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Identity options in the textbooks of Russian and Kazakh as second languages

Abstract. *Identity options available in secondary school textbooks may play an important role in stimulating or inhibiting the learners' success. They are particularly significant in the multi-ethnic Kazakhstani context with a large number of minorities and their cross-cultural communication in the society. This paper investigates identity options provided in second language textbooks for Kazakhstani secondary-school students. The identities of imagined learners, imagined interlocutors, and hidden identities that are not included were analyzed in the texts. The study results conclude that the textbooks' sets of identity options are likely stimulate or impede language learning. Findings from this study may contribute to the evaluation of current teaching methodology and materials and inform future textbook development with regard to identity representations and identity construction.*

Keywords: *identity, school textbooks, Russian, Kazakh, second language learning.*

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Kazakhstan is an ethnically diverse country with a population comprised of over 120 ethnicities [1, p. 4–5], but a vast majority of the people speaks one or both of the two dominant languages: Kazakh (74%) and Russian (94.4%) [1, p. 289]. These two languages are also the mediums of instruction in almost all the schools. While the official policy is to reach near-universal bilingualism by 2020—95% of the population are to be proficient in Kazakh and 90% in Russian [2]—in reality, graduates of Russian-medium schools rarely reach a high level in Kazakh, and graduates of Kazakh-medium schools, especially in the predominantly Kazakh-speaking regions, do not excel in Russian. This, for example, can be seen in the Unified National Test results: in 2016, the average score in Kazakh in Russian schools was 17.5 out of 25, whereas the average

score in Russian in Kazakh schools was 14.48 out of 25, and in the mostly Kazakhophone South Kazakhstan it was 12.7 out of 25 [3].

One of the reasons for such low results in language acquisition is often cited as low motivation and poor quality of textbooks [e.g., 4]. Norton [5] uses the notions of *imagined communities* (i.e. socially or individually constructed groups that language learners seek affiliation with, through literacy and language practices), and investment (i.e. affinity with the target language based on their desire to enlarge cultural capital and social power, and to acquire membership in imagined communities) to explain the learners' motivation (or lack thereof) and learning outcomes. Building on this theory, Shardakova and Pavlenko [6] discuss the *imaginary worlds* of language textbooks and

how they impact “students’ motivation, degree of engagement with the target language and culture, and development of their intercultural competence” [6, p. 28]. They introduce the term *identity options*, which are repertoires of identities offered to language learners through characters in the textbooks. Thus, identity options available in Kazakhstani textbooks may play an important role in stimulating or inhibiting the learners’ success. They are particularly significant in the multi-ethnic Kazakhstani context with a large number of minorities, as “misrepresentation, stereotyping, and oversimplification of these imaginary worlds could lead to cross-cultural miscommunication, frustration, offence, and conflict” [6, p. 28].

In this article, we investigate identity options provided in second language textbooks for Kazakhstani secondary-school students. In these texts, we seek the identities of imagined learners, imagined interlocutors, and *hidden* identities that are not included in the texts. In our analysis we follow the approach used by Shardakova and Pavlenko [6] in their study of a Russian as a foreign language textbook, where non-White identity options for learners as well as Russian speakers are missing [6, p. 31]. We then use these results to conclude if the textbooks’ sets of identity options are likely stimulate or impede language learning. Findings from this study may contribute to the evaluation of current teaching methodology and materials and inform future textbook development with regard to identity representations and identity construction.

In our analysis, we will pursue the following research question: Which identity options (both imaginary learners’ and imaginary interlocutors’) are presented (or hidden) in the texts?

Literature review

Identity in language learning has been recognized as one of the most powerful factors that affect students’ motivation to learn an additional language, and therefore success in learning it [e.g., 5,6].

Identity in language textbooks has been at the centre of attention of many scholars in recent years, and a large number of studies have been published on this subject. For example,

Shardakova and Pavlenko (2004) study identities of both learners and imaginary interlocutors in two Russian textbooks, while Azimova and Johnston [7] focus on the representations of Russian speakers in nine popular textbooks to see minorities’ representations in these texts. Both studies note a rather limited and unrealistic depiction of Russian society, which is, as in Kazakhstan, is extremely diverse in its ethnic, cultural, and linguistic composition.

A similar study of Swahili textbooks conducted by Thompson [8] concluded that these texts take an abstract approach to language teaching, and do not offer any realistic identity representations of the diverse Swahili-speaking communities, thus, failing to convey any significant cultural information.

