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Торайғыров университета

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**THE CHALLENGES THAT KAZAKHSTANI GRADUATE
STUDENTS EXPERIENCE WITH ACADEMIC
READING AND WRITING IN ENGLISH**

Since Kazakhstan's independence in 1991, several English medium universities have appeared in the country. These universities were created to educate a new generation of thinkers and change agents who will lead Kazakhstan in concordance with the new global tendencies and directions. The staff and faculty members to serve at these universities were invited from across the world.

It has been around 29 years since the official launch of the first English medium university in the country; however, there is no research on how students cope with reading and writing in their L3, after Kazakh and Russian. Against this backdrop, a team of professors and researchers of Nazarbayev University, KIMEP University, and Suleyman Demirel University have designed a study to examine graduate students' struggle with academic reading and writing at English medium universities in Kazakhstan. This article elicits early findings related to graduate students' challenges in reading and writing obtained from an online survey.

This study employed a mixed-method approach. Graduate students' perceptions of reading and writing in English were obtained through an online survey comprising closed- and open-ended questions. The result of quantitative data was analyzed employing inferential statistics. The total number of respondents is 269.

The findings of the study reveal that Kazakhstani graduate students face several challenges in reading and writing although they have obtained the required scores in their IELTS and TOEFL tests. They asserted that reading in English is challenging because the ideas, concepts, and terminologies used in academic papers are difficult to grasp. The study confirms that there is no significant difference in challenges among genders; however, in terms of age, more mature students respond to challenges less stressfully compared to their younger counterparts.

Keywords: academic reading and writing; challenges; experiences; graduate students; Kazakhstani universities, English language instruction.

Introduction

In his annual address to the people of Kazakhstan in 2007, the First President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, emphasized the significance of the English language for the citizens [1]. He stated that to compete in a global market, Kazakhstani citizens need to be highly educated; moreover, possessing fluently three languages, Kazakh, Russian and English, would provide harmonious integration into the international arena, and assure sustainable relationships with neighboring countries and promote peaceful existence within the country. Knowledge of the English language will also help provide a competitive advantage in the international labor market.

An English language-related policy has been facilitated by joining European Higher Education Area and signing the Bologna declaration in 2010. In the frame of the Bologna parameters, Kazakhstani students were engaged in various academic mobility programs funded by the Ministry of the Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The majority of students (62 %) during their mobility programs employed the English language [2, p. 5]. Hence, this opportunity opens more possibilities for students to be competitive in their careers, both in Kazakhstan and other countries.

Although the role of the English language remains pivotal, the use of L1 and L2 has raised questions. As a result, a trilingual policy was promoted. At the early stage of employing three languages at universities [3] and schools, debates were raised in social media on the role of the Kazakh language [4]. Hence, to have a more balanced utilization of three languages, a proportion of 50:20:30 was implemented in the State Compulsory Education Standard in 2018 [2]. In other words, 50 % of the courses in L1 (either Russian or Kazakh); another 20 % of the courses in L2 (either Russian or Kazakh). There remained 30 % of the courses in English from the third year of study [2, p. 40]. This step is expected to equip all learners to possess three languages fluently, regardless of their social and academic background.

A study that examined 83 papers of international experiences of English Medium Instructions (hereinafter-EMI) identified 13 key issues [5], which are necessary to theorize the concept of EMI across the globe. However, among them, there are five priority ones for Kazakhstan, which are a) need to define the EMI; b) identify the purpose of increasing the number of EMI courses; c) to diversify key agents within EMI implementation and discussion; d) to expand research on EMI experiences and its role in Kazakhstan; finally, e) to explore students' and faculty members' perceptions and practices in EMI universities and trilingual policy-related activities. These are only five key issues that remain topical at both international and local levels.

International studies show various challenges faced by students within EMI universities; the critical challenges related to proficiency of the English language per se. Students meet obstacles in writing, as it requires building arguments, aligning sentences coherently, and following the academic writing structure [6;7]. They refer to technologies to translate their ideas from a native language into English [8]. They were not prepared to receive constructive feedback on their written work, which caused tension [9;10]. Hence, these are experiences of international students surrounded by either the English language ecosystem or EMI programs in a non-English environment. Kazakhstani students in EMI universities might face similar obstacles.

