finally, the themes were interpreted in relation to research aims, questions and observed literature.

The data were interpreted taking into consideration both empirical evidence and theoretical perspectives of multilingual education. The main attention was paid to participants’ contextual explanations, which made it possible to reflect teachers’ lived experience rather than predefined assumptions.

The validity and reliability of data analysis were ensured through verbatim transcription of interviews, a clear audit trail of coding and themes development, and finally by anonymity of participants and ethical transparency.

Results and Discussion. Teachers' attitudes to multilingual education (RQ1)

The multilingual context of education in modern educational conditions is a complex issue. For example, the professional training of foreign language teachers is usually perceived as training a specialist who teaches only one language. Even teachers themselves consider themselves to be instructors of one language rather than another. Therefore, for the shift in “potential professional identity” from a monolingual teacher to a teacher with awareness of multilingualism, a “multilingual turn” must occur in teacher training [9].

One of the aims of the study was to find out what secondary school teachers' attitudes to multilingualism were. Our research showed a huge variation in teachers' views on multilingual education in secondary schools.

The findings were based on the teachers' response to the question of whether multilingualism should be encouraged and developed in the classroom settings or whether the students should speak only their first language. Most teachers expressed support for multilingual education, referring to a variety of factors, among which are mental development, the acquisition of additional skills, and opportunities for education abroad and employment. *“When students learn several languages, their thinking becomes more flexible, and they understand subjects better.”* One of the more compelling arguments was a necessity of promoting multilingual education encouraged by the Kazakhstani government: *“Since it is a new teaching tendency ... the governmental teaching objectives are pushing the learning process on the multilingual side.”* Moreover, other participants referred to the idea of linguistic variety in the world and to be able to benefit from the experience of other people, it is significant to speak several languages: *“All languages are precious instruments of communication and the significance of each of them should be admitted.”* In addition, it was stated that it is not enough just to speak the language, but there should be a positive attitude toward it. *“Knowledge of several languages gives students more opportunities for studying abroad and future employment, which is the reason to have a positive attitude to the multilingualism.”* Moreover, they see *“the distribution of books in different languages, holding extracurricular activities, rewarding achievements in in-school and off-site projects, and language olympiads”* as a way to implement multilingual education in secondary schools.

But there are also teachers who have a more negative attitude towards multilingualism in schools. They do not deny the benefits of introducing multilingual education; nevertheless, they see it as a reason for challenging learning and low academic performance. *“Students sometimes get confused when too many languages are used, and this affects their academic performance.”* Other respondents expressed lack of readiness to learn several languages simultaneously among students. *“Not all students have a strong first language foundation, so introducing additional languages makes learning more difficult for them.”* Figure 1 demonstrates thematic analysis of the interview data collected on the first research question.

Use of foreign language as a medium of instruction (RQ 2)

The importance of choosing the language of instruction is the key to success in learning a foreign language and developing students' thinking in the target language. In the recent research, Opore-Kumi (2024) defined a "language of instruction as a key input in education outcomes," which was reflected in the research results. Thus, convincing evidence was presented that the degree of transfer to a foreign language as a medium of instruction has a positive effect on learning outcomes in English and does not have a significant negative effect on learning outcomes in other school subjects taught in the native language. Moreover, the earlier this transfer occurs, the higher the possibility of effective language learning [10].

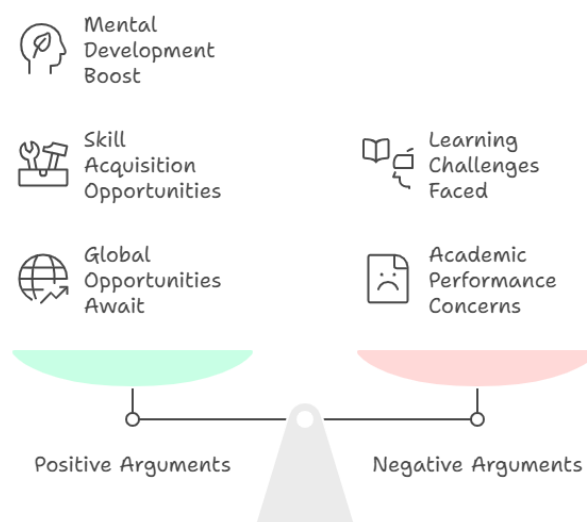


Figure 1. Teachers' attitudes to multilingual education

Source: developed by Delovarova Kh.

In the framework of the second research question of the current study, when asked about the methods of developing multilingualism in a classroom setting, many of the participants did not mention the use of a foreign language as a medium of instruction. Therefore, it turned out that in most cases, teachers switch to students' L1 to give instructions and explanations. Teachers see the use of the first language as appropriate and give a number of arguments to support their position, which definitely make sense to exist. Firstly, teachers taught the students to estimate their first language, which might have encouraged students to admit the importance of their mother tongue, consider it as an integral part of human life: *“The mother tongue is really important, as it distinguishes your belonging to the society”*.

