

# **Trilingual Education in Kazakhstan: A Qualitative Study**

**María-Elena Gómez-Parra**

Universidad de Córdoba (España)

**Ainur Abdiyeva**

Universidad de Córdoba (España)



## Trilingual Education in Kazakhstan: A Qualitative Study

### Educación trilingüe en Kazajistán: un estudio cualitativo

**María-Elena Gómez-Parra**

Universidad de Córdoba (España)

elena.gomez@uco.es

**Ainur Abdiyeva**

Universidad de Córdoba (España)

abdi\_nurik@list.ru

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#### Resumen

Este estudio aborda las complejidades de implementar la educación trilingüe en Kazajistán. El trilingüismo ha ido ganando tanto adeptos como detractores entre profesores, estudiantes y padres. El objetivo principal de este artículo es analizar la opinión de seis docentes kazajos sobre la implementación de políticas trilingües en todo el país. Los participantes provienen de dos tipos diferentes de escuelas (es decir, NIS y escuelas secundarias generales) y las entrevistas se realizaron en línea. El análisis cualitativo de los datos adopta una perspectiva de teoría fundamentada para establecer las diferentes categorías, a través de las cuales realizamos el análisis de contenido. Los resultados muestran que los docentes piensan que la educación trilingüe es necesaria en Kazajistán. Sin embargo, se identifican inconvenientes específicos (p. ej., falta de personal docente calificado o nivel de competencia lingüística de los estudiantes). Nuestras conclusiones sugieren que la educación trilingüe es beneficiosa para el sistema kazajo, aunque las diferencias identificadas entre los NIS y las escuelas de educación secundaria general pueden poner en peligro una implementación exitosa.

**Palabras clave:** Educación trilingüe; Investigación cualitativa; Política educativa; Opiniones de los profesores.

### Abstract

This study addresses the complexities of implementing trilingual education in Kazakhstan. Trilingualism has been gaining both supporters and opponents among teachers, students, and parents. The main objective of this paper is to analyse the opinion of six Kazakh teachers on the implementation of trilingual policies across the country. Participants come from two different types of schools (i.e., NIS and general secondary schools) and interviews were conducted online. The qualitative analysis of the data adopts a grounded theory perspective in order to establish the different categories, through which we carry out content analysis. Results show that teachers think that trilingual education is necessary in Kazakhstan. Specific drawbacks, though, are identified (e.g., lack of qualified teaching staff or level of language competence of students). Our conclusions suggest that trilingual education is beneficial for the Kazakh system though the differences identified between NIS and general secondary education schools may jeopardise successful implementation.

**Keywords:** Trilingual education; Qualitative research; Educational policy; Teachers' opinions.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Kazakhstan is in the process of modernizing its educational system. This goes hand-in-hand with the revision of national language policies as the linguistic landscape of the country is convoluted due to historical reasons and cultural differences. The Russian language is very popular in Kazakhstan (Bekmurzayev, 2019), which speaks about the difficulties of restoring the lost status of Kazakh as a national language. To this panorama, we must add the fact that English is gaining popularity due to its global dominance as a *lingua franca* (Melitz, 2018), but still lacking proper tuition at Kazakh schools. As suggested by Semashkina (2018, para. 1), this might be explained by the low level of teachers' language proficiency in English. The numbers presented in the article show that 2,815 out of the 3,485 teachers who took part in the evaluation of their language skills, had an A1-A2 level (i.e., the lowest level) according to the CEFR framework (Council of Europe, 2001).

According to the former President of Kazakhstan (Nazarbayev, the initiator of the reforms):

Educational reforms should be brought to a logical conclusion. The reality nowadays requires new sets of skills and competencies to be taught. Trilingualism ought to become a norm. Our children are global citizens who study in a global setting, at the best universities. For this reason, they should have a good command of their mother tongue - Kazakh, the Russian language and English as a global language. It is crucial. (Vaal, 2019, p. 2).

Therefore, the main aim of these reforms is to increase the level of education to be on par with other developed countries. This must be done in terms of quality education,

according to Nazarbayev's words, which could also have an impact on the overall socio-economic development of the country. International research shows that reforms do not only provide a social lift for people, but also a positive effect on the economy of the country (Hanushek, Jamison, Jamison, & Woessmann, 2008). An educated society often enjoys higher social unity as well as a more active participation of its members in the improvement of the community (Campbell, 2006). As an additional benefit, crime rates are lower in more educated countries (Hjalmarsson & Lochner, 2012).

