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INTERSECTING LINGUISTIC HIERARCHIES AND LEARNER TRAJECTORIES IN MULTILINGUAL UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract. This article describes a sociolinguistic case study of twelve pre-intermediate English language learners, aged 14-15, in Karakalpakstan, a multilingual region in a post-Soviet country. The study explores how language hierarchies, i.e., the segregation of Karakalpak-medium and Russian-medium school streams, affect learners' linguistic resources, learner confidence, learner motivation, and learner participation. The language hierarchy and segregation of school streams are also discussed, focusing on how Karakalpak-medium learners are marginalized compared to Russian-medium learners, whose early exposure to Russian corresponds more to English than to Karakalpak. The article also describes individual learner profiles to show how language medium, gender, ethnicity, and identity intersect and affect learners' educational paths. The implications of the study are discussed, focusing on how a critical, narrative-informed approach to teaching can avoid essentialist language and learner categorizations and promote learner empowerment in multilingual, socially stratified language learning situations. The study contributes to the overall discussion on equity, linguistic justice, and teacher agency in expanding-circle EFL teaching situations.

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

Introduction. Within the context of a multilingual educational environment, the interplay between pedagogy, language, and identity is seen to play a significant role in the learning experience of the student. This paper aims to develop a sociolinguistic profile of twelve adolescent English language learners in Karakalpakstan, exploring how their linguistic backgrounds, i.e., their affiliation with Karakalpak-medium or Russian-medium educational streams, mediate their experience of English language acquisition, educational achievement, and motivational factors. By its application of sociolinguistic theory and research, the study critically investigates the ways in which the differential distribution of linguistic resources and positioning present challenges and opportunities in the process of language learning (Fought, 2011; Labov, 1963). The research critically engages with the arguments of those who question the validity of categorical sociolinguistics (Tirvassen,

2018), with the aim of bringing into focus the complex, individuated nature of the process of learning English in a hierarchically organized multilingual environment.

The group of interest consists of twelve pre-intermediate students (four females and eight males) enrolled in additional English courses at a private educational institution in Karakalpakstan. Although all students come from Karakalpak-speaking homes and have native-like proficiency in the state language, Uzbek, their educational background diverges. A substantial number of them have primary education in Russian, while the others are educated in Karakalpak, with Russian being taught as a foreign language. This structural divide within the institution is clearly formative, influencing not only language biographies but also confidence levels, classroom discourse, and motivational factors, thus reflecting the larger post-Soviet sociolinguistic order, where Russian holds considerable hidden prestige (Fought, 2011).

For students from Karakalpak-medium backgrounds, there are challenges associated with linguistic marginalization and academic stratification. Heritage languages, as noted by Fought (2011), are often plagued by inadequate institutional support. This is exemplified by the lack of bilingual learning materials for Karakalpak and English, thus forcing learners to use Uzbek as an intermediary language, a cognitively demanding and demotivating experience for learners. Students are also allocated to Karakalpak-medium classes after failing to meet academic standards in Russian-medium placement tests, thus illustrating a stratification of academic achievement. From a structural perspective, there are more phonological and syntactic challenges associated with Karakalpak-English due to their greater linguistic dissimilarity compared to Russian-English. This is exemplified by learners’ hesitancy, high teacher scaffolding needs, and an overall dependency on extrinsic motivation, thus illustrating a behavior consistent with Labov’s (1963) axiom that one cannot separate language from its social context (p. 275).

On the contrary, Russian-medium students generally arrive in the English classroom with more linguistic capital. The early acquisition of Russian as an additional language seems to foster metalinguistic understanding and techniques beneficial for the acquisition of English as a second language later on. The acquisition of Russian-English learning materials minimizes cognitive load, and this is in accordance with Schilling’s (2011) theorization of linguistic resources as social capital. This group generally holds dominant discourse position and exhibits increased levels of confidence and self-sustaining motivation. The ease with which this group adjusts to the English classroom reflects broader sociolinguistic currents where proficiency in a dominant language is often associated with academic and future potential and is a feature of dialect prestige (Nichols, 1983, as cited in Fought, 2011).

