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Code-Switching in a Multilingual Classroom in Kazakhstan: A University Students' Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the specificity of multilingualism in higher education in Kazakhstan based on the use and functioning of code-switching in the context of the state trilingual policy. The purpose of the study is to identify the degree of the implementation of the language policy from the point of view of students as direct participants in the educational process. The study is based on data from a sociolinguistic questionnaire with a sample of 400 undergraduate students from multilingual groups in technical, natural science and social educational programs at four leading universities in the western area of Kazakhstan. The study allowed identifying the types of code-switching most preferred by students and the main reasons why they code-switch in the educational context. However, students were unable to give clear answers regarding the impact of code-switching on the quality of their learning and identity. A conclusion is drawn that despite the active state promotion of all the three languages, it is too early to talk about significant success of the state language policy. Since multilingual groups

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are a relatively new phenomenon in Kazakhstan, students seem to lack a clear understanding of the essence of code-switching as a form of multilingualism in education, and they are not yet fully aware of the opportunities and benefits associated with it.

Keywords: Code-switching; Higher Education; Kazakhstan; Language Policy; Multilingualism; Multilingual Education

1. Introduction

Due to the active entry of Kazakhstan into the globalization space and the expansion of its scale of international relations, particular attention should be drawn to the changes in the educational sphere[1]. The governmental program "Trinity of Languages" has been introduced in Kazakhstan to realize the emerging demands for linguistic diversity and language learning[2]. According to this program, education must serve as "a conveyor belt" to build a multilingual society[3] with fluency in three languages – Kazakh as the state language of the country, Russian as a language of interethnic communication, and English as an international lingua franca[4, 5]. Higher education is regarded as an environment for the formation of multilingual competence[6], as the main sphere of language vitality[7], as a source of targeted formation of language competence and creating prerequisites for the further functioning of the languages[8]. In order to implement the trilingual policy in Kazakhstan, multilingual education has been introduced to the leading universities in Kazakhstan, having special emphasis on training competitive specialists that are professionally fluent in the three languages[9]. In this regard, it is of utmost significance to study the possibilities of establishing a multilingual society through higher education.

Code-switching as a form of multilingualism has recently become a hot topic in educational settings. It is generally understood as a speaker's shift from one language (or variety) into another at the level of a word, phrase or clause in an utterance (intra-sentential) or at the level of a sentence (inter-sentential), or as the insertion of a single word or phrasal tag in an utterance (tag switching)[10]. Traditionally, code-switching was not welcomed in the educational sphere, as switching to an alternate language was viewed as the result of having incomplete knowledge of the language[11]. Yet, today it is positively associated with language competency[12], and is reported to act as a useful and effective strategy to facilitate language learning[13] and as a tool for transferring new knowledge to students[14].

A lot of recent studies in the field of multilingual education worldwide focus on teachers' perspectives and the pedagogical functions of code-switching[15, 16]. From the point of view of teachers, code-switching is believed to facilitate better communication and encourage student interaction[17]. However, despite the growing global interest in code-switching in multilingual education, this domain of the functioning of trilingualism, especially in higher education, still remains poorly studied in relation to Kazakhstan. Furthermore, little attention has been paid to students' perspectives on the simultaneous functioning of the Kazakh, Russian and English languages in a multicultural classroom. Following previous studies in the field of multilingual education, we take the view that being aware of students' attitudes and perceptions can account for their linguistic and academic achievements[18] and allows for better understanding of how they can be sustainably supported to adjust and succeed in multilingual education[19]. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the specificity of using code-switching in higher education in Kazakhstan as a criterion of the effectiveness of the trilingual policy adopted by the country's leading universities. Based on the analysis of students' attitudes and perceptions it is possible to evaluate how the new language policy is implemented in university multilingual programs.

2. Materials and Methods

This study has a quantitative descriptive design, based on a sociolinguistic questionnaire to explore students' attitudes to the use of code-switching in higher education in Kazakhstan. The questionnaire was conducted in four universities that are located in four regions of the western area of Kazakhstan and offer multilingual undergraduate programs in technical, natural and social sciences. These universities were purposefully selected based on the integration of Kazakh, Russian and English as the languages of instruction in their teaching and learning programs. The essence of multilingual education in Kazakhstan is that from the first year of university, the teaching of at least 20% of academic disci-

plines is introduced in a second language, which is Kazakh for students in Russia as their first language or Russian for students in Kazakh as their first language. From the third year of university, the teaching of at least 30% of academic cycles of basic and specialized disciplines is delivered in English.

