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Multilingual Education in Kazakhstan: Policy and Practice

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Abstract This article examines the language education policy in Kazakhstan as an integral part of the country's broader language policy, with a special focus on foreign language education. It explores how multilingualism and multiculturalism shape policy goals and content, aiming to promote intergovernmental and intercommunity communication, prevent and resolve conflicts related to language use, and strengthen national unity. The study analyzes the constitutional and legal framework regulating the status and functions of Kazakh, Russian, and foreign languages in education, highlighting trends in language instruction across primary, secondary, and higher education. Statistical data on language proficiency and language-of-instruction preferences are presented to illustrate the dynamics of linguistic shifts in the educational system. The findings indicate a significant increase in the role of Kazakh as the state language, stable high competence in Russian, and gradual growth in English proficiency, particularly within the trilingual education framework. The article concludes with insights into the implications of these developments for Kazakhstan's sociolinguistic landscape and educational strategy.

Keywords: *Language policy, Language situation, Language status, Language planning, Language education*

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1. Introduction

Language policy is a system of measures and legislative acts implemented by the authorities and/or public institutions of a country, aimed at achieving specific sociolinguistic objectives. Like any other type of policy, language policy reflects the values of a particular class, party, or ethnic group, often to the detriment of the interests of others. In the context of foreign language (FL) education, language policy seeks to establish intergovernmental and intercommunity communication, to prevent, regulate, and resolve conflicts that may arise from the suppression or overemphasis of certain languages in society (Kraus, 2012; Lo Bianco, 2010). In a multicultural and multilingual country, the aims and content of language policy are influenced by factors such as bilingualism/multilingualism, the specifics of

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national and interethnic relations, and the sociopolitical context. The development of multilingualism is possible only through political actions directed toward the practical implementation of language equality. Educational language policy is an inseparable part of the overall national language policy (Spolsky, 2018), yet it has distinctive features determined by the objectives and content of the broader educational strategy pursued by the state at a given stage of societal development (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 2017). A common strategic aim uniting national language policy, school language policy, and FL education policy is the promotion of peace and cooperation between peoples, as well as the avoidance and elimination of interethnic conflicts in a multinational state. These policies contribute to the consolidation of society by setting appropriate priorities in the choice of languages to be studied and in defining their status and functions (Ricento, 2015). In the current context, Kazakhstan's educational language policy seeks to create favorable conditions for learners from diverse backgrounds to study a wide range of foreign languages, meeting both societal and individual needs.

Although a number of studies have examined language policy, trilingual education, and language planning in Kazakhstan (Kambatyrova, 2024; Pavlenko, 2023; Sarmurzin et al., 2024), most have focused on individual aspects of multilingualism, including the status of the Kazakh language, the implementation of trilingual education, or public attitudes toward language reforms. However, questions remain regarding how effectively Kazakhstan's language education policy addresses these aims in the context of balancing the roles of Kazakh as the state language, Russian as the language of interethnic communication, and English as the main global lingua franca. The interplay between constitutional provisions, practical measures in education, and sociolinguistic realities requires closer examination to understand the trajectory of language policy development in Kazakhstan. In particular, limited attention has been paid to the relationship between national language policy objectives and their practical implementation within the education system using recent policy documents and statistical evidence.

While earlier research has examined multilingualism as a general sociolinguistic phenomenon in Kazakhstan (Koptleuova, Karagulova, et al., 2023), the present study shifts the focus specifically to language education policy and its implementation across the education system. Unlike previous work, which primarily presented survey data on language proficiency, this study analyzes the interplay between policy documents, legislative frameworks, and practical educational outcomes, with particular attention to the implementation of trilingual education, language-of-instruction distribution, and teacher preparation measures. By examining recent policy documents and educational statistics, this study contributes new insights into how Kazakhstan's language policy translates into educational practice. The purpose of this study is to provide a comprehensive analysis of Kazakhstan's language education policy and to examine how multilingualism is promoted through educational measures at different levels of instruction (i.e., primary, secondary, and higher education). By analyzing policy documents and statistical data, the study seeks to evaluate the extent to which educational language policy supports the goals of national language policy and multilingual development. Therefore, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the key policy discourses, language ideologies, and status-planning mechanisms that characterize Kazakhstan's language education policy as articulated in official documents?
2. How do policy documents address the implementation challenges of multilingual education, and to what extent do official statistics reflect the policy objectives of balancing Kazakh, Russian, and English in the education system?

2. Theoretical Framework

Language policy in Kazakhstan is a system of measures implemented by state authorities and public institutions to regulate the country's linguistic situation and support broader sociocultural and political objectives. Language policy serves to organize language use within society and, ideally, to prevent or resolve conflicts arising from linguistic differences. In academic literature, the concept of language policy is closely associated with language planning, introduced by Haugen (1975), which encompasses both status planning and corpus planning. In American sociolinguistics, language planning is

understood as the deliberate influence on language by governments, institutions, and social groups, particularly with regard to official language varieties and their use in public life (Ricento, 2006; Spolsky, 2004). Such planning is especially relevant in multilingual societies, where linguistic diversity requires conscious management and coordination. The ultimate aim of language planning is to influence language behavior and direct language development in accordance with specific social, political, or educational objectives; however, the implementation of planning decisions ultimately depends on language users themselves (García & Otheguy, 2020; Johnson, 2013; Tollefson, 2013). Language policy is therefore implemented through specific programs, concepts, and legislative frameworks designed for a particular national context, taking into account historical development, sociolinguistic conditions, genetic and areal relationships among languages, and broader socio-economic circumstances. Effective language legislation should be accompanied by careful scientific forecasting of potential consequences, including the risks of language conflicts, social fragmentation, or separatist tendencies (Samoilova, 2009).

