

Revitalizing Heritage Languages in Diaspora: Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Kazakh for Heritage Speakers Course in Russia

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Abstract

As globalization and migration intensify, heritage language attrition has emerged as a critical concern, particularly among second- and third-generation immigrant communities. Despite early exposure, many heritage speakers lose proficiency due to limited use and societal pressure to assimilate linguistically. This study investigates the state of Kazakh heritage language use and evaluates the effectiveness of the Kazakh for Heritage Speakers Course, a culturally grounded educational intervention designed for ethnic Kazakhs residing in the Russian Federation. Utilizing a quasi-experimental, single-group pretest-posttest design and qualitative interviews, the research examined three dimensions: (1) patterns of Kazakh language use among heritage speakers, (2) changes in language proficiency after course participation, and (3) participants' perceptions of the course. A total of 100 ethnic Kazakhs living in Russia participated in the study. Heritage language use was found to be infrequent in daily life, mostly limited to interactions with older family members. Despite this, learners expressed strong intrinsic motivation to reconnect with their linguistic and cultural roots. Pre- and post-course assessments using the Language Assessment Scale revealed a statistically significant improvement in Kazakh language proficiency ($p < .001$), supporting the effectiveness of the intervention. Interview feedback indicated high levels of satisfaction with the course's structure, accessibility, and instructional design. Participants highlighted the value of native-speaking mentors, multimodal materials, and progressive learning tasks. Suggestions for improvement included more conversational practice, extended course duration, and the inclusion of cultural content such as songs and poetry. This study contributes to addressing practical and empirical gaps in heritage language education by offering a scalable, evidence-based model for revitalizing underrepresented languages in diasporic contexts. Findings offer implications for language policy, curriculum development, and future research in heritage language pedagogy.

Keywords: *Kazakh language, heritage language pedagogy, ethnic Kazakhs in Russia, language proficiency, heritage language acquisition.*

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Introduction

Preserving a heritage language is widely recognized as vital for maintaining cultural identity and fostering strong family bonds. Parents often endeavor to pass their mother tongue to their children to sustain a connection with their cultural roots and to enhance communication within their communities (Fishman, 1991). Beyond cultural significance, maintaining proficiency in one's native language plays a crucial role in psychological well-being, cognitive development, linguistic competence, social integration, and academic achievement.

Despite these benefits, heritage languages frequently face decline across generations, particularly when their use becomes limited in daily life. This trend is especially pronounced among second- and third-generation speakers, who typically experience fewer opportunities to actively use and transmit the language. Consequently, even if the first generation maintains fluency, proficiency tends to diminish over time, posing a threat to the language's survival (Hayakawa et al., 2022).

Kazakh, spoken by ethnic Kazakhs in the Russian Federation, exemplifies this pattern. Predominantly used by first-generation immigrants, the language's use and competence weaken significantly among their descendants. Studies reveal that younger ethnic Kazakhs living abroad demonstrate markedly lower levels of Kazakh language proficiency and usage compared to older generations, highlighting an ongoing attrition of linguistic skills (Kuzembayeva et al., 2024). This decline persists despite a strong desire among ethnic Kazakhs to reclaim and strengthen their heritage language, driven by motivations such as understanding oral communication, engaging with media, participating in daily interactions, and deepening cultural and historical knowledge.

Given the growing importance of heritage language proficiency in influencing learners' cognitive, social, emotional, and educational outcomes (Goldberg et al., 2008), it is imperative to develop effective strategies to address language loss. The global rise in migration and cultural exchange has further intensified the need for focused educational interventions aimed at heritage language maintenance and revitalization.

The aim of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the *Kazakh for Heritage Speakers Course* as a pedagogical intervention. Specifically, the study investigates (1) how frequently and in what contexts the Kazakh language is used by heritage speakers, (2) whether participation in the course leads to measurable improvements in language proficiency, and (3) how participants perceive the structure, content, and cultural relevance of the course.

To guide the investigation, the following research questions were posed:

RQ1: What are the patterns of Kazakh heritage language use among ethnic Kazakhs living in Russia in terms of frequency, communicative domains, and underlying motivations?

RQ2: Does participation in the *Kazakh Course for Heritage Speakers* lead to a statistically significant increase in Kazakh language proficiency among ethnic Kazakhs living in Russia?

