



TEACHER AND TEACHING CHALLENGES IN EFL HIGHER EDUCATION IN KAZAKHSTAN

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Abstract

In recent years the foreign language education in Kazakhstan has been undergoing drastic changes connected with the state policy on the tri-unity of the Kazakh, Russian and English languages, on the one hand, and the internationalization of the national educational system as a whole, on the other. The process of changes in the higher education of the country is linked with serious challenges. This paper is aimed at identifying the most common of these challenges and offering the possible ways to tackle them. The detailed analysis of the state regulatory documents on education, as well as personal teaching experience and class observations, have made it possible to reduce the major problems to the three areas. The first is the underestimation of the importance of an EFL program in university curricula and teaching, limited resources for efficient teaching and learning, and insufficient university administration support. The second area has to do with the quality of the EFL teacher training and the professionalism of the EFL teachers. The third domain deals with a lack of interaction and cooperation among the EFL faculty involved in the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of EFL education in the country. The paper presents the results of the research conducted in a number of technical universities of Kazakhstan, which help to define the strengths and weaknesses of the EFL faculty and to find the ways to enhance the former and minimize the latter. All that will contribute to achieve a higher level of EFL proficiency nationwide.

Keywords: Language Education Reforms, EFL Teaching, Kazakhstan.

1. Introduction

The Republic of Kazakhstan is one of a very few countries where the necessity to speak the English language is considered to be an important strategic goal of the language policy. In Kazakhstan, trilingualism is being developed at the national level in accordance with the tasks that have been established by the President of RK, N. A. Nazarbayev, who initiated “The Trinity of Languages” project. This project is aimed at preparing competitive professionals fluent in three languages: Kazakh as the state language, Russian as the language of interethnic communication and English as the language of successful integration in the global economy. Being a strategically important task, it is supported and developed in a number of republican regulatory documents, the most recent and important being: The State Program for the Development and Language Functioning in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2011- 2020 (Strategy 2050, 2011; Strategy 2050, 2014; Kafu, 2015) in Part III (Article 79) of which a stage-to-stage transition to the use of the English language in the education system is stated.

The development of foreign language education in Kazakhstan is closely connected with promoting trilingual education. During recent years, much has been done in this direction. The educational standards have been renewed; Centers of Excellence to train teachers have been established; 117 schools are piloting trilingual education, which makes up 2.3% of the total; in 42 higher educational institutions there are departments where English is a language of instruction, while 34 higher educational institutions prepared pedagogical cadres to teach in English in 2015; in 2016-2017 there was a one-hour increase in the number of English language classes in the first grade (Готовность, 2016).

The plans for the future are even more ambitious than what has already been accomplished. By 2019, the period of schooling is expected to be extended to 12 years. From 2019-2020, in high schools, chemistry, biology, physics and information technologies will be taught in English. By 2021, Bachelor students are expected to reach C2 level (Поэтапный переход, 2016). From 2016 to 2020 2,400 school and university teachers will annually upgrade their qualification through language courses (Kafu, 2015). According to the state program, by 2020, 95% of the population of the Republic of Kazakhstan will speak Kazakh, 90% - Russian and 20% - English [State Program, 2011].

Though certain accomplishments in the area of the foreign language education in the RK are obvious, the current situation causes some concern. First of all, there are radically different attitudes to trilingual education in the country ranging from enthusiastic support on the part of those who realize the crucial role of the English language in the process of integration into the world community and further career development to severe criticism on the part of those who strongly believe that the spread of English in Kazakhstan could negatively affect the development of other operating languages, primarily the state (Kazakh) language.

Another essential problem reflected in all the major documents and publications is a lack of highly-qualified English language teachers and the insufficient number of those who can teach through English. It is common knowledge that many school-leavers, as well as their parents, are not satisfied with the quality of foreign language education at school. According to the English First international rating, in the list of 80 countries Kazakhstan ranks 67 by the English Proficiency Index (EF EPI, 2017).