Building on this general understanding of language policy, it is important to consider the underlying sociolinguistic forces that shape policy decisions in any multilingual state. The linguistic situation and language policy of any multilingual state are shaped by the interaction of two fundamental and often competing needs: the need for identity and the need for communication (Alpatov, 2020). The need for identity is based on the tendency of individuals and communities to use their native language, which is usually acquired in childhood and is closely linked to ethnicity, culture, and collective memory. As noted by Mikhalchenko (2024), communication in one's native language requires less cognitive effort and provides a greater sense of comfort and belonging. At the same time, the need for communication requires individuals to interact effectively with others and to overcome linguistic barriers. Successful communication depends on mutual intelligibility, which often necessitates bilingualism, multilingualism, or the involvement of intermediaries such as interpreters.

These general dynamics of identity and communication become particularly pronounced in the context of post-Soviet multilingual states, and Kazakhstan serves as a compelling case in point. Kazakhstan's language policy can only be fully understood within its specific historical, cultural, and sociopolitical context. As a multiethnic and multilingual state, Kazakhstan has sought to balance several interconnected objectives: strengthening Kazakh as the state language and a key symbol of national identity, preserving Russian as a language of interethnic communication, and promoting English as a language of international integration and global competitiveness. This approach reflects broader nation-building processes that have taken place since independence and highlights the close relationship between language policy, cultural heritage, and social cohesion. Recent studies have further emphasized the importance of language policy in preserving cultural identity while simultaneously fostering multilingual competence among citizens (e.g., Tazhitova et al., 2025). In this study, the terms multilingual education and trilingual education are used interchangeably to refer to Kazakhstan's educational model promoting the acquisition and use of Kazakh, Russian, and English. While multilingual education is a broad educational approach that supports the learning and use of multiple languages, the Kazakhstani context is characterized by a specific three-language model, and both terms are used throughout the paper to refer to this policy framework.

To contextualize the analytical framework of this study, it is useful to first review previous empirical research on the implementation of language policy and multilingual education in Kazakhstan. Previous studies have examined various aspects of language policy and multilingual education in Kazakhstan. Sarmurzin et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review of Kazakhstan's trilingual education policy and identified persistent implementation challenges, including regional inequalities, shortages of qualified multilingual teachers, inconsistencies in curriculum implementation, and the need for stronger institutional support. Kambatyrova (2024) examined parental language ideologies within the context of Kazakhstan's trilingual education policy and found that parents generally support multilingual education while expressing concerns regarding the balance between strengthening Kazakh as the state language and maintaining high levels of Russian and English proficiency. The study highlights the importance of family attitudes in the successful implementation of language education policy.

Drawing on the theoretical foundations, the national context, and the empirical findings reviewed above, the present study adopts a specific conceptualization of language policy to guide its investigation. Within this theoretical framework, the present study adopts the definition of language policy proposed by Desheriyev (1977), who conceptualize it as a system of deliberate state-directed measures aimed at influencing both the functioning and development of language. This interpretation is particularly relevant to Kazakhstan, where language policy is largely designed and implemented through centralized educational and administrative institutions. Accordingly, language policy is operationalized in this study as the set of governmental and institutional measures regulating the status, use, and teaching of Kazakh, Russian, and English within the educational system, including language-of-instruction policies, foreign language education, and the implementation of trilingual education. This perspective is complemented by Grigoriev's (2003) understanding of language policy as the theory and practice of deliberate influence on language development and by Kanevsky's (2015) emphasis on its sociopolitical and regulatory functions. Together, these approaches provide the analytical framework for examining language use, language proficiency, and educational language policy in Kazakhstan.

3. Methodology

3.1. Corpus

The corpus for this study comprised constitutional and legislative documents, namely the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan (adopted on 30 August 1995, as amended), the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Languages in the Republic of Kazakhstan (No. 151-I, 11 July 2003, as amended), the current State Mandatory Standards of Education, and other regulations governing language instruction. The second category included national policy and strategic documents, including the State Program for the Development of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020–2025 (Resolution No. 988, 27 December 2019), the Concept for the Development of Preschool, Secondary, Technical and Vocational Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2023-2029 (Resolution No. 249 of 28 March 2023), the Roadmap for Further Implementation of the Updated Educational Content for 2018-2021 (approved by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan on May 10, 2018), documents regulating trilingual education, and ministerial guidelines concerning Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and foreign language education. The third category comprised official statistical reports. These included the Sociological and Analytical Research on Language Policy in the Republic of Kazakhstan (2023), Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan (National Census 2021) (2024), and annual statistical reports published by the Ministry of Education. These sources were selected because they provide authoritative and publicly accessible information on the development and implementation of Kazakhstan's language education policy.

3.2. Procedure

This study employed a qualitative document analysis design supported by the examination of official statistical data. The qualitative component focused on the systematic analysis of policy documents and educational programs regulating language use and instruction in Kazakhstan. The analysis was conducted through a six-phase procedure adapted from Braun and Clarke (2021). First, the documents were read repeatedly to gain familiarity with the content. Second, initial codes were generated to identify policy objectives, implementation strategies, language ideologies, and multilingual education practices. Third, related codes were grouped into broader categories. Fourth, these categories were reviewed and refined by comparing patterns across the documents. Fifth, the final themes were defined and named according to their conceptual relevance to the research questions. The discussion was organised around five interrelated themes: (1) The ideological framing of the "Trinity of Languages"; (2) The construction of language hierarchies through status planning; (3) Mechanisms of implementation and pedagogical adaptation in language-in-education planning; (4) Teacher preparation and institutional readiness as a policy challenge; and (5) Balancing of nation-building with global competitiveness. Finally, the themes were interpreted alongside official statistical data to contextualize the qualitative findings and compare policy objectives with implementation outcomes.

4. Results

4.1. The Ideological Framing of the "Trinity of Languages"

Multilingual education in Kazakhstan is conventionally presented in official discourse as an essential means of preparing a competitive generation capable of functioning effectively in a globalized world. It aims to develop multilingual competence through the use of innovative educational technologies and advanced teaching practices, thereby preparing competitive citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan who can communicate confidently in diverse linguistic environments and successfully integrate into multicultural societies. The idea of multilingual education in Kazakhstan was first articulated in 2006, and its practical implementation began in 2007 through the cultural project "Trinity of Languages". The project was designed to promote the country's development of three languages: *"Kazakhstan should be perceived worldwide as a highly educated country whose population speaks three languages: Kazakh as the state language, Russian as the language of interethnic communication, and English as the language of successful integration into the global economy"* (https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/K070002007_/links). This initiative reflected Kazakhstan's strategic vision of balancing national identity with participation in the international community and recognized the growing importance of multilingual competence in the modern world. In contemporary Kazakhstan, where preserving national identity while actively participating in global processes has become a key priority, multilingual education is viewed as a mechanism for forming a new generation of citizens proficient in both the state language and other languages. Within the framework of Kazakhstan's multilingual education policy, each language performs a distinct social and educational function.

