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## Level teaching of the English language in schools of Kazakhstan: perception and understanding of the reform by teachers

This article is devoted to the analysis of the current state of level teaching of the English language in schools in Kazakhstan. The introduction of the Common European Framework of References for Languages in the process of foreign language education in Kazakhstan entailed significant changes that made it possible to improve the quality of teaching English, bring it closer to international standards, and ensure its competitiveness at the global level. However, research has shown that in order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to take into account the awareness and opinion of teachers. This article is an exploratory study examining the application of CEFR in the English language teaching system in general education schools in Kazakhstan, with emphasis on the knowledge and opinions of teachers. The article also provides a brief overview of world experience in the practical application of the principles of CEFR in teaching English. This study used a survey for English teachers as the primary data collection method. The results of the study showed that there are difficulties at the school level that affect the final result of proficiency in English language teaching. Nevertheless, thanks to the adopted language policy, the country is undergoing a progressive development of foreign language education and purposeful work is being carried out to ensure the quality of teaching English, which is reflected in almost all program documents for the development of education.

*Keywords:* level language teaching, Common European Framework of References, activity approach, trilingual education.

### Introduction

One of the main approaches in the strategy of trilingual education in Kazakhstan is level training in Kazakh, Russian, English languages in accordance with the international CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) standard. English, one of the three target languages, is the language of integration into the global community. High-quality mastering of this language is one of the strategic objectives of the development of the education system in Kazakhstan. Starting from 2017, students of grades 5 and 7 switched to level-based education (in 2018 — 4th and 8th, in 2019 — 3rd and 9th, etc.), who over the next years should «align» language competencies in accordance with the CEFR levels, since these levels were not previously provided for in the curriculum. However, the «mechanisms» of the educational process for «leveling» language learning of schoolchildren have not been developed. Today, in the scientific community of Kazakhstan, there are many works devoted to the prospects and problems of trilingual education in Kazakhstan. The preconditions for the shift to level teaching of languages in Kazakhstan were as follows:

a) in empirical terms: the formation of the Center for Trilingual Education at the National Academy of Education named after I. Altynsarin; monitoring of a pilot project on multilingual education in 33 specialized schools of Kazakhstan was carried out twice [1–2]; the early study of English (from the 1st grade) in all schools of the country began from 2013–2014 academic year; the Regional program for the development of trilingual education in East Kazakhstan region for the period of 2015–2019 is being implemented; the National Academy of Education monitored the approbation of educational programs and textbooks;

b) in theoretical terms: analysis of the existing state educational standards and curricula as a basis for organizing preparatory work for the transition to trilingual education was carried out [3]; a research program in the field of trilingual education has been developed [4]; a program for preschool children has been developed to study the state, Russian and English languages in play and interactive forms [5]; a teaching aid for integrated teaching of the English language and academic subjects of the natural science cycle (Computer science, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Natural science) was developed [6]; programs of additional education for schoolchildren in three languages and programs of extracurricular work of high school subjects, which

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will be studied in English, have been developed [7], recommendations on methodological support for the development of multilingual education in general secondary education system (analytical materials, guidelines) have been developed [8], Concept of development of foreign language education in the Republic of Kazakhstan [9], Concept of development of multilingual education in the Republic of Kazakhstan [10], fundamental research of the problems of foreign language [11], multilingual education [12] has been carried out.

The works of such scientists as S.S. Kunanbaeva, B.A. Zhetpisbaeva [13–14], B.M. Aitbaeva [15] and others are devoted to the problems of scientific and methodological support of multilingual education in Kazakhstan. Many linguists — educators believe that the basis of multilingual education should be a properly structured system of teaching languages, corresponding to the real situation of development of the scientific, methodological and methodological base of languages [16–20]. The model of trilingual education in Kazakhstan is not analogous to CEFR, but takes this document as a basis and adapts its ideas and basic provisions to the specific conditions of the national education system.

Although there have been many studies on the implementation of CEFR in curricula in different countries, the existing literature focuses only on the implementation of CEFR in a European context. This study will attempt to fill this gap by examining the application of CEFR principles and level English teaching in the Kazakh education system, with an emphasis on teachers' perception and understanding of the reform.

This article represents exploratory research in the selected field and is a part of the dissertation thesis.