Textbooks are another big challenge. Teachers and educators point out that new language textbooks copy the structure and the content of some best-selling course books without taking into consideration cultural peculiarities (Gersonskaya, 2017). In addition, they are not always designed in compliance with the basic didactic and methodological principles indispensable of any high-quality textbook.

Since Kazakhstan became an independent country, the system of education has been undergoing constant reforming, which, unfortunately, does not always bring positive results. Higher education institutions, for example, have shown significant decrease in the first-year students' language proficiency in both their native and English languages (Gersonskaya, 2017). This raises the problem of the quality of the English language education in schools, the professional level of school English language teachers, and the compliance of the school learning outcomes with the requirements outlined in the Ministry of Education and Science documents.

2. Methodology

To research the strengths and weaknesses of the English as a foreign language (EFL) faculty and to find the ways to enhance the former and minimize the latter a survey was conducted in three major technical universities of Kazakhstan: K. Satbayev Kazakh National Research Technical University (KazNRTU), Kazakh-British Technical University (KBTU) and International Information Technology University (IITU). Because the purpose of the study was to examine diverse issues, two survey questionnaires and a class observation template were composed. They covered three areas of interest: (1) the level of student study satisfaction, (2) the level of teacher job satisfaction and (3) the main areas of difficulty for teachers.

300 out of 1811 KazNRTU first-year students who enrolled in 2016 participated in the survey. The Student Questionnaire aimed at defining the level of their study satisfaction was distributed among English language students doing the Elementary, General, Academic and Business English courses. A survey questionnaire required providing basic information on student age, city of residence, school attended and the English language course of studies in the university. The questionnaire consisted of 18 questions dealing with the English language teaching at schools and in the university.

50 KazNRTU, 5 KBTU and 7 IITU local English language teachers, the numbers differing due to the size of these universities, filled in the Teacher Questionnaire. The questionnaire suggested six open-ended questions dealing with the student study skills and program administration issues.

All student and teacher respondents were informed that their answers would remain anonymous. The responses were reviewed and grouped for further analysis. The analysis of the student responses was based on the data provided by all students who participated in the survey. The statistical results were calculated in per cent and represented the average for all student responses. The teacher open-ended responses served as a background source for identifying both the challenges experienced by the teachers and the recommendations they suggest for solving their problems.

The third part of the survey or the Class Observation analysis aimed at detecting the main areas of difficulty for teachers and focused on the following peer assessment criteria:

- Relevance of the topic to the calendar plan and syllabus;
- Achievement of the lesson aim and learning outcomes;
- Teaching methods (interactivity, use of innovative approaches, originality of a lesson structure and presentation, etc.);
- Availability of handouts and their form;
- The use of equipment and teaching aids;
- Teacher engagement with the audience;
- Speaking skills (clarity, ease of comprehension and presentation);
- Level of proficiency in the language of instruction;
- Level of student participation;
- Pedagogical culture (teacher appearance, appropriateness of speech, pacing, diction, etc.).

The authors of this paper attended classes of 35 KazNRTU teachers in Elementary, General, Academic, Business and Professional English courses. The analysis of the observations provided feedback for evaluating faculty strengths and weaknesses as well as for working out recommendations to enhance EFL teaching and learning.

3. Data Analysis and Discussion **The Student Perspective**

The KazNRTU first-year students who participated in the survey attended classes in the Elementary, General, Academic and Business English. Each discipline is designed for a particular foreign language competence and proficiency level in accordance with CEFR (Common European Framework, 2001). Thus, the Elementary English course corresponds to A1 (or Elementary/Breakthrough), the General English course to A2 (or Pre-Intermediate/Waystage user), the Academic English course to B1 (or Intermediate/Threshold user) and the Business English course to B2 (or Upper-Intermediate/Independent user) levels.

In compliance with the state requirements students who finish the secondary school are expected to have the A2 (Pre-Intermediate) level of the English language. That means that the starting level of the university students is supposed to be B1 (Intermediate). However, the research data proved that only 6.2% out of 1811 KazNRTU first-year students are B1 and 2.4% B2 students, while 34.5% are A1 and 56.9% are A2 ones.

