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Art. culture. *language.*

(On some aspects of teaching english abroad)

Abstract

The education system in Kazakhstan has been undergoing significant changes since the past years, driven by historical events and associated with political, economic and social changes in the world society. Kazakh universities and higher institutions keep in line with the Bologna Process to provide comparability in the standards and quality of higher-education qualifications. The current national educational programmes and legislation aim to ensure modern education of high quality. Foreign language education is considered a priority by different stakeholders: economists, politicians, teachers, students, parents, school administrators, therefore much attention is paid to the issue of modernization of foreign language education environment by designing innovative teaching materials or introducing new techniques and technologies in the study programmes offering teacher training courses. Together with Kazakh and Russian, English has now become a key subject at all levels of education. The author of the article is currently living and working in Kazakhstan and brings some aspects related to teaching foreign languages, specifically English, in one of the higher-education institutions.

Key words

Art. Culture. Kazakhstan. Kazakhstanis. Language. Teaching.

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Art. Culture. Language. At first glance, these three terms may seem incompatible, impossible to co-exist. Art is generally believed to bring and express something beautiful, appealing, extraordinary, something related to certain aesthetic principles. Culture, on the other hand, may be regarded as a form of human behaviour depending on social norms, customary beliefs, values and attitudes shared by people. Last but not least, language could simply be considered as a means of communication, expressing someone's thoughts and ideas, either verbally or non-verbally. My intention is to join the terms together and to show how closely they may be linked, especially within the context of education.

The inspiration for writing the article is my current academic stay in Kazakhstan, the ninth largest country in the world. It is a multilingual and multinational place where "everything" and "everyone" exist

together in harmony. Although the official languages are Kazakh and Russian, Kazakhstan is well-known for its traditional respect for the other languages spoken by different ethnic groups and nationalities living in the country. Some sources state over a hundred and thirty nationalities living and over a hundred languages spoken in Kazakhstan. That is one of the reasons why the citizens of Kazakhstan are often referred to as Kazakhstanis rather than Kazakhs.

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and 'World History' will be taught in Russian at all schools of the country, regardless of the language of instruction. Beginning from 2019-2020 academic year, 'Computer Science', 'Chemistry', 'Biology' and 'Physics' will be taught in English. Transition to teaching disciplines in English will be implemented gradually from 2017 to 2023¹. English thus has become a leading discipline today and teaching English is an integral part of every stage of education. That clarifies the necessity to have well-trained and qualified English teachers at all levels of education.

The Institute where I am accomplishing my duty is located in a small town in the central part of Kazakhstan. The institution was founded in 1972 and now consists of four faculties. It is a dynamic and prospective public higher education institution with the aim to become a leading educational, scientific and pedagogical centre offering teacher-training

¹ Trilingual education implemented in 117 schools in Kazakhstan - Education Ministry. [online]. [2017-09-26]. Available at: <http://www.inform.kz/ru/trilingual-education-implemented-in-117-schools-in-kazakhstan-education-ministry_a2877173>.

programmes with various teaching combinations of requisite subjects. As a foreign language teacher, I am not only observing the way a foreign language is taught but also the way it is acquired. One of my tasks is to teach several groups of students and academic staff English – some groups are complete beginners, some are of an elementary level. The students are future English teachers in their fourth – and at the same time final year. After completing their studies, they will obtain a bachelor's degree. These are the students with a satisfactory level of English and can be involved in practical lessons, such as how to teach English.

To me – as a foreigner coming from a culturally different environment, every action in the classroom is interesting. The innate respect for authority in Kazakhstan (either parental authority or authority for principals or the elders in general) is shown when the teacher or a guest enters the classroom: the students stand up in order to greet them. The same is repeated when the teacher or guest leaves the classroom. I did not know what to expect on the first lesson: a foreigner coming to teach English, with Russian good enough to communicate and not knowing a word in Kazakh. However, one of the typical features of the people living in Kazakhstan is tolerance and thanks to that, they soon made me feel comfortable. Gradually, I have been learning a lot about culture, customs and traditions in Kazakhstan. Peace and co-existence, respect and hospitality, a strong sense of family values, high appreciation of quality education, extremely firm commitment and determination to achieve the goals set, these are only some of the characteristics common and natural for Kazakhstanis. When planning my lessons, these features are taken into consideration and I always try to employ them in the

classroom. Kazakhstanis, for example, love speaking. They are masters of creating, improvising, designing. The attribute probably comes from their nomadic way of life in the past and is still preserved as an essential part of their national identity and culture. They have developed their rhetorical skills and expanded them into an elegant form of verbal art; public competitions of improvised poetry or singing are very popular even these days. Therefore, the students do not hesitate when asked to comment on something. They are able to brainstorm and come up with such amazing and most unusual ideas that even teachers sometimes would not think about. They could perform or create wonderful pieces of poems or compositions, or design posters or projects. The so called task-based learning, in other words learning through doing, is very appropriate for Kazakhstani students. When asked to complete meaningful tasks, they get the chance to use authentic language. It is a challenge for them to find out information on their own, for example to go and interview someone, to observe a situation, to detect a solution.