RQ3: How do ethnic Kazakhs living in Russia perceive the effectiveness, relevance, and instructional quality of the *Kazakh Course for Heritage Speakers*?

The following hypotheses were formulated:

H₀: There is no statistically significant increase in Kazakh language proficiency among ethnic Kazakhs living in Russia after completing the *Kazakh Course for Heritage Speakers* (mean difference = 0).

H_a: There is a statistically significant increase in Kazakh language proficiency among ethnic Kazakhs living in Russia after completing the *Kazakh Course for Heritage Speakers* (mean difference > 0).

The *Kazakh for Heritage Speakers Course*, a targeted educational program designed to enhance Kazakh language proficiency among ethnic Kazakhs living in Russia, seeks not only to improve linguistic skills but also to support cultural integration and identity affirmation within this community. Findings from this research will contribute valuable insights to the field of heritage language acquisition and pedagogy, informing the development of best practices and policies that support the revitalization of Kazakh as a heritage language.

Literature Review

Heritage languages are defined as non-mainstream and non-societal languages spoken primarily by linguistic minorities who are exposed to both their home language and the dominant societal language (Comanaru & Noels, 2009; Mu, 2016; Mutongoza et al., 2023). Typically, second-generation immigrants acquire their heritage language in early childhood within the family environment, often sequentially or concurrently with the dominant language spoken in the broader community (Karimova et al., 2023; Montrul, 2016). While heritage language learners usually gain exposure to their heritage language from a young age at home, formal schooling frequently prioritizes the dominant language. Consequently, learners often develop only latent or tacit knowledge of their heritage language and shift rapidly to the majority language once they enter the school system (Duff & Doherty, 2019). This dynamic results in a common pattern: heritage

language learners tend to become highly proficient in the dominant societal language but display varying degrees of literacy and competence in their heritage language, sometimes marked by significant gaps (Montrul, 2010; Polinsky et al., 2010).

In response to this imbalance, heritage language programs have emerged to support the linguistic and cultural development of heritage language learners, offering opportunities to strengthen language skills that may not be fully developed through home exposure alone. These programs are educational initiatives specifically designed to meet the linguistic and cultural needs of heritage language learners. Such programs have historically developed outside of mainstream education, which has traditionally prioritized foreign language instruction (Fishman, 2001; Valdés, 2001). Typically established by community members such as families, cultural organizations, or religious institutions, these programs aim to preserve language and cultural identity across generations. While they vary widely in structure, instructional methods, and resources, they commonly integrate cultural content and community participation, often using the heritage language as a medium for transmitting traditions and values.

The existing body of research on heritage language education, as synthesized by Zhang et al. (2025), identifies four primary foci: heritage language maintenance, acquisition, pedagogy, and learner identity. While these studies have deepened understanding in these domains, the review also reveals substantial gaps that constrain the advancement of effective heritage language pedagogy. Specifically, there is a pressing need for research that employs valid and context-sensitive evaluation tools to measure heritage language proficiency accurately. Moreover, educational approaches and instructional materials must be more firmly grounded in sociolinguistic theory and cultural realities. Action research and tailored classroom interventions, particularly those that reflect learners' diverse identities and social backgrounds, remain underexplored. Furthermore, the influence of intersecting factors such as gender and socioeconomic status on learners' ethnic identity formation and heritage language development warrants closer examination to support more equitable and effective educational practices.

Pedagogical research has increasingly emphasized the integration of innovative instructional strategies, including the use of digital technologies and multimedia resources, to improve literacy, vocabulary acquisition, and reading comprehension in heritage language learners (Zhou, 2022). Curriculum development and textbook design are critical components shaping learners' heritage language experiences and outcomes. For instance, Curdt-Christiansen (2008) analyzed heritage

language classroom textbooks and highlighted how their use of historical contexts and discourse methods promotes cultural identity formation alongside literacy skills. This research underscores the dual role of instructional texts not only in language acquisition but also in enabling learners to understand and navigate their sociocultural environments effectively (Karimova et al., 2024; Rudik et al., 2025).