This research aims to tap into teachers' views of Kazakhstan's trilingual education system. To meet this goal, online interviews with six teachers from two different types of schools were conducted for the purpose of examining their views towards trilingual policies at schools, including the provision of teaching materials and workbooks, provision of training and preparatory courses, positive aspects and implementation difficulties, the level of students' proficiency in Russian, Kazakh and English and the attitude of parents and colleagues toward trilingual policies.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKDROP

The idea of trilingualism in education in Kazakhstan was first introduced on the 12<sup>th</sup> session of the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan (2006) with the purpose of creating the necessary conditions for people to learn three languages: Kazakh, Russian and English. According to this Assembly, Kazakhstan should become an educated multilingual country, where Kazakh is the State language, Russian is used for interethnic communication, and English is a means of integration of the country into the global community (Tanirbergenov, Kalilakhanova, & Alimbekov, 2008).

The linguistic situation in Kazakhstan is complex. It all started with the foundation of the USSR: after the Bolshevik revolution, the new power began to reshape the country (that consisted of various nations and ethnicities) to promote local languages. It was a necessary step, since that was the only means of communication for (mostly) illiterate people from different backgrounds and languages (Liber, 1991; Smith 1998). Therefore, initial language policies were intended to support local languages. However, installing the new regime by means of local languages was also part of the political agenda of those days. This process was successful until bourgeois nationalistic ideas started taking root among locals in National Republics around 1930s. This led to repressions of the local elite and to rethink Russian as the main language across the entire Soviet Union. According to Slezkine (1994, p. 445), the presence of 192 local languages was not working for the benefit of the State. Then, the new stage (the Russification process) began with changes in language policies (i.e., Russian became a mandatory subject in non-Russian schools). The further switch to the Cyrillic alphabet intensified that trend and assisted the process of learning Russian (Smith, 1998). Another important step the State took to ensure the perception of Russian as the main language was using words in Russian for new

terms. This was especially noticeable in the fields of technology, science and State ideology. Thus, Russian was pervasive in technical fields, and the population left Kazakh for everyday usage (Sytnik, n.d.). In 1991 the collapse of the Soviet Union took place, which resulted in a language shift across national republics, as Russian progressively started losing its status as the main language in those countries.

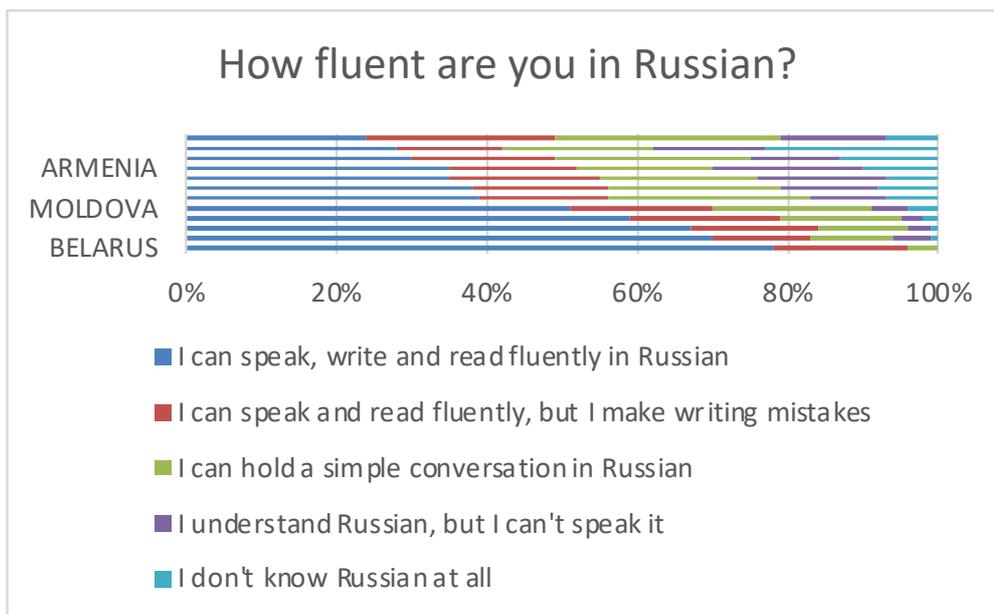
However, in many countries, including Kazakhstan, this process was hindered by several factors: the majority of local populations had a good command of Russian opposed to poor knowledge of local languages (Smagulova, 2008), which was especially noticeable in cities. Thereby, this language shift was meant to neutralize the Soviet influence and improve the level of local languages. Another hindrance was the multi-ethnic condition of these societies which required Russian as a language of communication. Thus, local languages could not fully replace Russian because people had an insufficient knowledge of these local languages and further work on vocabulary and standardization was needed (Alpatov, 2000). After some years, the scope of Russian diminished in Kazakhstan and Central Asia in general due to changes in language policies and outward migration of ethnic Russians. These two factors in collaboration affected the proportion of Russian speakers in Kazakhstan (Smagulova, 2008; Smith, 1998). Since gaining independence, language policies caused heated discussion both at the State level and among the general public.

