

Title: English Language Proficiency (ELP) and Attitudes Towards Language Policy with English (LPwE) in Kyrgyzstan

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Askarbek Mambetaliev

PhD student

University of Pannonia

Doctoral School of Multilingualism

10 Egyetem Street

Veszprem, Hungary, 8200

Email: amambetaliev@alumni.umass.edu

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Abstract: It is important to investigate the attitudes and motivations of varying local communities with different levels of English language proficiency (ELP) towards Language Policy with English (LPwE) in Kyrgyzstan. Therefore, this study attempts to determine correlations between ELP and LPwE. What Kyrgyzstani people think about current language policies that encourage learning English? The local communities, in this study, are represented by participants whose first language is Russian and Kyrgyz. A particular interest is how attitudes towards LPwE differ among people, whose first languages (L1) and ELP are different. The term LPwE in this article is the level of inclusion of English in official language policies, which is a growing trend in the world, including Kyrgyzstan.

Introduction

After a 200 year history of perceiving English as the language of hostile “imperialistic” world, it appears that some Central Asian leaders start seeing it as an access to global knowledge, and even an assistance for the state language, since “the implication of a third language of wider communication may serve as a balancing power to preserve minor national languages” (Mambetaliev, 2019). The case study of Kazakhstan proves that trilingualism with English has played a positive role in development of Kazakh language. However, opponents of this theory argue that “because of this trilingual education reform system the development of the state language (i.e. Kazakh) may decrease as students devote more time to both Russian and English” (Neuendorf, 2019). Another study of 182 secondary school students with different local and foreign ethnic backgrounds concluded that “[f]or most students English may be a good asset but very few consider it a language that can be used in contexts other than the classroom” (Komlósi & Ferdinand, 2016). In theory, individuals with advanced ELP perform better academic achievements (Martirosyan, Hwang, & Wanjohi, 2015; Grisso, 2018; Stoffelsma & Spooren, 2019). Unfortunately, the education system in Kyrgyzstan cannot boast with learning outcomes that produce good ELP, though language subjects occupy up to 50 percent of the time in the state curriculum (Komlósi & Ferdinand, 2016). According to OECD only maximum of 7 percent of

Kyrgyzstan's population claims to know the English language (OECD, 2007, pp. 47,53). Considering these mutually exclusive theories, there is a need to (re) assess attitudes of Kyrgyz communities towards language policies that include English as a third important language for the region.

At this stage we need to clarify the term minorities for this study in relation to country and larger entities. Most often “minorities are defined by their relation to the state” (Gorter & Cenoz, 2012, p. 186). However, languages of some minorities in the former soviet countries are actually dominant languages in the independent countries. The Kyrgyz language, for instance, is the state language of the Kyrgyz Republic, where Russians are a minority. However, the language of the latter is under careful attention of its powerful kin country, which provides textbooks to Kyrgyz schools as a humanitarian help. In addition, most ethnic Kyrgyz parents prefer Russian schools for their children. Minorities also support a language policy favoring global languages in their hosting or native country. A rationale behind this is that learning the state language, which is not a global language, requires additional investments. Therefore, ethnic minorities in Kyrgyzstan usually choose English or Russian, but not Kyrgyz. Therefore, there should a distinction be between two types of languages: 1) a minority language, which is widely spoken (by more than 50% of population) in another nation state; and 2) a language, which is unique and have no other country, where it is widely

spoken. Some examples of the 1st type in Kyrgyzstan are Russian, Turkish, Chinese, etc. Some examples of the 2nd type are the Kyrgyz, Kurdish, Uighur, and other languages, which are spoken by less than 15 million people in another titular country, or have no nation state, or a subject of other nation states.