Despite these valuable insights, there remains a significant empirical gap regarding heritage language instruction among ethnic Kazakhs living in diaspora communities such as Russia. Research by Kuzembayeva et al. (2024) documents that ethnic Kazakhs of different age groups in Russia express strong needs for practical language skills: comprehension of oral speech, interpretation of mass media, mastery of culturally relevant vocabulary, and fluency in everyday face-to-face interactions. They also emphasize the importance of integrating authentic Kazakh cultural content such as traditions, regional knowledge, and real-life dialogic scenarios into language courses to foster intercultural competence and a nuanced understanding of the Kazakh worldview (Karimova et al., 2024; Kuzembayeva et al., 2022; Ryskulbek et al., 2025). However, there is limited practical knowledge and empirical evidence on how to design and implement such culturally embedded heritage language programs effectively within this context.

In summary, the current literature reveals several critical gaps that this study aims to address. There are evidence gaps, as limited data exist on the effectiveness of heritage language courses specifically tailored for Kazakh speakers living abroad, particularly in the Russian Federation (Bokayev et al., 2024; Yeleussiz & Qanay, 2025). Additionally, knowledge gaps remain due to insufficient understanding of how sociocultural and identity-related factors influence language acquisition among Kazakh heritage learners. Practical knowledge gaps are evident in the lack of validated pedagogical models and instructional materials designed to meet the unique linguistic and cultural needs of Kazakh heritage language learners in diaspora contexts. Furthermore, empirical gaps persist, with few rigorous studies evaluating both language proficiency outcomes and learners' perceptions following participation in heritage language programs targeting Kazakh speakers. Addressing these gaps is crucial for developing effective and culturally responsive heritage language education that can support the preservation and intergenerational transmission of Kazakh. This study contributes to filling these gaps by empirically evaluating the Kazakh for Heritage Speakers Course, designed with consideration of cultural authenticity and learner needs, thus advancing both theoretical knowledge and practical application in this under-researched area.

Addressing these gaps is vital for preserving Kazakh as a heritage language and supporting its intergenerational transmission. This study responds to these needs by evaluating the *Kazakh for Heritage Speakers Course* developed by the authors for ethnic Kazakhs living in Russia. The course aims to enhance linguistic proficiency and cultural competence through authentic, culturally grounded pedagogy tailored to learners' real-world needs.

The findings will contribute valuable empirical evidence and practical insights to the fields of heritage language acquisition and pedagogy. This will inform the development of effective, culturally responsive language education policies and practices, ultimately supporting the revitalization of Kazakh as a heritage language across generations.

Methods and Materials

Research Design

This study employed a quasi-experimental single-group time-series design to evaluate the effectiveness of the *Kazakh for Heritage Speakers Course* developed by the authors. The research targeted ethnic Kazakhs residing in the Russian Federation who were enrolled in this course. Due to practical limitations in accessing a comparable control group with equivalent language exposure, motivation, and heritage identity, a single-group design was selected, which is commonly used in applied educational research where random assignment is not feasible but where meaningful inferences can still be drawn from pretest-posttest comparisons (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021; Shadish et al., 2002).

The primary objective was to determine whether participation in the Kazakh for Heritage Speakers Course led to measurable improvements in linguistic proficiency. To this end, standardized pretest and posttest instruments were administered at the start and conclusion of the course, allowing researchers to evaluate the development of key linguistic competencies in heritage speakers.

In addition to quantitative measurement, the study integrated a qualitative component to gain deeper insights into learners' experiences. To explore participants' perspectives on the course and identify their specific linguistic needs and expectations, semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted with a subset of participants. The interviews aimed to capture personal reflections on the challenges of maintaining the Kazakh language in a Russian-speaking environment, the cultural relevance of course materials, and the perceived usefulness of the instructional content.

and methods. This allowed for triangulation of data, ensuring a more nuanced understanding of the course's impact while addressing both linguistic outcomes and learner perceptions (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Research Participants

The data was collected from ethnic Kazakhs living in the Russian Federation admitted to the Kazakh Course for Heritage Speakers. One hundred ethnic Kazakhs participated in the experiment. Age of participants ranged from 16 to 56 years old ($M=38$). The participants had either no (0) or low (A0) heritage language proficiency.

All participants signed an informed consent form before entering the study. Tables 1 and 2 display the demographic and background information of the participants.