However, the "Trinity of Languages" is not a neutral technical arrangement but an ideological construct that assigns each language a specific symbolic role within a broader nation-building narrative: Kazakh as the marker of ethnic and civic identity, Russian as a pragmatic inheritance of the Soviet and post-Soviet linguistic order, and English as the language of aspirational globalization and economic modernity. Official strategic texts, including the State Program for the Development of Education and Science for 2020-2025 (Resolution No. 988) and the Concept for the Development of Preschool, Secondary, Technical and Vocational Education for 2023-2029 (Resolution No. 249), reproduce this tripartite framing as though it described a settled, consensual division of linguistic labour among three functionally complementary languages. As articulated in the Concept 2023-2029: *"The state ensures the development of Kazakh as the state language, supports the functioning of Russian on equal grounds with the state language in state organizations and local self-government bodies, and promotes the learning of English as the language of international communication"*. Furthermore, the State Program 2020-2025 explicitly emphasizes that the primary purpose of language-in-education reforms is to: *"ensure the competitiveness of Kazakhstani education and human capital through quality education and the development of multilingual competence"*. Yet the framing itself encodes an implicit hierarchy of legitimacy: Kazakh is privileged symbolically as the language of statehood and titular nationhood, while Russian retains functional primacy in numerous high-status domains and English is cast in largely instrumental, competitiveness-oriented terms.

4.2. The Construction of Language Hierarchies (Status Planning)

The implementation of language policy in Kazakhstan is grounded in the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Languages in the Republic of Kazakhstan (2003). These legal instruments establish Kazakh as the state language while recognizing Russian as the language of interethnic communication, thereby reflecting Kazakhstan's multilingual sociolinguistic context. Article 7, Clause 1 of the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan explicitly establishes the primary status of the state language: *"The state language of the Republic of Kazakhstan is the Kazakh language."*

According to statutory legislation, Kazakh performs the principal functions of state administration, legislation, legal proceedings, and official documentation, and public authorities are required to create conditions that enable citizens to acquire proficiency in the state language free of charge (Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Languages in the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2003). Specifically, Article 4 of the Law on Languages (2003) states: *"It is the duty of every citizen of the Republic of Kazakhstan to*

master the state language, which is a key factor in consolidating the people of Kazakhstan. The Government ... creates all necessary conditions for the free and fee-free learning of the state language." Although this legislative framework has provided a strong legal foundation for strengthening the status of Kazakh, its implementation has been gradual and uneven. Official policy narratives point to substantial growth in Kazakh-medium education and increasing use of the state language in public administration as evidence that the policy has contributed to expanding the functional domains of Kazakh. However, the continued high level of Russian proficiency and its widespread use in education, business, and everyday communication suggest that Kazakhstan continues to operate as a de facto bilingual society (Law on Languages, 2003). Citizens are guaranteed the legal right to use Russian when interacting with public authorities and in accessing socially significant services, as well as in preschool, secondary, technical, vocational, and higher education (Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan; Law on Languages, 2003).

These findings suggest that Kazakhstan's language policy has achieved a degree of stability by preserving Russian as an important means of interethnic communication while simultaneously promoting the expansion of Kazakh. Nevertheless, the continued predominance of Russian in several high-status domains also illustrates one of the principal challenges facing language policy implementation. The increasing use of Kazakh in public administration and education has not been accompanied by a comparable reduction in the functional importance of Russian. Consequently, the coexistence of the two languages reflects not only a successful policy of linguistic accommodation but also the continuing difficulty of expanding the functional domains of the state language without disrupting established patterns of bilingual communication. This demonstrates that Kazakhstan's language policy is characterized by an ongoing negotiation between nation-building objectives and the practical linguistic needs of a multilingual society. Taken together, the legal architecture reviewed in this theme constructs a de jure language hierarchy that places Kazakh at the apex as the sole state language, assigns Russian a constitutionally protected but formally secondary status as the language of interethnic communication, and leaves English without any comparable constitutional or statutory status, instead relying on strategic and educational documents (the State Program 2020-2025; the Concept 2023-2029) to elevate its practical importance.

The Kazakhstani model of multilingual education is based on the gradual development of communicative competence in three languages, followed by the introduction of selected non-linguistic subjects in a second or third language through Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (State Program 2020-2025). This approach combines subject learning with language acquisition and is organized around four interconnected dimensions: content, communication, cognition, and culture (Bulatbaeva & Shakhmetova, 2021; Lenneberg, 1967). International research distinguishes between strong and weak multilingual education models. Strong models develop functional literacy in the native language before introducing additional languages and have demonstrated positive outcomes in numerous educational contexts worldwide (Melnikova, 2017). Kazakhstan's multilingual education policy is most closely aligned with the strong model aimed at enriching existing linguistic repertoires and developing functional multilingualism. The use of English as a medium of instruction for selected subjects provides access to international knowledge, reinforces foreign language acquisition, and enhances graduates' competitiveness in the global labor market.

A key distinction between strong and weak models concerns the language of instruction. In weak models, additional languages are taught only as separate subjects, whereas strong models incorporate subject-language integrated learning in non-linguistic disciplines. Prior to the introduction of trilingual education, Kazakhstan predominantly followed a weak model in which Kazakh or Russian served as the language of instruction and other languages were taught separately. Research has shown that applying a single multilingual education model to all schools is ineffective given the diversity of educational contexts across the country (Serikkizy, 2017). Therefore, the implementation of multilingual programs should be based on institutional readiness, including the availability of qualified teachers and appropriate learning. The ultimate objective is not only multilingual proficiency but also the achievement of academic outcomes comparable to those of students in conventional educational programs.