While the trends from subgroup analysis are informative, the individual student data provide a level of complexity to what otherwise might be seen as simplistic groupings. For instance, a female student from the Karakalpak-medium group is struggling significantly with her spontaneous spoken language and grammar, her lack of proficiency in Russian and her limited linguistic resources at home contributing to this problem. In contrast, a high-achieving female student from the Russian-medium group displays a high level of confidence and accuracy in her controlled use of language but seems tentative in her collaborative group

work, as if she is holding back in a discussion dominated by her male classmates, reflecting the intersection of gender-based styles of interaction and linguistic privilege. A multilingually proficient male student from a Russian-medium background shows high levels of spoken language proficiency but is often disengaged and distracted, thus scoring variably on tests unrelated to his linguistic ability. A male student from a Karakalpak-medium stream shows strong grammatical accuracy in controlled writing but is hesitant with spontaneous spoken language due to high levels of shyness.

These narratives also call for a critical approach to the process of subgrouping. Although the Karakalpak/Russian-medium distinction is a fruitful tool for understanding structural inequality, over-reliance on such categories might obscure the everyday reality of learners' lives. Tirvassen's (2018) argument is highly relevant in this context, as he problematizes the dominant sociolinguistic approach, which, in his view, privileges reductive categories over the narrative nature of identity construction in language practice. A narrative approach, he suggests, requires that we foreground personal biography and interactional dynamics. Such a stance can be related to Van Booven's (2018) emphasis on developing sociolinguistic and interactional competence, suggesting that we move beyond reductive ability categories towards promoting students' ability to deal with diversity in communicative contexts.

This analysis can be further enhanced when examining the intersection of gender and ethnicity. With eight males and four females, classroom participation can be seen as supporting Schilling's (2011) findings on competition and, possibly, a predominantly male discourse. In most cases, female students tend to be observers, contributing most actively when directly solicited by the instructor. Ethnically, the learners are homogeneous as Karakalpaks, and their experiences are stratified along linguistic lines. Fought's (2011) notion of ethnic and linguistic identity as 'twin skin' (239) can be seen as pertinent when examining the marginalization of Karakalpak-medium learners as a function of ethnic hierarchies favoring Russian speakers within the postcolonial educational landscape. Calder's (2020) intersectional approach can be seen as useful when examining ethnicity, medium of instruction, and gender as intersecting factors that can shape learners' access and self-efficacy.

The current learning environment is a private tutorial school in Nukus, where students attend to make up for what they feel is lacking in school English classes and to reach the B2 level of proficiency that is often necessary for entry into higher education. Teaching is conducted using global course materials like Solutions Pre-Intermediate and Grammarway 2, as well as practice materials from the Preliminary English Test (PET), whose alignment with CEFR standards is justified by criterion alignment, as described by Ayhan (2015). The classroom environment, where Russian-medium students are more active and willing to contribute, reflects the findings of Eckert (2003) on the institutional basis of linguistic confidence. Code-switching between English, Karakalpak, and Russian is done for the purpose of ensuring understanding, thus offering a practical refutation of the "monolingual mindset" as described by Kachru (1990, p. 13).

The envisaged use of English in the future for this group is largely academic in nature, with all students aiming for higher education, while others also aspire for international education. According to Kachru’s model, Uzbekistan belongs to the Expanding Circle, where English is used for educational advancement, not for daily communication. Such use of English as a tool for advancement has pedagogical implications, as it requires meeting the ‘neutral norm’ of English varieties in inner circle countries, as argued by Bayley & Villarreal (2018, p. 3). However, with concepts such as Deumert’s (2011) ‘receptive multilingualism’ (p. 265) and suggestions for developing pedagogical materials that ‘embrace variation’ by incorporating local cultural themes, as argued by Bayley & Villarreal (2018, p. 5), it is possible to bridge such gaps.

