

TRILINGUAL EDUCATION IN KAZAKHSTAN AND GRADUATES EMPLOYABILITY PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract. *Development of trilingual education in Kazakhstan and use English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) is a complicated process with both positive and negative sides; so it is necessary to explore EMI policy in Kazakhstani Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and its role for graduates' employability and career prospects and opportunities through qualitative and quantitative research in order to define holistic approach to higher education in the frame of trilingual education policy and the aspects of EMI that need improvement.*

The following subtopics will be explored during the research:

- additional competences suggested by both regulating documents on implementation of multilingual education in HEIs in Kazakhstan and educational programs (EP) using EMI;*
- opinions of students enrolled into EP with EMI about opportunities and challenges of the programs / EMI education;*
- opinions of HEIs graduates who studied in English about opportunities and challenges of EMI education;*
- opinions of the employers of multilingual graduates about their professional skills, competences, and soft skills.*

The main research question that our study aims to answer is: What are the implications and challenges of EMI in HEIs in Kazakhstan for the employability and career opportunities of graduates? To answer the research question, a range of methods will be used for collecting data (surveys and interviews with students, graduates and employers).

Keywords: *EMI, HEI, employability, trilingual education policy.*

Introduction

Implementation of trilingual approach into Kazakhstani education system and use English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) is a complicated process with a variety of advantages and disadvantages; so, it is necessary to conduct the analysis of EMI policy in Kazakhstan Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (British Council, 2024); to study its' role for graduates' future employability and career prospects in order to define holistic approach to higher education.

Trilingual education policy serves as a platform for further development of EMI in Kazakhstan system of higher education; however, there are some aspects of EMI that should be studied thoroughly, e.g. additional competences provided by educational programs (EP) using EMI; opportunities and challenges of the programs / EMI education; opinions of HEIs graduates who studied in English about opportunities and challenges of EMI education; opinions of the employers of multilingual graduates about their professional skills, competences, and soft skills.

Currently, there are four large universities in Kazakhstan with academic programs in English, according to Tajik, Akhmetova, Fillipova, Shamatov, Zhunussova (2022) and the number of universities suggesting EMI programs is growing. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on the drawbacks and advantages of such programs as well as on stakeholders' expectations and challenges faced by students, as there is a lack of empirical studies related to the above-mentioned issues.

The aim of the project is to explore English Medium Instruction (EMI) policy in Kazakhstani Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and its role for graduates' employability and career prospects and opportunities through qualitative and quantitative research in order to define holistic approach to higher education in the frame of trilingual education policy and the aspects of EMI that need improvement.

Thus, the novelty of this research work is associated with insufficient investigation of the influence of education in English both on the educational process itself (from the position of students, their point of view on the difficulties and advantages of such learning), and on its result, i.e. on the employment opportunities of a specialist who received education in English, and on the opportunities for further career growth determined by this factor. The main approaches the researchers will use for the project are systematic and conceptual as it is planned to develop the conception of language teaching and learning influence on employability of Kazakhstan HEIs graduates, as few researchers have addressed the issue (although there is some research on the topic in foreign sources, e.g. European employment services (2021), Study on Foreign Language Proficiency and Employability Final Report (Beadle et al., 2015).

As it is a research project, we do not have the extended results at this stage of its' implementation; so, in this research paper we focused on the perspectives of our study.

Research Questions

Taking into account such factors as (1) influence of foreign language skills on educational process, (2) stakeholders' expectations, the main research question that the given study aims to answer is: What are the implications and challenges

of EMI in HEIs in Kazakhstan for the employability and career opportunities of graduates?

To answer the research question, both qualitative and quantitative methods will be used for collecting data.

Thus, it is planned to use the data from interviews with employers and employer organizations, data collected by reviewing online vacancy databases in Kazakhstan; and data from a survey of employers in the process of our research project implementation.

Empirical approach will also be used as the researchers will collect empirical data and perform their statistical analysis, as well as activity approach for studying professional activity of EMI EP graduates.

Literature Review

EMI is defined as “the use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions in which the majority of the population’s first language is not English” (Macaro and Aizawa, 2022). The definition is widely used in literature although it received some criticism for separating English speaking and non-English speaking contexts. Otherwise, Han (2023) stated that “EMI typically happens in an English as a foreign language setting, but the object of instruction is not English per se but an academic subject such as Engineering, Biology, Medicine, Physics, and Applied Linguistics”.