According to *Russkii Yazyk v Novyh Nezavisimyh Gosudarstvah* (2007, pp. 1–3), this is a summary of the use of these languages in different contexts (social, intimate and educational):

- a. Kazakh people speak the following languages at home: 46% speak Russian, 35% speak the local language (Kazakh), and 16% speak both Russian and Kazakh.
- b. 45% of the population speak Russian at work, 23% use Kazakh, and 30% speak both languages in informal settings.
- c. The language people use in educational contexts is distributed as: 50% speak Russian, 33% speak Kazakh, and 16% use both.

Moreover, Fig. 1 provides an image of the level of proficiency and fluency for each of these languages. These data support the correlation between frequency of language use and the population's level for each of these languages: 67% of people in Kazakhstan speak, write and read fluently in Russian; 17% read and speak fluently but make mistakes in writing; 3% understand Russian but cannot speak the language; and only 1% claim that they do not know Russian at all.

Demoscope (2017) states that 52% of people claim full fluency in Kazakh; 18% can speak the language; and 19% understand but do not speak Kazakh. English is the third language in this trilingual scheme, but it is different in nature due to various reasons. Kazakhstan had joined the Bologna process in 2010 (Kazinform,



Graph 1. Russian Language in New Independent Countries

Fig. 1: Level of proficiency and fluency of Kazakh population. (Russkii Yazyk v Novyh Nezavisimyh Gosudarstvah, 2007, p. 3).

2010), which served as a catalyst for moving towards trilingualism in education. Since English is the medium of instruction in many universities across the globe, most academic resources and research papers are in English. Thus, it made sense to include English in the language policy along with Kazakh and Russian. Nevertheless, while Russian and Kazakh are widely used in everyday life, this is not the case with English. Kazakhstan is on the 93<sup>rd</sup> place regarding proficiency of the population in English (Seilkhanov, 2019). Moreover, school and undergraduate students attribute their poor knowledge of English to several factors: (i) undeveloped material technical base, (ii) student motivation, (iii) low level of teacher qualification, and (iv) lack of appropriate materials (Yeskeldiyeva & Tazhibayeva, 2015). We will see that some of these factors concur with the results of this research.

Given the linguistic complexity that characterizes present-day Kazakhstan, great efforts have been recently made to regulate and organize its multilingual condition. Henceforth, some of the measures undertaken are briefly discussed. Historically, Russian was the main language of communication during the times of the Soviet Union and, consequently, the role of the local languages in other Soviet countries diminished throughout that period. However, after gaining independence, the attitude towards Russian started to change, and since then Kazakh has gained more importance in many areas of life (for instance, in education, documentation, television and everyday life) (Fierman, 2006). However, the most salient change after the collapse of the Soviet Union took place in education: the revision of school subjects and the languages in which they were taught had a considerable impact

on people's opinion, since not everyone agreed with such changes. According to Mamashuly (2016), some prominent people in Kazakhstan such as poets and writers (e.g., Mukhtar Shakhonov, Kabdesh Zhumadilov, Dulat Isabekov), historians (e.g., Beibit Koishybayev, Talas Omarbekov) and political scientists (e.g., Amirzhan Kosanov, Aidos Sarym) opposed the idea of introducing the trilingual language policy in the school education system. The most widely expressed objection lied in the fear that English would be introduced at school at the expense of lessons instructed in Kazakh and this would lead to a decrease in the influence of Kazakh on the curriculum. Another view was voiced by Nurov, the President of the scientific and educational foundation 'Aspandau'. He did not oppose the idea of trilingualism in the long run, but found the current implementation hasty (Radionov, 2015). Nurov also drew the public's attention to a possible decline in the quality of subject teaching due to specialist teachers' poor command of English. The same opinion was echoed by Kuanysh Tastanbekova, PhD in Education at The University of Tsukuba who, in an interview to Vlast.kz Internet Journal (2016), claimed that before attempting to provide education in all three languages, quality education in Russian and Kazakh should be provided in the first place.