2.1. Participants

The research sample comprised 400 undergraduate students aged between 18 and 20 from K. Zhubanov Aktobe Regional University (Aktobe region), the Caspian University of Technology and Engineering named after Sh. Yessenov (Mangistau region), Kh. Dosmukhamedov Atyrau State University (Atyrau region) and M. Utemisov West Kazakhstan University (West Kazakhstan region) studying in multilingual groups in the 2nd-4th years. In the introductory part of the questionnaire, the respondents had to state the level of their proficiency in the Kazakh, Russian and English languages. **Figure 1** illustrates the participants' proficiency in the three languages – Kazakh, Russian and English – in four modalities: speaking, reading, listening and writing.
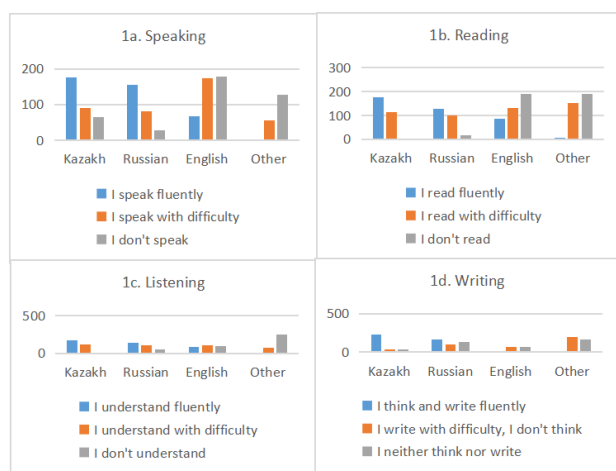
Figure 1. Participants' proficiency in Kazakh, Russian and English by modality.

As seen from **Figure 1**, most often the respondents chose the options of fluency in speaking, reading, writing and listening in relation to the Kazakh language, which indicates a generally high level of proficiency in the state language among students of multilingual groups. For the Russian language, the option of fluency in four skills was also quite often chosen, although in quantitative terms the Russian language

is inferior to the Kazakh language. It is interesting that the largest number of respondents chose Russian to answer the question about their level of language proficiency in the field of writing, and the number of answers "I write with difficulty, I don't think" and "I neither think nor write" regarding the Russian language exceeds the number of the same answers regarding the Kazakh and English languages. Consequently, there remains a fairly large number of students with poor command of the Russian language. Based on the students' responses, we can also conclude that they have an insecure command of the English language, since the smallest number indicated fluency in all types of speech activity in English.

2.2. Data Collection

To clarify what attitudes university students have towards code-switching as a form of multilingualism in higher education in Kazakhstan, in the spring of 2023 we performed a sociolinguistic questionnaire students of multilingual groups studying at four leading universities in the western region of Kazakhstan. The questions were distributed online using the Google Spreadsheets. The questionnaire contained 50 closed-ended questions in the form of statements divided into six parts, being devoted to the students' attitudes to code-switching (Questions 1–12), its influence on the quality of education (Questions 13–17), reasons for using code-switching in higher education (Questions 18–24), its impact on students' identity (Questions 25–30), the frequency and students' awareness of using code-switching (Questions 31–37), and students' levels of code-switching proficiency (Questions 38–50). Informed consent was obtained from the respondents to take part in the study and to process the responses received.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was based on the statistical results using the IBM SPSS Statistics, which enabled obtaining frequencies and percentages for all the categories and subcategories in the six parts of the questionnaire. The interpretations of the respondents' answers to almost all questions were based on a 5-grade Likert scale.

3. Results

3.1. Attitudes to Code-Switching

The questions in the first part of the questionnaire were devoted to the students' attitudes towards the use of code-switching in multilingual education. In the first question, we asked the respondents how familiar they are with the phenomenon of code-switching as a form of multilingualism, and whether code-switching is familiar to them in an educational context. Thus, 38% of the respondents agreed with the statement that the transition from Kazakh/Russian to English and vice versa is familiar to them, that is, they use it in their speech. At the same time, 46% expressed disagreement with this statement, that is, code-switching in speech is not common for them. Therefore, many students of multilingual groups, in their opinion, are not yet familiar with the phenomenon of code-switching as a form of multilingualism, so much so as to use it in speech as a common phenomenon.

