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Measuring students' abilities to study academic subjects taught in English at postgraduate level in the Republic of Kazakhstan

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Abstract

This article presents the results of research conducted among first-year students enrolled in a two-year, full-time Master's degree programmes at Pavlodar State University, Republic of Kazakhstan. The aim was to evaluate their readiness to study academic subjects taught in English. Based on the analysis of the research results, it was concluded that transition to teaching and learning in English should be carried out in a gradual manner. It is proposed to use Content and Language Integrated Learning as the most appropriate methodology for the identified level.

Key words: trilingualism; Bologna process; internationalisation; polylingual education

Introduction

The modern stage of Kazakhstan's development is characterised by intensification of international co-operation in many spheres. Therefore, the demand for specialists who fluently speak not only Kazakh (the state language) and Russian (the language of international communication in former USSR countries), but also English is increasing.

The necessity to learn foreign languages has been constantly stressed since the moment our country gained independence in 1991. "Modern Kazakhstan must be perceived in the world as a highly-educated nation using three languages, i.e. the Kazakh language as the state language, the Russian language as the language for communication among representatives of different ethnic groups, and the English language as the language required for successful integration into the global economy." (Nazarbayev, 2007).

According to the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On Education" (2007), all educational institutions, regardless of their form of ownership, must ensure mastering of Kazakh, Russian and one foreign language by all students at a level meeting the requirements of the State Compulsory Standard of Education for the respective level of education. Moreover, as of today, Kazakhstan is the only former

Soviet republic that has adopted a state program on trilingualism (the Tri-Unity of Languages project) aimed at learning and mastering three languages at equal level (Seitov, 2013).

The role of English has significantly increased after our country's accession to the Bologna process in 2010. As a result, massive reforms have been launched with the aim of bringing the national system of higher education in line with the basic parameters of the Bologna declaration. Owing to these reforms, students from Kazakhstan now have an opportunity to enter undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in the leading higher education institutions of the world. Postgraduate students and teaching staff can have internships in higher education institutions abroad. Kazakhstani researchers have become active participants of many international research projects, and they publish their research results in highly-rated research journals abroad. The percentage of academic subjects taught in English is constantly growing, and so is the number of researchers and professors from other countries invited to give lectures and teach practical classes in Kazakhstan.

As a result, the requirements for the level of English have increased significantly both for students and teaching staff. It should be noted that the government conducts an active policy in the field of polylingual education. A number of important documents have been adopted including The Concept of Foreign Language Teaching in the Republic of Kazakhstan (Kunanbayeva, 2006) which defines the aims and content of foreign language teaching in accordance with the requirements of international standards, and The Concept of Polylingual Education Development in the Republic of Kazakhstan (Kubeyev, 2008) which is a result of the research devoted to the problem of developing the theoretical and methodological foundations of polylingual education.

Ensuring high quality of foreign languages teaching has become a task of national importance after the Nation's Plan "100 Steps Towards the Implementation of 5 Institutional Reforms" (2015) was adopted. This plan, among other things, provides for a stage-by-stage transition to teaching in English in senior secondary schools and higher education institutions. In the framework of the Nation's Plan implementation, the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Kazakhstan developed The Roadmap for Development of Trilingual Education (2015). This document provides for a gradual transition to teaching certain subjects (namely, information science, physics, chemistry and biology) in senior secondary schools and at least 30 percent of basic and special disciplines in higher education institutions in English. At the same time, students will study English throughout the entire period of studies in higher education institutions.

The main problem with this language reform consists in the fact that the national system of education did not have enough time to adjust to the new requirements. Before 2008, the year when The Concept

of Polylingual Education Development in the Republic of Kazakhstan was adopted, English was not widely used as a language of instruction for teaching other subjects. Just 10 years after that, by the year 2018, we are expected to teach nearly one third of all subjects at the level of higher education in English only, according to The Road Map for Development of Trilingual Education. There are concerns that the quality of teaching is very likely to deteriorate because, as of now, the level of English is generally insufficient, both among students and teaching staff.

Although the above-mentioned reform will require changes at all levels of the system of education, the author of this article believes that special attention should be paid to the postgraduate level and 2-year Master's programmes in particular. Most of those who take 2-year Master's programmes subsequently work in the system of education (those who are interested in working in other fields take 1-year Master's programmes known as "field-specific programmes"). So, they are the people who will form the basis of teaching staff of the national system of education and, therefore, will be responsible for the development of education and science in the future. They will have to work in new conditions with significantly higher requirements for the level of English.

In order to evaluate postgraduate students' current level of English and determine if they are ready to study academic subjects in English, research was conducted among full-time Master's degree students at Pavlodar State University.

Study Participants

Thirty-two full-time Master's degree students enrolled in 2-year programmes and majoring in various areas took part in this study. Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to the start of the research.