The implementation of the trilingual policy in Kazakh NIS (Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools) and regular secondary schools takes place through the introduction of subjects in three languages: Kazakh, Russian and English. According to the *Integrated Educational program* presented by the Board of AEO Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (2017), in NIS the subjects of Geography and History of Kazakhstan, (otherwise referred to as Kazakhstan in the Modern World) and Kazakh language and literature classes are conducted in the Kazakh language. Russian language and literature lessons are carried out in Russian. Also, subjects such as Mathematics and Design and Arts are offered in either Russian or Kazakh. Then, the following subjects are delivered in English: Biology, Chemistry, Physics, ICT, Economics. Two more subjects (i.e., Global Perspectives and Project Work) are generally available in English.

As for regular secondary schools, in 2018-2019 most of them adopted the renewed system that was modelled after NIS schools, with a similar language policy, grading system and content of education. Starting from September 1, 2017, History of Kazakhstan has been taught in Kazakh and World History in Russian in general schools across the country. Then, Physics, Biology, Chemistry and ICT have been conducted in English from September 1, 2019. Moreover, the implementation of the trilingual policy in NIS was facilitated by involving foreign teachers, which was particularly useful in those subjects conducted in English. However, regular secondary schools did not receive funds to hire expat staff. This highlights that these latter schools have lower budgets in comparison to NIS.

The characteristics of NIS (i.e., the structure of education, the evaluation of students' work, and new subject areas) are described in a document called the *Board*

of *AEO Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools* (2017). In Kazakhstan there are 20 NIS. These schools have a new format and constitute the testing platforms for national trilingual initiatives. The project was first launched in 2008 and their educational approach is different from that implemented in regular secondary schools in that lessons are conducted in English, Kazakh and Russian. This means that all teachers and students should command the three languages at a good level. The ultimate goal of NIS is to educate youngsters so that they can become competent, determined and resourceful citizens who positively contribute to both the cohesion among the different communities and the development of the country. To this end, NIS nurture specific traits in youngsters such as teamwork, academic integrity, and principles of lifelong learning.

Another significant feature of NIS is the evaluation system: while general secondary schools follow a relative grade system, where students' performances are compared to each other and the final grade depends on the highest and lowest grades, NIS implement a criterial assessment so that students' grades are compared to the set benchmark. Another important distinguishing feature refers to the fact that NIS support and embrace children with various talents and inclinations through a range of extracurricular activities (Shpakov, 2009). Kazakh regular schools also provide some extracurricular activities but on a smaller scale due to general scarcity of either space, materials and staff, or all of these factors combined. Also, as a rule, Kazakh regular schools work in two shifts, with half of the children attending school in the mornings and the second half in the afternoons (OECD/The World Bank, 2015). According to the same review, in exceptional cases, when the number of children at school is very high, then the schools might opt for a three-shift workday. Hence, the overly efficient use of space at regular schools might potentially leave less space for extracurricular activities. Finally, in terms of subjects, the NIS curriculum includes six mandatory fields (i.e., Language and Literature, Mathematics and IT, Natural Science, Understanding the World, Art, and Physical Education) while regular schools maintain separate subjects. In addition, NIS schools exercise cross-curricular learning to connect topics across subjects, whereas regular schools tend to keep them fairly separated.

Since teachers' opinions and their analysis of teaching / learning situations are influential factors for the implementation of new approaches (Avidov-Unger, 2011; Ferreira & Kalaja, 2012), the present study aims to delve into six Kazakhstani teachers' opinions about the relatively recent introduction of trilingual programs in the country. To accomplish this objective an online in-depth interview was conducted with 6 teachers from the two trilingual instruction settings available in the country: NIS and general secondary schools. The interviews shed light on the identification of the main educational features in the process of implementation of the trilingual policy in Kazakhstan, revealing the perceptions of teachers regarding the introduction of these new educational policies.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative design was used for this exploratory study. This type of design aims to analyse the opinions of the participants in order to interpret the phenomena underlying their opinions. For this particular study, opinions analysed were those of teachers regarding the implementation of trilingual education in Kazakhstan. Following the tenets of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006), the phenomena observed in teachers' opinion were grouped within categories.

#### 3.1. Participants

This study was conducted online with six teachers (three men and three women) during the 2019-2020 academic year. Three of them (50%) were working at a NIS, and the other three were teaching at a regular secondary school in Kazakhstan. The NIS was chosen because it follows a curriculum specially designed for this type of education, whereas the secondary school acts in accordance with the new updated curriculum, which keeps some features of the old system to which three elements of the NIS curriculum were added: (i) change of the grading system, (ii) assessment in general, and (iii) the number of subjects conducted in English.