The number of universities in Kazakhstan that deliver some courses in English has grown from 42 to 57, and 70 [11;2;12]. The difference between EMI universities and EMI programs in non-English universities is in their environment and international staff. Keeping in view the growing number of EMI programs and emphasizing the English language in Kazakhstan, this present study aimed to explore graduate students' experiences with academic reading and writing in EMI universities and EMI programs in regional universities. The research question that guided this study was the following: What are the nature, forms, and levels of challenges faced by graduate students in academic reading and writing in English in Kazakhstani universities?

Research Materials and Methods

This study was conducted at ten Kazakhstani universities that offer graduate programs in English as the medium of instruction. Around three of these ten universities offered entire graduate programs in English, whereas the remaining seven universities offer, within a graduate program, a significant number of courses in English. After receiving ethics approval from the Nazarbayev University's Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC), these universities were approached to participate in this study voluntarily. Out of over 17 universities invited, ten universities agreed to participate in the study. These universities are located in different cities across the country.

The study employed a mixed-method research design with both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection. The quantitative design included an

online survey comprising 44 questions and five open-ended questions. Together, these questions aimed to explore how graduate students explain their experiences and challenges of studying in the English language. The qualitative design included semi-structured interviews with selected participants, but the data used in this paper comes from the online survey only.

The survey questions were piloted among 12 graduate students at one of the universities in Central Kazakhstan. This university did not participate in the study. The students who filled the pilot survey confirmed that they spent 15 to 20 minutes completing the survey. These students also identified a few questions as unclear and ambiguous. These questions were modified and made clear.

Before launching the survey, all universities received an invitation letter to participate voluntarily in the study. Their rights, risks, benefits, the purpose of the study, and time allocated to participate were indicated in the invitation letter. Purposeful sampling was used to identify universities that had graduate programs in English. A total of 17 regional universities were sent the letter, out of which ten agreed to participate. The total number of respondents on the online survey was 269.

A quantitative analysis was used to collect and analyze the received numerical data. This approach is suitable for quantifying opinions, attitudes, and behavior and finding out how the whole population feels about particular issues [13]. The quantitative data obtained from the closed-ended survey were processed using the Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 23.0. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to identify statistically significant differences by gender in respect to English academic challenges. Furthermore, a One-Way between groups was conducted to identify how age might impact academic reading and writing challenges in English. A p-value $<.05$ was utilized to identify statistical significance.

The responses to the five open-ended questions in the survey were analyzed through organizing the responses, reading the texts, and identifying codes, organizing codes into themes corresponding to the research question. The qualitative analysis used a constructive grounded theory approach developed by Charmaz [14]. It helped to examine an issue in a particular context without generating a general theory. The analysis steps consisted of three stages: open, axial, and selective coding [15]. These steps were analyzed by comparing them to help build an understanding of the issue [16]. Open coding helped identify central themes, whereas axial coding provided in-depth understanding by connecting themes revealed within an open analysis. Finally, selective coding is supported to keep the discussion around challenges.

Research Results

The study first presents findings that emerged from the analysis of the five open-ended questions and then supported the findings with quantitative data. The first two were directed to explore students' challenges in reading and writing out of five

open-ended questions. Since open-ended questions were voluntary, some students skipped these questions. As a result, the response rate varied from question to question.

Regarding challenges in reading, there emerged five categories based on 149 responses (50,4 %) out of 269 total responses. Themes were merged based on the frequency of responses. For example, words merged under the first category, «Content Understanding: Language Issues,» such as «lack of vocabulary, unknown words» repeated 65 times (44 %). Further investigation of this category elicited three subcategories where 56 times (86 %) students referred to vocabulary issues. Hence, a lack of understanding was triggered by insufficient vocabulary.