The ethnic minorities in Kyrgyzstan are increasingly adopting Russian while forgetting their own heritage languages. This trend enables the former Soviet majority language to take over not only minority languages, but also the state language, which may lead to serious disintegration processes in the country with destructive consequences that has a great potential to spill over the national borders. In the reverse case, when the languages of Chechens, Tatars, Ukrainians, Turkish people, Armenians, Uzbeks, Dungan's and other ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan is supported on the official level, the language ecology will be improved through diversity, which will help the state language to overcome the struggle to fulfill its function. This proposal is an attempt to preserve all languages in the country through improving diversity of language ecology, which ultimately should bring to the national unity in Kyrgyzstan. The same strategy might be true for the Ukrainian case, which is currently attempting to strengthen the state language by all means, including very radical nationalistic methods as depriving rights of some ethnic groups to learn in their mother tongues in public schools.

Such methods, which have been employed not only in Ukraine, but in other Eurasian countries, might yield an opposite effect.

Considering the described factors, it is important to investigate the attitudes and motivations of varying local communities with different levels of ELP towards LPwE in Kyrgyzstan. Some previous studies show that "although English is often considered an asset, students do not have faith in it as the key to have a better life". Moreover, most rural students "deny that knowing English may contribute to have a better life" and believe that "English, although practical in some domains, does not produce any superiority over those who speak Kyrgyz, Russian or any of the other local language" (Komlósi & Ferdinand, 2016, pp. 29-30). At the same time, a pilot survey of this study has demonstrated that while Russians do not support enforcing multilingualism with English in Russia, the Kyrgyz are divided into two groups: 1) Russian speaking Kyrgyz support both English and Russian EMI in Kyrgyzstan; 2) Kyrgyz speaking young Kyrgyz support English more than Russian. However, these results may differ among different groups depending on their languages, ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Therefore, this study attempts to determine correlations between ELP and LPwE. What the Kyrgyzstani people think about current language policies that encourage learning English? The local communities, in this study, are represented by participants whose first language is Russian and Kyrgyz. A particular interest is

how attitudes towards LPwE differ among people, whose first languages (L1) and ELP are different. The term LPwE in this article is the level of inclusion of English in official language policies, which is a growing trend in the world, including Kyrgyzstan.

Main Research Question:

What are the correlations between ELP and attitudes towards LPwE among bilingual Kyrgyzstani people with different ethnic and religious backgrounds?

Research Method:

There are different methods to measure language proficiency in English. This study employed verbal fluency (VF) test. “The validity of the fluency tasks as a tool to assess verbal ability (VA), specifically lexical access ability, has been confirmed in numerous studies (Shao, Janse, Visser, & Meyer, 2014). VF is the ability of the individuals to access the mental lexicon and the ability of language production. It usually measures semantic fluency and letter fluency within a limited time, during which participants have to produce as many unique words as possible starting with a given letter (for example words starting with “W” or “S”) or within a category fluency (for example, fruits names or girls’ names). The total number of produced words in each task is the participant's score.

The ability to access to mental lexicon, or verbal and semantic fluency, is often used in both testing mental diseases and as an indicator of language fluency. “A normal score for a native English speaker with at least a high school education is at least 8 words” (Stephen, 2018). A study that included 304 adult participants with no evidence of intellectual disability showed that “both letter (phonemic) and category (semantic) fluency are related to language, but the relationship to EF is not supported by the results” (Whiteside, et al., 2016).

In the VF test for this particular study, the participants passed a session, in which they wrote as many fruits names in English as they could have retrieved from their mental lexicon within 60 seconds. Then participants completed a survey about their attitudes towards language policies. The results were recorded to determine the needed correlations.

Participants:

In this assignment, data was collected from four groups of participants:

LKG: Kyrgyz speaking Kyrgyzstani (45 participants).

LRU: Russian speaking Kyrgyzstani (51 participant).

The following two groups were selected from among the LKG and LRU:

EKG: Ethnic Kyrgyz, who indicated their religion as Muslims and their L1 as Kyrgyz (10 participants).

ERU: Ethnic Russians (10 participants).

All participants in these groups are between 20-40 y.o.

Note: a considerable number (22 persons) in the both LKG and LRU groups indicated their religion as Evangelical Christians.

Data Collection:

The data were collected via online system at <http://multil.org>. The questionnaire contained biographical, test related and attitude related information.

Results:

Table 1: Correlations between VF test results and attitudes toward English among language and ethnic groups.