*CEFR in Europe.* Much effort has been focused on exploring the practical use of this system. In foreign literature, the term «common currency» became applicable to CEFR system [21, 22]. For example, Broek and Ende [23] conducted a study to investigate the use of CEFR in the European education system and the impact of the system on examinations, curriculum development, textbooks, and teacher training. The result of the study showed that the relationship between the system itself and language assessment is weak, but the general approach to language learning, the materials used (where curricula and textbooks take into account the contextual use of the language and CEFR descriptors), as well as teacher training is carried out with reference to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Another study in Italy was undertaken to identify the impact of CEFR, sociolinguistics and pragmatics on foreign language teaching in high school. The main focus of the study was the awareness of teachers and the teaching methodology used. Maldina argues in her writings that CEFR plays an indirect role in shaping curricula and teaching methods used by teachers. Limited knowledge of CEFR, lack of awareness of the system are identified as the reasons for the weak link between CEFR and teaching practice in schools. Because of this, teachers do not view CEFR as a valuable tool for improving the quality of foreign language teaching [24].

Another study was conducted by Buckland at the Wall Street Institute (WSI) in Spain to compare expected learning outcomes with CEFR principles. Research has proven excellent correlation between WSI learning levels and CEFR descriptors with 80 % match. Thus, Buckland found that the WSI curriculum and expected learning outcomes are quite comparable to CEFR [25]. As mentioned earlier, the CEFR aims at setting goals and ensuring the development of a language program. This is especially true in Central and Eastern Europe. The various levels of CEFR offer teachers options for learning objectives, curriculum design, teaching and testing methods, allowing them to expand the teaching range. Berešova investigated the possibility of comparability of the state exam in English in Slovakia with CEFR. Research has shown that CEFR is a useful tool not only for maintaining the quality of teaching and learning languages, but also for testing target language knowledge. The study also argues that this comparability helps to initiate strategic actions to develop three main areas in education, namely standard, assessment and teaching professionalism [26]. Although CEFR was developed as a tool for synchronizing language teaching, learning and assessment, Fulcher writes in his research that CEFR is used more universally for standard assessment, which in turn obscures the original purpose of the system [27].

*CEFR in Asia.* In Japan, studies were conducted to examine an attempt to adapt CEFR to national language exams and ultimately led to the development of their own framework, which they called CEFR-J. The idea of developing such a structure came from a study conducted to determine the level of English proficiency among Japanese employers, according to which 80 % of registered employers showed knowledge below level A (non / basic user), less than 20 % of them were classified as level B (independent users), while a very small number of employers were proficient at a level close to C (advanced users) [28]. Taking into account the fact that CEFR must be open and flexible to adapt to any language situation, CEFR-J was developed with the inclusion of certain sublevels in the original version of CEFR. Due to the low competences level among Japanese employers, it became necessary to develop levels below A level of the original CEFR. Thus, the new CEFR-J has been developed with a number of adaptations. First, the inclusion

of three sublevels in A1 CEFR level and the creation of «pre-A1» level, which consists of A1.1, A1.2 and A1.3. Second, levels A2 and B2 are further divided into two sub-levels A2.1 and A2.2, as well as levels B2.1 and B2.2.

Nakatani studied the possibility of using CEFR to improve the communication skills of Japanese students through communication tasks. The result of the study showed a significant improvement in their competencies [29].

A similar study was undertaken by a group of scholars in China to explore the possibility of using CEFR to assess writing skills when organizing the College English Test (CET). CEFR has been found to be highly practical, provided that teachers receive suitable and appropriate training in the use of CEFR assessment criteria. Prior to the training on the use of the assessment system, the teachers' awareness was tested using a questionnaire, and it was found that CEFR is completely unknown to teachers from the «formal» education, as they showed little or no awareness. However, through training by a CEFR expert (from the British Council, United Kingdom), the practical relevance of CEFR assessment criteria has been demonstrated as a very useful tool for promoting foreign language education in China [30]. All of the above mentioned studies have provided empirical evidence that CEFR implementation has benefits for improving the English language education system. Despite the fact that CEFR has the potential to improve the system of foreign language education, its implementation has received different feedback from teachers around the world.

