The Language Flagship Program and Multilingualism in Overseas Language Immersion

Samuel Eisen

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rlj

Part of the Slavic Languages and Societies Commons

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.70163/0036-0252.1024
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rlj/vol70/iss1/2
The Language Flagship Program and Multilingualism in Overseas Language Immersion

SAMUEL EISEN

Abstract
The relocation of the overseas Arabic and Russian Language Flagship programs to Morocco and Kazakhstan created challenges and also opportunities for advanced students of Arabic and Russian to develop greater intercultural understanding as they negotiate the cultural underpinnings of these multilingual environments. These students will bring in more nuanced understanding of complex international environments as they move into positions in government or other international fields. The Language Flagship program is designed to meet the need for professional language proficiency and intercultural skill in federal service. In both Morocco and Kazakhstan, the local language is undergoing revitalization while the post-colonial language still serves as a language of science and education. In Morocco the local dialect of Arabic is considered marginal in the Arab world, and Flagship students now learn both Moroccan and Egyptian dialects. Russian Flagship students are now learning basic Kazakh along with advanced Russian. The homestay environments in particular are a space in which family and intergenerational dynamics demand nuanced understanding of ethnic and cultural sensitivities. The multicultural dynamics can be especially challenging for US heritage Russian learners in Kazakhstan. The complexities of the trend toward Kazakhization within an ideology of multilingualism to promote interethnic peace and stability necessitate the introduction of basic Kazakh into the curriculum for the advanced US students of Russian in Almaty in order for them to succeed in a changing multicultural environment.

Keywords: language flagship, multilingualism, study abroad, less commonly taught languages, Kazakhstan

1 Disclaimer: The contents of this article are the opinions of the author and not of the Department of Defense.
1. Introduction
Flagship students are increasingly bringing advanced language proficiency into multicultural and multilingual environments overseas where complex interethnic and generational dynamics may problematize the use of the target language within the cultural context. This article will outline the US federal needs for graduates with multilingual and multicultural talents, survey the context of advanced Arabic learning in Morocco, and then examine more deeply the complexity of learning Russian in Kazakhstan in the current context of Kazakhization.

2. Multilingualism and federal service
A number of Federal overseas language and culture immersion programs have had to relocate from the traditional centers of culture to more peripheral locations, often into bilingual or trilingual settings where the target language may not be the dominant cultural or professional language. These relocations present challenges for overseas immersion in terms of language preparation, cultural perspectives, and professional training in a multilingual and multicultural environment. Current multilingual environments for overseas language immersion in the Flagship programs and initiatives include Arabic immersion in Meknes, Morocco; Russian immersion in Almaty, Kazakhstan; Turkish immersion in Baku, Azerbaijan; and French immersion in Dakar, Senegal. While the relocation of the Arabic and Russian Flagship programs overseas has created challenges, it also creates the opportunity for advanced students of Arabic and Russian to develop greater breadth and intercultural understanding as they negotiate the cultural underpinnings of these multilingual environments. As a result, the students will bring in more nuanced understanding of complex international environments as they move into positions in government or in other international fields.

The David L. Boren National Security Education Act of 1991 created a unique federal program that combines the mandate to improve US foreign language learning with a mission to expand the pool of US graduates with foreign language proficiency and regional expertise for service in government. The Language Flagship program provides intensive language instruction for over 1,250 registered US undergraduates of all majors at 23 domestic institutions and 7 overseas locations in 7 strategic languages. Flagship emphasizes proficiency-based instruction and
content learning at advanced levels in the target language across a variety of fields and disciplines. Students gain advanced proficiency on their home campus and then participate in the overseas capstone programs, which include intensive language instruction, local university courses, homestays, and professional internships. Overall, approximately 69% of Flagship students achieve professional proficiency after the capstone year, and the percentage in Russian is nearly 90% (National Security Education Program [NSEP] 2019, 109–10). Eight domestic institutions now host the Russian Flagship, and six participate in the Arabic Flagship program. The Russian and Arabic overseas Flagship capstone programs are administered by American Councils for International Education.

The Language Flagship program responds to the need for a partnership between the Federal Government and US higher education to address critical shortfalls in the number of US graduates with the professional language proficiency levels needed for the national security sector (Nugent and Slater 2017, 10). Since 2010, the National Security Education Program has offered a dedicated Boren Flagship scholarship for undergraduates participating in the overseas capstone programs in order to provide support and a pathway into federal service. In exchange for the overseas scholarship funding, these students commit to a year of federal service drawing on the language and intercultural skills gained during their overseas immersion experience. The ROTC Flagship initiative also provides scholarship opportunities with service for over 100 ROTC cadets and midshipmen currently enrolled in the Flagship program (NSEP 2019, 26).