#### 3.2. Data collection

Data were obtained by means of twelve open-ended questions (see Appendix) formulated to the participants in an online interview. These questions were aimed at analysing teachers' opinions about subjects, classroom materials, training courses, their opinion on the development of trilingual education in Kazakhstan, parents' attitude towards the new policies, or students' level of language. According to Patton (2003), "Open-ended questions and probes yield in-depth responses about people's experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings, and knowledge. Data consist of verbatim quotations with sufficient context to be interpretable" (p. 2). These questions were modelled after the seven key areas present in a report entitled *Teachers and Education Reform* published by the Education Week Research Center (2017). The main aim of this report was "to learn more about the reforms that are impacting teachers most in the classroom. We also aimed to learn more about teachers' attitudes toward these reforms" (2017, p. 3). Due to the parallelism between this report and our research, the interviews of our study were arranged to collect information following the same seven key areas:

- How teachers feel about changes and how these can have an impact on teaching.
- What difficulties or benefits teachers find in new policies.

- If teacher training was planned to facilitate teachers' work with the new NIS curriculum.
- If there are materials for teaching according to the new curriculum.
- How students cope with the new curriculum and languages.
- If general secondary schools are ready to implement the NIS model in their schools.
- What are the teachers' predictions for the following five years regarding the implementation of the trilingual policy.

Following the Delphi technique, our instrument was validated through 3 repeated rounds. Consensus among five experts was reached regarding the adequacy and validity of the questions according to the main objective of our research.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

Data were tapped into through content analysis (Krippendorf & Bock, 2008). This involved the systematic reading and observation of the texts obtained through the interviews with the 6 target teachers. The participants' responses were labelled to pinpoint categories and then, to identify similarities (comparison) and differences (contrast). Four main categories emerged: methodology, stakeholders, general factors, and language-related factors.

## 4. RESULTS

This section reports the findings following the analysis of both NIS and non-NIS teachers' opinions regarding the general features of trilingual education in Kazakhstan. To offer examples of the different categories identified (general features, language, stakeholders and methodology), we refer to extracts taken from data gathered through the 12 open-ended questions (Q) with a code in brackets that identified participants in the sample (codes starting with NT identify NIS teachers, whereas codes starting with SC identify secondary school teachers).

### *Q1. What subject/s do you teach and in what language/s?*

The main goal of this question was to distinguish content from language teachers. The three teachers from NIS teach Physics, English and IT. At secondary schools, the first teacher had Chemistry and Self-cognition lessons; the second, Physics and Maths; and the third, IT. Thus, while at NIS teachers focus on one subject, in the secondary school teachers usually must combine some subjects. This latter fact is due to teacher shortage in general secondary schools (Makhmutova & Moldagaliyev, 2019) and was mentioned by most teachers (5 out of 6) along the interviews:

[NT1] I think there is a shortage of staff who are qualified to teach the subject in English.

[NT3] In my opinion, our country is half-way through in the implementation of the trilingual policy, since there is a shortage of skilful teaching staff.

*Q2. What can you say about the current trends in education in Kazakhstan in general and the policy of trilingualism in particular?*

The opinions of the six teachers were unanimous in: (i) the reforms are positive, and (ii) the system needs to be updated. Regarding the positive aspects of the reforms, one of them stated:

[NT1] Policies regarding integration of trilingualism are at the moment the most ambitious direction that the state has set out.

Regarding the update of the system, another teacher affirmed:

[SC1] Of course, it requires some time and a thought-through plan of gradual implementation.

*Q3. In your opinion, at what stage of implementation of the trilingual language policy in Kazakhstan are we now?*

Data show that the majority of teachers (5 out of 6) agreed that the country is halfway through as regards the implementation of trilingual language policies.

[NT2] I think we are at the middle stage of the introduction of this language policy.

And only one participant claimed it is at its initial stage:

[ST1] In my opinion, it is still at the initial stage.

*Q4. What benefits and/or difficulties have you personally experienced in implementing this policy in your school?*

Regarding benefits, the NIS teachers mentioned that the main advantages of the implementation of this new system were: (i) update and improvement of their English level, and (ii) the fact that teachers receive many training courses.

[NT1] Now, there are constant trainings and seminars for teachers that are conducted several times a year.

Regarding difficulties, the three NIS teachers answered that they did not experience any on the implementation of this new language policy:

[NT2] Well, I personally do not experience any problems in the implementation of trilingual education, since I solely teach my subject in English [please note: the teachers of English as a subject teach only in English] and I don't have any problems here.