Table 1

Survey Participants' Demographic and Background Information

Items	Characteristics	Amount (%)
Gender	Males	10
	Females	90
Family Nationality Composition	Two parents Kazakh	90
	Kazakh father, mother – other	0
	Kazakh mother, father – other	10
Age	<29 years	16
	30-60 years	67
	>61 years	15
Marital Status	Single	30
	Married	55
	Cohabiting	0
	Divorced	15
	Widowed	0
Living with / Married to	Kazakhs	65
	Other nationality	10
Economic Status	Skilled professional	65
	Unskilled manual	0
	Stay at home parent	25
	Student	10
	Unemployed / seeking employment	0

Table 2*Interview Participants' Demographic and Background Information*

No	Age	Gender	Marital Status	Generation	Economic Status
P1	31	F	Single	2nd	Stay at home parent
P2	21	F	Single	4th	Student
P3	33	F	Married	>4th	Stay at home parent
P4	47	F	Married	2nd	Stay at home parent
P5	40	F	Single	3rd	Stay at home parent
P6	36	F	Married	2nd	Stay at home parent
P7	43	F	Single	2nd	Skilled professional
P8	42	F	Married	2nd	Skilled professional
P9	39	F	Single	>4th	Skilled professional
P10	17	F	Single	3rd	Student

Intervention: Kazakh for Heritage Speakers Course: Ethnocultural Unit-Based Methodology for Teaching Kazakh to Ethnic Kazakhs Living Abroad

The authors of the article developed a methodology of teaching Kazakh to heritage speakers based on ethnocultural units (Table 3).

Table 3*Model of Teaching Kazakh as a Heritage Language through the System of Ethnocultural Units*

Goal: to develop Kazakh language proficiency in ethnic Kazakhs living abroad who do not speak Kazakh, but on an intuitive level can roughly understand the general meaning of the simple expression (A0)

Stage 1: Developing Methods of Kazakh Language Proficiency Evaluation in Ethnic Kazakhs living Abroad	Stage 2: Defining the System of Ethnocultural Units for Teaching within the Kazakh as a Heritage Language Course			
1) Questionnaire for ethnic Kazakhs living abroad, defining: - Levels of Kazakh language proficiency in Ethnic Kazakhs Living Abroad - Qualitative Criteria of Kazakh Language Proficiency in Ethnic Kazakhs Living Abroad - Quantitative Criteria of Kazakh Language Proficiency in Ethnic Kazakhs Living Abroad	1) Greeting	2) Family	3) Relatives	4) Lineage
	5) Kazakh Zhuses (Tribal System)	6) Life and Economy of the Kazakh People	7) Traditions and Customs of the Kazakhs	8) The Theme of Love in the Understanding of the Kazakhs
	9) Folklore	10) Kazakh Prohibitions and Superstitions	11) Sacred Numbers among the Kazakhs	12) The Religious Culture of the Kazakhs
	13) Kazakh Units of Measurement	14) The Measurement of Time in the Kazakh Worldview	15) Nature in the Life of the Kazakh People: the Connection with Festive Events	16) The Material Culture of the Kazakhs
Stage 3: Methodology of teaching Kazakh as Heritage Language Through the System of Ethnocultural Units				
Textbook	Teacher's Book		Video Course	
Result: Developing the Kazakh language proficiency in ethnic Kazakhs living abroad (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2)				

The course textbook covers 16 themes with various ethnocultural units in their titles (Yermekbayeva et al., 2024b, 2024c, 2024d). Each topic follows the same structure:

1. A brief overview of the unit's ethnocultural content, which serves as the foundation for mastering the following section, "Kazakh Language Rules";
2. "Kazakh Language Rules" presents grammar content that is primarily based on Russian grammar;
3. The "Check Yourself" section consists of only one task that can be performed verbally and has a psychological significance for performing the following tasks;
4. Assignments (from 5 to 10) are aimed at consolidating and revising the grammar content from simple to complex language units (from word to phrase, from phrase to sentence, from sentence to text);
5. The "Getting into Speech" homework section is creatively designed;
6. The dictionary of Kazakh words and phrases features an end-to-end numbering system to encourage continuous revision.

Each textbook topic includes aspects of interactive modular technology (Yermekbayeva et al., 2024a):

1. Each topic is divided into three parts that, due to the interdependence of ethnocultural and grammar material, provide intra- and inter-thematic links.
2. Reference schemes, which are primarily offered in the form of tables, aid in the successful retention of ethnocultural and linguistic information.
3. Creativity is necessary while doing homework to ensure productivity and mastery of the educational issue.

