

Developing Kazakh Language Fluency Test in Nazarbayev University

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Abstract—The Kazakh Language Fluency Test, based on the IELTS exam, was implemented in 2012 at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan. We would like to share our experience in developing this exam and some exam results with other language instructors. In this paper, we will cover all these peculiarities and their related issues. The Kazakh Language Fluency Test is a young exam. During its development, we faced many difficulties. One of the goals of the university and the country is to encourage fluency in the Kazakh language for all citizens of the Republic. Nazarbayev University has introduced a Kazakh language program to assist in achieving this goal. This policy is one-step in ensuring that NU students have a thorough understanding of the Kazakh language through a fluency test based on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). The Kazakh Language Fluency Test exam aims to determine student's knowledge of Kazakh language. The fact is that there are three types of students at Nazarbayev University: Kazakh-speaking heritage learners, Russian-speaking and English-speaking students. Unfortunately, we have Kazakh students who do not speak Kazakh. All students who finished school with Russian language instruction are given Kazakh Language Fluency Test in order to determine their Kazakh level. After the test exam, all students can choose appropriate Kazakh course: Basic Kazakh, Intermediate Kazakh and Upper-Intermediate Kazakh. The Kazakh Language Fluency Test consists of four parts: Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking. They are taken on the same day in the abovementioned order.

Keywords—Diagnostic language test, Kazakh language, placement test, test result.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE Kazakh Language Fluency Test serves as a placement test for the 1-year students in order to determine their Kazakh Language. Nazarbayev University is the only university in Kazakhstan that has the status of an autonomous educational organization.

In Kazakhstan, there is also KAZTEST [1], State Kazakh test which is mandatory for those who apply for civil service or candidates for 'Bolashak' Programme. This Programme is a scholarship which is awarded to high-performing students from Kazakhstan to study abroad. The KAZTEST is also serves as a diagnostic language test, but it does not include speaking part, which is very essential for Nazarbayev University students. In this paper, the the peculiarities of the

Kazakh Language Fluency Test, its importance and structure, as well as test results are briefly introduced.

The Kazakh Language Fluency Test is given twice a year: firstly, the students of Foundation Program are given in order to determine their Kazakh level, because Kazakh Language Program offered to Foundation Program students differs from Kazakh Program developed for Undergraduate students. Secondly, all 1-year students take the Kazakh Language Fluency Test during orientation week, and the test results are indicated on Student Information System. In 2012 and 2013, undergraduate students of Basic and Intermediate levels were given this test after completing each course. It served as a diagnostic test for students who had the biggest weakness in speaking Kazakh. In order to improve their speaking skills, Nazarbayev University offered Intensive Kazakh Summer Program. After completing Intensive Kazakh course in summer, that test was given again for students who earned less than 5 bands and took Intensive Kazakh course. The test result showed that all students made a progress in learning Kazakh. Consequently, they were moved to a higher level of Kazakh language.

II. TESTING CENTER IN KAZAKHSTAN

The purpose of the National Testing Center of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan is organizational and technical support for improving quality of education in the permanent education system of the Republic of Kazakhstan, introduction of a new model of student population in the Republic of Kazakhstan.

National Testing Center carries out work on control of the quality of knowledge of pupils, students, applicants for master's degree and PhD applicants, and also monitoring of the education system and formation of student population of higher educational institutions of Kazakhstan through the common national testing and complex testing of applicants. The Center carries out intermediate state education control in secondary and higher vocational education institutions, scientific research regarding national assessment system of the education quality, harmonization of domestic education system with an international educational space.

A. Overview of the Types of Activity of the National Testing Center

Common national testing. Common national testing is a form of the final certifying examination of students of the general secondary educational institutions, combining with the entrance examinations in secondary and higher vocational education institutions. Common national testing is conducted

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for graduates wishing to enter secondary or higher vocational education institutions in the current school year, applicants for General Certificate of Secondary Education “Altyn Belgi” and General Certificate of Secondary Education with honours, winners of national scientific competitions and general academic competitions for schoolchildren in the current year.