Another positive aspect when teaching a foreign language in Kazakhstan is that the students are naturally bilingual/multilingual. Their verbal-linguistic competence (or intelligence, as Howard Gardner² would call it), ability to handle and play with words, to understand the so called word puns designate these people to acquire foreign languages relatively fast. Not everyone, certainly, is a quick language learner, however, the knowledge of the systems of the two languages (Kazakh and Russian) and ability to use them appropriately (the so

² GARDNER, H.: *Frames of Mind. The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. New York : Basic Books, 1983.

called code-switching, even though code-mixing is also often present) is simply incredible. Kazakhstanis' natural interest in singing is reflected also in language education: using songs in the classrooms or given them to “prepare” them as “homework” may be very useful and practical. Kazakhstanis may have some difficulties to pronounce certain syllables or produce some sounds, especially older learners whose oral apparatus is not used to producing some sounds and not motile enough to generate them, nevertheless, through singing they may imitate intonation and melody of the target language rather well.

A common feature of Kazakhstanis is their natural competitiveness. The desire to compete and will to win pushes them forward; a good teacher can employ this element when planning tasks and activities. The lesson will definitely be very engaging, full of emotions and thrill and the final evaluation of the lesson will be more than interesting. On the other hand, the students can also extremely well cooperate. Being set a work-group

task, they rapidly organize the whole work, delegate duties and reach a consensus. It is not hard for them to appoint a team leader and to accept his or her decisions. This may reflect a family situation in Kazakhstan where a family of five children is of a common convention. The family hierarchy is kept and strongly followed: the eldest are the ones to take care of their younger siblings and the decisions of the eldest are seldom questioned by the younger ones.

The teacher-centred approach in its most rigorous form may not be the best solution for Kazakhstani students. The origin of the word “Kazakh” means “a free, independent person, nomad” and that is what the students are exactly like. Free, independent young people with their own opinions and ideas, who are not afraid of presenting them openly. Teachers should be aware of their individual personalities and uniqueness. They are used to thinking critically, and when asked, they honestly express their point of view. Hence, the student-centred approach chosen by the teacher

would surely be more suitable for them. Already in their university studies, most of the students have developed themselves into autonomous learners: responsible for their actions, for their studies, education, and results. Homework, the activity often considered unpopular among students, is in Kazakhstan taken as natural part of their studies, either more pleasant or less, however, they do not complain or beg for less. A similar attitude may be discovered in connection with extra work; many students attend various courses in their free time. I have also witnessed different social events (Teacher's Day, Day of Languages, etc.) where the students prepared a special programme for the teachers to celebrate with them, or to commemorate. I had seen them gathering after the class, training and practising the programmes, singing and dancing, discussing, drawing, decorating and preparing – there was no need for teachers to force them. Interestingly, the students also watch for all the instruments and tools the teacher needs. They “take care” of laptops, projectors, books, dictionaries; they prepare everything in advance once they have observed what and how the teacher uses and if something does not work, they arrange someone to come and fix it if they

cannot do it themselves.

To be in good terms with the students means to address them appropriately. However, this may be slightly problematic for some of the names could be very difficult to pronounce and remember for someone who does not speak Kazakh. What may help is the translation of the names – Kazakh names are very poetic or romantic, often related to nature, especially flowers, (girl names) or they refer to bravery and freedom, such as some names of boys.

As stated in the beginning, trilingual education in Kazakhstan is very topical today. Thus, widely discussed is also another point in the education system in Kazakhstan – the adoption of a single standard of the Kazakh alphabet in the Latin script by the end of 2017. That means the transition of Cyrillic script into Latin alphabet, development of a new alphabet, training specialists and creating new textbooks and material. Kazakhstanis have a long journey ahead but I am sure that thanks to their strong will and attentiveness they will succeed.

The short article is a simple attempt to depict or demonstrate the situation in a small Institute located

in a small city in Kazakhstan. It is far from being a strict academic paper supported by many external sources; nor a serious research with a proper case study has been presented. However, it has not been the aim of it. I would merely like to share my experience as a teacher and observer as well as to point out how cultural aspects and students' identity may be linked with the art of teaching a foreign language. Even though the Institute is rather well equipped with modern technologies, the mastery does not lie in the frequency of their usage. Sometimes a single “feeling” or the teacher's intuition would do a better job. Knowing students and their background is a great help to the teacher. Understanding and empathy, patience, respect for individuality, abandoning prejudice – these may be little keys to the teacher's (and students') success.

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Eva Smetanová is a Head of Department of British and American Studies. Her professional interests are related to methodology of English, psycholinguistics, cognitive linguistics and teaching English for Specific Purposes. She has written a number of articles discussing various ways of foreign language acquisition and a foreign language teaching. At the moment she is conducting her research study in the Republic of Kazakhstan.