When asked whether the students are satisfied with the multilingual format of classes, i.e., using English and Kazakh/Russian languages, three quarters of the surveyed students from multilingual groups agreed (52.8%) or completely agreed (25%) that classes should be conducted using both the English and Kazakh/Russian languages. Hence, in general students from multilingual groups support the multilingual format of classes at university.

Using the next group of questions, we aimed to find out how the respondents felt about their teachers' use of code-switching. The vast majority of the respondents indicated a positive attitude towards the use of code-switching when explaining grammatical (77.8%) and lexical material (69.3%) and, in general, towards the fact that teachers can use the Kazakh/Russian and English languages simultaneously in speech. Almost half (49.3%) of the multilingual students surveyed generally viewed code-switching as a positive phenomenon, and the majority of respondents (54%) stated that they utilized code-switching in their speech. Moreover, 47.8% of the survey participants would like classroom assignments to be multilingual, i.e., to include switching from Kazakh/Russian to English and vice versa. **Table 1** presents the students' responses concerning their attitudes to code-switching in detail.

In addition, it was important for us to clarify the personal attitude of students from multilingual groups towards the use of code-switching as a form of multilingualism by other people in an educational context. The answers to the questions whether the simultaneous use of Kazakh/Russian and English in speech is pleasant or annoying exhibited differences of opinion by the respondents. Thus, 42.8% of them answered that they liked the simultaneous use of the Kazakh/Russian and English languages in speech, while 30.5% indicated that they did not like mixing languages in speech. However, almost half of the respondents (47.5%) stated they did not experience irritation when languages were mixed in speech. Besides, almost half of the respondents (46.3%) agreed that they experienced pleasure when they heard the Kazakh/Russian and English languages mixed in speech. But at the same time, just over a third (35.5%) of the respondents answered they did not enjoy alternating between languages in speech. Such a variety of responses probably indicates that students' opinions regarding the use of code-switching are not yet well established, since multilingual groups are a new phenomenon in higher education in Kazakhstan.

3.2. Influence of Code-Switching on the Quality of Education

In the next group of questions, the respondents answered whether the use of multilingualism affects the quality of their education at the university. **Table 2** shows that more than half (51.5%) of the surveyed students from multilingual groups agreed with the statement that mixing languages contributes to productive language acquisition. Almost half of the respondents (48.3%) agreed that mixing languages helps them experience learning satisfaction. On the other hand, more than half of the respondents (54.8%) disagree with the statement that they feel less lost when switching from Kazakh/Russian to English or vice versa. At the same time, there is no clear opinion whether switching from English to Kazakh/Russian or vice versa helps to increase comfort in the learning process: 34.8% agree with this statement, while 35.5% disagree. A similar situation is observed with the response to the statement that switching from English to Russian/Kazakh or vice versa reduces tension in the educational process: 47.5% of respondents agree with this statement, while 40.5% of respondents disagree with it.

Based on the data from the second part of the questionnaire, we can assume that students from multilingual groups are still not sure how much code-switching can contribute to the educational process. Moreover, most of the respon-

Table 1. Students' attitude to code-switching.

Statements	I Strongly Disagree	I Disagree	I Don't Know	I Agree	I Strongly Agree
1. The teacher should switch between languages when explaining grammatical material.	1 (0.3%)	44 (11%)	44 (11%)	269 (67.25%)	42 (10.5%)
2. The teacher should switch between languages when explaining lexical material.	11 (2.75%)	112 (28%)	0 (0%)	220 (55%)	57 (14.25%)
3. I approve of teachers who use Kazakh/Russian and English in speech simultaneously.	3 (0.8%)	96 (24%)	49 (12.2%)	206 (51.5%)	46 (11.5%)
4. The simultaneous use of several languages in speech is a positive phenomenon.	7 (1.75%)	111 (27.75%)	85 (21.2%)	133 (33.3%)	64 (16%)
5. I would like the home assignment to include the simultaneous use of Kazakh/Russian and English.	64 (16%)	112 (28%)	58 (14.5%)	128 (32%)	38 (9.5%)
6. I would like the classroom assignment to include the simultaneous use of Kazakh/Russian and English.	21 (5.25%)	122 (30.5%)	66 (16.5%)	138 (34.5%)	53 (13.25%)
7. I avoid using Kazakh/Russian and English simultaneously in speech.	0 0%	216 (54%)	35 (8.8%)	147 (36.7%)	2 (0.5%)

