

The Gap in the Quality of the English Language Education in Urban and Rural Schools in Kazakhstan

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Abstract— One of the main priorities of any state is to offer high-quality educational services as it plays a crucial factor in building intellectual human capital. Currently, the Kazakhstani system of education is undergoing significant changes, with a particular emphasis on the modernization of secondary school education. The issues of improving secondary school education in Kazakhstan are raised at the state level and are reflected in national programs and projects. This article deals with the main aspects related to the development of secondary school education, the gap in the quality of English language education in urban and rural secondary schools, and the possibilities of enhancing the quality of English language teaching in secondary schools in the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Index Terms— gap, English language education, quality, urban and rural schools.

Introduction

With the increasing cooperation and exchanges on the international level, the popularization of the English language has become a trend worldwide, and the Republic of Kazakhstan is no exception. Kazakhstan has a unique linguistic situation that includes Kazakh, Russian, and English. While Kazakh is recognized as the official language of the country, Russian holds the status of a language of interethnic communication and English as a language of international communication.

The importance of the English language is underlined in many policy documents and national programmes of the Republic. In 2018, Kazakhstan updated State Compulsory Standards for General and Secondary Education in which a greater emphasis is placed on English as a foreign language and language of instruction in subjects related to science, technology and engineering. The Concept of Education Development of Kazakhstan for 2022-2026 highlights the necessity of training pre-service teachers who will teach subjects in English. To ensure effective methodological support for teachers who teach in English, the mentoring institute has been launched. Furthermore, teachers of physics, chemistry, biology are receiving English language courses as a part of their professional development. According to the results of the survey

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conducted by Kazakhstani researchers, among the youth English is perceived as a language of developed countries, developed economies, and therefore, prestige [1].

However, a number of research studies have revealed disparities in the quality of English language education in urban and rural schools in the country. According to PISA data, the language of instruction in schools (Kazakh or

Russian), school location (urban or rural), and the socio-economic background of students and schools make a significant difference in students' performance [2]. Bridges and Sagintayeva identify deterioration of school infrastructure and a shortage of qualified teachers as the main factors for these discrepancies [3]. Other factors involve limited access to the Internet [4] and an inequitable distribution of teachers among schools, with skilled teachers being less inclined to work at disadvantaged schools and more inclined to move to schools that offer additional resources [5].

In Kazakhstan, specific measures are being implemented to mitigate the disparities in the quality of education between urban and rural schools. Thus, for example, the public association "Alpha Academy" with the support of the Social Development Fund of Nazarbayev University initiated the "Hello, Aul" project which provides two-month English language courses to rural students. Other regional programs to support rural schools include "Digital Kazakhstan", "Mobile teacher", "Patronage of high-performing schools over low-performing rural schools." Nevertheless, the disparity in the quality of education is increasing every year [6].

Accordingly, the following research questions guided this study:

1. What factors affect English proficiency in rural schools?
2. What is the current situation of English language proficiency among urban and rural students?

The primary objective of this study was to conduct a comparative analysis of the English proficiency of first-year rural and urban students of two Kazakhstani universities. This comparison was used to determine whether any significant difference still exists in the level of English language education of urban and rural students in Kazakhstan. To provide context for the analysis, the study also examined the current state and factors influencing English language education in urban and rural schools of Kazakhstan based on documentary material and official statistics.

Materials and Methods

To analyze the current state of secondary education in Kazakhstan and identify the factors leading to a gap in educational achievement between urban and rural schools, documentary material was drawn from international comparative studies (PISA), official reports and presentations of authorized state bodies and research institutes under the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan (the National Academy of Education named after I. Altynsarin,

Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “Daryn” Republican Scientific and Practical Center).

To determine whether any significant difference still exists in the level of English language proficiency of urban and rural students in Kazakhstan, there was conducted a comparative analysis based on the quantitative data which allows for the objective measurement and provides more precise and reliable results. The quantitative data present the proficiency test scores of first-year students of two Kazakhstani universities. These two universities are Astana IT University (AITU) located in the capital of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana, and Pavlodar Pedagogical University (PPU) located in the north-east of Kazakhstan, the city of Pavlodar. The choice of these universities was predetermined by their location, with one situated in the capital of the country and the other in a regional area, as well as by entrance requirements in English language proficiency which are higher in comparison to those of regional universities.