Gail McGinn, who served prior to retirement as the first Department of Defense Senior Language Authority, observes, “Given the reach of our government’s work, and the complexities of today’s world, knowing the languages of the world is more critical than ever. Truly, the Federal Government’s need for foreign language and cultural expertise is broad and it is deep” (McGinn 2015, 3). McGinn presents a thorough overview of the gaps in language proficiency capability across agencies such as Department of Defense, State Department, USAID, and FBI. McGinn cites figures indicating that 77% of State Department Language Designated Positions were filled by personnel with the required proficiency and that while Department of Defense positions were 81% filled, only 28% of those positions were filled with personnel at the full proficiency level (15–20).
However, steps taken under the Defense Language Roadmap and the National Security Education Program in particular are beginning to address the lack of personnel proficient in strategic languages for the positions. Across the federal government, Flagship graduates now serve in a variety of positions where their language and intercultural skills are needed and not necessarily limited only to one target country or culture. Flagship graduates have been hired for positions in the Department of Defense, the Department of State, USAID, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Intelligence community, as well as in the Department of Treasury, the Department of Commerce, and NASA (https://www.thelanguageflagship.org/content/careers). For example, the US Customs and Immigration Service (USCIS) hired a number of Flagship alumni to serve in the Refugee, Asylum, and International Operations (RAIO) Directorate. According to USCIS officials in the Strategic Talent Acquisition and Resourcing Team,

The humanitarian nature of RAIO’s work and its international presence mean that employees must be able to interact with and elicit critical information from individuals from different cultures. A number of NSEP Language Flagship alumni have used cultural adaptability in their roles as RAIO officers. . . . USCIS values the international experience, strong communication skills, and cultural sensitivity that many NSEP alumni develop through their international work. The insights they bring help overcome even the most challenging cultural differences, allowing NSEP alumni to play a vital role in how our nation serves the most vulnerable immigrant populations. (Discourse: Fall 2018)

In sum, Boren Flagship students are launching careers that require not only analysis skills tied to reading and listening ability but also broad regional focus involving skillful diplomacy and negotiation and the ability to work with people affected by regional conflicts and instability. In this context, the multilingual or multidialectal and multicultural training afforded of necessity in the Flagship Overseas Capstone programs answers the needs for training global professionals preparing to negotiate complex and interrelated regional issues.

3. Multilingualism in the Arabic Overseas Flagship in Meknes
On the Arabic Overseas Flagship Capstone program in Meknes,
Morocco, and the Russian Overseas Flagship Capstone program in Almaty, Kazakhstan, students operate in a variety of contexts—classroom, homestay, internship, local university—that each offer different multilingual challenges. Multilingualism is a “characteristic feature” in the postcolonial and post-communist settings (Stavans and Hoffman 2015, 94) and figures in the establishment of individual, social, professional, and national identity (Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004, 2, 5). Pavlenko and Blackledge note that previous study of interethnic group dynamics has been criticized for “its monolingual and monocultural bias, which conceives of individuals as members of homogenous, uniform, and bounded ethno linguistic communities and obscures hybrid identities and complex linguistic repertoires of bi- and multi-linguals living in a contemporary global world” (5). The Moroccan and Kazakh patterns of multilingualism both exhibit features of incomplete replacement of the colonial language, but with strong incentives to maintain knowledge and usage of the colonial language for educational and professional purposes.

The language environment in Meknes, Morocco, is primarily a mix of Arabic, French, and Berber. The inherent diglossia of Arabic adds to the linguistic complexity, as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is the register used for more formal conversation and as the medium for communication with the wider Arab world, while Daarija, the local Moroccan Arabic dialect, is used in more informal contexts. Daarija is relatively distant from the Levantine and Egyptian dialects of Arabic, which are more central within the Arab space. After gaining independence in 1956, the Moroccan constitution declared Arabic rather than French the official language and embarked on a policy of Arabization to create a MSA that could eventually replace French as the language of administration, education, and science (Stavans and Hoffman 2015; Ennaji 2005). Arabic functions as the language of cultural identity and national unity, while attitudes toward French remain positive in its function as a language of modernization, science, education, and administration (Stavas and Hoffman; Ennaji 2005).