Table 2. Influence of multilingualism on the quality of higher education.

| Statements	I Strongly Disagree	I Disagree	I Don't Know	I Agree	I Strongly Agree
1. The simultaneous use of several languages in speech contributes to productive language acquisition.	15 (3.8%)	94 (23.5%)	47 (11.8%)	206 (51.5%)	38 (9.5%)
2. The simultaneous use of several languages in speech helps me feel satisfied in my studies.	2 (0.5%)	136 (34%)	31 (7.8%)	193 (48.3%)	38 (9.5%)
3. I feel much more comfortable learning when I switch between languages.	0 (0%)	142 (35.5%)	60 (15%)	139 (34.8%)	59 (14.8%)
4. Switching between languages helps me feel less stressed in my studies.	2 (0.5%)	162 (40.5%)	27 (6.8%)	190 (47.5%)	19 (4.8%)
5. I feel less lost during classes when I switch between languages.	0 (0%)	219 (54.8%)	34 (8.5%)	136 (34%)	11 (2.8%)

dents do not feel comfortable and confident when switching to another language. These responses also support our assumption that students from multilingual groups still do not fully understand what code-switching is and what benefits it provides in the educational sphere. This needs to be clarified by further investigation.

3.3. Reasons for Code-Switching and Identity Issues

The respondents expressed their opinion on the statements regarding the pragmatic intentions of the simultaneous use of the Kazakh/Russian and English languages in speech. Thus, the most common reason for using code-switching among students in multilingual groups is the lack of understanding of the meaning of a word or expression on the part of the students themselves (as stated by 49% of the respondents) or on the part of the interlocutor (as stated by 48%). The least common reason for using code-switching is to make speech incomprehensible to everyone, and half (50%) of the respondents disagreed with this statement. The desire to make speech more expressive through code-switching was indicated as the reason for its use in speech by more than a third (36.8%) of the respondents, but at the same time, 42.5% of the respondents disagreed with the statement. Among important reasons, the respondents also identified the desire to fill lexical gaps (when words are missing in one of the languages) (45%), to attract the attention of the listener (43.5%), to make speech more understandable to the listener (44.3%). More detailed information about the respondents' answers

can be found in **Figure 2**.
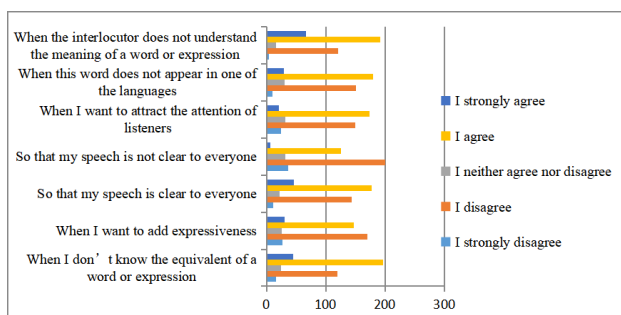
Figure 2. Reasons for using code-switching in multilingual education.

We were also interested in finding out how much influence the use of code-switching has on identity. Interestingly, when asked whether code-switching determines the students' personality, they expressed conflicting opinions: 44.8% of the respondents disagreed with this statement, whereas 32.5% agreed. The divergence of opinion is also observed in the responses to the statements that code-switching gives a certain impression of the presence or absence of intelligence of the speaker. Thus, according to 43% of the respondents, if code-switching is used, the speaker is considered by listeners to be intelligent; at the same time, 40.3% disagree with this statement. On the other hand, 35.3% of the survey participants are convinced that listeners consider them less intelligent, whereas 41.3% expressed their disagreement. Besides, 35.5% of the respondents agreed with the statement that when using code-switching they feel integrated with society, while 30.8% disagreed. At the same time, 51.7% of respondents did not agree with the statement that with the simultaneous use of Kazakh/Russian and English languages in speech, they feel isolated from society. Interestingly, with the ever-increasing role of the English language as a marker of prestige, almost half (48.8%) of the respondents disagreed with the statement that when code-switching, society respects them more.