The most common subject of textbook analyses is English as Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks. For instance, Shin, Exlami, and Chen [9] analyze seven internationally distributed EFL books, and Weninger and Kiss [10] look at two EFL textbooks produced in Hungary. Both of these studies note that the texts focus mainly on linguistic competences, and ignore, or provide little space for, identity representations of learners and interlocutors. In yet another paper, Alimorad [11] analyses two EFL textbooks used in Iran: one written by Iranian authors and used in most public schools, and one written by UK authors and available only to private school students. In this study, Alimorad finds that the Iranian text offers a significantly more homogenized representation of English speakers than the British one, suggesting that public school students are disadvantaged by this discrepancy.

Mun [12], in her master’s dissertation, analyses images in a set of 15 Kazakh school primers (i.e. books that introduce the alphabet) used in Kazakhstani public schools, and discovers that the set of identity options is extremely limited: in fact, there is not a single depiction of a non-Kazakh ethnic character in the books. She interprets this as the government’s attempt to construct the students’ national identity in ethno-centric terms.

All of the above studies have one thing in common. As Canale [13] finds in her analyses of

9 studies on cultural representations in foreign language textbooks, identity representations “follows a common pattern of homogenization” [13, p. 19], criticized by all the researchers. There seems to be a consensus among scholars on the need to expand the range of identities offered in language textbooks to provide a fair and true representation of the target language communities. Going back to the notion of *investment in imagined communities*, it is also important because “if we do not acknowledge the imagined communities of the learners, we may exacerbate their non-participation and impact their learning trajectories in negative ways” [14, p. 768]. This study looks at how the textbooks used in current practice of teaching Kazakh and Russian as second languages represent the target language communities and thus have an influence on the learners’ motivation and engagement with the languages.

Methodology

In order to address our research question, we explore the imaginary worlds provided in two currently used language textbooks for 5th-grade secondary school students: a Russian language textbook for Kazakh learners [15], and a Kazakh language textbook for Russian learners [16]. As all school students in Kazakhstan are required to learn either Russian or Kazakh as a second language, and the textbooks are all controlled centrally by the Ministry of Education and Science, this way we will cover the texts, to which almost all 5th-grade students of state schools are exposed to. The choice of grade was dictated by the fact that this is the earliest year in which students receive the maximum number of hours of Kazakh/Russian instruction, with these texts potentially producing the highest impact on the learners.

Following Shardakova and Pavlenko[6], we base our analysis of identity options presented in these two texts on the general discourse analysis framework proposed by Fairclough [17,18], which assumes “mediated connections between properties of texts and social and cultural structures and processes” [6, p. 30]. Unlike the books analyzed by Shardakova and Pavlenko, which are character-based with a clearly defined

learner character and the interlocutor characters representing the target language culture, our textbooks do not have such division. Thus, we assume all the characters present in the text, as well as other content, to represent both the learners’ and the interlocutors’ identity options, all of which, through learners’ interaction with the text, are likely to affect the learners’ investment in the target language. In our analysis, we focus not only on the actual text, but also on other semiotic features of the books, such as images, page layouts, and color palettes.

The study employs a mixed-method approach for textbook analysis. The quantitative part of the study aims to numerically evaluate the range of identity options (elements) present in the text categorised by ethnicity, gender, age, and class. These elements, as found in the textual data and in the images, are tabulated (Table 1, Table 2).

Table1 – Identity options available in images by age, gender, ethnicity and social class

	Russian-language textbook		Kazakh-language textbook	
Texts	27	100%	20	100%
Characters	54	100%	42	100%
AGE OPTIONS:				
Children	43	65.1%	24	58.5%
Adults	23	34.8%	13	31.7
Unidentified age	-		4	9.8%
GENDER OPTIONS				
Female	32	48.5%	19%	46.3%
Male	33	50%	18%	44%
Unidentified-gender	1	1.5%	4%	9.7%
ETHNIC OPTIONS				
Slavic	2	10.6%	-	
Central Asian	17	89.4%	16	80%
Unidentified ethnicity	-	-	4	20%
SOCIAL CLASS OPTIONS				
Urban middle class	8	47%	5	25%
Rural	1	6%	-	-
Unidentified-social class	8	47%	15	75%

Table2—Identity options available in texts by age, gender, ethnicity and social class

	Russian-language textbook		Kazakh-language textbook	
Texts	27	100%	20	100%
Characters	54	100%	42	100%
AGE OPTIONS:				
Children	30	55.6 %	22	52.4%
Adults	24	44.4%	11	26.1%
Unidentified age			4	9.5%
GENDER OPTIONS				
Female	16	29.6%	18	42.8%
Male	37	68.5%	20	47.7%
Unidentified (gender)	1	1.8%	4	9.5%
ETHNIC OPTIONS				
Slavic	11	40.8.8%	-	
Central Asian	7	25.9%	17	85%
Unidentified ethnicity	9	33.3%	3	15%
SOCIAL CLASS OPTIONS				
Urban middle class	21	77.8%	4	20%
Rural	3	11.1%	1	5 %
Unidentified social class	3	11.1%	15	75%

In the qualitative part, we performed content analysis by examining the context in which the characters are presented, as well as other properties of the text that may constitute identity options of imaginary learners and imaginary communities of target language speakers. We also seek to identify the ways the meaning encoded in the text or image can be decoded by the learner [19].