LKG	LRU	EKG	ERU	YOUR ATTITUDES TO FOLLOWING OPINIONS:
0.22	0.07	0.00	-0.05	O1: "About 50% of subjects must be taught in English in all educational institutions throughout the world!"
0.29	0.18	-0.22	0.01	O2: "In Kyrgyzstan, it's necessary to initiate teaching some subjects in English!"
0.26	0.02	0.12	0.03	O3: "In the future, children must be fluent in English on the same level as in their mother tongue!"

Legend: LKG and LRU – Participants, who filled questionnaires in Kyrgyz and Russian respectively.

EKG and ERU – Participants, who indicated their ethnicities as Kyrgyz and Russian respectively.

LKG includes the Kyrgyz with different religious and language identities.

EKG includes only those Kyrgyz, who indicated their religion as Muslim.

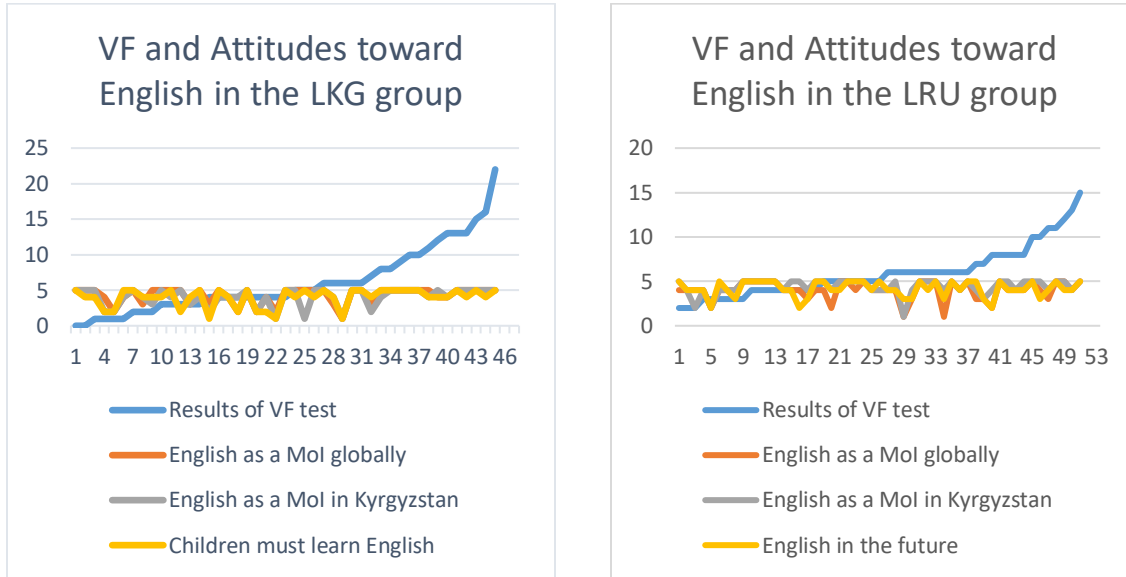
Table 2. Total sums of marks in support of opinions about English

	O1	O2	O3
Total sum of marks by female participants	198	200	194
Total sum of marks by male participants	185	192	183