Intermediate State Control. Intermediate State Control is a form of independent external control over the education quality. Intermediate State Control is conducted at primary (Grade 4) and basic (Grade 9) general secondary educational institutions, and higher educational institutions. Intermediate State Control of 4 Grade is carried out on one subject; Intermediate State Control of 9 Grade is carried out on three subjects. The list and number of subjects on which ISC is carried out are established by Ministry of Education and Science annually.

Complex Testing of Applicants. Complex testing of applicants is a form of examination conducted simultaneously on several subjects with the use of information technology. Complex testing of applicants is conducted for graduates of the general secondary educational institutions of past years; graduates of primary and secondary vocational schools (technical and professional, postsecondary); graduates of secondary schools who have learned abroad on the programs of international exchange of students and who have not taken part in Common National Testing; graduates of secondary schools with Uzbek, Uighur and Tajik teaching languages; graduates of national boarding schools of music; as well as those citizens who graduated educational institutions abroad.

Entrance examination for postgraduate education. External state control is implemented at admission for master's degree program, residency, adyunktura and Ph.D. during entrance examinations on foreign, Kazakh and Russian languages, which is conducted in accordance with National Testing Centre procedure. Thus, entrance language examination is conducted in the form of complex testing in the regional centers. The regional centers were established for the purpose of providing uniform requirements for candidates and increasing objectivity of the entrance examination results.

The system of Kazakh language knowledge evaluation – KAZTEST. Since 2006, the National Testing Center began works on establishing system of Kazakh language knowledge evaluation – KAZTEST. This is a domestic system for state language knowledge evaluation of citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan and foreign citizens engaged in various activities on the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan [2].

The KAZTEST is based on the international systems evaluating the level of knowing the language such as: TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign language); IELTS; TRFL (Test of Russian as a Foreign Language); DALF (Diplome Approfondi de Langue Française); DELF (Diplome d'Etudes en Langue Française); DSH (Deutsche Sprachprüfung für den Hochschulzugang); Grundbaustein DaF, Zertifikat Deutsch; TÖMER (Türkçe Öğretim Merkezi) etc. KAZTEST consists of Listening, Reading, Lexis-Grammar Part and Writing sections. Those who pass KAZTEST exam, get a certificate about their test result. [3]

Another online testing system which provides Kazakh language diagnostic test is a web-site developed by Caspian Training Group. This test consists of 50 questions and is available for everybody who is interested in learning Kazakh. A test taker is given multiple choice questions, and he/she should choose a right answer out of given four questions. The system provides the information about a test taker's Kazakh language level via email address [4].

III. OVERVIEW OF THE KAZAKH LANGUAGE FLUENCY TEST

Some local universities in Kazakhstan do not use placement test for determining the Kazakh knowledge of students, because they just offer practical Kazakh courses. Some Kazakhstani high schools use diagnostic language test developed by their faculty members. Most of them are based on multiple choices. As teaching experience shows, a diagnostic test where test takers are expected to select a right answer is very for Kazakhstani students for many reasons. Firstly, Kazakh language is taught in all secondary schools. Therefore, most of Kazakhstani people know the grammar of Kazakh language. Secondly, the Nazarbayev University students live in Kazakhstan where the state language is Kazakh language. The problem is that Nazarbayev University students (except international students) cannot make up complex sentences, cannot express their thoughts in Kazakh (both in written and oral) although Kazakh is a State language of the Republic of Kazakhstan. It is easy for most learners to choose a right answer if the question is like ‘which is the correct answer’ or ‘find correct endings to these sentences’. In general, learners find it difficult to find synonyms and/or antonyms in the text for the given words, because their vocabulary is limited. Taking into consideration all these facts, the Department of Kazakh Language, Literature and Culture made a decision to develop a complex testing system. The working group examined all diagnostic language tests, and started working on Kazakh Language Fluency Test («Қазақ Тіліне Жетіктігін Анықтау Тесті») which was implemented in April 2012 for the first time.