Literature Review

A. Urban vs. Rural Schools

Disparities in the quality of education in urban and rural schools has been the focal point of researchers’ attention worldwide. Defining the terms “urban” and “rural” is a complex task due to the lack of a universally accepted definition. In its general meaning, the term "rural" refers to areas outside the city and is primarily characterized by agricultural production. From the sociological point of view, the rural environment is considered to be less developed technologically and culturally in comparison to the urban environment. Currently, there can be identified various criteria for the analysis of rural and urban concerns. These include demographic and location criteria, the amount of the population’s income, types of basic activity of inhabitants in a certain territory [7]. Rural areas are typically characterized as sparsely populated regions with lower incomes and a focus on agricultural activities. The authors of TIMSS 2019 Assessment Frameworks proposed general international definitions of rural and urban environments which are based on the number of inhabitants in the region where the school is located [8].

Students in rural schools often demonstrate lower achievement. Thus, several researchers observe that, compared with urban schools, rural schools do not provide students with the opportunity to achieve high learning outcomes, and this is primarily due to the low qualification of teachers, poor economic conditions and higher rates of unemployment [9]-[11]. A study by Alpe revealed that graduates of rural schools have lower aspirations regarding further education compared to those of urban schools [12]. A significant proportion of rural school graduates opt for shorter university courses or choose vocational education.

Rural schools have an important educational function, but besides they also play a pivotal role in tackling cultural, social, and intellectual concerns in rural communities. Wiiten et al.

highlight that rural schools are “catalysts for community participation, social cohesion and the vitality of neighbourhoods” [13; 307].

B. Urban and Rural schools in Kazakhstan

After gaining independence, in Kazakhstan the issues related to small schools intensified along with the problem of the village. In 1991, the country experienced the outflow of other nationalities (Germans, Russians, Ukrainians, etc.) returning to their historical homelands (Fig. 1). The emigration had a significant impact on the number of rural schools in the country. Later, in 1995, internal migration began in Kazakhstan, which resulted in high rates of unemployment. By the end of 2020, the number of unemployed people in Kazakhstan has amounted to 448.8 thousand people, and the level increased to 4.9%.

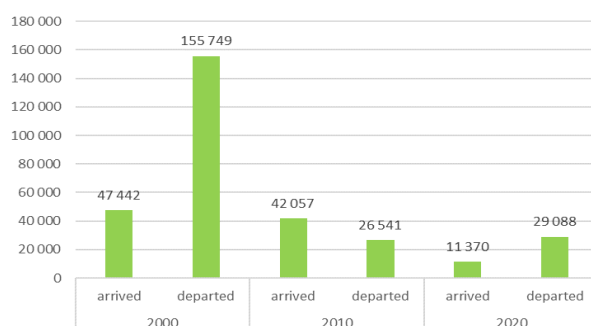


Fig. 1. External migration of the population of Kazakhstan (2000-2020)

Source: Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan

In 2005, urbanization in Kazakhstan began to increase rapidly, leading to a significant shift of the rural population to urban areas, and as a result, to the closure of numerous rural schools. According to the Agency for Strategic planning and reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan [14], currently about 59,5% of the population in Kazakhstan resides in urban areas, which is significantly higher than the corresponding percentage (54, 5%) in 2010 (Fig. 2). Over the last decade, there has been a noticeable acceleration of the urbanization process in the country, resulting in a population growth rate in cities that is around 8% higher than that in rural areas.