The position of the Russian language in Kazakhstan remains stable due to its widespread use among the population, which limits demand for learning it as a foreign or second language. Nevertheless, Russian continues to occupy an important place within the educational system. In schools with Kazakh as the language of instruction, Russian is introduced from the second grade, and students are required to take state examinations in Russian upon completion of grades 9 and 11. Language instruction also continues during the first year of technical and vocational education, as well as in higher and postgraduate education institutions, where students subsequently complete language assessments. Alongside Kazakh and Russian, English has become increasingly important as the dominant language of international communication. Recognizing its significance for global integration, Kazakhstan introduced English language instruction in secondary schools beginning in 2001, initially from the first grade. However, subsequent methodological research and educational analyses demonstrated that simultaneous acquisition of three languages at the earliest stages of schooling posed considerable challenges for young learners. As documented in the Concept 2023-2029*: "To ensure a developmentally appropriate linguistic foundation, instruction in Kazakh-medium primary schools focuses exclusively on the native language in Grade 1, introducing Russian language instruction in Grade 2 and foreign language (English) instruction in Grade 3".*

4.3. Mechanisms of Implementation and Pedagogical Adaptation (Language-in-Education Planning)

Within this broader process of educational modernization, multilingual education has emerged as an important component of state educational policy. Since gaining independence, Kazakh, Russian, and foreign languages have been taught as separate subjects in schools; however, efforts to promote multilingual competence gradually led to the introduction of trilingual and multilingual education models. The first such model was introduced in 1997 in Kazakh-Turkish lyceums, currently known as Bilim-Innovation Lyceums (BIL), where instruction was initially conducted in Kazakh and Turkish and later expanded to include Russian and English. Beginning in 2007, multilingual education was further implemented in 33 schools across Kazakhstan within the KATEV educational network, including the Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS) (Mehisto, 2014). Building on the experience of these two school systems, and in accordance with the "Roadmap for Further Implementation of the Updated Educational Content for 2018-2021", approved by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan on May 10, 2018, trilingual education was gradually extended to other schools throughout the country. According to clauses 25 and 26 of the Roadmap (2018-2021), regional authorities were required to develop and approve schedules for the transition to teaching selected subjects in English, taking into account the readiness of individual schools.

The sequencing of implementation, from two small, academically selective pilot networks (BIL, then KATEV/NIS) to a nationwide Roadmap that delegates pacing to regional authorities, taking into account the readiness of individual schools, embeds a structural asymmetry into the rollout itself. Multilingual/CLIL education was first normalised in institutions that were already resourced and selective, and its subsequent expansion was made conditional on locally assessed "readiness" rather than mandated uniformly. Neither the Roadmap nor the State Mandatory Standards of Education specifies transparent, common criteria for what constitutes institutional readiness, leaving considerable discretion to regional education departments. In addition to these initiatives, national educational standards require all educational institutions to provide instruction in at least one foreign language. Schools may choose English, German, or French as the primary foreign language, while some institutions also offer additional languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Turkish, and others. This diversification of language offerings reflects Kazakhstan's broader commitment to multilingualism and its efforts to prepare students for participation in an increasingly interconnected global environment.

Kazakhstan's current educational policy emphasizes multilingual education as a response to the economic, political, and informational transformations associated with globalization (Concept 2023-2029). The objective is not only to modernize language education but also to create opportunities for the practical use of languages across disciplines and communicative contexts. Multilingual education is implemented through a continuous and progressive model extending from primary to upper secondary education and incorporating linguistic, cross-curricular, and ethnocultural components. Native-language instruction remains the foundation of literacy and cognitive development, while

second and foreign language teaching follows a level-based approach aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), ensuring continuity and internationally recognized standards of language assessment.

4.4. Teacher Preparation and Institutional Readiness as a Policy Challenge

Multilingual education is viewed as a means of developing not only language competence but also intellectual, cultural, and intercultural awareness (Concept 2023-2029). However, one of the major challenges in its implementation has been the insufficient methodological preparation of teachers. Although numerous innovative teaching approaches exist, their effectiveness depends largely on teacher competence and appropriate pedagogical support. Consequently, successful multilingual education requires a phased and level-based approach that systematically develops listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills throughout all stages of education.

The scale of the teacher-preparation effort documented in the corpus is considerable. Beginning with the 2017-2018 academic year, fifteen universities responsible for training teachers in four natural science specialties switched to English-medium instruction in their programs (http://adilet.zan.kz/kaz/docs/U1600000205). As a result, by 2019, a total of 14,473 teachers had attained a language proficiency level of B1 or higher, enabling them to teach natural science subjects, including Computer Science, Physics, Chemistry, and Biology, in English. By the same year, 352 schools had introduced English-medium instruction for STEM disciplines, while 5,922 teachers incorporated elements of English into their teaching practice and 818 teachers conducted instruction entirely in English (State Program 2020-2025). A critical reading of these figures, however, surfaces an important conflation embedded in the policy design itself: the metric used to certify teacher "readiness" is a general language-proficiency threshold (CEFR B1), not a validated measure of CLIL pedagogical competence, that is, the specific ability to teach subject content through a second or third language while sustaining both content mastery and language development. Attaining B1 in English is a necessary but not obviously sufficient condition for delivering CLIL instruction, yet the statistical record treats the two as equivalent, reporting teacher numbers as evidence of implementation success. This is compounded by the Roadmap's devolution of pacing decisions to regional authorities, taking into account the readiness of individual schools without specifying, in the State Mandatory Standards of Education or elsewhere in the corpus, a transparent or standardized definition of institutional readiness. The result is a policy architecture in which the criteria for judging whether a school or teacher is genuinely prepared remain largely discretionary, leaving open the possibility that reported readiness reflects administrative compliance (meeting a language-certification quota) rather than demonstrated pedagogical capacity.