This method, however, has a significant limitation: it does not look into the students' interaction with the text and the meanings they infer from them [6], which needs to be investigated in future studies, including observations or interviews, such as, for example, Driagina and Pavlenko's[20].

Findings

The findings of the analysis are presented as a comparison between the two textbooks and grouped according to the three main categories of properties, i.e. format and layout of the texts, quantitative analysis (including pictures and human characters in the texts), and qualitative (content analysis).

Format and lay-out.

The two books have similar font and format. Both are grammar oriented: each chapter contains a new grammar section. However, image formats differ: the book "Russian language" contains black-and-white drawings; the pictures in the Kazakh language book include drawings and photographs, all of them in colour. The Russian book also contains an appendix of full-colour reproductions of five classical paintings by Soviet and Kazakh artists and six photographs of Kazakh national symbols, e.g. the eagle, the Kazakh national costumes, and the yurt (Figure 1). The pictures in both books and the general page lay-out crammed with text (Figure 2) are stylistically reminiscent of Soviet-era images and differ significantly from the modern images of and for teenage children normally seen in the media today.



Figure1—Example of full-colour insert showing Kazakh ethnic symbols (Russian textbook)

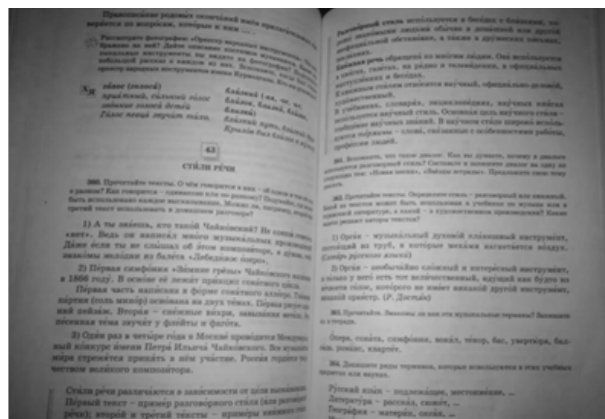


Figure2—Typical page lay out of the Russian language textbook

Quantitative analysis

Identity options in graphically depicted human characters.

Overall, the Russian language book contains 27 black-and-white drawings that depict people, who are mostly children (65%), urban middle class (47% with 47% unidentified) (e.g., Figure 3), and Central Asians (89%, most likely to be interpreted as Kazakhs). While there is a small proportion of pictures showing rural people (6%) (e.g., Figure 4), other social classes, such as the urban working class, are not represented at all. The typical situation in which the characters are depicted is the classroom (e.g., Figure 5).



Figure3—Example of picture of rural-class people (Russian language textbook)

The Kazakh language textbook contains pictures mostly children (58.5%) and Central Asian (80%). While the gender distribution is about equal (47% male and 45% female), the social class options are again only urban middle class (25%) and no rural characters (with 75% not clearly identifiable in terms of class).



Figure4—Example of urban middle-class family (Russian language textbook)



Figure5—Example of typical school setting (Russian language textbook)

Identity options in the human characters in texts

The identity options presented in the texts are quite different. The Russian texts contain about 41% ethnically Slavic characters and 26 Central Asians; mostly males (68.5% as opposed to 30% females), and urban middle class (78%). Again, there are no urban working class characters.

The Kazakh texts are relatively equal in terms of gender (43% males and 48% females), but all of the characters that could be ethnically identified are Central Asians (85%). Social class in the texts of the Kazakh book is unclear in most cases: 20% urban middle class and 5% urban working class.

Qualitative (content) analysis

The Russian language textbook

Most of the texts in the Russian book are excerpts from the classical Russian and Russian Soviet literature. The authors of the texts include Peskov, Spasskiy, Levanovskiy, and Chaikovskiy. Most of these texts are either playful explanations of grammar (exercise on p.23), descriptions of nature (e.g., riddle [15, p. 147]), or archaic in nature (old folk song lyrics [15, p. 156]). None of the texts include identity options that are particularly relevant to modern teenage experience.