However, as the system of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages influences the reform of educational programs around the world, along with the reforms in the scientific community, attempts are increasingly being made to study the experience of implementing this system in the context of different countries. For example, in France, school teachers on the one hand are filled with anxiety and fear, because with very little knowledge of the newly adopted structure, they will need to revolutionize their teaching system, on the other hand, they are overwhelmed with a sense of enthusiasm, since teachers see CEFR as a system for teaching «magical thinking» and see it as innovation in language education [31]. A study of the implementation of CEFR in Poland, carried out by Komorowska, revealed a complaint about «insufficient dynamics of the development of phonological competence» [32, p. 107]. The complaint was a reference to page 117 of the CEFR (2001) document, which provided only a brief discussion of pronunciation and prosody, whereas methods of teaching pronunciation and prosody were not suggested. By the way, this criticism was accepted by the system developers and in CEFR 2018 version the most significant change in descriptors has been the complete replacement of the integral phonological control scale. Most studies show that CEFR has advantages in improving English language education programs, but a prerequisite for successful implementation is to ensure that the core principles of the system are properly implemented.

### *Experimental*

To study the experience of implementing CEFR based level teaching of English in our educational context an experiment was conducted which involved 25 English teachers from 6 secondary schools in Karaganda, Kazakhstan. All respondents were selected among teachers of secondary schools who were trained in recent courses for teachers of English as part of updated content of secondary education in the Republic of Kazakhstan. Such courses are periodically organized by JSC «National Center for Advanced Studies»Orleu»with the support of regional institutes for advanced training of teachers. This sample of respondents is explained by the fact that teachers with basic knowledge of CEFR were able to provide answers directly on the topic under the study, which greatly facilitated data collection. The study used a quantitative methodology. The data was collected using a questionnaire. There are several reasons that influenced the decision to choose the survey in this study. First, it provides extensive and useful information that is not available through simple observation. Secondly, if the questionnaire contains open-ended questions, then this allows participants to give their answers to fully disclose a specific question. Finally, it gives researchers control over the types of information they receive, because they decide for themselves what questions will be asked in the questionnaire. By virtue of its peculiarities, questionnaires have a number of advantages over other methods of polling: the time for registering respondents' answers is reduced due to self-counting; formalization of answers creates the possibility of using mechanized and automated processing of questionnaires; thanks to anonymity, it is possible to achieve sincerity in the answers. The questionnaire consisted of 20 open-ended questions, mainly focused on measuring teachers' awareness of CEFR and how CEFR affects their teaching methods, assessment, and materials used in teaching English.

*Results and Discussion*

Teachers' experiences were studied to shed light on aspects of curriculum implementation. Conclusions and discussion below will focus on the following elements:

- General knowledge about CEFR;
- Levels, goals and objectives of CEFR;
- Teaching method;
- Evaluation method;
- Development of materials

Table 1

**Knowledge of teachers on some key elements of CEFR implementation**

Basic knowledge on CEFR	School 1 (in %)	School 2 (in %)	School 3 (in %)	School 4 (in %)	School 5 (in %)	School 6 (in %)	Total (in %)
CEFR levels	70	65	53	79	55	67	64,8
Aims and objectives of CEFR	55	47	39	60	44	66	51,8
Teaching method	70	73	75	71	70	86	74,1
Evaluation method	65	63	67	59	64	64	63,6
Development of materials	49	55	52	52	49	57	52,3

Based on the data received, all respondents confirmed that they knew 6 CEFR levels. This knowledge was gained in the course of trainings, seminars and workshops that they attended, as well as through their own study of the literature on actual problems of teaching EFL. Based on the data collected, all respondents have a general knowledge of CEFR levels, which shows an average of 64.8 % (ranging from 53 to 79 % awareness), but not all teachers are well versed in what competencies each level defines. They only mentioned the levels that students must reach at the end of each semester of their study period. For example, 2nd grade students must reach A1 CEFR level at the end of the study period, and 5th grade students must reach A2 level. In addition to having knowledge of different levels according to CEFR, general knowledge of CEFR also implies knowledge of the goals and objectives of the system. Thus, not all teachers were aware of the goals and objectives of the reform being pursued. Only 51.8 % of the respondents indicate that they are fully familiar with the goals and objectives of CEFR. For example, some of the respondents in schools 3 and 5 noted that they adhere to instructions given «from above», while the essence of the reform is not clear to them. The rates in these schools are lower than in the rest. Although all teachers had had training, a complete and holistic understanding of the goals and objectives of CEFR itself still remains vague for teachers whereas the content of the training programs devoted a certain number of hours to familiarization with CEFR. According to the respondents, the implementation of the new program was imposed and carried out in the shortest possible time, while the number of hours of training, as noted by the majority, precisely in terms of the goals and objectives of CEFR is not sufficient for effective practical application in the classroom.