This gap between input metrics and pedagogical readiness has direct implications for equity. Because implementation has proceeded from resourced, selective pilot institutions (BIL, KATEV, NIS) outward to the wider system on a regionally negotiated timetable, schools and teachers in less-resourced or rural districts are structurally more likely to lag in both the quantity and the quality of trilingual provision, even where they meet nominal certification thresholds. The corpus offers no disaggregated data on regional or urban–rural variation in teacher B1 attainment or in the ratio of certified teachers to schools actually delivering CLIL instruction, which itself constitutes a notable gap in the official monitoring apparatus (Ministry of Education annual statistical reports) relative to the ambitions articulated in the State Program 2020-2025 and the Concept 2023-2029. Institutional readiness is thus better understood not as a fixed precondition that either is or is not met, but as an ongoing policy challenge that the current reporting framework is not fully equipped to track.

4.5. Balancing Nation-Building with Global Competitiveness

Over the past decades, Kazakhstan has achieved significant success in the development of its educational system by introducing innovative approaches, expanding access to quality education, and ensuring equal educational opportunities for different social groups (Concept 2023-2029). The state continues to modernize school infrastructure, implement digital educational platforms, and align national educational practices with international standards, thereby increasing the global competitiveness of the Kazakhstani education system. Particular attention has been devoted to supporting gifted and talented students through specialized initiatives such as the NIS network and the "Bolashak"

scholarship program, both of which aim to develop the academic potential of young people and provide opportunities for study within Kazakhstan and abroad. Kazakhstan's participation in international educational assessments, including PISA, further demonstrates the country's commitment to improving educational quality and integrating global standards into the national education system.

The growing importance of English is also reflected in policies designed to improve access to higher education and promote international academic standards. Since 2020, Kazakhstan has implemented a system for converting internationally recognized examination scores, including IELTS, SAT, AST, and IB results, into Unified National Testing (UNT) scores (Concept 2023-2029). Graduates holding these certificates are exempt from taking the UNT examination in English, a measure intended to increase the accessibility of higher education and encourage talented students to continue their studies within the country. Further support for multilingualism was introduced in 2022, when universities implementing trilingual educational programs under the State Mandatory Standard of Education began planning instruction in three languages: the primary language of instruction, a second language, and English. Higher education institutions are granted autonomy in determining the proportion of courses taught in each language. As reported in the Concept 2023-2029: *"Under the State Mandatory Standard of Higher Education, 71,356 university students are enrolled in trilingual educational programs, including 70,038 bachelor's students, 622 master's students, and 696 doctoral students"*. At the societal level, indicators of English proficiency also demonstrate gradual growth: the proportion of adults reporting knowledge of English increased from 27.5% in 2020 to 28.0% in 2021 and 29.0% in 2022, suggesting a steady expansion of English language learning among the population (Sociological and Analytical Research on Language Policy in the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023).

At the same time, the use and development of languages constitute an important component of state policy in Kazakhstan, as language policy is closely linked to national security, social cohesion, and the strengthening of statehood (Law on Languages, 2003; Concept 2023–2029). Within this framework, the Kazakh language occupies a central position, having been granted the status of the state language by the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan and serving as the language of the titular nation. Beyond its legal status, Kazakh is viewed as a unifying factor for the diverse ethnic groups living in the country and as a repository of the nation's cultural and spiritual heritage (Concept 2023-2029). Consequently, proficiency in Kazakh and its use in communication, public services, and education are regarded as essential prerequisites for fostering mutual understanding among citizens, strengthening patriotic values, and promoting respect for Kazakhstan's history and culture. At the same time, Kazakhstan's language policy seeks to preserve linguistic diversity by creating favorable conditions for all ethnic groups to communicate, receive services, and access educational resources in their native languages, including Russian.

As both the native language of the Kazakh people and the state language of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Kazakh has experienced a steady increase in the number of speakers among various ethnic groups living in the country (Table 1). Sociological and Analytical Research on Language Policy in the Republic of Kazakhstan (2023) indicates that conversational proficiency in Kazakh is reported by 72% of Uzbeks, 71.7% of Uighurs, and 58.5% of Kyrgyz, while approximately 12% demonstrate a high level of proficiency. Among representatives of the Slavic and European diasporas, 25.1% of Russians, 23.7% of Ukrainians, 22.8% of Belarusians, 22.1% of Poles, and 25.2% of Germans report understanding conversational Kazakh. However, only 2.9% of these groups possess professional-level reading and writing skills in the language. These figures demonstrate positive quantitative changes in the spread of the state language while simultaneously highlighting the need to further improve the quality and depth of Kazakh language proficiency and use across different sectors of society.

As reported in earlier sociolinguistic research on multilingualism in Kazakhstan (Koptleuova, Karagulova, et al., 2023), conversational proficiency in Kazakh varies considerably across ethnic groups. The current analysis extends these findings by examining how these proficiency patterns relate to educational language policy and language-of-instruction trends. According to the Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan (National Census 2021) (2024), 13,768,406 people (80%) aged 5 and older have proficiency in the

state language, of whom 8,472,661 people (49.3%) use it in everyday life. This shows that the majority of the population understands spoken Kazakh and can read and write it fluently.

Table 1
Proficiency in the Kazakh Language among Different Ethnic Groups in Kazakhstan (Sociological and Analytical Research on Language Policy in the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023)

Ethnic Group	Conversational Level %	High proficiency (%)	Professional Reading and Writing (%)
Turkic-speaking peoples			
Uzbeks	72.0	12.0	-
Uighurs	71.7	12.0	-
Kyrgyz	58.5	12.0	-
Slavic diaspora			
Russians	25.1	-	2.9
Ukrainians	23.7	-	2.9
Belarusians	22.8	-	2.9
Poles	22.1	-	2.9
Germans	25.2	-	2.9

The level of Russian language proficiency among the population is 90.6% (Table 2). Good proficiency is reported by 51.8% of respondents, while 11.2% speak and read Russian fluently but experience difficulties with writing. A further 20.3% understand and can communicate in Russian, and 7.2% understand the language well but are unable to speak it fluently. Only 9.4% of respondents demonstrate limited or no proficiency, including 8.9% who understand only some words and 0.5% who report no knowledge of Russian at all (Table 2). These figures indicate that Russian continues to occupy a strong position within Kazakhstan's multilingual environment and remains one of the most widely used languages in the country (Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024). The high overall proficiency rate, together with the large proportion of respondents demonstrating advanced language skills, suggests that the policy objective of maintaining Russian as a language of interethnic communication has largely been achieved. From a policy perspective, the findings demonstrate the continued effectiveness of historical, educational, and social factors that support the use of Russian in public life, education, and professional communication.