Additionally, teachers had a common idea that L1 serves as a basis for cumulating further knowledge and experience and can demonstrate students' ability to transfer knowledge from one language to another. Thereby, it was mentioned by several respondents that it was significant for a student to understand some information in L1, for instance, abstract concepts, to be able to apply new knowledge: *“That's really important that you understand such things in your mother tongue otherwise, students cannot apply this knowledge.”*

During the interview, the reasons, except attaching great importance to L1, for insufficient use of a foreign language as a medium of instruction were also identified. Thus, the use of students' L1 is explained by the teachers' fear of not conveying the whole essence of the task or message, which, in their opinion, is much more important than the possible benefit of using a foreign language as a medium of instruction: *“It is more important for students to understand what they need to do.... their first language can provide full understanding.”* Moreover, in using L1, which makes the lesson less formal and reduces affective filters, teachers see a means to be closer to the student. *“When I speak their language, students feel more relaxed and open to communication.”* Better rapport, according to teachers, leads to a more relaxed and accommodating classroom environment. And finally, the least cogent reason is the underestimation of the importance of use of a foreign language as a medium of instruction in the classroom by teachers. Therefore, teachers say that there are enough instructions in a foreign language in textbooks, and if the student needs additional explanations, then it's probably better to do it in their L1: *“... explain in a language that is more understandable to them”*. Figure 2 visually demonstrates the results of the thematic analysis of the data collected on the second question.

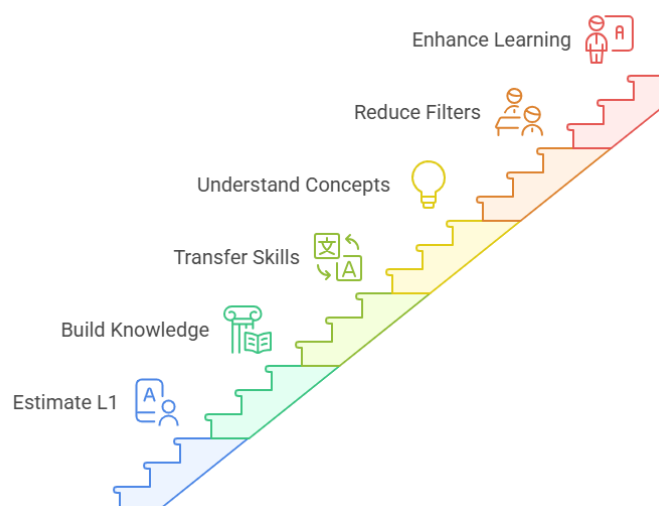


Figure 2. Reasons to avoid FL as a means of classroom instruction

Source: developed by Delovarova Kh.

Thus, despite the positive attitude towards multilingual education, many secondary school teachers still deliberately often use students' native language as a medium of instruction in foreign language classes and have their own arguments and justifications for this. *“Even though multilingualism is important, in real lessons I often switch to the mother tongue so that students clearly understand the material.”*; *“Using the first language helps me avoid misunderstandings and save lesson time.”* Based on these arguments, it should be noted that the use of L1 in the foreign language classroom is restricted by teachers' practices and a lack of special preparation for multilingual settings and priorities. *“We were trained to teach one language, not to manage several languages at the same time.”*; *“At university, we did not learn how to work in a multilingual classroom.”*

Although there is evidence of frequent and explained use of students' L1 in foreign language classrooms, it is important to distinguish pedagogically justified cases to understand whether the reasons given by the teachers were valid. According to Yang & Foley (2025), pedagogically justified use of L1 in the foreign language classroom includes: L1 use to support comprehension, scaffold learning, create inclusive multilingual learning environments, processing complex information, participation of learners with low L2 proficiency, and cross-linguistic knowledge transfer [11]. Other reasons to shift to students' L1 might be the evidence of teachers' low proficiency in teaching in a multilingual context.

Teacher education on how to implement the theoretical knowledge in practice or how to benefit from students' linguistic potential can be a solution to the described problem. *“If we had more training on how to use students' languages effectively, it would be easier to apply multilingual approaches.”*; *“Teachers need practical guidance, not only theory.”* The need for professional training of teachers in multilingual schools is explained in the contemporary publication by Shao & Velasco (2025) and Shaba (2025), who confirm the significant difference in the pedagogical processes of multilingual and monolingual schools. Thus, when planning successful educational strategies, teachers in multilingual schools must take into account both methodological, cognitive, communicative, and emotional aspects [12, 13].

As a form of professional training for teachers capable of working in multilingual context, different in-service trainings might be considered. Among them are short-term courses and modules, aimed at practical implementation of multilingual education (CLIL, translanguaging, flexible language use). Also, teachers can have practice-oriented trainings and workshops, where they can work with cases, analyse real academic situations in multilingual classes and model the lessons. Another effective solution might be professional communities and mentoring practices, which will

give them an opportunity to share experience and get support from colleagues who have an expertise in working in multilingual contexts.