3.4. Frequency and Awareness of Code-Switching

The next set of questions was devoted to how often the surveyed students from multilingual groups switch from one language to another. **Figure 3** shows that the most common type of switching is switching from Kazakh to Russian (24% of the respondents chose the option "very often" and 39%

chose the option "often"). Less frequent are switches from English to Kazakh (22% chose "very often" and 20% chose "often") and from Russian to English (9% chose "very often" and 26% chose "often"). Among the rare types of switching, transitions from Kazakh to English were highlighted (40% of the respondents chose the option "rarely", 19.8% - "very rarely" and 15.8% - "never").
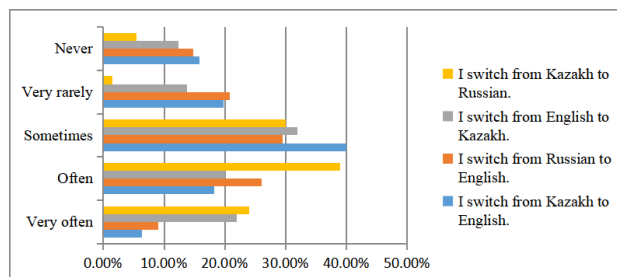
Figure 3. Frequency of code-switching in multilingual education.

Based on their responses to statements regarding the awareness of code-switching, transitions from English to Kazakh and from Kazakh to English occur consciously for more than half of the respondents (52.3% and 54.3%, respectively). More unconsciously, according to respondents, switches from English to Russian (45.8%) and from Russian to English (45.5%) occur.

3.5. Level of Code-Switching Proficiency

In the next block of questions, we were interested in clarifying at what level – the level of words, phrases or sentences – code-switching occurs in the speech of the surveyed students from multilingual groups. **Table 3** shows that at the level of individual words, code-switching occurs most often between Kazakh and English (49.8%), between English and Kazakh (49.8%), and between Russian and English (48%). Despite the fact that a fairly large number of the surveyed students (42%) use code-switching at the level of individual words, a larger number of the respondents (46.8%) did not agree with this opinion. At the phrase level, switching between the Kazakh language and English (51%), as well as Russian and English (46.3%) occurs less frequently; switching between these languages occurs more often at the sentence level (48.3% and 47.8%, respectively).

Therefore, students from multilingual groups mostly tend to insert English words in Kazakh sentences and vice versa. And to a large extent they prefer to switch from Kazakh

Table 3. Code-switching at different levels.

Statements	Yes	No	I Don't Know
1. I insert individual English words when I switch from Kazakh to English.	199 (49.8%)	143 (35.8%)	58 (14.5%)
2. I insert individual Kazakh words when I switch from English to Kazakh.	199 (49.8%)	157 (39.3%)	44 (11%)
3. I insert individual English words when I switch from Russian to English.	192 (48%)	166 (41.5%)	42 (10.5%)
4. I insert individual Russian words when I switch from English to Kazakh.	168 (42%)	187 (46.8%)	45 (11.3%)
5. I insert a whole phrase in English when I switch from Kazakh to English.	147 (36.8%)	204 (51%)	49 (12.3%)
6. I insert a whole phrase in Kazakh when I switch from English to Kazakh.	182 (45.5%)	163 (40.8%)	55 (13.8%)
7. I insert a whole phrase in English when I switch from Russian to English.	142 (35.5%)	185 (46.3%)	73 (18.3%)
8. I insert a whole phrase in Russian when I switch from English to Kazakh.	172 (43%)	184 (46%)	44 (11%)
9. I switch from Kazakh to English between sentences.	193 (48.3%)	173 (43.3%)	34 (8.5%)
10. I switch from Russian to English between sentences.	191 (47.8%)	172 (43%)	37 (9.3%)
11. I switch from English to Kazakh between sentences.	185 (46.3%)	160 (40%)	55 (13.8%)
12. I switch from English to Russian between sentences.	165 (41.3%)	174 (43.5%)	61 (15.3%)

or Russian to English at the sentence level, as well as to insert English words in their Russian sentences.

4. Discussion

Based on the findings of our investigation, it seems necessary to discuss several issues concerning the use of code-switching in multilingual higher education as an indicator of the effectiveness of the trilingual policy in Kazakhstan. Of particular interest were the respondents' answers regarding the frequency of switching between different language combinations. Thus, the most frequent switches are those from Kazakh to Russian, which can be explained by the predominance of Kazakh-Russian bilingualism in the linguistic situation of modern Kazakhstan[20]. The desire to switch from English to Kazakh may indicate that English has not yet come into widespread use and students do not feel confident in it, so they often switch to their native Kazakh.