Table 2
Russian Language Proficiency Levels among the Population of Kazakhstan (Compiled by the authors based on data from the Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2024).

Proficiency Level	Percentage (%)
Overall proficiency	90.6
Good proficiency (speaks, reads, and writes well)	51.8
Speaks and reads fluently but writes poorly	11.2
Understands and can communicate	20.3
Understands well but cannot speak	7.2
No proficiency	**9.4**
Understands some words	8.9
No knowledge at all	0.5

The consistently high proficiency in Russian (90.6%), as documented in previous studies on Kazakhstan's language situation (e.g., Koptleuova, Karagulova, et al., 2023), continues to characterize the country's linguistic landscape. The present study builds on this finding by analyzing how Russian maintains its position within the education system. The proportion of respondents reporting some level of English proficiency is 29.0%, including 5.0% with good proficiency, 1.0% who speak and read fluently but write poorly, 10.2% who understand and can communicate, and 12.8% who understand well but cannot communicate. However, the distribution of proficiency levels suggests that advanced command of English remains limited, with only a small proportion of respondents demonstrating high-level language skills (Table 3). Furthermore, the fact that more than two-thirds of respondents either do not speak English or possess only minimal comprehension indicates that the policy objective of widespread trilingual competence has not yet been fully achieved. Therefore, the findings point to a mixed outcome: there is notable progress in promoting English language learning alongside continuing challenges in developing advanced and broadly distributed proficiency across the population.

Table 3

English Language Proficiency Levels among the Population of Kazakhstan (Compiled by the authors based on data from the Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2024)

Proficiency Level	Percentage (%)
Overall proficiency	29.0
Good proficiency (speaks, reads, and writes well)	5.0
Speaks and reads fluently but writes poorly	1.0
Understands and can communicate	10.2
Understands well but cannot speak	12.8
No proficiency	**71.0**
Understands some words	35.2
No knowledge at all	35.8

Previous research has noted the gradual growth of English proficiency in Kazakhstan (Koptleuova, Karagulova, et al., 2023). The current study extends this observation by examining the specific educational measures that have contributed to this growth, including CLIL implementation and teacher training programs. The proportion of respondents reporting proficiency in all three languages averages 29.0%. Within this group, 6.0% indicate good proficiency, 5.2% speak fluently but write poorly, 5.0% understand and can communicate, and 12.8% understand the language well but cannot speak it. In contrast, 28.1% of respondents report that they do not know the language at all, while 42.9% understand only individual words or phrases. These figures suggest that Kazakhstan has made tangible progress toward the development of a trilingual society, one of the central objectives of its multilingual education policy. The presence of nearly one-third of respondents with some level of competence in all three languages reflects the growing role of Kazakh, Russian, and English within the educational system and public life. At the same time, the distribution of proficiency levels indicates that advanced trilingual competence remains relatively limited. Only a small proportion of respondents demonstrate high-level mastery of all three languages, whereas the largest groups consist of individuals with only partial comprehension or no knowledge of the language. From a policy perspective, these results point to a gap between exposure to multiple languages and the attainment of functional or advanced multilingual proficiency.

Legally, Kazakh occupies the apex as the sole state language; functionally, Russian retains the broadest and deepest reach across administrative, academic, and professional domains, while English remains at 6% "good" proficiency and 29% any proficiency, a minority competence. The state's own

statistical apparatus (The Sociological and Analytical Research on Language Policy in the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023) thus performs a double function: it is invoked as evidence of policy progress, yet it simultaneously documents how far attainment still lags behind the tripartite parity that the ideological framing projects.

According to the Sociological and Analytical Research on Language Policy in the Republic of Kazakhstan (2023), English is the dominant first foreign language (L1) in Kazakhstan's schools. It is studied by 99.6% of students in Kazakh-medium schools, 99.5% in Russian-medium schools, and 97.0% in schools with other languages of instruction. In this context, L1 refers to the first foreign language studied within the school curriculum, whereas L2 denotes an additional foreign language studied after the first foreign language. A smaller proportion of students study German, French, Arabic, or Chinese as either their first or second foreign language. The data indicate some variation by language of instruction: students in Russian-medium schools show greater participation in German and French language learning, whereas Chinese and Arabic are more frequently selected in Kazakh-medium schools (Table 4).

Table 4

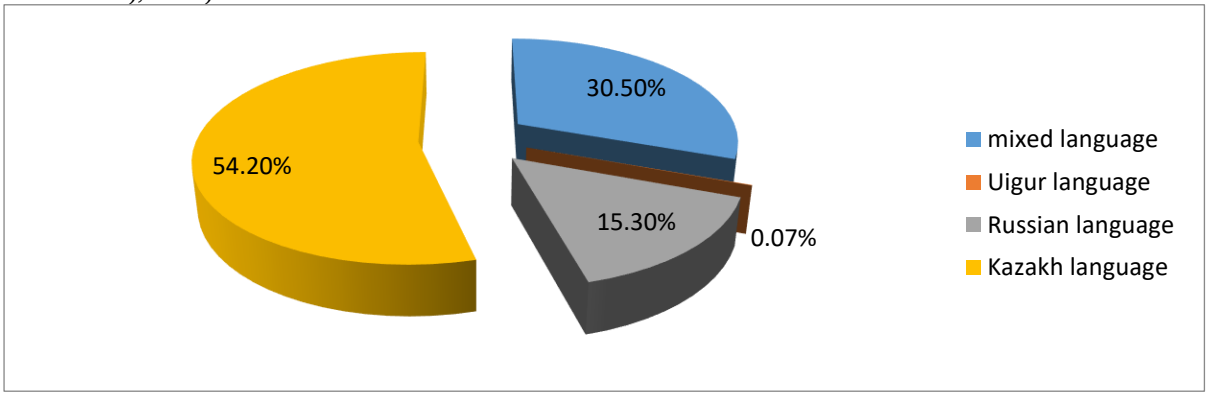
The Number of Students Studying Foreign Languages (Sociological and Analytical Research on Language Policy in the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023)