A video course also provides methodological support for the process of teaching Kazakh to heritage speakers using an ethnocultural unit-based framework. The video course is available on Baishev University's instructional portal (Video Course, 2024). The content of the video course is displayed in Table 4.

Table 4

The Content and Quantitative Data of Kazakh as a Foreign Language. Elementary Level (A1) Video Course

Topics	Time (min: sec)
Topic 1. Greeting	
Part 1. Greeting: Official and Unofficial Forms	8:17
Part 2. Greeting: Introduction	5:37
Part 3. Greeting: Communication	15:59
Topic 2. Family	
Part 1. Family Members	16:26
Part 2. How Old are the Family Members?	17:19
Part 3. The Role and Importance of Family Among Kazakhs	04:27
Topic 3. Family Ties of Kazakhs	
Part 1. My Relatives on Father's Side	08:16
Part 2. My Relatives on Mother's Side	04:24
Part 3. Relatives on the Side of the Husband and Wife	05:32
Topic 4. The Family Tree of the Kazakhs	
Part 1. Seven Generations of Ancestors	09:35
Part 2. Seven Generations of Descendants	08:52
Part 3. Procreation: Customs and Rituals	02:29
Topic 5. Kazakh Zhuzes (Tribal System): From the Kazakh Khanate to Modern Kazakhstan	
Part 1. Senior Zhuz. Middle Zhuz. Junior Zhuz	09:34
Part 2. Tribes that are not Included in Zhuzes	09:14
Part 3. Kazakh Zhuzes in the Faces of the Past and Modern Kazakhstan	09:36

The video course includes the content for improving communication abilities such as speaking and listening, but it does not exactly replicate the textbook. However, the first three topics of the video course include grammar material, tasks for oral and written performance, and ethnocultural material to help learners get acquainted with the textbook. The Topic 4 of the video course goes on without these assignments, allowing the learner to finish them on their own by consulting the textbook. As a result, the video course is free of superfluous instructional content.

Following Topic 7, the video course no longer concludes with a dictionary as it formerly did. Instead, the final slide simply lists the additional numbers of Kazakh words and expressions, which aids the learner in understanding how many of these terms and expressions are learned each time. Thus, the educational content of the video course is gradually removed, allowing the students to independently study and repeat the information using the textbook as a guide.

Research Instrument

To comprehensively investigate the research questions and test the associated hypotheses, this study employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative research instruments. These instruments were carefully selected to examine patterns of Kazakh heritage language use, assess

changes in language proficiency resulting from course participation, and explore learners' perceptions of the *Kazakh for Heritage Speakers Course*. The integration of multiple instruments allowed for a robust, mixed-methods approach to understanding both language development and learner experience.

To address Research Question 1, which explores the patterns of Kazakh heritage language use among ethnic Kazakhs living in Russia, a background language use and motivation questionnaire was administered prior to the course. This instrument collected demographic data including participants' age, education level, and generational status, as well as information regarding the frequency and context of Kazakh language use in the home, community, and online spaces. In addition, the questionnaire probed participants' motivations for learning Kazakh, such as cultural identity, family communication, or professional goals. The items were structured using a combination of multiple-choice and Likert-scale formats, enabling the collection of quantitative data that was later analyzed using descriptive statistics. This instrument provided a detailed sociolinguistic profile of the participants, offering essential contextual data for interpreting proficiency outcomes and course perceptions.

To investigate Research Question 2, which evaluates whether the Kazakh for Heritage Speakers Course results in measurable improvement in language proficiency, a standardized language proficiency test was employed as both a pretest and posttest instrument. The test, formally titled the *Language Assessment Scale for Ethnic Kazakhs Abroad* (Kuzembayeva et al., 2024), was designed and validated by the research team specifically for heritage speakers in diaspora settings. The instrument assessed learners' speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills using task-based prompts and performance descriptors aligned with internationally recognized language benchmarks. The scale spans proficiency levels from A0 (no functional ability) to C2 (near-native fluency), and was developed in consultation with experts in heritage language pedagogy and Kazakh language education. To ensure scoring reliability, raters were trained in the application of the scale, and inter-rater reliability was verified using Cohen's kappa coefficient ($\kappa = 0.86$), indicating a high level of agreement.