In terms of the teaching method, most of the respondents believe they know which teaching method is recommended by CEFR. However, not all the teachers understand and adhere to the same teaching method in the same way according to the curriculum. Some teachers mentioned that CEFR focuses on speaking skills and therefore they are now trying to change their teaching method to focus on the development of speaking. Consequently, communication activities are often carried out in the classroom. Some responded that they believed CEFR focuses on all four skills. When asked about actual practice in the classroom, the majority of respondents believe that the new reform has somehow influenced the learning process in the classroom, as a result of which they move to communication activities in which students are encouraged to use language for communication. Thus, the majority of respondents have an idea of the teaching method recommended by CEFR, the majority of answers (74.1 %) indicate that communicative activities are used in the classroom (positive answers vary from 70 to 86 %).

The answers showed that the respondents are familiar with the assessment method. The range of positive answers from respondents in this section of the survey varied from 59 to 67 %, and the average indicator was 63.6 %. Most of the respondents seem to know how to grade students according to CEFR standard. Among teachers, however, not everyone understands this aspect of the curriculum. It should be noted that in Kazakhstani education system, criteria-based assessment of students' knowledge is used, which,

in terms of subjects, is subdivided into assessment tools: formative and summative assessment. However, the English language competencies are assessed based on the criteria and descriptors recommended by CEFR for each level. All of the interviewed teachers took advanced training courses on criteria-based assessment, however, as the answers show, CEFR based assessment in the course content was provided in small amount. In their practice, not everyone uses the general concept of the recommended assessment: some have not learned how to compose tasks for complex assessment and use ready-made materials, someone has not fully understood the essence of this assessment. The most frequently encountered responses were about the difficulties arising in evaluating listening and speaking skills, developing assignments, scheduling summative assessment, and the tendency to form a large number of classes. These issues are associated with insufficient organization of cooperation and mutual support within school teams.

Material development is probably the most problematic element for teachers. Here the minimum rate of positive answers was 49 %, and the maximum was 57 %, the average rate for the surveyed schools was 52.3 %. All teachers indicated that they use the material prescribed by the ministry (a textbook) when introducing CEFR in the classroom. The use of recommended textbooks by teachers can be explained by two reasons. First, teachers stated that using the textbook is the surest and safest way to stay in the CEFR program. Since the textbook is prescribed by the ministry, its use for teaching can ensure that the lesson is in line with the curriculum. Second, using the textbook will save them more time than developing their own material. Among the responses was also the opinion that nowadays teachers are required to complete too many tasks, which leaves them very little time for developing their own material. However, there were also those among the respondents whose answers voiced dissatisfaction with the content of the textbooks. In their opinion, the assignments were written without taking into account the assessment principles recommended by CEFR.

### *Conclusions*

Based on the findings and discussion in the previous section, the implementation of CEFR in Kazakhstan can be viewed from three perspectives. First, curriculum reform is undoubtedly a complex process, and it is simply unrealistic to expect complete success and smooth implementation in a short period of time. Second, the implementation of the curriculum requires teachers to take on new roles and responsibilities, and change their practice in accordance with the new standard. Therefore, the continued efforts and support of all parties is very important, especially the support of colleagues and authorities. Finally, it is important to prepare teachers to implement change through on-the-job and pre-job training. Trainers responsible for delivering teacher training should be selected from experts to ensure effective intervention at all stages of the program implementation. Despite the fact that, according to state regulations governing foreign language education in schools of Kazakhstan, teaching foreign languages is based on the principles of level approach, real educational practice shows that levelteaching of the English language is not fully implemented within schools. Indeed, the process of teaching English in schools is based on standard foreign language curricula, which are designed in accordance with and taking into account international standards of level teaching. On the basis of these programs, in turn, textbooks were developed to meet the requirements of the communicative orientation of the educational material and correspond to a specific level in a continuous multi-level system of teaching English. Thus, it can be argued that the procedural and content component of foreign language education in schools of Kazakhstan ensures the implementation of level teaching of foreign languages and the reason for its incomplete implementation in practice lies in another aspect. In our opinion, the basis for such a state of affairs may be a number of the following reasons:

- there is a lack of preparedness of teachers for teaching languages in conditions of level education, which is expressed in insufficient knowledge in working with new educational literature, the use of new approaches and teaching methods;
- there is a practice of large classes (more than 30 students), which reduces the effectiveness of the teaching process, which results in low motivation of teachers to use the principles and methods of level teaching, and students to learn a foreign language;
- there is an insufficient provision of the process of teaching foreign languages with the appropriate educational and methodological literature and technical equipment, which have a significant impact on the quality of the educational process.