The research data provide precious insights into student perceptions of the EFL teaching and learning. The analysis of the student responses to the survey question: “Were you satisfied with the English language course at school?” demonstrated that only 40% of the Academic and Business English students and 15% of the Elementary and General English students think that the school has prepared them for the university while almost a quarter of the former and 56.7% of the latter state that the school has not fulfilled its mission. Interestingly, 60% of respondents claim that they had a private tutor, attended language courses or educational centers. Thus, parents of the majority of the school-leavers have to pay money for the English language competence their children are expected to obtain at school.

Out of those, 40 % of Business and Academic English students who seem to be satisfied with the level of teaching English at school, 42.5% finished Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools and 17.5% the Kazakh-Turkish Lyceums, 7.5% came from the international schools and schools for talented students, 30% from lyceums and gymnasiums and only 2.5% from the mainstream schools. Actually, the mainstream schools, which constitute more than 90% of all the secondary

educational institutions in Kazakhstan, are far behind the other types of schools by many factors.

Most of the student survey participants realize that their English language competence is low and give the following reasons for that:

- The inadequate professional level of the teachers (Students' quotes: "It is necessary to change the school faculty", "It is necessary to improve the quality of teaching", "I know English better than my teacher", "The teacher could not explain grammar", "Interpress EFL Center gave me much more knowledge than school", "The language competence of my school teacher was satisfactory", "Actually I did not gain anything at school, it was only rote memorization and cheating", "In many schools the faculty today is young, as a result, they are not well-prepared to do their job", etc.).
- Inappropriate attitude of teachers to their work (Students' quotes: "School teachers are not interested in what they do", "The teachers do not pay attention to the students", "If only the lessons were conducted at least according to the timetable", etc).
- The insufficient amount of time to learn English at school.
- A high turnover of teachers.
- A lack of teaching materials.
- No creative classroom activities.

The analysis of the student survey results demonstrates that EFL school preparation is not generally sufficient. This makes university English language instruction programs difficult to implement.

3.1 The Teacher Perspective

The KazNRTU, KBTU and IITU teacher survey revealed a number of student and administration-related challenges experienced by the English language instructors. The student-related challenges have been grouped into five major categories:

- 1) **Organizational:** non-compliance of the student EFL proficiency level with the requirements of university disciplines.
- 2) **Linguistic:** insufficient vocabulary, gaps in the knowledge of grammar, weak pronunciation skills, problems with the logical construction of speech.
- 3) **Skill level** for Elementary and General English: students cannot (and do not want to) read and face difficulties in understanding oral speech.
- 4) **Psychological:** uncertainty, fear of making a mistake, language barrier, low self-esteem.
- 5) **Personal:** inability to manage time, limited general knowledge base, low motivation for learning a foreign language (do it for the sake of points), lack of self-discipline (absenteeism), difficulties in social adaptation to a new way of life (to the conditions of a university).

The practical solutions that the respondents recommend in order to tackle these challenges are:

- To add to the university curricula an introductory course for beginners;
- To increase the number of credit-hours for Elementary and General English courses (up to 6 hours a week instead of 3);
- To encourage student self-education through specialized multimedia training programs, including the on-line mode;
- To advise students to attend additional classes at external language training centers or private tutoring;
- To involve students in out-of-class activities in the English language such as clubs, competitions, Olympiads, debates, etc.

The administration-related challenges that teachers most usually face refer to:

- 1) the discrepancy between the level of some students and the level of the course taught which is mainly due to the frequently inadequate results of the placement/diagnostic test;
- 2) the difficulties in transferring weak students to a lower level;

- 3) the insufficient amount and/or lack of resources (textbooks, multimedia programs, equipment and facilities);
- 4) the high number of students in a group;
- 5) the difficulties in working with foreign students.

To tackle these challenges the respondents suggest the following steps to be undertaken:

- Improving the quality of the placement/diagnostic test;
- Teaching not more than two aspects of English during a semester;
- Making a better work/teaching and office-hour schedule;
- Attending classes of more experienced colleagues;
- Teacher training and retraining: good if done by foreign specialists, even better if sent abroad.