The test was administered at the beginning and end of the course to measure linguistic gains. The resulting scores were analyzed using a paired t-test to determine whether the observed change in proficiency was statistically significant. This analysis directly addressed the study's hypotheses: the null hypothesis (H_0) posited that there would be no significant increase in proficiency after

course completion (mean difference = 0), while the alternative hypothesis (H_a) posited that there would be a statistically significant increase (mean difference > 0). The structure of this analysis reflects the quasi-experimental single-group time-series design of the study, which, while lacking a control group, allows for robust pre–post comparisons in applied educational research.

Research Question 3, which examines participants' perceptions of the effectiveness and relevance of the course, was addressed through semi-structured online interviews conducted with a purposive subset of participants. These interviews were guided by a flexible protocol that included open-ended questions designed to elicit reflective responses on the course's instructional quality, the relevance and accessibility of materials, and the extent to which the course addressed participants' personal and linguistic needs. The interviews also included several evaluative items rated on a five-point Likert scale, allowing participants to provide numeric assessments of course clarity, material usefulness, and perceived progress.

The interviews were conducted online to accommodate participants' geographic dispersion and were audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed using qualitative data analysis software. The thematic coding process was inductive, allowing key categories and concepts to emerge from the data. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed member checking, wherein a subset of participants reviewed and validated the researchers' interpretations of their responses. While the interviews primarily yielded qualitative insights, the inclusion of Likert-scale questions provided supplemental quantitative data, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of learner perceptions.

Together, these three instruments (the background questionnaire, the standardized language proficiency test, and the semi-structured interviews) enabled a triangulated investigation of heritage language use, course impact, and learner experience. Each instrument was strategically linked to a specific research question, supporting both descriptive and inferential analyses while ensuring that the study's mixed-methods design was implemented in a coherent and methodologically sound manner.

Data Collection

To evaluate the development of participants' heritage language proficiency before and after the intervention (*Kazakh Course for Heritage Speakers*), the study employed a repeated-measures data collection procedure. Participants completed two rounds of testing: a pretest administered prior to

the start of the course to establish baseline proficiency levels, and a posttest at the end of the course to capture changes in proficiency. Both instruments used the Language Assessment Scale (N = 25 items), designed by the researchers to evaluate listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills across CEFR-aligned levels (A0 to C2). The tasks were delivered digitally via Google Forms, making the assessment accessible to participants across geographically dispersed locations within the Russian Federation. This format also facilitated ease of administration and ensured uniformity in task presentation.

In addition to the quantitative assessment, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured online interviews with ten heritage speakers. All interviews were conducted by a single trained researcher using a standardized protocol to ensure consistency. Interviews were conducted in a language preferred by the participants (Kazakh or Russian) and were audio-recorded with consent. Following the interviews, the recordings were transcribed verbatim to preserve the integrity of the responses for analysis. Notes and reflections were recorded during the process to support the interpretation of participants' perspectives in a broader pedagogical context.

Data Analysis

Data collected via the pretest and posttest surveys were analyzed using Microsoft Excel and RStudio, which enabled both basic and inferential statistical analyses. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize participants' demographic information, heritage language use patterns, and baseline performance on the language assessment tasks.

To determine whether the *Kazakh Course for Heritage Speakers* led to significant changes in language proficiency, a paired t-test was conducted. This test allowed for the comparison of paired measurements of the same individuals before and after the intervention, a method particularly appropriate for within-subjects experimental designs (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Assumptions for the t-test, such as normality of the difference scores, were tested prior to the analysis to ensure the validity of the results. The significance threshold was set at $p < .05$, with results interpreted accordingly to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention.

Data from the interviews were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach was chosen to allow themes to emerge organically from the data without being constrained by preexisting theoretical frameworks. The process involved

familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme development, refinement, and final definition of thematic categories. Coding was done manually to enable close engagement with the text, and all interview data were organized using categorical matrices to compare patterns across participant responses. To ensure trustworthiness and analytical rigor, peer debriefing and reflexive memoing were used throughout the analysis process.

The integration of statistical results with thematic qualitative findings provided a comprehensive picture of how the course affected learners' proficiency and experiences. This triangulation of data strengthened the study's internal validity and allowed for a more nuanced understanding of both outcomes and learner perspectives.