Foreign Language	Level	Kazakh instruction	Russian instruction	Other languages instruction
English	L1	2 262 852	1 057 777	100 189
	L2	-	1 737	-
German	L1	33	2 256	-
	L2	2 164	8 798	-
French	L1	103	194	-
	L2	2 918	7 825	-
Arabic	L1	1	-	-
	L2	225	100	-
Chinese	L1	-	-	-
	L2	1 230	-	-

Statistical data (https://stat.gov.kz) reveal the continuing strengthening of the Kazakh language within the education system. Of the 172,000 school graduates in the 2022-2023 academic year, 120,439 completed their education in Kazakh-medium schools, accounting for slightly more than 70% of all graduates. This represents a gradual increase compared with the previous year, when 117,088 students graduated from Kazakh-language schools, constituting 68.8% of approximately 170,000 graduates. Similar trends can be observed over a longer period. In the 2020-2021 academic year, 111,183 of approximately 150,000 graduates completed schooling in Kazakh, representing 74% of all graduates. A decade earlier, however, the situation was markedly different: out of 168,744 graduates, only 82,947 studied in Kazakh-medium schools, corresponding to 49% of the total. The long-term trajectory is even more striking when viewed historically. In 1993, only 37% of students in Kazakhstan were educated in the Kazakh language. At that time, of the country's 3,101,420 students, only 1,153,730 received instruction in Kazakh. These figures demonstrate a substantial expansion of Kazakh-medium education over the past three decades and provide clear evidence of the effectiveness of state policies aimed at strengthening the role of the state language within the national education system.

Figure 1

Distribution of Schools in Kazakhstan by Language of Instruction (2022-2023) (Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Education in the Republic of Kazakhstan), 2024)

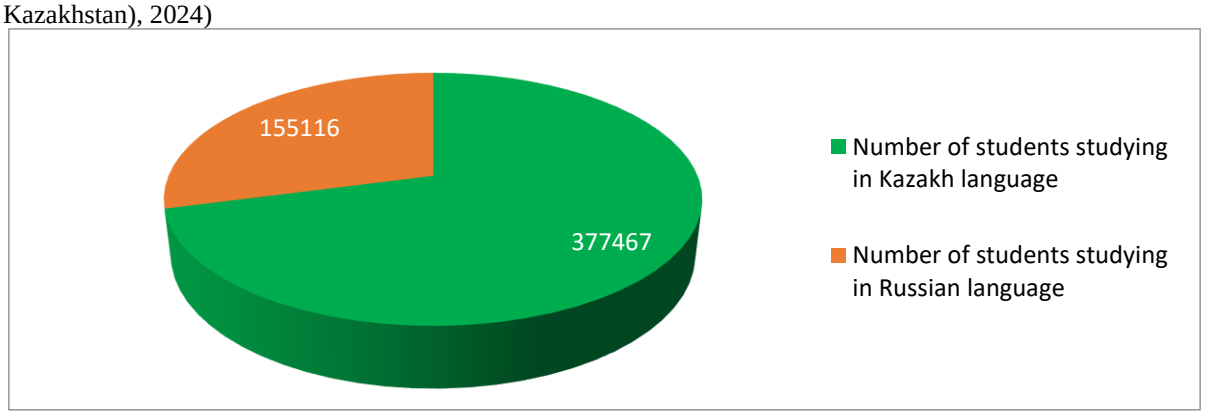


Currently, Kazakhstan's school system includes 6,909 public schools, of which more than half (54.2%), or 3,743 schools, operate with Kazakh as the language of instruction, while 1,055 schools use Russian as the language of instruction. In addition, there are 5 schools with Uigur as the language of instruction and 2,106 mixed-language schools (Figure 1). This distribution demonstrates the continued dominance of Kazakh-medium education within the general school system, alongside the sustained presence of Russian-medium and multilingual educational environments.

According to the Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Education in the Republic of Kazakhstan) (2024), the use of Kazakh as the language of instruction has expanded substantially in higher education. The statistical report indicates that Kazakhstan has 119 higher education institutions enrolling 532,583 students, of whom 377,467 study in Kazakh and 155,116 in Russian. The same report further shows that 163,472 students were admitted during the 2022–2023 academic year, including 105,493 enrolled in Kazakh-language programmes, while 161,974 students graduated, of whom 108,528 completed programs taught in Kazakh. These official statistics demonstrate the continued expansion of Kazakh-medium instruction in higher education and its increasing role as the principal language of university education in Kazakhstan.

Figure 2

Language Preferences in Kazakhstan's Higher Education (2022-2023) (Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Education in the Republic of Kazakhstan), 2024)



In previous years, the linguistic distribution of students in higher education in Kazakhstan was different (https://stat.gov.kz). In the 2020-2021 academic year, the total student contingent amounted to 571,691 individuals, of whom 322,042 (56%) studied in Kazakh-medium programs, while 238,579

students were enrolled in Russian-medium instruction (Figure 2). These figures already indicate a shift toward the increasing dominance of the Kazakh language in higher education, although Russian continues to maintain a significant position within the academic system.

A more pronounced contrast can be observed when compared with data from a decade earlier. In the 2002-2003 academic year, 597,489 students were enrolled in universities, but only 214,793 individuals, or approximately 35%, studied in Kazakh, indicating that the majority of students at that time were educated in Russian. This comparison clearly demonstrates a substantial transformation in the linguistic structure of higher education over time. Thus, during the period of Kazakhstan's independence, significant changes have taken place in the country's educational landscape, particularly in relation to the growing role of the Kazakh language, including in higher education where Russian has traditionally held a strong position. The data suggest a steady long-term trend toward the expansion of Kazakh-medium instruction and allow for the expectation of its further growth, as younger generations increasingly choose Kazakh as the language of their higher education.