Nevertheless, these teachers highlighted that the level of English should be improved for both groups, teachers and students:

[NT1] In my opinion, the most important problem teachers face has to do with the language barrier and with their own approach, i.e. for them it is, in a way, a hindrance and an obstacle to explain things to children (in English). In addition to that, children's English should be on a decent level for them to be able to understand the subject.

[NT2] The teachers in high school who teach major subjects struggle a bit. The teachers find it difficult to explain their subjects in English.

On the other hand, the secondary school teachers argued that they had experienced different difficulties in: (i) language learning (e.g., the teacher's educational background in German as opposed to English, which is quite common in older generation teachers since German was the main foreign language during the Soviet period and sometime later); (ii) learning new things (unspecified); (iii) materials (scarcity of workbooks for a particular subject).

[SC3] The one I can think of is the lack of workbooks. We don't have any in English. Of course, one can easily find resources on the internet, there are many options, but the workbooks that are aimed at teaching this particular subject in English are not there.

*Q5. What do you think about the materials you use for teaching?*

Here we find two types of answers that are intimately related to the schools where teachers work. Whereas the three NIS teachers believe that all the necessary materials are available, teachers from the secondary school think that (in a way or another) they lack some resources:

[NT3] All the learning materials are easily available for every person.

[SC1] I try to look for interesting material on the internet that are useful for students: the main goal is to look for something interesting and engaging for the lessons. But the textbooks still leave much to be desired. They should be revised.

*Q6. Have you received any training or preparatory course on the implementation of the trilingual policy?*

Five out of six teachers claimed that they receive at least one training course per year (mostly teachers from NIS schools). Furthermore, most teachers have these courses several times per year, even in several locations (including courses abroad). Only one teacher from the secondary school mentioned that she had not received any training course:

[SC1] No, I had no training.

*Q7. Do you think students are ready for this policy? How are they coping with the new program?*

Regarding students' level for having lessons in three languages, all teachers (both from the NIS and the secondary school) noted that some of the students experience problems with lessons in English. Such problems were mainly related to specific subject terminology, the difficulty of following lessons in a foreign language and the adaptation to the new summative assessment model.

[NT1] There is a certain cohort of students who experience some problems with the language for their level of English varies between students.

[NT3] The only problem at the moment is the language.

[SC1] There are some difficulties, in terms of summative assessments, following the updated curriculum.

*Q8. What is the average level of your students in the three languages? Is there any preference for a particular language?*

The six participants collectively agreed that the students are more inclined to use their mother tongue (Kazakh and Russian), since they find it easier to think and communicate.

[NT1] Of course, students might have a preference for a particular language. It is usually either Kazakh or Russian. They find it easier to express their thoughts in that language.

Moreover, one NIS teacher pointed out that the preference for one language or another is substantiated by the region of Kazakhstan where students live, with the Eastern part being more Russian speaking:

[NT2] Well, it depends on the region of Kazakhstan. If we take our region, perhaps, Russian is more predominant.

*Q9. What is the attitude of parents towards the new policies?*

Data show that the three teachers from the NIS believe that there are proponents and opponents among parents at the same time. However, they think that the majority of parents recognize the need for a change, so they end up supporting these initiatives. Teachers think that their attitude is positive:

[NT2] The majority of parents' attitude is quite positive towards the trilingual policy.

[NT3] Very positive.

Teachers from the secondary school have a more neutral opinion on this question and they answer vaguely on parents' attitude towards trilingual education policies:

[SC1] I think they have only begun to deal with this policy, since it's only the initial stage.

*Q10. How do you think your colleagues at your school deal with trilingualism?*

Findings here reveal that the six teachers expressed their confidence that they are doing well with the implementation of trilingual policies:

[SC2] Everyone has a good command of Russian and Kazakh and many teachers are learning English by themselves.

Even more, those who lack proficient language skills declare that they are putting all their effort into learning the languages:

[NT2] Those who don't know Kazakh – learn Kazakh, pass the IELTS tests, APTIS and they understand that the knowledge of the languages is the necessity [sic], knowing English, Russian and Kazakh.

*Q11. Do you think the NIS model will eventually work in a regular school? Do you know any example?*

The most polarized opinions were provided for the question about the possibility of implementing the NIS model in regular secondary schools. The answers to this question show two main tendencies: most teachers (two from the NIS and the three from the secondary school) express some doubts about successful implementation of the model, mainly due to: (i) scarce funding, and (ii) the new assessment system in place and its effect on homework.

[SC2] I find it difficult to answer that question. There are some SOR, SOCH (Note: SUA, STA – Summative Unit Assessment, Summative Term Assessment – new elements of criterial assessment according to the updated education model), but I think it will not be exactly like NIS because funding plays a major role.