Internationalization of education and the need to be competitive in a global market have led to the growing popularity of EMI in different countries. However, use of EMI may have various effects, cultural, educational, and others, in the countries where English is not the state, official or native language of the majority of the population (Dearden, 2016). One of the effects and issues at the same time might be the transformation of the personality of Kazakhstani students who study in English, but need to apply the acquired knowledge in Russian or Kazakh. There are only few studies addressing this issue, for instance the research paper by Zhunussova, Tajik, Fillipova, Antwi (2023), discusses the issue from the perspective of EMI’s impact on national and linguistic identity of students. Also, there are some studies showing the rate of students who dropped out from EMI education programs comparing to those who chose national language as a medium of instruction: “students subjected to English-medium instruction answer significantly fewer test questions correctly and drop out from the education to a much higher degree compared to the students accessing the education in the national language should give stakeholders pause and inform the continued discussion concerning the (i) advantages and disadvantages of adopting EMI, and (ii) what (pedagogical or linguistic) support might be needed to scaffold students’ learning experience in EMI” (Bälter, Kann, Mutimukwe, Malmström, 2023).

However, no research to the best of our knowledge has studied the influence of EMI on personal and professional qualities of students and graduates, and employability as well as career opportunities resulted from studying in English in Kazakhstani context.

Ability to communicate and use information in different languages is another challenge that globalization poses to university graduates. EMI programs at universities in Kazakhstan help students respond to the challenge by giving the opportunity to study profession-related content in English, at the same time improving their English. However, in this case, English is considered rather as a tool than as a subject. In other words, mastery of the English language is regarded as a by-product of attaining academic knowledge in content courses (Alfehaid, 2018).

The novelty of our study lies in the fact that this is the first attempt at an integrated study that will take into account both the interests of stakeholders and the advantages that university graduates who use English as a language of instruction have, as well as the problems they face in their professional activities. The given research will identify following things:

- To what extent can EMI develop students' competences in their field?
- How students and graduates assess the role of EMI in their professional training?
- What languages do EMI program graduates use in their work? To what extent does education received in English expand their professional competencies??
- To what extent does education received in English enhance their employment opportunities?
- What strengths and weaknesses do employers note in preparing potential employees using EMI?

So, study of various aspects of EMI is one of the challenges in the field of ELT as it is “increasingly being used in universities, secondary schools and even primary schools. This phenomenon has very important implications for the education of young people. Yet little empirical research has been conducted into why and when EMI is being introduced and how it is delivered. We do not know enough with regard to the consequences of using English rather than the first language (L1) on teaching, learning, assessing, and teacher professional development” (Dearden, 2016).

Why is it necessary to study EMI implementation?

The main reasons to conduct such kind of study look as follows:

- 1) To observe ELT at the universities of the Republic of Kazakhstan within the framework of the declared trilingual strategy (including the

- study of both official documents and documentation of universities in which this strategy is being implemented);
- 2) To analyze EMI programs in order to determine their advantages and development opportunities;
 - 3) To identify the opportunities that both students and graduates of these educational programs receive in employment, as well as their potential difficulties;
 - 4) To determine the impact of English on graduates and on the perception of their capabilities by potential employers.

Currently, research has been conducted in the Republic of Kazakhstan on EMI and its impact on the personal characteristics and social status of students (Zhunussova, Tajik, Fillipova, Antwi (2023); the employment opportunities and potential benefits, as well as the difficulties experienced by graduates of these programs, have been practically unexplored, which determines the significance of our study on a national scale.

The importance of the project results lies in the fact that it plans to find out the impact of EMI on the learning process, as well as on its outcome; determine to what extent training in programs using EMI is in demand, how interested industry representatives are in training using English, as well as to what extent the expectations of graduates who studied in EP using English have been met, how competitive graduates of these EPs are and how their knowledge is applied in professional activities.

Research Techniques to Study EMI

Complex research methodology will allow the research group to get more objective results through triangulation and use of statistical analysis instruments and avoid subjectivism in interpretation of research data / results. “These include the need for extensive data collection, the time-intensive nature of analyzing both text and numeric data, and the requirement for the researcher to be familiar with both quantitative and qualitative forms of research” (Creswell, 2017).

The research is interdisciplinary as it plans to

- study interrelation of content and language to understand how it affects employability and career prospects;
- study the opinions of students on EMI;
- study the opinions of employers on the advantages and disadvantages of EMI in professional / tertiary education.