There is a disparity in the way the social classes are depicted in the book. The urban middle class

characters are shown engaged in varied exciting and leisurely activities, such as shopping, going to concerts, doing sports and arts, traveling, and celebrating holidays. The rural class are shown mostly at work. For example, the text *Zhatva* by Shim [15, p. 47] tells about people working the harvester (see also Figure 3). Most pictures and texts construct gender identities in the stereotypical manner, e.g., all the teachers are female.

Although the Russian book contains more representations of Slavic characters, it is mostly due to the nature of the texts, and the pictures (especially the modern photos of the Kazakh rural lifestyle and national symbols in the coloured Appendix) reveal a disproportionate representation of Central Asian (Kazakh) ethnic identity. Notably, no other ethnicities except Central Asian and Slavic ones are presented (or can be clearly identified) in either pictures or texts, thus making most ethnic minority identities *hidden* in this textbook.

The Kazakh language textbook

The Kazakh textbook offers a wider variety of identity options for students, but it does not fully reflect the diversity of contemporary Kazakhstan society. The following features of the textbook may have a negative effect on students and deprive them of finding identity options close to their own. For instance, only Kazakh ethnic names are given in the texts and dialogues about friendship, holidays, sport, family, help, language development, wonderful world, the mind, a good boy and situations in places like house, classroom, school library, school canteen, village, Dacha, forest, and playground. The texts predominantly portray only Kazakh ethnic boys and girls, parents, and educators.

Social class representation is closely related to age. Most characters who are not school students in the text are urban middle class (e.g., school teachers, athletes). And although the social class of the child characters is not explicit, it can be assumed to be also middle class because they are often shown visiting their grandparents in the in the country in summer. Thus, implicitly rural identity is associated with senior citizens, while the urban one is associated with the young.

Overall, the book is strongly skewed ethnically towards Kazakhs, both in pictures (all the images depict Central Asian people) and texts (e.g., only Kazakh names are used throughout). Interestingly, some elements of the western culture are appropriated in this book, such as the *Ayaz Ata* [Grandfather Frost] (the Russian equivalent of Santa Clause *Ded Moroz*, brought to Kazakhstan via Soviet Russification), who is depicted here as Asian [16, p. 111] (Figure 6).

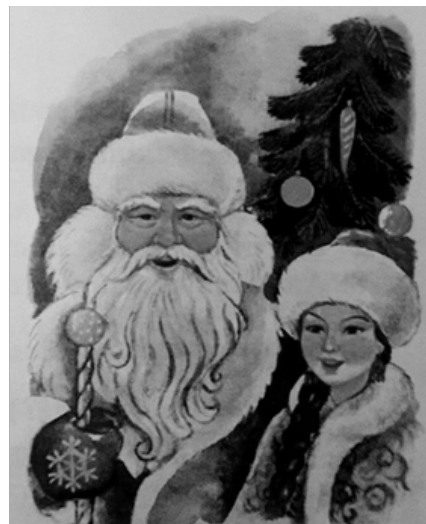


Figure6—*Ayaz Moroz* (originally Russian character *Ded Moroz*) depicted as Asian (Kazakh textbook)

There is one attempt to include Kazakhstan's ethnic minorities in the text, but the identity options presented in this way are not likely to be effective as they are folklorized by depicting the minority characters in ethnic national costumes (Figure 7).



Figure7—*Minority identities folklorised* (Kazakh language textbook)

The textbook represents some opportunities for learner's reflection on identity in the tasks and final tests by encouraging students express their own identities through talking about their own experiences in sport, sharing opinions about advantages of doing sport.

We can also observe some intercultural features in the textbook which develop learners' language awareness in the school context. For instance, the use of the English word e-mail (written in English) in the text which is *elektrondyk poshta* in Kazakh [16, p. 38, 41, 43]. Some elements of intercultural education exist in the texts on the general information about Kazakhstan [16, p. 79, 107], active and passive types of sport, information about sports in the USA, the UK and other countries [16, p. 128, 129]. Interestingly, a text about Kazakhstani champions of the 2015 Olympic Games [16, p. 136] portrays Kazakhstan's athletes of different ethnic backgrounds. It contains pictures and sportsmen's names [16, p. 137]. It differs from the majority of texts, which illustrate only Kazakh ethnic characters, and does provide some alternative identity options.

