

NAVIGATING LINGUISTIC STRATIFICATION: SOCIOLINGUISTIC PROFILING AND EQUITY-ORIENTED PEDAGOGIES IN POST-SOVIET ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

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Annotations: The current study offers a sociolinguistic case study of twelve teenage ELSs in Karakalpakstan, investigating the impact of segregation into Karakalpak-medium and Russian-medium school groups on learners' linguistic potential, self-confidence, motivation, and engagement in the classroom. The study demonstrates that learners in the Karakalpak-medium groups are disadvantaged, while learners in the Russian-medium groups enjoy linguistic and social capital. The study also provides learner profile data that illustrates the intersections of language medium with gender, ethnicity, and identity. The paper argues, based on these findings, that a critical approach to pedagogy that goes beyond essentializing categories of identity, drawing on narrative theory, is necessary to achieve linguistic justice in EFL teaching in Expanding Circle settings.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics, multilingual education, linguistic hierarchy, post-Soviet context, Karakalpakstan, equity, critical pedagogy

Introduction. This research focuses on a sociolinguistic background of twelve English-learners among adolescents in Karakalpakstan, with an emphasis on the mediating role of their educational streams in Karakalpak medium schools and Russian medium schools in the process of English acquisition, academic involvement, and English learners' motivation. Based on the principles of sociolinguistic theory (Fought, 2011; Labov, 1963), the study critically examines the effects of unequal access to linguistic resources in the formation of different educational trajectories. In addition, the study addresses the limitations of categorical sociolinguistics (Tirvassen, 2018) to emphasize the complex character of English acquisition in the hierarchically structured multilingual context.

The cohort comprises pre-intermediate learners, numbering twelve, with four females and eight males, from a private educational center in Karakalpakstan. The participants are all native Karakalpak speakers proficient in Uzbek, but their educational background represents a fundamental dichotomy: some have received their education through the Russian medium, while others have received it through Karakalpak. Such a dichotomy represents a larger social hierarchy, where Russian holds a "covert prestige" (Fought, 2011).

However, learners of the Karakalpak medium face challenges based on linguistic marginalization and academic stratification. These learners are not provided with any bilingual materials written in both Karakalpak and English, and they are forced to use the Uzbek language as an intermediary language, which is cognitively demanding for them. These learners are also put in the Karakalpak medium because they failed the entrance exams in the Russian medium. There are also structural differences between the Karakalpak and English languages, which make these learners hesitant and in need of external motivation, as described by Labov (1963) as language cannot be separated from its social context.

On the other hand, learners in the Russian medium group come into the learning process with more linguistic capital. Research suggests that early exposure to a language, like Russian,

helps learners develop metalinguistic skills that are beneficial for learning other languages like English. Additionally, exposure to Russian-English materials relieves cognitive load, a clear example of Schilling’s (2011) definition of linguistic resources as a form of social capital. Furthermore, learners in this group tend to dominate discourse in class, a characteristic associated with high levels of confidence and intrinsic motivation, a common phenomenon in societies where a dominant language is a hallmark of academic potential.

Individual profiles blur these binary boundaries. An individual Karakalpak-medium female faces issues with spontaneous speaking, due to a lack of Russian language skills and resources at home. A Russian-medium female is a high achiever in organized tasks but avoids male-dominated group activities. A Russian-medium bilingual male is a competent speaker but frequently disengaged and inattentive. A Karakalpak-medium shy male is a competent writer in grammar but avoids spontaneous speaking.

These stories require a critical perspective on subgrouping. Although the Karakalpak/Russian-medium binary highlights structural issues, overemphasizing these boundaries may conceal individual experiences. Tirvassen (2018) argues that a narrative approach should focus on individual biography and interaction. This corresponds with Van Booven’s (2018) view that there should be a focus on developing sociolinguistic and interactional ability rather than on ability boundaries.

The described reality calls for pedagogical strategies that are sensitive to both structure and individual learner needs. Differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2001) can address learners of different needs and ability levels, thus lowering Krashen’s (1985) “affective filter.” Strategic use of code-switching can be a key facilitator of comprehension without undermining English immersion objectives (Deumert, 2011). Think-pair-share and sentence starters such as “I think... because...” can be useful strategies to promote equitable opportunities for participation.

The addition of cultural themes from Karakalpak culture may also enhance learner identity and combat marginalization (Bayley & Villarreal, 2018). Mixed-gender groups and alternating leaders may also combat issues of discursive dominance (Schilling, 2011). The addition of technology through curated digital media may also enhance learner engagement and receptive multilingualism (Deumert, 2011).

Traditional standardized tests have been known to be discriminatory against marginalized students. More flexible and formative tests, such as portfolios, projects, and journals, may offer a more holistic view of the student. Rubrics may be used to clarify the criteria, but tests must be adapted to assess interactional competence, or the ability to interact in different social contexts, as well as the student’s dynamic identity (Tirvassen, 2018; Van Booven, 2018).

Conclusion. This study demonstrates the ways in which institutional structures, language practices, and social identities intersect to produce stratified learning opportunities in the English classrooms of Karakalpakstan. It contends that in such settings, the teacher’s role should extend beyond the language classroom to become a critical mediator and advocate for equity. By taking a responsive approach to teaching and learning, grounded in sociolinguistic analysis and narrative understanding, the teacher may empower the learners not only to improve their language skills but also to become sociolinguistically competent, confident, and self-efficacious agents. This approach is consistent with a critical approach to teaching English

that challenges the hierarchies of power marginalizing non-dominant language communities (Canagarajah, 1999).

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