Nevertheless, the following category, «Academic Reading Challenges,» found that students pinpointed understanding concepts and ideas rather than English words per se. They emphasized 33 times (22 %) the difference in writing styles and complexities of academic texts. Therefore, for the reading part, graduate students highlighted two challenges that refer to a lack of proficiency in the English language and the need to adapt to English structured academic texts.

The challenges related to writing may seem to have a slight difference, although they have similarities. The response rate for this question is 143 (48 %) out of 269. The three major categories that took more significant proportions are «Structure» 42 times (30 %), where students stated that academic writing has a different structure as argumentative writing, aligning paragraphs, paraphrasing sentences in doing a literature review. The following one, «Vocabulary,» shows 35 times (24 %) mentioned as it was asserted in reading. Vocabulary paucity caused challenges in using synonyms and alternative words. Finally, academic style aspects such as APA, grammar and punctuation were new to students, and they were mentioned 24 times (17 %). It is worth mentioning here that although in both categories we can see ‘vocabulary paucity,’ quantitative analyses show that most of the participants, 45 % (109), possess IELTS and TOEFL certificates, and 45 % (109) confirmed their language knowledge through other test systems organized by a university. Hence, English academic writing brought new obstacles to its structure, which differs from Kazakh and Russian, and vocabulary should be elaborated to produce solid work. Finally, the writing style as an international standard in the Kazakhstani context has not yet been introduced.

In the quantitative analysis, an independent sample t-test, conducted to compare the English academic challenges based on gender, found no statistically significant difference (see Table 1). In other words, both females and males face similar challenges. Again, One-Way between groups ANOVA, conducted to find out how age impacts on challenges in academic English, found no statistically significant difference; however, further analysis of mean scores of the individual groups revealed that more mature students tend to be more receptive to challenges as compared to younger ones (see Table 2).

Conclusion

To conclude, the findings of the study revealed that graduate astudents studying in English medium universities and other universities that offer certain programs with instructions in English face several challenges in academic reading and writing. Although these students are enrolled in the programs based on stringent admission criteria, including English language tests, they still struggle in meeting the demands of advanced level academic reading and writing. The study identified three significant issues within writing and reading in English in EMI programs at Kazakhstani universities:

1 Both in reading and writing, students refer to their lack of vocabulary. They may not be reasonably proficient in using synonyms or expressing their ideas clearly, although most of the students provided and passed English language tests such as IELTS and TOEFL before their admission to graduate programs.

2 Both in reading and writing, the structure of academic texts and requirements to produce academic texts were unfamiliar to students, due to their structural inconsistencies with Kazakh and Russian.

3 It was found that challenges emerge, regardless of gender, whereas age might provide some benefits to more senior scholars.

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Disclose Statement

There are no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests to report.

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ҚАЗАҚСТАНДЫҚ СТУДЕНТТЕРДІҢ АҒЫЛШЫН ТІЛІНДЕ ОҚУ МЕН ЖАЗУ ТӘЖІРИБЕСІНДЕГІ ҚИЫНДЫҚТАРЫ

Қазақстан тәуелсіздігін алғаннан бері ағылшын тілінде оқу бағдарламалары жүзеге асырылатын, ағылшын тілінде білім беретін ұйымдардың жүйесіне сәйкес бірнеше университеттер пайда болды. Бұл университеттер Қазақстанды жаңа әлемдік ағымға сәйкес басқаратын ойшылдар мен көшбасшылардың жаңа буынын тәрбиелеу үшін құрылған. Сол себептен, аталған мақсатқа қол жеткізуге және заманауи тұрғыда ойлайтын ұрпақты тәрбиелеу аясында әлемнің түкпірінен мыңдаған қызметкерлер мен оқытушылар шақырылды.

Ағылшын тілінде оқытылатын алғашқы университеттің негізі қаланғаннан бері 29 жылдай уақыт өтті, алайда, студенттердің қазақ және орыс тілдерінен кейінгі L3-те оқумен, яғни ағылшын тілінде жазу мен оқу қалай жүріп жатқандығы жайлы зерттеу шектеулі. Осыған орай, Назарбаев Университетінің, КИМЭП Университетінің және Сүлейман Демірел Университетінің профессорлары мен зерттеушілері осы мәселені зерттеу үшін жоба дайындады. Бұл мақалада сауалнамадан алынған магистранттар мен докторанттардың ағылшын тілінде оқу мен жазудағы қиындықтарына байланысты алғашқы нәтижелер келтірілген.