Procedure

The participants were invited to complete a test that was in 4 sections: Listening Comprehension (number of test items: 10, time limit: 10 minutes), Lexical and Grammar Test (number of test items: 20, time limit: 15 minutes), Reading Comprehension (number of test items: 10, time limit: 15 minutes), and Writing (a short essay on a given topic, time limit: 10 minutes). Total time: 50 minutes. The test was anonymous, therefore, there was no Speaking section.

The test was designed to check Master's degree students' readiness to study the subject of Pedagogics (a compulsory subject for all Master's degree students enrolled in 2-year programmes, regardless of the field of specialisation). All texts and tasks used in the test were devoted to the topic of Higher Education.

The Lexical and Grammar Test section was aimed at checking the level of knowledge of linguistic rules (lexical and grammatical rules in particular). The test was based on the CEFR level descriptors (Verhelst et al., 2009) and included tasks of levels A1 to B2.

The Listening Comprehension section tested the ability to understand spoken English in an academic environment. The audio file was played twice with a pause of one minute. The title of the text was "Higher Education in the US for the Blind and Visually Impaired Students." The level of the text was B1-B2. The level of the tasks was A1 to B2. The length of the text was 200 words. The following listening skills were evaluated in this section: listening for gist, listening for specific information, and listening for detailed understanding.

The Reading section tested understanding of the content of an authentic text. Title of the text: "Higher Education in the UK." The length of the text: 350 words. The level of the text: B1-B2. The level of the tasks: A1 to B2. In order to complete the offered tasks successfully, the test takers were expected to demonstrate the following reading skills: scanning, skimming, and detailed reading.

In the Writing section, the participants were asked to write a short free-form essay on the topic "Higher Education in Kazakhstan." The assessment criteria for this section were as follows: task achievement, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy. IELTS Writing Task 2 band descriptors (n.d.) were used as the basis for evaluation.

Each section contained tasks of various levels of difficulty from Elementary (A1) to Upper-Intermediate (B2). This made the test comprehensible for all participants, regardless of their level of English, and also made it possible to evaluate each student's level quite precisely based on the analysis of his or her mistakes.

So, the maximum score for all 4 sections was 50 points. Master's degree students with 45-50 points (i.e. those who gave from 90 to 100 percent of correct answers) have a high level of foreign language competence. Their level of English allows them to study academic subjects in English. Result ranging from 35 to 44 points (70-89 percent of correct answers) indicate the medium level of foreign language competence. Such students are partially ready to perceive information in English, but they need to use their mother tongue as the basis in learning. Finally, test participants with results below 34 points (less than 70 percent of correct answers) have a low level of foreign language competence. They are not ready to study academic subjects in English without additional training.

Results

Four participants of the research (12.5% of the total number of participants) returned blank answer sheets. Therefore, they got a 0 for each section of the test.

The highest results were shown in the sections assessing perceptual skills, i.e. the Listening and Reading Comprehension sections. The mean scores for them were 6.5 (out of 10), and 7 (out of 10) respectively. In percentage terms, that was 65 and 70 percent of correct answers respectively. A breakdown by levels for the Listening Comprehension section was as follows: 4 people with a high level (9-10 correct answers), 14 people with a medium level (7-8 correct answers), and 14 people with a low level (6 or fewer correct answers). As for the Reading Comprehension section, the results were as follows: high level (9-10 correct answers) - 14 people, medium level (7-8 correct answers) - 10 people, and low level (6 or fewer correct answers) - 8 people.

The mean score for the Lexical and Grammar test was 8.3 (out of 20), which is 41.5 percent of correct answers. 2 Master's degree students showed results corresponding to a high level (from 17 to 20 correct answers). A medium level (13-16 correct answers) was shown by 6 participants. Finally, 24 people who took the test gave 12 or fewer correct answers.

The lowest results were shown in the Writing section with the mean score of 3 (out of 10), which is 30 percent of the maximum result. A high level of writing (9-10 points) was demonstrated by 2 participants. 2 Master's degree students scored 7 or 8 points, which corresponds to a medium level. 28 people got 6 points or fewer which indicates a low level. 9 people got 0 points: besides those who returned blank answer sheets (4 people), 3 more students did not attempt the Writing section despite having completed the previous sections of the test; finally, 2 participants copied their essays from the Internet. Only the essays written independently were assessed.

The mean overall score was 24 (out of 50). Only 2 Master's degree students (6.25 percent of the total number of participants) showed a high level of foreign language competence. The results of 6 participants (18,75 percent) correspond to the medium level. Finally, the overwhelming majority of Master's degree students who agreed to take the test (75 percent) showed a low level of English. It is also worth mentioning that results in the "low-level group" were distributed very unevenly: some participants of the research (6 people, 18.75 percent) needed just 1 to 5 more points to get into the "medium-level group", but at the same time, 16 people (50 percent of all test-takers) scored below 25 points, which means that they gave less than 50 percent of correct answers.