Thus, we see that a number of certain difficulties are noted at school level that affects the final result of teaching foreign languages in general. Nevertheless, thanks to the adopted language policy, the country is undergoing a progressive development of foreign language education and purposeful work is being carried

out to ensure the quality of teaching English, which is reflected in almost all program documents for the development of education. Thus, with regard to foreign language education in Kazakhstan, it can be stated that the following tendencies of its reform are observed in the state: implementation of level teaching of foreign languages in accordance with CEFR; introduction of early teaching of English; implementation of trilingual education.

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### **Қазақстан мектептерінде ағылшын тілін деңгейлік оқыту: мұғалімдердің реформаны қабылдауы және түсінуі**

Мақала Қазақстан мектептеріндегі ағылшын тілін деңгейлік оқытудың қазіргі жағдайын талдауға арналған. Қазақстандағы шет тілдерін оқыту үдерісінде тілдерге арналған CEFR жүйені енгізу ағылшын тілін оқыту сапасын арттыруға, оны халықаралық стандарттарға жақындатуға және оның әлемдік деңгейде бәсекеге қабілеттілігін қамтамасыз етуге мүмкіндік берген елеулі өзгерістерге алып келді. Алайда, зерттеулер көрсеткендей, бұл мақсатқа жету үшін мұғалімдердің көзқарасы мен пікірін ескеру қажет. Сондай-ақ, авторлар ағылшын тілін оқытуда CEFR қағидаларын іс жүзінде қолданудың әлемдік тәжірибесіне қысқаша шолу жасаған. Бұл зерттеуде негізгі мәліметтер жинау әдісі ретінде ағылшын тілі мұғалімдеріне арналған сауалнама қолданылды. Зерттеу нәтижелері мектеп деңгейінде ағылшын тілін оқытудың соңғы нәтижесіне әсер ететін қиындықтар бар екенін көрсетті. Осыған қарамастан, қабылданған тілдік саясаттың арқасында елімізде шет тілінде білім беру қарқынды дамуда және білім беруді дамытудың барлық дерлік бағдарламалық құжаттарында көрсетілген ағылшын тілінің оқыту сапасын қамтамасыз ету бойынша мақсатты жұмыстар жүргізілуде.

*Кілт сөздер:* тілді деңгейлеп оқыту, шет тілдерін меңгерудегі жалпы еуропалық құзыреттілік, белсенділік тәсілдері, үштілді білім.

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### **Уровневое обучение английскому языку в школах Казахстана: восприятие и понимание реформы учителями**

Статья посвящена анализу современного состояния уровневого обучения английскому языку в школах Казахстана. Внедрение общеевропейских компетенций владения иностранными языками в процесс иноязычного образования в Казахстане повлекло за собой значительные изменения, которые позволили повысить качество обучения английскому языку, приблизить его к международным стандартам, обеспечить его конкурентоспособность на глобальном уровне. Однако исследования показали, что для достижения поставленной цели необходимо принимать во внимание осведомленность и мнение учителей. Авторами дан краткий обзор мирового опыта в практическом применении принципов CEFR в обучении английскому языку. В этом исследовании в качестве основного метода сбора данных использовалось анкетирование учителей английского языка. Результаты исследования показали, что на уровне школы отмечаются свои трудности, влияющие на конечный результат уровневого обучения английскому языку. Тем не менее, благодаря принятой языковой политике, в стране идет поступательное развитие иноязычного образования и проводится целенаправленная работа по обеспечению качества обучения английскому языку, которая находит свое отражение почти во всех программных документах развития образования.

*Ключевые слова:* уровневое обучение языкам, общеевропейские компетенции владения иностранным языком, деятельностный подход, трехязычное образование.

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