When the Arabic Flagship Overseas Capstone program moved from Egypt to Morocco in summer 2013, Arabic language immersion in the Moroccan multilingual environment required a number of adaptations. In order to preserve the highly effective Arabic curriculum taught in Alexandria, and in order to maintain training in the Egyptian Common dialect, the Arabic Flagship took the unusual step of inviting a
core of the Egyptian instructors to come to Meknes and teach MSA and Egyptian dialect while Moroccan instructors concentrated on Daarija. Contrary to the common wisdom in the field, the Flagship students engaging in higher-level study of two dialects simultaneously were able to demonstrate high proficiency in MSA, Egyptian dialect, and Daarija (*Discourse: Spring* 2015).

Flagship preparation at the domestic institutions now includes training in Daarija as well as Egyptian dialect. However, French language is not part of the pre-program curriculum, and this can cause complications in classes, internships, and homestays with well-educated families. A study of the homestay experience for US students in a non-Flagship Arabic program in Tunisia, a language environment similar to Morocco, found it necessary to emphasize to host families the importance of speaking Arabic, after students complained when families reverted to French or English for communication (Shiri 2015, 12, 15). Shiri notes that this linguistic environment “differs considerably from the idealized, monolingual environment that study abroad, and specifically the homestay experience, are supposed to offer second language learners” (7).

In Morocco, US students who have no French must struggle to convince local people to converse informally with them in local Arabic dialect against all expectations. Students may experience convergence (where the interlocutor uses language preferred by the addressee) to indicate friendly relations, or divergence (where the interlocutor uses language that the addressee is less comfortable with) in order to distance the addressee (Ennaji 2005, 4). In classes at the Moulay Ismail University, students must learn to use the correct register of Arabic. In internships in Morocco, a biology major interning in a blood lab encountered computer systems entirely in French and often had to remind colleagues to switch back to Arabic in order to communicate with him. Conversely in internships working with traditional crafts masters, the students found greater opportunity to converse with colleagues and improve mastery of the dialect (Eisen 2014, 15–16).

4. **Overseas Russian language immersion in the context of Kazakhization**

While there are many similarities among postcolonial settings and the
post-Soviet setting, there are also historic and geographic circumstances that differentiate the situation in the post-Soviet space (Moore 2006, 17). Russia has struggled throughout its history with how to classify the Eurasian space (23). Shared history with Russia played a complex and formative role in the creation of Kazakh identity and a Kazakh language, literature, and intelligentsia (Sabol 2003, 54–55). During the Soviet period, Kazakhs who learned Russian could mediate between the influx of monolingual Russians, who wielded administrative power, and the less educated Kazakh population. Prior to independence, ethnic Kazakhs were a minority in the republic in the range of 30% (Olcott 2002, 31; Fierman 2012, 1081; Smagulova 2008, 170). As part of a general program to increase the status of the Kazakhs in the nation, a language law passed in August 1989 created a public role for the Kazakh language in administration (Olcott 2002, 32). In 1997 a new law established Kazakh as the official state language while maintaining Russian as a language with equal status (Fierman 2012, 1083; Smagulova, 2008 175). Tensions remained, however, as monolingual Russians are frustrated by being addressed in Kazakh, and Kazakh speakers are annoyed with people who cannot exchange simple greetings in Kazakh (Olcott 2002, 74). As Kazakh language steadily gained ground, monolingual Russian speakers found themselves at a disadvantage while the vast majority of Kazakh speakers enjoy the advantages of fluency in both languages (Olcott 2002; Fierman 2012; Pavlenko 2008). Burkhanov cites a view promoted by the Russian cultural organization LAD that “Kazakh cannot serve as a language of modern politics, science, and education, since Kazakh, historically, never was the language of higher culture and civilization; rather, it was just the language of nomadic folklore poetry and epics” (Burkhanov 2017, 9). Interethnic tensions then remain and influence the view of Kazakhs by ethnic Russians as well the perception of Russian monolingualism by Kazakhs.

E. D. Sulemeinova argues that the specific linguistic history of Kazakhstan, characterized by the influx of diaspora groups as a result of prior deportations and other trends, the influx and then exodus of Russian speakers, and the earlier and current policies to develop Kazakh as the national language, has overall led to a higher level of bilingualism in Russian and Kazakh than seen in other post-Soviet contexts (Sulemeinova 2009, 23–24). The Kazakhs balance an ethnic
nationalist trend against a desire to retain good relations with Russia in their language policy. Most Kazakhs value Russian language and culture as a positive tradition providing modern technology, education, and a window into the broader world and do not wish to sacrifice the advantages of Russian language proficiency (Olcott 2002; Smagulova 2008). Kazakhstan has embraced a multiethnic country and the benefits of multilingualism, unlike neighboring countries that have followed a more nationalist path and de-russified their language environment (Fierman 2012, 1091). Sulemeinova observes that the trend toward linguistic Kazakhization, in which the government is systematically mobilizing social, educational, and governmental resources to promote the Kazakh language, still draws on the highly multilingual environment to develop Kazakh as a stabilizing force and balancing, rather than suppressing, Russian and other languages both exogenous and indigenous to Kazakhstan (Sulemeinova 2010, 250). In 2015 the Ministry of Education and Science of Kazakhstan issued a “Roadmap of Trilingual Education for 2015–2020” with the aim of integrating trilingual education in Kazakh, Russian, and English at all levels of the educational system (Moldagazinova 2019, 1). The multicultural emphasis and trilingual strategy are integrated under the broader stated goal of then President Nazarbayev that Kazakhstan become one of the 30 most developed nations in the world (Syzdykbaeva 2016, 16). To further engage the younger generation, regions in Kazakhstan conduct a trilingual Olympiad called the “Tyldaryn” for ages 18–25, and returned English-speaking Boloshak scholars are expected to teach for two hours per week at academic centers (Moldagazinova 2019; Syzdykbaeva 2016).