Only one NIS teacher believes that the transmission of this experience to general secondary schools is going well, as implementation mostly depends on teachers:

[NT1] I believe that this model can be implemented and work at an ordinary school. I will reiterate that everything depends on the teacher.

*Q12. As a teacher, what is your five-year prediction regarding trilingualism?*

Data show that the six teachers believe that Kazakh educational system will be refined and improved over the years:

[SC1] I think it will develop further, and it will no longer be the initial stage; it will be a proper implementation of the policies.

Table 1 presents a summary of teachers’ opinions towards the implementation of the trilingual policy in Kazakhstan, divided into the four main areas of our analysis and arranged according to frequency.

Table 1. *Teachers’ opinions on the implementation of the Kazakh trilingual educational model. Data arranged based on frequency (own elaboration).*

| Implementation (general)  | Language  |
|---|---|
| 1. The trilingual reform is necessary (NT / SC)   | 1. Reforms have made teachers update / improve their language level (NT)                        |
| 2. Reforms are positive (NT / SC)   | 2. Language update is needed (NT)   |
| 3. The system needs an update (NT / SC)   | 3. Teachers’ language level is a difficulty for successful implementation (SC)                  |
| 4. The implementation of the trilingual policy is at a middle stage of progress (NT / SC)   | 4. Students’ experience problems due to lack of proficiency in the 3 languages (NT / SC)        |
| 5. Doubts about the success on the implementation of this new system in regular secondary schools due to:<br>(i) scarce funding<br>(ii) the new assessment system (NT / SC) | 5. Students mostly use their mother tongue to communicate (Kazakh and/or Russian) (NT / SC)     |
| 6. The system will be improved along the years (NT / SC)  | 6. Teachers are putting all their efforts to improve / update their 3 language levels (NT / SC) |
| Stakeholders (teachers, students, parents)  | Methodology and classroom materials   |
| 1. Shortage of teaching staff (NT / SC)   | 1. Scarcity of materials, mostly workbooks and specific materials for some subjects (SC)        |
| 2. Teachers receive training courses (NT)   | 2. All necessary materials are available (NT)   |
| 3. Parents are proponents and opponents of this new system (NT)   | 3. Learning new things is a difficulty that teachers must face (SC)                             |
| 4. Neutral opinions toward parents’ attitudes (SC)  |   |

NT: NIS teachers

SC: Secondary school teachers

## 6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

According to Salhberg (2008), in the last two decades a global movement of educational reforms has transformed education worldwide. Verger and Altinyelken (2013) affirm that “Managerial reforms also challenge the professional status of teachers and reshape teaching as a profession” (p. 2), a thought which underlies the basis of this study. The analysis of how teachers from two different types of schools (i.e., NIS and secondary schools) perceive educational reforms is relevant, therefore, because it gives a hint on how such changes have an impact on stakeholders. The findings of this study show that, in terms of the overall tone of the interviews, the 3 NIS teachers seem to hold positive views about the implementation of trilingual

policies in their school, whereas the teachers from the secondary school seem to be more critical. There are several factors that might explain these NIS teachers' more favourable opinions. Firstly, in order to be admitted into NIS, students undergo a rigorous selection process because seats at these schools come with a full scholarship. Thus, the school pays for students' materials, food, school uniform and, in some cases, they even provide dormitories for students. Research shows that there is a relationship between the quality of education and the status of getting a scholarship (Akareem & Hossain, 2016). Secondly, NIS teachers receive substantial training and training courses along with educational trips abroad. This reveals a clear institutional interest in investing in teachers' updating, which is one of the keys to educational success (Bonal, 2013, p. iv). Thirdly, teachers have to go through a hard selection process to work at NIS to prove that they have the necessary skills, teaching experience and, most importantly, a sufficient command of the three languages (Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools, 2019).

The teachers from the secondary school were more critical with the trilingual policy and pointed out that there is a noticeable shortage of teachers who are able to conduct lessons in three languages. Students' level of English is also a main issue as it normally fails to be homogeneous (Al-Subaiei, 2017), in contrast to the situation described at NIS, where students seem to have a better (and more uniform) language level. The three secondary school teachers also pointed out that there are training courses for them, but they mostly take place in Kazakhstan. At least, none of the teachers mentioned that they had been given the opportunity to take courses abroad—a measure that tends to boost motivation to learn and, therefore, induce learning (Pérez Cañado, 2014).