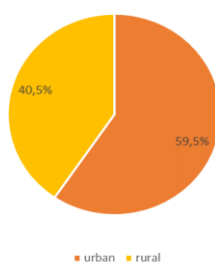


Fig.2. Proportion of urban and rural population in Kazakhstan

Source: Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan

In 2020, Kazakhstan's birth rate reached a historic peak, surpassing the previous record set in 1987 (Fig.3). This upward trend is having a positive impact on the country's total fertility rate. The Bureau of National Statistics reported that 432.6 thousand children were born in 2022, which represents a 2% increase from the previous record of 417.1 thousand. In 2021, the total fertility rate was 23.5% per 1,000 individuals, which is one of the three highest rates observed since the country gained independence, indicating a trend of sustainable population growth. The two highest birth rates were recorded in 2007 and 2008, with rates of 22.79% and 22.60%, respectively.

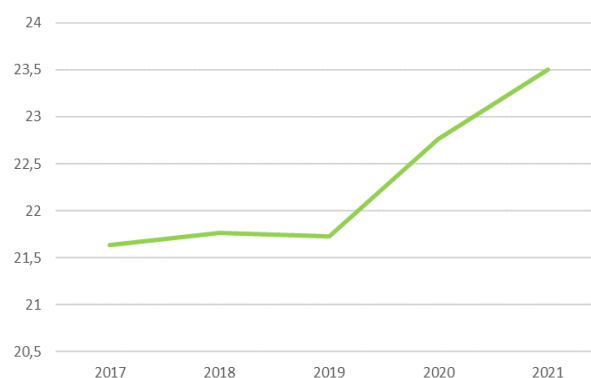


Fig. 3. Total fertility rate in Kazakhstan

Source: Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan

All the above mentioned factors had a significant impact on the number of schools in Kazakhstan. As presented in Fig. 4a, in the Republic of Kazakhstan, there are 7473 general education schools, out of which 70% (5261) are rural schools. 37% of all schools (2753) can be classified as small (or ungraded) schools meaning that these schools do not have a sufficient number of learners to provide each year group with a separate classroom and, consequently, these schools teach students from various age groups in a single class. A significant majority of small schools, 99% (2727), are located in rural areas (Fig.4b).

General education schools by type of locality

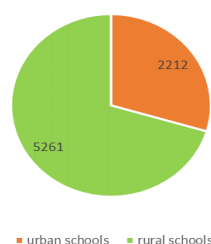


Fig.4a. Distribution of general education schools and small schools by type of locality

Source: Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan

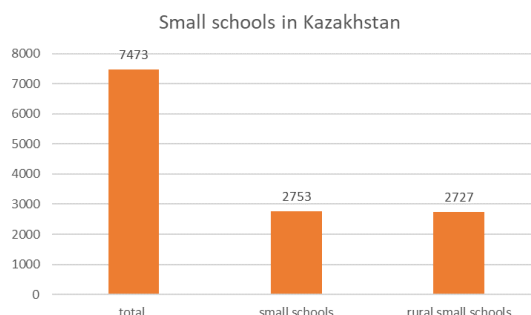


Fig.4b. Distribution of general education schools and small schools by type of locality

Source: Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan

Between 2011 and 2021, the number of small rural schools has decreased by 1468 (35 %) schools, and as prognosed, this process will continue until the year of 2025. According to the data of 2021, the student population in small schools comprised 13% of the total number of students in rural schools [15]. Furthermore, the National Report indicates an increase in the birth rate of children in rural areas since 2017 [14]. Thus, factors such as urbanization, emigration as well as an increase in the birth rate of children in rural areas and a decrease in the number of rural schools can exacerbate the problem of education inequality between urban and rural areas.

C. English language education in rural schools of Kazakhstan

The development of English language education in rural schools of Kazakhstan is essential for the country's economic and social development, as it enables students in remote areas to compete in a globalized world and contribute to the country's integration into the international community.