However there is also a Kazakh nationalist undercurrent that students of Russian must understand as they balance Russian and Kazakh perspectives. Kazakh reinterpretations of Russian history and the Russian literary tradition underpin official state doctrine and the contemporary relationship with Russia. Harsha Ram’s analysis of the reinterpretation of the Igor Tale by the Kazakh poet and essayist Olzhas Sulemeinov in his book, Az i Ia, illustrates how Sulemeinov privileges Turkic linguistic influence on the Igor Tale to show the closeness of the Turkic and Slavic peoples (“synthesis” and “interdependence”) instead of the conflict between them (Ram 2001, 292, 299). Turkic pride that privileges the primacy of the Turkic language nevertheless emphasizes shared geography and history with the
Slavs. Ram further shows how Olzhas Sulemeinov’s rereading of the Igor Tale itself draws on Russian modernism, particularly in works of Marr and Khlebnikov, in redefining center and periphery in Eurasia (Ram 2001, 291). Similarly, Lev Gumilev’s reinterpretation of the Battle of Kulikovo dismisses the domination by the Mongols and reinterprets the battle as the moment of fusion of Slavic and Turkic peoples against the West (Catholics, Jews, and Muslims) (Bassin 2015). Marlene Laruelle points out the relevance of Gumilev’s work within the context of Kazakh Neo-Eurasianism, noting that the national Eurasian university in Nur-Sultan has been named after Gumilev. Laruelle argues that the non-Russian Neo-Eurasianists valorize their own cultures through “symbiosis” with Russian culture and that Kazakh Eurasianism shifts the center to Kazakhstan as the place of the meeting of East and West, Europe and Asia, Russia and the East (Laruelle 2015, 188). On the Russian side, however, Sulemeinova cites evidence that when the Russians promoted Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek as national languages, they asserted that these languages had no relation to the earlier Turkic languages that preceded the rise of Russian language and domination (Sulemeinova 2010, 232).

With the current trend toward Kazakhization, in “Strategy Kazakhstan 2050” Nazarbayev declared that “the Kazakh language is our spiritual center” (Arntz 2018, 54). Further in February 2018 Nazarbayev declared that official meetings would be held only in Kazakh, although pressure from Russia and the Ukraine example forced Nazarbayev to walk that back (56). The current plan to switch the Kazakh language to the Latin alphabet indicates a further move to distance the language from Russian.

Students in the Russian Flagship Overseas Center at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University in Almaty learn Russian from a mix of highly qualified Kazakh and ethnic Russian experts. The language gains from the relocated program in Almaty using the Petersburg curriculum in the first year were very close to the gains seen in the highly regarded program at Saint Petersburg State University. The language environment differs from St. Petersburg not so much in the Russian spoken by local residents but in the sociolinguistics of code-switching between Russian and Kazakh. Homestays on the program are generally placements with highly educated families associated with the university or other professional organizations. Educated ethnic Kazakh families who
usually speak Kazakh at home did not report any difficulty switching to Russian at home with the US students. However, in many urban Kazakh families Russian language may predominate at home for more extended conversations, thus reinforcing the use of Russian despite widely professed parental ideology that Kazakh should predominate (Amantay, Aigerem, and Karabay 2017, 14). Smagulova notes the phenomenon of “school talk,” where the introduction of Kazakh language education for the students creates a dynamic where parents use a didactic or pedagogic function for Kazakh but revert to Russian in more natural situations. Although the use of “school talk” reduces the role of Kazakh in many urban home settings, it also establishes the concept of Kazakh as a “high” language of education (Smagulova 2017, 13). By learning basic Kazakh, the US student in a homestay then participates with both the parents and the children in the pedagogic revitalization of Kazakh, while still strengthening everyday and more formal Russian language with the educated parents. In general, a preference towards Kazakh language may divide the young generation and parents (Burkhanov 2017, 11). However, a disparity can sometimes be seen in the language ideology and practice among youth, where more young people ascribe Kazakh as their native language as an ethnic identification than actually demonstrate mastery of Kazakh language (Moldagazinova 2019, 3).