The research group is also planning to perform needs analysis and analysis of the aims and means of EMI in the teaching and learning process in HEIs in Kazakhstan based on the following:

- Analysis of regulating documents on EMI for understanding how EMI is implemented in HEIs in Kazakhstan;

- Collection and analysis of data on viewpoints of the students, main stakeholders, studying in English (EMI EP students)
- Study of EMI programs' graduates' opinions about their education (opportunities, advantages, drawbacks)
- Study of employers' (important stakeholders) opinions about hiring graduates of EMI programs

The main research methods planned to be used in the project are analysis of secondary sources (regulating documents), observation, survey and interview.

Conception of Development of Higher Education and Science in Kazakhstan for 2023-2029 (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023) states that multilingual education will continue to be implemented so that HEIs' students could fully benefit from academic exchange programs, which emphasizes the importance of the research question. EMI educational programs' graduates might also be important for globalization of companies where they will use professional knowledge acquired in English.

The research question and research objectives require using a complex of research methods, including both qualitative and quantitative, for collecting and analyzing data. Quantitative research methods will be used for analyzing primary data collected from students and graduates of EP with EMI, and qualitative research methods, for instance, content-analysis, will be used to analyze data collected through interviews with employers, students and graduates.

Research Population

Five different groups of stakeholders are supposed to participate in the research. The first group of respondents includes university authorities and management like rectors, presidents, vice rectors / provosts, deans, program coordinators, and other management staff. The second group includes teaching staff (content and English), and the third group includes EMI students. Group four is EMI graduates and group five is employers.

Main Stages of EMI Implementation Analysis

The first stage of the project will include analysis of regulating documents (state standards, government decisions / decrees, Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023, etc.), and the documents of EMI EP to determine the peculiarities of language learning and teaching and what and how the content is taught in English.

The second stage of the research is surveying and interviewing students to understand their needs, which will allow to determine the advantages and drawbacks of EMI. This, in turn, will help develop recommendations for a more student-centered approach to EMI.

The third stage includes observation, survey(s) and questionnaire(s) for graduates of EMI EP. The focus in this case will be on learning and teaching means and learning outcomes. Qualitative and quantitative analysis in this case will allow to make recommendations for more practice / job-oriented learning and teaching process.

The fourth stage of the project aims at surveying EMI EP graduates.

The fifth stage will be an in-depth interview with employers to determine their viewpoint on the advantages of EMI education of their employees, and their opinions on the need of improving particular aspects of potential employees' education, which will help develop recommendations for more practice/ job-oriented learning and teaching EMI process. The project group will use content analysis of the in-depth interviews. According to A. Voiskunovskii and S. Skripkin qualitative research is mostly about subjective interpretation of the researched phenomena and subjective opinion of the respondent, interviewee or the person being observed. Lincoln (1995), Trochim (1999) claim that subjectivity of qualitative research requires a completely different approach to the objectivity of data. They suggest using 'confirmability' as one of the parameters of objectivity / reliability of data / results. As any qualitative research is unique in the way that it is based on the personal viewpoint of the researcher(s), 'confirmability' helps assess its reliability, validity and 'replicability'. At the final stage of qualitative research data audit should be done for detecting deviations and errors in the process of data collection and analysis (Voiskunovskii, Skripnik, 2001). In this regard, triangulation of data, which provides more objective results due to use of several sources of information, and theoretical triangulation, which allows the interpretation of information from different perspectives, should be done.

Use of statistical analysis methods will allow to analyze the data collected at various stages of the research project with multiple regression methods and modeling through structured equations.

Ethical Concerns

Ethical concerns will be resolved through submission of questionnaires, interview questions and participants' consents to University Ethical Committee before the data collection stage. Before the submission of the application to the Ethical Committee, project group members will have negotiations with the authorities of HEIs with EMI programs to get the consent for universities' staff and students' participation in the project. Consent letter will have the information about the aim and scope of the research, methods and procedures of data collection, risks and benefits, participants; rights and research group members' contacts. Participation in the research will be anonymous and confidential, and participants will be able to refuse to answer any questions in the process of data

collection. The participants will also have the right to require to delete any piece of information, or stop using it, or quit the project at any time.

Conclusion and expected effect of the study

The results of the project will help various groups of stakeholders, in particular, the management of universities implementing EMI-based Educational Programs, as well as potential employers who might hire the graduates of these Educational Programs. They could become knowledgeable about particular strategies for implementing tri-lingualism in the classroom and for creating Educational Programs that use English as the primary language of instruction. Throughout our research boundaries, it is intended to develop recommendations for content teachers and English language teachers on conducting classes that will help in adjusting the content of disciplines using EMI, in accordance with the expectations of graduates of these Educational Programs and their employers.

As the authors tell about the project which is planned to be implemented, here is a description of the stages, research population and research techniques of prospective study.

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