The sociolinguistic realities, as they are documented, call for pedagogies that are sensitive both structurally and individually. Differentiated instruction, as discussed by Tomlinson (2001), which centers on the strategic variation of the level of complexity and the provision of support, may help in engaging the students at different levels, hence reducing the so-called "affective filter" as discussed by Krashen (1985). Some may need the provision of visual aids and language frames, while others may be encouraged through open-ended and analytical tasks.

The strategic use of pedagogical code-switching appears to assume significant importance as a vital scaffold for the learners, especially when they have limited proficiency in the bridging language. As Deumert (2011) also concedes, the use of language alternation is an integral feature of the multilingual classroom. Momentarily using Karakalpak or Russian for the purpose of explaining complex instructions or abstract ideas may avoid comprehension failure. To address the problem of imbalanced participation, the interaction may be managed through the use of think-pair-share and the offer of “I think… because…” types of conversational gambits, which are in line with the Vygotskian model of supportive collaboration.

The creation of identity-responsive learning materials is an essential aspect in the development of learner engagement, especially among marginalized students. The inclusion of materials that reflect aspects of Karakalpak cultural heritage, history, or issues can be utilized as a means of validating the learner’s identity, which could potentially be amplified, as was discussed in the study by Bayley & Villarreal (2018). Conversely, the strategic grouping of students based on a mixed gender composition and leadership can be utilized as a means of breaking down discursive dominance, as was discussed in the study by Schilling (2011). The inclusion of technology can capitalize on the interest of the students who are inclined towards digital media, which can be utilized as a means of promoting the concept of receptive multilingualism through the aid of technology, as was discussed in the study by Deumert (2011).

In such cases, the traditional methods of assessment might not take into consideration the sociolinguistic factors described above, which might put learners from marginalized linguistic groups at a disadvantage. Traditional assessment methods, which are standardized and time-constrained, might not be an accurate reflection of the abilities of learners who are accustomed to processing language through multiple linguistic channels or who are

assessment-anxious. There is an urgent need for more flexible and formative assessment practices. Other forms of assessment, such as portfolio assessment, project-based assessment, and journal-based assessment, might provide a more detailed insight into learners' development. This agrees with Ayhan's (2015) suggestion that assessment tools should be designed in such a way that they do not discourage learners from their low grades by providing developmentally focused feedback.

Rubrics for analytical assessment of essential language skills can help unmask teacher expectations and alleviate student anxiety. Nevertheless, as argued by Tirvassen (2018) and Van Booven (2018), language assessment needs to move away from the current focus on static language knowledge. There is a need for a narrative and interactional approach that considers the dynamic identity of the learner and focuses on interactional competence, which refers to the ability to move through meaning-making in various social contexts. This critical approach encourages constant questioning of whether assessment practices are inadvertently supporting dominant language ideologies.

This sociolinguistic profile demonstrates the significant ways in which these structural, historical, and social factors intersect to produce distinct trajectories of learning in the English language classroom in Karakalpakstan. It demonstrates that, in such a context of linguistic stratification, the teacher's work necessarily expands beyond that of a language teacher to that of a critical mediator and advocate. As a matter of professional practice, it must extend to the development of the learner's sociolinguistic and interactional competence, such that they can navigate diverse worlds of communication. This means a pedagogy that is deeply aware of power structures, sensitive to the individual learner's narratives, and focused on the creation of a space where all voices can emerge. Such a pedagogy would, in fact, be a form of critical pedagogy, as conceptualized by Canagarajah (1999), that works to resist the hierarchical structures that marginalize non-dominant linguistic communities. In this context, English language teaching becomes more than a linguistic project; it becomes a project of developing the confidence, resilience, and agency required to navigate and construct a learner's multilingual worlds.

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