The major problems reiterated by both groups of teachers were: (i) lack of funding, (ii) different language levels among teachers, (iii) difficulties to adapt to the new assessment system, and (iv) lack of teaching materials. Regarding funding, the six teachers noted a difference between the provision made for NIS and for general secondary schools. According to them, general secondary schools receive less financial support. This is a clear hindrance regarding the success in the implementation of new educational approaches and research (Burkhardt and Schoenfel, 2003). To bridge the difference of language levels among teachers, more money should be invested in preparatory courses and enhanced exposure to real-life English should be facilitated for general secondary school teachers (OECD, 2017). Furthermore, introducing CLIL to improve the quality of English at schools by integrating content and language following western system, and implementing 12-year secondary education could all be aligned with the transition towards global education principles while preserving positive aspects from the Soviet system, such as the strong tradition of teaching Natural Sciences and Maths in particular, along with dissemination of interest towards the 'world culture and Russian culture' (Mynbayeva & Pogolian, 2014, p. 155). The importance of using quality educational materials is profusely found in the literature. Mehisto (2012, p. 16) states:

Quality learning materials foster the creation of relational links between intended learning, students' lives, the community, and various school subjects. They help students understand how learning is and can be applied in and outside of school. They seek to build intrinsic motivation to problem-solve and learn. Quality learning materials guide students in seeking out and using other resources (sources) for learning.

NIS schools are positioned as a test platform in the nation from which the model should be extrapolated to the rest of the schools in the country. Flick (2007) states: "Evaluation has to produce judgments through research - does a specific programme work or not - which means that researchers have to give up their neutrality at a specific point" (p. 6).

Given the previously mentioned arguments, the authors of the present study can conclude that implementing the NIS model in Kazakh general secondary schools would be nearly impossible because these start from a disadvantaged position due to: (i) less funding, (ii) less teacher training, (iii) no selection process for students or teachers, and (iv) fewer quality materials. Furthermore, secondary schools are expected to keep up with NIS standards, which also puts a lot of pressure for school board teams and the main stakeholders in education processes, whether teachers, students or parents. Specially revealing is the shortage of qualified teaching staff, which is considered a key factor for the success of, among others, CLIL programmes (Papaja, 2013; Hillyard, 2011).

Therefore, from the results of this study we can state that the Kazakh trilingual educational reform has had a different impact on general secondary schools from that on NIS due to key differences between these types of school: organization of teacher training, provision of scholarships for students, funding policy that affects the resources teachers have and, finally the varying level of English among teachers and students. Despite the shortcomings and difficulties found, teachers seem to be enthusiastic about the implementation of the trilingual policy, and they trust that the process will be improved in a few years' time, as they support the language policy reform proposed by the Kazakhstan government. This research article has explored the meaning attached to the implementation of the educational reform in Kazakhstan comparing two different perspectives, that of NIS teachers and that of regular secondary education teachers. Our findings reveal that the same educational measures are seen differently when other educational aspects are considered (e.g., scholarships to students or level of second languages), which are not the same for both types of schools. Bantwini (2010) states: "In the case of curriculum reform, the newly formulated meaning(s) may nor may not support the new curriculum, and this will have consequences when it is implemented in the classroom." (p. 83).

The findings presented in this paper should be interpreted in the light of two limitations. First, due to the nature of an exploratory study, as a starting point, only teachers located in one context, Kazakh teachers, were considered as target population. Consequently, the findings may not be applicable to other participants

located in different contexts or with different backgrounds. Future research should consider recruiting more participants from different schools (both, secondary schools and NIS) so comparisons with the current research could be performed. Second, the qualitative findings were based on self-reported data, so they may be affected by respondents' subjective opinions about the topic. For this reason, future studies should also consider obtaining data through additional sources (e.g., questionnaires, focus groups, observations) in order to obtain more reliable data.

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## APPENDIX

Online questionnaire on the implementation of the trilingual educational model in Kazakhstan for NIS and non-NIS teachers

1. What subject/s do you teach and in what language/s?
2. What can you say about the current trends in education in Kazakhstan in general and the policy of trilingualism in particular?
3. In your opinion, at what stage of implementation of the trilingual language policy in Kazakhstan are we now?
4. What benefits and/or difficulties have you personally experienced in implementing this policy in your school?
5. What do you think about the materials you use for teaching?
6. Have you received any training or preparatory course on the implementation of trilingual policy?
7. Do you think students are ready for this policy at school? How are they coping with the new program?
8. What is the average level of your students in the three languages? Is there any preference for a particular language?
9. What is the attitude of parents towards the new policies?
10. How do you think your colleagues at your school deal with trilingualism?
11. Do you think the NIS model will work in a regular school? Do you know any example?
12. As a teacher, what is your five-year prediction regarding trilingualism?