The structure and the strategy of the Kazakh Language Fluency Test is based on IELTS [5]. Each language skill of a test taker is evaluated here according to IELTS Assessment Criteria. As Nazarbayev University students find it difficult to express their thoughts in Kazakh (both in written and spoken), writing an essay on different topics and speaking about familiar topics allow us to determine the actual level of knowledge of Kazakh Language

IV. FACULTY MEMBERS AS TEST CREATORS

As the Kazakh Language Fluency Test is given 2 times a year, there are a lot of versions of this test. In 2014, the faculty members of the Department of Kazakh Language, Literature and Culture analyzed the test result in cooperation with the language experts from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and considered to share experience with other language experts.

Nazarbayev University is a leading university, and the graduates of this university are required to be fluent in three languages: Kazakh, English and Russian. Although Kazakhstan students had been studying Kazakh language for 11 years at school, their speaking in Kazakh still requires a lot of practice. They are taught Kazakh grammar well, so they can identify the right answer among three wrong answers. In 2012, the Kazakh Instructors of the Department of Kazakh Language, Literature and Culture decided to create a placement test based on IELTS, because it has also writing part (not grammar test) and speaking, which are very important for Kazakhstani students. This Kazakh Language Fluency Test is developed by the Kazakh Language Instructors of Nazarbayev University, who are fluent in English and took International English Language Testing. This instructor examined the structure, strategy and question types, as well as assessment criteria of IELTS, after the department created working teams. One team collected texts in Kazakh, other team analysed the level of difficulties of each question. In spite of busy work schedule of instructors, the newest test was developed at a given time. Due to the lack of instructors of Kazakh language, current developers had to work even at weekends to interview the students and check their written works. All of this works were very helpful for students to understand their linguistic strengths and weaknesses.

The Department organized workshops on creating questions based on the question types of IELTS. In 2012, our working group collected and adapted texts in order to use these materials for developing Kazakh Language Fluency Test. For the first time, the structure and strategy was based on IELTS. Taking into consideration the fact that Nazarbayev University students are learners who live in Kazakhstan, test creators made a slight change to the assessment criteria in 2013. Namely, there were questions about Kazakh culture and traditions. In 2014, it was decided to make a change into Listening and Reading sections. Some audio and video materials for listening part were taken from Internet resources. Texts for reading section were not adopted as before, and also Kazakh folklore, as well as newspaper articles were used by test creators. In this way, Kazakh Language Fluency Test enlarged its database.

Every year 500 Foundation Program students take this exam, before taking Kazakh courses and after completing Kazakh Program (when they become 1-year students of Nazarbayev University). Starting from 2013, students of Basic and Intermediate levels stopped to be given this test after completing Kazakh courses for Undergraduate Program students, because the teaching experience showed that learners made a considerable progress while sitting in appropriate Kazakh classes. Therefore, the necessity of taking Intensive Summer Kazakh course receded. Starting from 2016, the conception of Kazakh Language Fluency Test will be changed in terms of learners who graduated from Kazakh schools with Kazakh language instruction. Students who graduated from Kazakh schools with Kazakh language instruction will be given only writing and speaking parts.

V. THE STRUCTURE OF KAZAKH LANGUAGE FLUENCY TEST

The Kazakh Language Fluency Test is a new approach in language teaching in Kazakhstan. The advantage of the Kazakh Language Fluency Test is that it covers all 4 language skills: Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking which will be taken in one day. [6]

Listening consists of four sections. Students listen to four recorded texts and write the answers to a series of questions. The first section is a conversation between two people based on everyday context. The second section is a monologue set in a social context. The third section is a conversation between three people set in educational context. The last section is a monologue on an academic subject, usually ready Internet resources are used for this part. Each section has 10 questions, and each question is equal to one point. The students hear each recording only once. Duration is 30 minutes; students are given extra 10 minutes for transferring their answers to the Listening answer sheet.

Reading part includes three texts which are taken from Kazakh books, magazines and newspapers. The first text is taken from Kazakh folklore which is interesting experience for test takers. The second text ranges from the descriptive to discursive. The third long text may be cognitive and scientific articles taken from newspapers and Kazakh Wikipedia. There are 40 questions in Reading part. Duration is 60 minutes.