Unlike the tendency of teachers to utilize inter-sentential switching, or switching between languages at the level of a sentence[21], students from multilingual groups seem to practice intra-sentential and tag switching. According to the results of the questionnaire, students from multilingual groups are mostly proficient in inserting English words in Kazakh and Russian sentences. In these situations of code-switching, the English language can be called the weaker language[12] or the non-dominant language[21]. Thus, in the context of multilingual education in Kazakhstan code-switching is more frequent from the non-dominant (English) to the dominant language (Kazakh or Russian). And code-switching can be seen as a form of communicative support for the weaker or non-dominant language[12].

Another issue is connected with the role of English in the linguistic situation of Kazakhstan. Multilingual education is one of the most prioritized areas in the country's education policy and the language policy consists in promoting the acquisition of three languages – Kazakh, Russian and English – by its population. The questionnaire data confirmed

that in the field of higher education, as in other social spheres like popular culture[22] or language landscape[23], English has great prestige and is seen as a marker of professionalism and a key to successful integration into the global educational space[24]. However, despite the generally positive attitudes towards the promotion of English in higher education and the expansion of the area of its active use[25], we cannot conclude that the multilingual policy in Kazakhstan has been implemented successfully yet, as English is still not a widely used language in the sphere of higher education. Moreover, in contrast to the traditional languages of Kazakhstan, which are Kazakh and Russian, English remains significant only as a factor for professional growth[26].

Finally, based on the responses to some of the survey questions it seems that students from multilingual groups are not fully aware of what code-switching is and what benefits it offers in the sphere of higher education. Among the benefits of code-switching described by scholars are maintaining the flow of conversation and learners' attention, facilitating communication and encouraging engagement in classroom activities[27]. The problem of unawareness of students was raised by Bahous et al.[28], when the results of their study on the use of code-switching in a Lebanese multilingual educational environment showed that the university faculty and students were unaware that they code-switch. In this regard, it is recommended to raise awareness of the phenomenon of code-switching in multilingual education to ensure that the scope of its use is expanded.

5. Conclusions

The purpose of the present study was to explore the specificity of using code-switching in multilingual higher education in Kazakhstan as a criterion of the effectiveness of the trilingual policy adopted by the country's leading universities. Using a sociolinguistic questionnaire among undergraduate students of multilingual groups, we described their attitudes to code-switching, its influence on the quality of education and identity, the reasons for code-switching and its frequency, as well as students' awareness and levels of proficiency in code-switching. The results of the study confirm that the simultaneous use of Kazakh, Russian and English in the educational context is a reflection of the policy of trilingualism in education, aimed at training competitive specialists who

are professionally fluent in the three languages. However, despite the active governmental promotion of all the three languages, it is too early to speak about the success of the state language policy. As the results of the questionnaire show, students from multilingual groups have not yet realized and taken advantage of the benefits that multilingualism provides in higher education. Moreover, since multilingual groups are a relatively new phenomenon for Kazakhstan, university students do not even seem to have a clear understanding of the essence of code-switching as a form of multilingualism in the educational context. Although they generally view code-switching as a positive phenomenon, in many cases they do not have a strong and clearly stated opinion regarding the possibilities it offers.

This study has some limitations related to the research sample size, which is rather small due to only the recent introduction of multilingual groups into higher education in Kazakhstan. A larger research sample involving undergraduate students in other regions of Kazakhstan would provide a more holistic view of the students' attitudes to the ongoing changes in the educational system of the country. As the study assesses subjective evaluations of students code-switching patterns, the study is limited by the highly subjective nature of the used method. The study would also benefit from adding a sample of postgraduate students and teachers and employing the qualitative analysis of ethnographic interviews that would enable to see the language situation and its realization in the higher education of Kazakhstan from supposedly different perspectives. As a further direction of research, intensive classroom observations of class interactions could be used and recordings of some of the classes could be made to deepen investigation into students' language practices. Measuring and analyzing instances of code-switching occurring in the multilingual classroom would permit obtaining more objective data to illustrated students' multilingual practices.

Author Contributions

read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The authors confirm that all data generated and analyzed in this study are included in this paper.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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