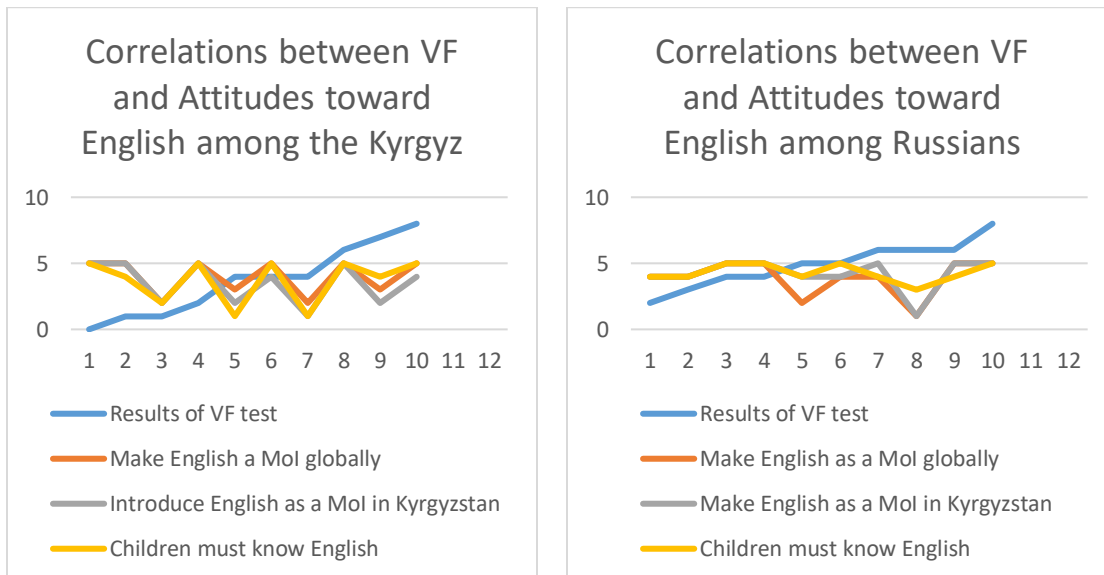
Table 3: Average scores in support of English by participants working in different spheres of economy

	O1	O2	O3
Private business owners	3.95	3.9	3.8
Government workers	4.14	4.43	4.14
Employees of International organizations	4.63	5	4.88
Educators and scientists	4.52	4.57	4.30
Technical workers	4.83	4.42	4.35

Graph 1. Correlations between VF test results and attitudes towards English among participants who chose to fill questionnaires in Kyrgyz or in Russian (with sorted VF column)



Graph 2. Correlations between VF test results and attitudes towards English among ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Russians (with sorted VF column).



Discussions:

Table 1 and corresponding graphs show that the correlations between VF test results and attitudes towards all 3 opinions are rather small, since none of the numbers in the cells are close to -1 or 1, which would indicate strong negative or positive correlations. This means that for these participants the level of VF has no correlation with the attitudes toward English in both groups. Nevertheless, numbers in the cells differ between language groups significantly. The correlations between the results of VF test and attitudes towards English differ between participants who filled questionnaires in Kyrgyz and Russian, as well as between religious groups. In general, the LKG group has more positive correlations towards all 3 questions than the LRU group. The striking difference between these groups is also the last row in the table where the results of the former is 13(!) times higher than the latter (0.26 vs. 0.02). This means that the higher is the VF of KG Group the stronger is their support for English as MoI in their children's education. The result can also be interpreted as the positive correlation between ELP and English language for the LKG group. It's interesting, though, that the LRU group showed the opposite result – the higher is VF, the lower is the support for English.

Participants with better English in the LKG group also supports introduction of English as MoI throughout the world 3 times stronger than the participants with better English in the LRU group. (0.22 vs. 0.07). The former also has more desire

to start teaching subjects in English than the latter one. So, these results, especially the third row, suggest that the English language proficiency has different effects on Kyrgyz speaking and Russian speaking groups. However, religion may significantly contribute to this difference between LKG and LRU, as well as EKG and ERU. In particular, the difference between the LKG (0.29) and EKG (-0.22) pertaining to Opinion 2 (O2) is significant. This shows that religions play an important role to the degree of desire for English as a MoI in Kyrgyzstan among the ethnic Kyrgyzs. In other words, non-Muslim ethnic Kyrgyzs responded to the O2 significantly positively than the Muslim Kyrgyz.

Female participants support all 3 opinions about English stronger than males (Table 2). Among professions, those who are employed in international organizations support all 3 opinions more than the others, though some technical workers show even stronger support for O1. The second group in this table are educators and scientists.

Conclusion

The study showed that there is a strong correlation between religious identity, gender, jobs and attitudes towards English. In particular, Evangelical Christians, female participants and the employees in international organizations support LPwE more than others. An explanation why these groups favor English may derive from

the fact that they have more frequent contacts with English speakers and international community than the other participants.

The other factors, including age, verbal fluency in English, education level, ethnicity and first language, contribute no significant support in the language policy that encourage English as the third important language for current and future life of Kyrgyzstan.

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