Writing part consists of two tasks as in IELTS. The duration is one hour. In the first task students are presented with a table, chart, graph or diagram and they are expected to explain the given information, also to describe or summarize by paying attention to the main information. Students have to write at least 150 words. The second task is writing an essay in response to a point of view or argument. Students are expected to write at least 200 words, using opinion words and phrases. Moreover, each essay should be well organized; an examiner will estimate also whether a student uses a wide range of structures with full flexibility and accuracy. This part also checks student's task achievement, coherent and cohesion, lexical resource and accuracy.

Speaking part is a face-to-face interview which lasts up to 15 minutes. At the beginning, an examiner asks about student's life, his/her family, interests and work. Then a student will be given a card that asks him/her to talk about a given topic. He/she has 2 minutes for preparation. Then the examiner asks questions connected to that topic.

VI. QUESTION TYPES AND ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

As a student is expected to find specific information, identify details and main idea, and interpret the speaker's opinion, there are different types of questions in the *listening part*. It contains the following types of questions: matching tasks, completing sentences/forms/notes, finding right answer(s), and short answer-questions. In Listening part each correct answer is awarded one mark, i.e. the maximum raw score a student can achieve on paper is 40. Band scores ranging from Band 1 to Band 9 are awarded to students on the basis of their raw scores [7]

Reading part questions check student's reading skill, understanding the main idea and searching for details. Students are given matching paragraph information questions, matching heading questions, True/False/Not given questions, summary completion questions, sentence completion questions, multiple choice questions, list selection, matching sentence endings, short answer questions and table completion. Reading part contains 40 items and each correct answer is awarded one mark, i.e. the maximum raw score a student can achieve on paper is 40. Band scores ranging from Band 1 to Band 9 are awarded to students on the basis of their raw scores.

In *writing tasks* students are awarded a band score for each of four criterion areas: Task Achievement (Task 1) and Task Response (Task 2); Coherence and Cohesion; Lexical Resource and Grammatical Range and Accuracy. The four criteria are equally weighted.

The *speaking part* is marked out of 9 according to the following criteria: Fluency and Coherence; Lexical Resource; Grammatical Range and Accuracy and Pronunciation. The four criteria are equally weighted.

Assessment criteria for the writing and speaking sections include student's knowledge of Kazakh folklore (the usage of Sayings and Proverbs, as well as creative writing and Critical Thinking. We find the elements of Kazakh Language Fluency Test to be very helpful even in classroom testing, because it appears more effective when test takers are given complex task, than when they receive only questions with multiple choice responses. In this paper, we will cover all these peculiarities and their related issues.

The passing score is at least 6 bands. Students have to receive an overall minimum score of 6. When setting the passing score just Overall Band Score is considered.

Each student's work is double checked by two faculty members. Then a third person compares evaluations, if there is confusion, one more examiner will be involved in this. All these steps are taken because faculty members of the Kazakh language, Literature and Culture Department as test developers aim to understand all the issues related to Kazakh Language Fluency Test, as well as learning outcomes. This is very important, because the Department of Kazakh Language, Literature and Culture is developing a new Kazakh Program for a new generation.

VII. TEST RESULTS AND DETERMINING KAZAKH LEVEL

The result of the test is declared within 15 days. Test result and each student's Kazakh level determined by the Kazakh Language Fluency Test will be available on Student Information System. This allows a student to be registered for Kazakh course appropriate to his/her Kazakh level.

The Department of Kazakh Language, Literature and Culture has developed the instructional advice for test takers, the guidelines for Kazakh Language Fluency Test Development for test creators.

In this paper the background and features of the Kazakh Language Fluency Test has been outlined. Even if there were many challenges, the faculty members of the Department of

Kazakh Language, Literature and Culture could overcome such obstacles and they are contributing their knowledge in further development of Kazakh Language Fluency Test. In the future, the university is planning to send the working group to testing center abroad.

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