In addition, primarily Russian-speaking home environments may exhibit a fair amount of code-switching between Russian and Kazakh, depending on cultural context (Amantay, Aigerem, and Karabay 2017, 16). In particular, Kazakh is often spoken with grandparents or elders as a sign of respect (17). At larger family gatherings or with relatives from more rural areas, more switching back to Kazakh may also occur. Within this context for student homestays, a basic knowledge of conversational Kazakh can greatly improve the chance for success in cultural interactions even where a primarily Russian speaking family homestay is selected.

In order to facilitate basic everyday interactions, the Language Flagship program introduced survival Kazakh into the curriculum alongside the advanced Russian study. Out in public the US students may frequently be addressed in Kazakh. At first this led to an unpleasant dynamic similar to the discomfort that Russian monolingual speakers feel on being addressed in Kazakh. Through the introduction of a
minimum level of bilingual education into the curriculum (a blended online Kazakh language course, “Сәлем, Қазақстан! “ (Kudyma and Manatkul 2017). has been developed to prepare students before going to Almaty), students who had expected an essentially monolingual immersion environment will be able to interact effectively with a wider range of people. The US students found that if they are able to exchange polite greetings with people who address them in Kazakh, most will be very willing to switch back into Russian for ease of communication.

The sociolinguistic challenge can be greater for US heritage language students who look and sound ethnic Russian, as local Kazakh speakers expect less willingness from them to interact socially and more likelihood for them to tend to cluster with Russian monolinguals. The notion of the “good” Russian or “our” Russian in the Kazakh media denotes Russians that “accept Kazakh political dominance” and “speak the Kazakh language and know or study Kazakh traditions and history” (Burkhanov 2017, 12). Thus it is doubly important for the Russian heritage language students to be able to demonstrate basic Kazakh and an interest in Kazakh culture in order to be comfortably accepted in the current sociolinguistic environment.

The Russian language is still predominant in many professional internship settings. In general, the environment in Kazakhstan has opened a wider range of internship possibilities than were available in St. Petersburg. The experiences of two heritage speakers of Russian and Spanish testify to the value of learning in the multilingual environment, as reported in the Discourse newsletter:

2 Kagan examined the sociocultural aspects of how heritage language learners are situated in their US environment as well as in their family’s native land, pointing out the sociocultural challenges for heritage learners’ “conscious awareness of significant differences between the individual’s own culture and the other culture and attempts to adjust behavior accordingly”:

If we analyze these features with a focus on heritage speakers . . . the differences between the learner’s “own culture” and the “other culture” need . . . to be reinterpreted. The home culture of the individual may also be based on a regional variant of the target language and culture or otherwise idiosyncratic (for example, based on a multicultural linguistic milieu), and it therefore needs to be juxtaposed with the dominant culture of the target country. (Kagan and Martin 2017, 148)

Kagan’s work on heritage learners provides a frame for precise analysis of linguistic and cultural issues for students encountering their heritage culture at home or overseas: it also informs our perspective on the situation facing today’s overseas Language Flagship capstone students.
Yelena Muratova interned at a company that produces business and cultural content for national television channels in Russian and Kazakh. She says she gained “some very valuable . . . insight into how the television industry works in Kazakhstan” compared with her experiences in US journalism and studying the sociology of mass media at UCLA. Students have developed new perspectives on the language and region. UCLA’s Braunny Ramirez says, “I came back with a further appreciation for Kazakhstan and Central Asia. It is such a unique experience to study Russian in a country other than Russia. I think many [people] tend to forget that there are so many native Russian speakers outside of Russia” (Discourse: Spring 2016).

In the current context, stronger emphasis on Kazakh in the overseas Russian capstone program enriches the student experience and is a necessity to maintaining good standing and good will within the host country. Entering the host country with the linguistic basis to negotiate these multilingual environments overseas, the Language Flagship students will be much better positioned for success in the overseas environment and will develop more nuanced multilingual and cross-cultural skills for service in government and other international fields.

References


---. 2010. “Русификация и казакизация как языковая гогоменизация многоязычного Казахстана [Rusifikatsia i kazakizatsiia kak iazykovaia gogomenizatsia mnogoiazychnogo Kazakhstana]”