All these possible forms of professional training for teachers working in multilingual context are reasonable to form required competencies:

- methodological competence (being able to consciously choose the language in different academic situations, using L1 as a resource, and applying CLIL, scaffolding, and translanguaging strategies);
- linguistic and interlanguage competencies (understanding of common and different aspects of languages, developing of cross-linguistic transfer skills and strategies, controlling code-switching);
- socio-linguistic and cultural competencies (awareness of students' cultural identity, respect to L1, understanding of language policies and their influence on secondary school education);
- affective-pedagogical competence (lowering students' affective filters, providing a supportive language environment);
- reflexive competence (self-analysis of language practices, critical assessment of effectiveness of L1/L2, readiness and willingness of professional development).

Conclusions. The research findings revealed that secondary school teachers demonstrate a generally positive awareness of multilingual education. This attitude is largely justified by the need to promote multilingual education encouraged by the Kazakhstani government, as well as by the recognition of linguistic diversity in the modern world and the benefits of speaking several languages.

However, the results also showed that teachers frequently switch to students' first language (L1) during classroom instruction, as they do not usually consider the use of a foreign language as a medium of instruction to be an effective way of developing multilingualism. Among the reasons for this practice, teachers mentioned the important role of students' L1 in their social and educational lives, concerns about not conveying tasks clearly, difficulties in achieving learning objectives due to increased students' affective filters in the classroom, and doubts about the effectiveness of using a foreign language as a medium of instruction for developing multilingual competence.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that secondary school teachers lack sufficient knowledge, experience, and professional preparation necessary for effectively implementing multilingual education in practice. This conclusion is consistent with the findings of Oliveira (2014), who identified the challenges teachers face when transitioning to a multilingual professional identity and emphasized the importance of specialized teacher education in multilingual teaching contexts as a way to address this issue [10, p.11].

As a possible solution, teacher training programs such as short-term courses, specialized modules, practice-oriented training sessions and workshops, professional learning communities, and mentoring practices may help prepare teachers to work effectively in multilingual educational environments.

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ҚАЗАҚСТАНДЫҚ ЖАЛПЫ БІЛІМ БЕРЕТІН МЕКТЕПТЕРДЕ КӨПТІЛДІ БІЛІМ БЕРУДІ ЕНГІЗУ МӘСЕЛЕЛЕРІ

Аңдатпа

Зерттеу Қазақстан мектептерінде көптілді білім беруді енгізу мәселелерін зерттеу мақсатында жүргізілді. Зерттеу барысында көптілді білім берудің мұғалімдердің көптілділікке көзқарасы және орта мектептерде шет тілін оқыту құралы ретінде пайдалану сияқты аспектілері ескерілді. Бұл мәселелер жалпы білім беретін мектеп мұғалімдері тұрғысынан қарастырылды, сондықтан іріктеу Алматы облысындағы екі үш тілде білім беретін орта мектептен 24 мұғалімнен құралды. Сапалы деректерді жинау құралы ретінде жартылай құрылымдық сұхбаттар пайдаланылды. Жиналған мәліметтерді тақырыптық талдау жалпы білім беретін мектептегі мұғалімдердің көптілділікке деген оң көзқарасын анықтады, өйткені ұзақ уақыт бойы мұғалімдер бірінші тілді дамытуға үлкен мән берді. Алайда, тәжірибеде мұғалімдер оқыту құралы ретінде екінші және шетел тілін емес, негізінен студенттердің бірінші тілін пайдаланады, біртүлділіктен көптілді тәжірибеге көшу үшін оларға білім мен тәжірибе жетіспейді. Қорытындылар мұғалімдердің осы мәселелерді шешу үшін жұмыс алдында және жұмыс барысында арнайы дайындықтан немесе тәлімгерліктен өтуі қажеттігін көрсетті.

Түйінді сөздер: көптілділік, оқу құралы, мұғалімдердің пікірі, орта мектеп, шет тілі, бірінші тіл, кодты ауыстыру.

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ПРОБЛЕМЫ ВНЕДРЕНИЯ МНОГОЯЗЫЧНОГО ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ В КАЗАХСТАНСКИХ СРЕДНИХ ШКОЛАХ

Аннотация

Исследование проводилось с целью изучения проблем внедрения полиязычного образования в школах Казахстана. В ходе исследования были учтены такие аспекты полиязычного образования, как отношение учителей к полиязычию и использование иностранного языка в качестве средства обучения в средних школах. Данные вопросы рассматривались с точки зрения учителей средних школ, поэтому выборку составили 24 учителя двух средних трёхязычных школ Алматинской области. В качестве инструментов сбора качественных данных использовались полу-структурированные интервью. Тематический анализ собранных данных выявил положительное отношение учителей к многоязычию в общеобразовательной школе, так как долгое время учителя придавали большое значение развитию первого языка. Однако оказывается, что на практике учителя используют в качестве средства обучения в основном первый язык учащихся, а не второй и иностранный. Причиной данной ситуации была указана нехватка знаний и опыта для перехода от одноязычной к многоязычной практике. Выводы предполагают, что учителям до и во время работы необходимо пройти специальную подготовку или наставничество для решения указанных проблем.

Ключевые слова: многоязычие, средство обучения, восприятие учителей, средняя школа, иностранный язык, родной язык, переключение кодов.

Received: 30.10.2025

Approved after peer review: 26.02.2026

Accepted for publication: 26.03.2026