Аталған зерттеуде аралас әдіс қолданылды. Магистранттар мен докторанттардың ағылшын тілінде оқу және жазу туралы көзқарастары мен тәжірибелері жабық және ашық сұрақтардан

тұратын сауалнамадан алынды. Сандық мәліметтердің нәтижесі қорытынды статистика (SPSS) арқылы талданды. Сапалы зерттеу нәтижелері құрастырылған негізделген теориямен (constructive grounded theory) талданды. Жалпы сауалнамадан алынған жауап коэффициенті – 269.

Зерттеу нәтижелері қазақстандық магистранттар мен докторанттардың IELTS және TOEFL ұпайларымен расталған тілдік негіздері болғанымен, оқу мен жазуда қиындықтарға тап болатынын мәлімдеді. Олар академиялық мақалаларда түсінуге қиын идеялар, тұжырымдамалар мен терминдер болғандықтан, ағылшын тілінде оқу қиынға соғады деп сендірді. Зерттеу, жыныстар арасындағы қиындықтардың айырмашылығы жоқ екенін растайды, дегенмен, жас ерекшелігі бойынша, жасы үлкен магистранттар мен докторанттардың жасы кішілерімен салыстырғанда қиындықтарға аз тап болатынын көрсетті.

Кілтті сөздер: академиялық оқу және жазу; қиындықтар; тәжірибелер; магистранттар мен докторанттар; Қазақстандық университеттер, ағылшын тілінде оқыту.

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ТРУДНОСТИ КАЗАХСТАНСКИХ СТУДЕНТОВ В АКАДЕМИЧЕСКОМ ЧТЕНИИ И ПИСЬМЕ НА АНГЛИЙСКОМ ЯЗЫКЕ

С момента независимости Казахстана были основаны несколько университетов с организационной экосистемой и образовательными программами на английском языке. Эти университеты созданы для обучения нового поколения мыслителей и лидеров, которые поведут Казахстан в соответствии с новыми мировыми тенденциями. В связи с этим, для продвижения этих идей и подготовки современного поколения мыслителей были приглашены сотрудники и преподаватели со всего мира.

Прошло почти 29 лет с момента открытия первого университета с образовательной программой на английском языке, однако исследования ограничены в том, как студенты справляются с чтением и письмом на

уровне L3, то есть, на английском языке, после казахского и русского языков. Профессора и исследователи Назарбаев Университета, Университета КИМЭП и Университета Сулеймана Демиреля провели исследование для изучения этой проблемы. В данной статье представлены первые результаты опроса магистрантов и докторантов, обучающихся на английском языке в казахстанских университетах по проблемам академического письма и чтения.

В данном исследовании используется смешанный метод. Взгляды и опыты магистрантов и докторантов по проблемам академического чтения и письма на английском языке были получены с помощью опроса с закрытыми и открытыми вопросами. Результаты количественных данных были проанализированы с помощью программы SPSS. Результаты качественного исследования проанализированы конструктивно обоснованной теорией. Всего полученных ответов на опрос – 269.

Результаты исследования свидетельствуют о том, что казахстанские магистранты и докторанты сталкиваются с трудностями при академическом чтении и письме, несмотря на сильные языковые знания, подтвержденные их результатами IELTS и TOEFL. Они утверждают, что читать на английском языке сложно из-за трудных для понимания идей, концепций и терминов, используемых в научных статьях. Исследование обнаружило, что различий в трудностях между полами нет; однако более старшие по возрасту магистранты и докторанты реагируют на трудности менее напряженно, чем молодые.

Ключевые слова: академическое чтение и письмо; трудности; опыты; магистранты и докторанты; Казахские университеты, обучение на английском языке.

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