The issues of English language education in rural areas have been examined across different geographical locations globally, portraying various aspects and complexities of language teaching/learning in rural settings. Language education in rural areas is commonly described as disadvantaged because of its limitations regarding infrastructure, shortage of teachers and teaching/learning resources [16]-[18]. However, there are only a few empirical studies that have attempted to explore English language education in rural schools of Kazakhstan. Batyrova conducted research on rural students' perceptions of English learning and the challenges they encounter in speaking English [19]. The data revealed that the non-English speaking environment, the lack of opportunities to practice English in the village and low professional skills of English teachers are the main causes of rural students' poor performance in English. The students described their English classes as boring and unchallenging. Furthermore, the

participants mentioned that their English teachers overuse L1 during classes which also negatively affect their English language proficiency. These findings correspond with the studies of Karabassova, where teachers' readiness for EMI was explored [20], [21]. As highlighted by the researcher, almost all pre-service teachers (97%) had English proficiency at the elementary level (A1-A2), and their English language skills did not improve, even by their final year. Furthermore, despite being issued CEPT (the Cambridge English Placement Test) certificates, teachers from rural schools admitted that these certificates did not reflect their real level of English language proficiency. Agaidarova explored perceptions of rural school stakeholders: school administration, teachers, and parents [22]. The findings revealed that all the three groups of stakeholders perceive English as a language of higher education, career, and travel. At the same time, the group of parents mentioned that they provide their children with additional resources such as private English language tutoring to assist their academic performance. Along with it, teachers stated that they purposefully utilized Kazakh and/or Russian languages to explain the English language content.

It is also interesting to note that over the past two years (2021-2022, 2021-2020) the majority of the winners in the "Daryn" Republican English Olympiad were students from urban schools, with only 1 student being from a rural school. This observation raises the questions about the quality of education in rural schools compared to urban ones. It becomes necessary to develop strategies to improve English language curricula in rural schools of Kazakhstan and ensure equal opportunities for students from all backgrounds to compete and achieve high results in academic competitions.

Thus, the literature analysis revealed that the development of English language education in rural schools of Kazakhstan is hindered by a number of factors. These, mainly, include the lack of an English-speaking environment and teachers' level of English language proficiency, which is often not high.

Results And Discussion

AITU offers 12 educational programs in the sphere of IT education, with English as the language of instruction. To enter the university students must either provide an international certificate confirming English language proficiency in accordance with the Common European Framework (e.g. IELTS 5.0) or take AITU excellence test, a specialized test consisting of two modules, one of which aims at checking the level of English language proficiency.

PPU provides 24 educational programs, with either Kazakh or Russian as the languages of instruction. The university also offers four multilingual educational programs (Computer Science, Chemistry, Biology, Physics) that provide instruction in Kazakh, Russian, and English. The primary objective of the university is to educate and prepare teaching professionals for the republic.

As of 2022, 3178 students were enrolled in AITU, with 1586 first-year students and 4398 students in PPU, with 643 first-year students. Students' personal storage folders were analyzed to determine whether they have graduated from urban or rural schools (Fig. 5).

As demonstrated in Fig. 5, the allocation of urban and rural students in PPU is nearly equal, with rural students constituting a slightly higher proportion by as much as 4%, whereas at AITU, there can be observed a notable disproportion between urban and rural students, with rural students comprising only 7% of all first-year students. These findings provide evidence that students have a greater inclination to remain within their regions rather than relocating to the capital city. There can be several reasons for this.

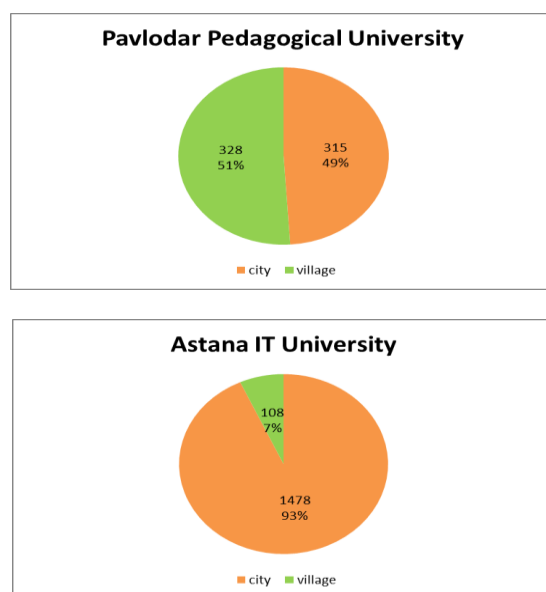


Fig. 5. Distribution of students (urban vs. rural schools)