Results

The purpose of this section is to present the findings of the study regarding (1) the patterns of heritage language use among ethnic Kazakhs living in Russia, (2) the impact of the *Kazakh for Heritage Speakers Course* on language proficiency, and (3) participants' perceptions of the course based on qualitative interview data.

The Heritage Language Use, Reasons, and Frequency of Ethnic Kazakhs Living Abroad

Figure 1 presents the self-reported frequency of Kazakh language use among ethnic Kazakhs residing in the Russian Federation.

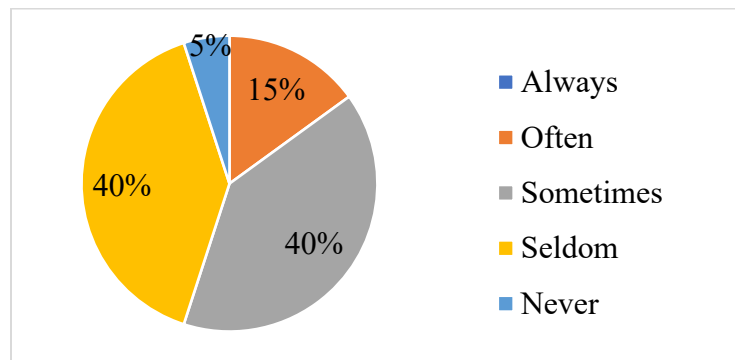


Figure 1. Respondents' Frequency of Speaking Kazakh

The findings reveal that the majority of respondents either rarely (40%) or never (40%) use Kazakh in daily life. Only 20% report using Kazakh *often* or *sometimes*.

Figure 2 depicts heritage language communicators (individuals with whom ethnic Kazakhs speak in the heritage language).

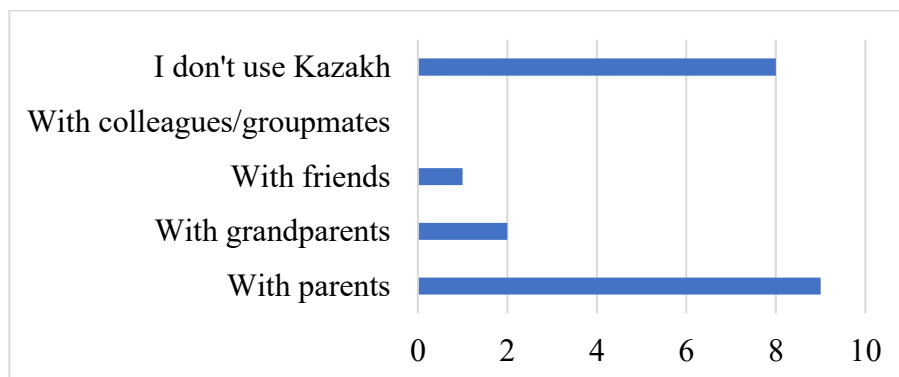


Figure 2. Respondents' Heritage Language Communicators

Respondents primarily use Kazakh with parents (45%), followed by grandparents (10%) and friends (5%). These data suggest that Kazakh is still used in intimate familial domains, though social use beyond the household is minimal.

Figure 3 shows the reasons of ethnic Kazakhs for using their heritage language.

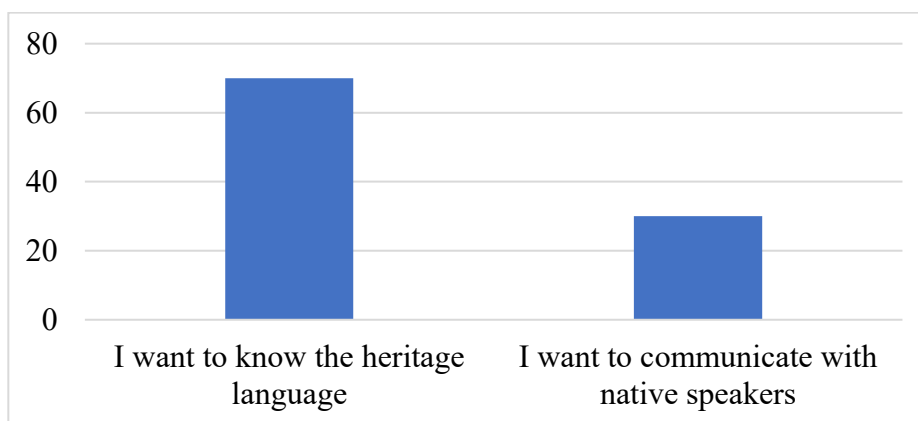


Figure 3. Reasons for Learning Kazakh

The results indicate that 70% of respondents study Kazakh out of intrinsic interest or identity-related motivations (e.g., wanting to know Kazakh), while 30% are driven by communicative goals such as speaking with native speakers.