Discussion

Our analysis of the two books has demonstrated a rather narrow range of identity options presented for the learners. Although the Russian textbook offers a reasonable proportion of Kazakh and Slavic ethnicities, it is due to the out-of-date texts which are mostly excerpts from classical Russian and Soviet Russian literature, and all the other ethnic identities are not represented here. Gender identities offered in this book are predominantly by male and social class identities are mostly urban middle. The outdated texts that are irrelevant to modern teenage experiences and the archaic style of images do not seem to offer any powerful identity options to language learners either. In general, it is likely that language learners using this textbook (especially minority ones, girls and belonging to social classes other than urban middle class) would not be able to find suitable identity options or construct attractive imagined communities of Russian speakers to stimulate their investment in the Russian language.

The Kazakh language book is even more homogenized in terms of ethnic identity representation: almost all the characters there are Kazakh. There are, however, depictions of ethnic minorities in drawings (though folklorised) and in stories of ethnically diverse prominent athletes. In terms of class, mostly urban middle class identity options are offered in this book, while rural class identity is strongly associated with old people. Again, this book offers limited identity options for learners of the Kazakh language, especially considering that most of them are likely to be non-Kazakh themselves, and may hinder the development of investment in the Kazakh language.

Conclusions and Implications

To sum up, the identity options in both of the book analyzed in this study are limited and may possible not represent imagined communities that could attract most of the modern Kazakhstani secondary-school students, especially non-Kazakh and non-urban-middle-class. This may result in lack of learner investment in the target language and inhibit language acquisition.

As was mentioned previously in this paper, this study cannot be conclusive of the actual effect of these identity options, as the student interaction with the books has not been studied. It is, however, a direction for further research: to investigate what meanings the students using these textbooks decode from them.

The findings of this study, however, urge us to make a few recommendations to the authors of Kazakh and Russian language textbooks: (1) to diversify the range of identity options presented through pictures and texts to reflect the diversity of Kazakhstan's population (including ethnic, class, gender identities); and (2) to replace archaic texts and pictures with modern and age-appropriate ones, and re-design the page lay-out of the books. In a multi-ethnic and multicultural country like Kazakhstan, where Russian-Kazakh bilingualism is an important element of a person's social capital, it is vital that all children, regardless of their ethnic and social background are not disadvantaged in acquiring both languages.

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**Орыс және қазақ тілдерін екінші тіл ретінде оқытуға арналған
оқулықтардағы жеке тұлға нұсқалары**

Аңдатпа. Орта мектеп оқулықтарындағы жеке тұлға нұсқалары оқушылардың жетістіктерін ынталандыруда немесе кедергі келтіруде маңызды рөл атқаруы мүмкін. Олар көпұлтты қазақстандық қоғамда азшылық ұлттардың көптігі және олардың қоғамдағы мәдениаралық қарым-қатынасы үшін маңызды. Бұл жұмыста қазақстандық орта мектеп оқушыларына арналған екінші тілдегі оқулықтарда берілген жеке тұлға нұсқалары қарастырылған. Оқушылардың танымында жоқ қиялдағы тұлғалар, ойдан шығарылған сұхбаттасушылар және жасырын сәйкестіктер мәтіндерде талданды. Зерттеу нәтижелері оқулықтардың жеке тұлға нұсқалары тілді үйренуге ықпал етуі немесе кедергі келтіруі мүмкін деген

қорытындыға келді. Осы зерттеудің нәтижелері оқытудың қазіргі әдістемесі мен материалдарын бағалауға ықпал етуі мүмкін және жеке тұлғаның көрінісі мен қалыптасуына қатысты оқулықтың болашақтағы дамуы туралы ақпарат береді.

Түйін сөздер: жеке тұлға, мектеп оқулықтары, орыс, қазақ, екінші тілді оқыту.

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Варианты идентичности в учебниках русского и казахского языков как второго языка

Аннотация. Варианты идентичности, имеющиеся в учебниках для средней школы, могут сыграть важную роль в стимулировании или сдерживании успеха учащихся. Они особенно важны в многоэтническом казахстанском обществе с большим количеством меньшинств и их межкультурной коммуникацией в обществе. В данной статье рассматриваются варианты идентичности, представленные в учебниках второго языка для казахстанских учащихся средних школ. Воображаемые личности, воображаемые собеседники и скрытые идентичности, которые не включены в учениках, были проанализированы в текстах. Результаты исследования позволяют сделать вывод о том, что наборы опознавательных текстов в учебниках, вероятно, стимулируют или затрудняют изучение языка. Результаты этого исследования могут помочь в оценке текущей методологии и материалов обучения и послужить основой для разработки будущих учебников с точки зрения представления и построения личности.

Ключевые слова: идентичность, школьные учебники, русский язык, казахский язык, изучение второго языка.

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