As observed by Stone and Evora, the geographic component in the university choice can be characterized as ‘highly localized’, which means that a majority of students from rural areas have close ties with their community and prefer to stay in a familiar environment being “both attached to the physical space of where they grew up as well as the familial ties that existed there” [23; 153]. From the economic perspective, studying in regional universities may be more affordable, allowing students to avoid expenses related to moving to a new location [24]. Furthermore, it can be argued that universities in big urban areas (such as cities of republic significance) may have stricter admission requirements and more competition among school-leavers. In this case, rural students might find it challenging to compete with urban counterparts in terms of their level of knowledge, performance on additional proficiency tests and other academic criteria.

To determine the current state of English language proficiency among urban and rural students, the results of English entrance tests were analyzed (Fig. 6).

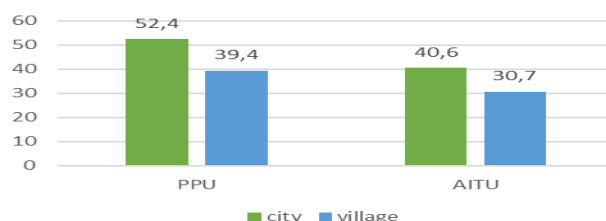


Fig. 6. First-year students' performance on English language proficiency test (urban vs. rural)

As has been mentioned above, one of the requirements for admission to AITU is a successful completion of the 2-module AITU excellence test. The first module of the test checks the level of English language proficiency and consists of 55 questions that cover vocabulary, grammar and reading. Students who achieve a score between 35-50 are considered to have successfully passed the first module, whereas those who score 25-34 points are eligible for admission, provided that they attend English courses at the University, and those who score 0-24 are required to retake the module. At PPU, the English placement test is administered to assign students to English language groups based on their respective proficiency levels. The results of this test do not impact students' enrollment to the university. The overall number of questions of the PPU English test is 55.

As depicted in Fig. 6, students from urban schools demonstrate better performance compared to their rural counterparts. At AITU, the disparity in the English test scores between students from urban and rural backgrounds makes up 8,7%, whereas at PPU, this gap stands at 11,8 %.

The Pearson's Correlation Analysis was used to analyze the data collected (Table 1). Correlation is a method to assess the connection between two quantitative variables. This type of analysis is employed to determine whether there is a relationship between the two variables and measure the strength of this relationship. In the context of the present research, the two variables are the type of locality (urban vs.rural) and students' achievement in the English proficiency test.

Table 1. Pearson's correlation coefficient

	AITU	PPU
Pearson's correlation coefficient	0,988	0,703

From the results of Pearson's Correlation Analysis, the type of locality is associated with students' achievement, demonstrating correlation coefficient values of 0,988 for AITU and 0,703 for PPU. The results indicate a significant correlation between the two variables and allow

to claim that in Kazakhstan, there still exists a gap in the level of English proficiency of urban and rural students.

Conclusion

The issues related to rural schools are not limited to preserving a particular type of educational institution. Rather, it is a national issue that is intertwined with the fate of the state itself [25]. Based on the analysis of the theoretical and methodological literature related to the problems rural schools face today in Kazakhstan, it becomes evident that rural education is currently one of the most pressing challenges within the education system of the country. Rural schools constitute a significant proportion of all schools in Kazakhstan, and the quality of education, in general, and that of English language education, in particular, provided in these schools has an impact on the overall level of knowledge in the country. The research identified several factors that indicate the gap in English language proficiency between urban and rural students, including lack of an English-speaking environment, teachers' level of English language proficiency, and low involvement in competitions. According to the English proficiency test results, there is still a significant gap in English language proficiency among urban and rural schools. Creating an English-speaking environment in rural schools requires that EL teachers involve both formal and informal methods to foster students' English language development: encouraging students to participate in communities of English clubs, exchange programs, English-speaking events, academic competitions, using language immersion techniques in teaching. EL teachers can improve their level of English language proficiency through participating in professional associations and events, professional development courses, language exchange programs, creating local professional communities, and developing peer mentorship.

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