Discussion

Relatively low results can be partly explained by the specificity of the test. It should be explained here that all prospective Master's degree students are required to pass the entrance examination in English (it is also allowed to take an exam in German or French instead of English, but an overwhelming majority

of test-takers choose English) with the score of no less than 50 points (out of 100) to be able to enter any Master's programme in Kazakhstan. The very fact that participants of this research are postgraduate students now means that they have passed it successfully having shown at least the minimum level required. However, there are several significant differences between the entrance exam and the test that they were offered to take within this research. First of all, the latter included more questions of higher difficulty levels (64 percent of all test items were B1-B2 levels tasks, while the entrance exam included only 31 percent of such tasks). This is due to the fact that a higher level of English is required for studying academic subjects compared to the level required for passing the entrance examination. Secondly, the entrance examination included the Listening Comprehension, Reading Comprehension and Lexical and Grammar Test sections, but there was no Writing section in it. This means that students did not pay any attention to the writing skills development even if they prepared well for the exam, which explains why results in the Writing section are especially low. Finally, unlike the entrance exam tasks, all texts and tasks in the test developed for this research were devoted to one specific topic, which is higher education. Even though there were no narrowly-specialized terms in the test and tasks where the correct answer would depend on the knowledge of the subject and not the language, it may be assumed that many test-takers had no prior experience of working with texts in English devoted to that area of knowledge.

In the current situation, when, on the one hand, teaching has to be carried out in English as it is demanded by the state, but on the other hand, learning cannot be effective due to students' low level of English, one of the most promising solutions could be the use of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). This teaching methodology serves 2 purposes: teaching a subject by means of a foreign language and teaching a language in the context of a specific subject. The degree of "immersion into language" may vary depending on learners' language proficiency level (Smala, 2009).

Participants of the present research demonstrated the ability to understand the meaning of the text in the Reading section, but at the same time quite a low level of linguistic rules knowledge was shown in the Lexical and Grammar Test section. This observation can be used for preparation of lecture notes that can be presented in the form of parallel texts in Russian and English. Reading a text in English, learners can compare lexical units and grammatical constructions to their equivalents in Russian. Besides, the presence of a full text in Russian guarantees that even students with a low level of English will be able to fully understand the content of each lecture, i.e. their knowledge of a specific subject will not suffer from a poor knowledge of English. Each lecture should also include a glossary with the key terms mentioned in the lecture.

Tasks for seminars and students' independent work should be of different levels so that each student could study at a comfortable level of difficulty, but at the same time, it is necessary to set a minimum level that must be mastered by each learner. It would be too naive to expect that students' level of

English will improve dramatically as soon as they start studying subject taught in English. However, if the same methodology is applied for all subjects that are supposed to be taught in English, this may result in formation of an English-speaking environment making it more natural and comfortable for students to speak English.

Conclusion

Transition to English as the main language of instruction is a long-term strategic goal in the field of education for the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Achievement of this goal implies serious changes in the entire system of education, from primary school to postgraduate level. The process has already been launched (e.g., English is now taught at all primary schools starting from Year 1; HEI students study English throughout their programmes, etc.), but it will definitely take some time before we see the results.

Unfortunately, frequent political changes (e.g. appointment of a new minister of education, adoption of a new "Nation's Plan" or another similar document, etc.) result in a lack of consistency in educational policy. One of the leading TEFL experts in Kazakhstan, Rashit Zagidullin (Zagidullin & Zagidullina, 2013), once said that any research aiming to describe ongoing reforms somehow becomes outdated soon after its publication. Indeed, it is true. Now we have transition to English as a language of instruction as a top priority goal for our system of education, but we cannot know for certain what will happen in just 2 or 3 years' time. Maybe, another ambitious goal will be set leaving the previous one in obscurity. So, the presence or lack of consistency and patience, as well as proper allocation of resources will be the main factors determining the success or failure of this reform.

As for the present state of the problem, the research has shown that current Master's degree students are not ready to study academic subjects taught in English only. Approximately half of the participants not only were unable to express their thoughts in writing, but also experienced considerable difficulties in the perception of English speech. So, a conclusion can be made that teaching in English only is likely to lead to a serious deterioration of the quality of learning, as most of students will not be able to master the subject at the required level.

A gradual stage-by-stage transition seems the only logical solution. The use of the CLIL methodology (modified taking into account the local context) can help students understand the content of the subject even with the minimum level of English owing to the use of parallel texts and flexible difficulty levels. Moreover, it is this article's author's belief that this strategy may yield a cumulative effect when applied to all subjects that are supposed to be taught in English. When students have to read texts, listen to speech and make some assignments in English on a daily basis, but at the same time, everyone is free to

learn at a comfortable level of immersion into the language, they will eventually gain more confidence with using English as the language of work and communication and show significant progress.

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