5. Discussion

The objective of this study was to examine Kazakhstan's language education policy as a key component of the national language strategy and to evaluate the roles of Kazakh, Russian, and English within the educational system. By integrating legislative and strategic policy documents with national statistical evidence, the study addressed two research questions: RQ1, concerning the key policy discourses, language ideologies, and status-planning mechanisms that characterize Kazakhstan's language education policy as articulated in official documents; and RQ2, concerning how policy documents address the implementation challenges of multilingual education, and the extent to which official statistics reflect the policy objective of balancing Kazakh, Russian, and English in the education system.

In response to RQ1, findings reveal that Kazakhstan's language education policy relies on the "Trinity of Languages" discourse, framing Kazakh, Russian, and English as functionally complementary yet hierarchical. Reproduced across the State Program 2020-2025 and Concept 2023-2029, this tripartite framing positions Kazakh as the symbolic language of statehood and identity, retains Russian for pragmatic interethnic and administrative dominance, and casts English as an aspirational tool for global competitiveness. Consistent with Spolsky's (2018) understanding of language planning as a mechanism of nation-building, the findings show that Kazakhstan strategically assigns complementary but unequal functions to Kazakh, Russian, and English. While Kazakh is constitutionally positioned as the state language, the documentary and statistical evidence indicates that Russian continues to occupy a prominent functional role across multiple domains. As noted by Utegulova et al. (2024), Russian performs a wide range of social and professional functions that extend beyond its constitutional role as the language of interethnic communication. Similarly, Bazarbayeva et al. (2024) and Koptleuova, Khairzhanova, et al. (2023) argue that Russian continues to facilitate regional and international communication across the post-Soviet space, reinforcing its practical value in education, research, and economic cooperation. The rollout of this policy embeds hierarchy through its implementation design. By starting in elite pilot schools (BIL, KATEV, NIS) and making national expansion conditional on regional "school readiness," English-medium instruction is treated as a privilege for advantaged schools rather than a basic right. Thus, language planning is not a neutral tool, but a system that elevates Kazakh symbolically, preserves Russian practically, and selectively grants English to boost institutional competitiveness. The implementation mechanisms identified in the policy documents correspond closely with previous research on multilingual education in Kazakhstan. The findings confirm the observations of Sarmurzin et al. (2024) about regional disparities, shortages of qualified multilingual teachers, and uneven curriculum implementation by demonstrating that official policy documents require schools to be "ready" for multilingual education while providing limited guidance on how institutional readiness should be assessed. Taken together, these findings answer RQ1 by showing that Kazakhstan's official policy discourse constructs language status through three interlocking mechanisms: an ideological framing that assigns each language a distinct symbolic function (Theme 1); a legal and constitutional architecture that formally elevates Kazakh while preserving Russian's protected status (Theme 2); and

an implementation architecture that reproduces, rather than corrects, existing institutional advantage in the distribution of multilingual educational opportunity (Theme 3).

In response to RQ2, official documents acknowledge implementation challenges only partially. Although the Roadmap mandates local assessments of school "readiness" and reports significant investments, such as 14,473 teachers reaching CEFR B1 English proficiency and 352 schools offering English-medium STEM by 2019, the policy corpus lacks standardized criteria for institutional readiness. Crucially, policy texts conflate basic B1 language proficiency with the specialized pedagogical skill needed to teach subjects like chemistry or physics in English. Compounded by a lack of disaggregated regional or urban-rural data, this leaves "readiness" largely discretionary, favoring already well-resourced schools.

The findings are consistent with Kambatyrova (2024), who emphasized that successful implementation of Kazakhstan's trilingual education policy depends on balancing the promotion of Kazakh with continued development of Russian and English. While the policy documents clearly articulate these objectives, the statistical evidence indicates that their realization remains uneven, particularly with respect to English-language competence and institutional readiness. This gap between policy aspirations and implementation outcomes reinforces Sarmurzin et al.'s (2024) conclusion that sustained institutional support and teacher preparation remain essential for achieving multilingual education objectives. Official statistics reveal an uneven balance among languages, qualifying optimistic views of multilingualism as an unproblematic asset (García & Wei, 2014; May, 2012). While the growing role of English aligns with global pressures (Crystal, 2012; Graddol, 2006), policy implementation remains asymmetrical. Competitiveness initiatives, such as converting IELTS, SAT, AST, and IB scores for university entry, primarily benefit well-resourced students, whereas Kazakh operates on a universal civic-consolidation logic. Rather than a stable equilibrium between nation-building and competitiveness, this creates ongoing tension across an uneven educational landscape. The findings reinforce that language policies must balance national identity with practical communication needs in multilingual societies (Alpatov, 2020). Kazakhstan's approach attempts to reconcile Kazakh as a symbol of statehood, Russian as an interethnic medium, and English for international engagement, aligning with the goal of preserving cultural identity while building multilingual competence (Samoilova, 2009; Tazhitova et al., 2025). However, statistical evidence shows uneven progress across all three languages, confirming that balancing identity and communication remains a primary policy challenge.

Despite providing a comprehensive analysis of Kazakhstan's language education policy, this study has several limitations. First, the analysis was based primarily on official policy documents and descriptive statistical data, which reflect policy intentions and implementation trends but do not capture the perspectives and experiences of key stakeholders, such as teachers, students, school administrators, and policymakers. Second, the study focused on the national level and therefore did not examine regional variations in the implementation of multilingual education across different educational contexts. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating qualitative interviews, surveys, or classroom observations to explore how language policy is enacted in practice. Comparative studies across regions or with other multilingual countries would also provide a deeper understanding of the factors influencing the effectiveness of language education policy and contribute to the development of more evidence-informed policy recommendations.

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Data Availability

All data supporting this study are derived from publicly available sources cited in the text; compiled statistical tables are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethics Declaration

This study analyzed publicly available documents and statistical reports; therefore, it did not involve human participants or primary data collection requiring ethical approval.

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