Moreover, teachers do not feel enough support on behalf of the university administration. Their most common complaints are associated with the limited resources for efficient teaching and learning, high workload and lack of sabbaticals, inconvenient schedule, poor facilities, insufficient office space and low pay. All these factors together can de-motivate teachers and lead to job dissatisfaction.

3.2 Peer Attendance

Class observations of 35 KazNRTU faculty members focused on identifying the main areas of difficulty for teachers who differ in age, character, work experience, teaching methodology and EFL proficiency. Thereby, the professional level of teachers varied in terms of their strengths and weaknesses. The most common drawbacks revealed in the class observation process are:

- Textbook domination;
- Difficulties in identifying teaching objectives and learning outcomes;
- Difficulties in choosing activities to match the objectives;
- Difficulties in identifying the aims of activities;
- Difficulties in correcting mistakes;
- Not using student knowledge to the maximum;
- Not drawing upon a complex of student visual/spatial, musical/rhythmic, bodily kinesthetic, verbal/linguistic, logical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic intelligences
- Problems with logical order, coherence and cohesion;
- Difficulties in writing a lesson plan per se;
- Vague understanding of the major didactic principles of validity, consistency and systemic learning;
- English language inaccuracies.

Some talented and/or experienced teachers (20%) have demonstrated high quality lessons, though very few of them (less than 3%) fully possess the so-called five knowledge domains for teaching, which include personal, contextual, pedagogical, sociological and social knowledge (Goodwin, 2010).

Young teachers conducted 60% of peer observed classes. Generally, they are open, motivated and eager to learn. Moreover, they can easily use Information technology and modern devices for teaching purposes (e.g. Internet, Wi-Fi). However, young teachers seem to have no constant self-development focus and very often behave as consumers: they prefer to receive all materials ready-made rather than think and create something by themselves. They do not critically analyze their weaknesses/problems and do not try to figure out potential solutions.

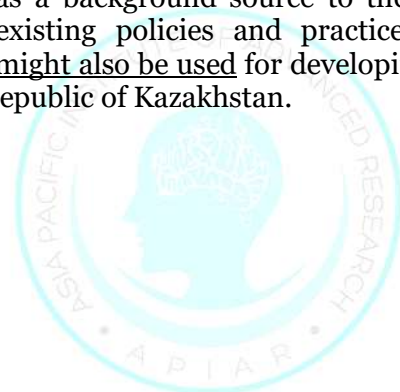
It is obvious that the overall EFL teacher training is inadequate to modern higher education requirements: many EFL graduates are not familiar with the basic methodological principles, methods of teaching and their foreign language proficiency very often leaves much to be desired.

Conclusion

The results of the research undertaken in three major technical universities of the Republic of Kazakhstan give ground to state that secondary mainstream school does not prepare students for academic life. The level of responsibility for the English language teaching at school is fairly low. As a result, university teachers have to fill in the gap instead of covering the university program, which makes the latter difficult to implement. It is obvious that there is an urgent need to increase the responsibility of schools for the results their graduates achieve in EFL. To do that, it is expedient to enhance English language teaching professional development by adequate teacher training and retraining, to provide incentives for changing teachers' attitudes and motivation, and for the RK Ministry of Education and Science to monitor the quality of teaching at schools and universities nationwide.

Moreover, EFL teachers have to learn and be aware of what their students are, to base their teaching on this knowledge and to help students acquire competences that will provide them a competitive advantage in the modern labor market upon graduation. To do that, EFL teacher community needs to combine its efforts through sharing and dissemination of the best experiences, establishing and/or strengthening EFL teacher network, interaction and cooperation of teachers from all three levels of EFL education (primary, secondary and tertiary) to produce joint result.

The survey results can serve as a background source to the interested institutions and EFL professionals for improving existing policies and practices to satisfy societal needs and expectations. The information might also be used for developing prospects and planning further steps in EFL education of the Republic of Kazakhstan.



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