Kazakh Language Proficiency Development: Experimental Results

To evaluate proficiency outcomes, participants completed a pretest and posttest using the Language Assessment Scale. Table 5 summarizes the descriptive statistics of the results.

Table 5*Pretest and Posttest Results of Heritage Speakers' Kazakhs Language Proficiency*

Groups	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Pretest	9	3.5	2	15	100
Posttest	14.5	5	7	23	100

The results show a mean increase of 5.5 points between the pretest and posttest, indicating a notable improvement in proficiency following course completion.

A paired t-test was conducted to determine whether this increase was statistically significant (Table 6).

Table 6*Results of Paired t-Test for Means of Pretest and Posttest*

Samples	t-Statistic	Degrees of Freedom	p-Value	Reject the H ₀
Pretest-Posttest	-137.5	99	< 0.001	Yes
SD of difference = 0.4	H ₀ : mean difference = 0		H _a : mean difference > 0	

*Significant at $p = 0.001$ level

With a p-value < 0.001, the null hypothesis (H₀: There is no statistically significant increase in Kazakh language proficiency among ethnic Kazakhs living in Russia after completing the Kazakh Course for Heritage Speakers) is rejected. The results support the alternative hypothesis (H_a: There is a statistically significant increase in Kazakh language proficiency among ethnic Kazakhs living in Russia after completing the Kazakh Course for Heritage Speakers). These findings provide strong evidence of the effectiveness of the *Kazakh for Heritage Speakers Course* in improving learners' functional language skills.

Participants' Perceptions: Interview Findings

To complement the quantitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with course participants. Overall, learners expressed high satisfaction with the course and identified several key strengths: flexibility of the online format, access to native-speaking mentors, clarity and progression of the curriculum, and the inclusion of audio materials.

Participants noted:

"An informative, interesting, and intensive program that allows you to learn the Kazakh language. The study is carried out in the shortest possible time, but with maximum effectiveness." P5

“The advantage of the course is the step-by-step study and clear presentation of the material. Audio recordings within the course contributed to the correct pronunciation.” P8

“The program is well designed. The assignments are provided from simple to complex. The authors of the program were constantly in touch, answering any questions that arose.” P9

“Everything is clearly explained in the textbooks. Audio for practicing pronunciation was also helpful.” P10.

Learners valued the scaffolded design of the course and the emphasis on oral skills, which are often neglected in traditional heritage language curricula. However, several participants suggested enhancements, such as extending the duration of the course, incorporating more cultural materials (e.g., poems, songs), and expanding interactive speaking opportunities.

For example:

“There is little time to study, although I understand that the course is fast.” P2

“Everything is fine. Add poems and songs after the course.” P3

“There was little time, we need to add more practice.” P4

“Little time, short course.” P5

“There seemed to be a lack of information in the textbooks, especially at the initial stages, specifically about sounds/letters and their use.” P10

Regarding the structure and content of the course, the participants noted its competent composition and consistency. The ethnic Kazakhs who took the course agreed that the tasks were clear.

“Everything is logical and understandable.” P2

“The assignments are all clear and logically designed for beginners and beyond.” P4

“The course is concise, convenient, and understandable.” P7

“The course material and assignments are presented in a comprehensible way.” P8

To increase the effectiveness of the heritage language learning, the participants in the experiment consider it necessary to have more online lessons, more conversational practice, learn the language from films and songs, and recognize their native language.

“It is necessary to practice the Kazakh language.” P1

“The desire of students to study Kazakh is necessary: conversational practice with family and environment, watching TV in Kazakh, reading Kazakh books and newspapers is required.” P4

“Responsible attitude and recognition of the need to know the native language is important.” P6

“It is necessary to systematically try to use the Kazakh language.” P5

These findings indicate participants' emphasis of extracurricular engagement with Kazakh, such as media consumption and family conversations, for consolidating language acquisition.

The results of interviews with the study participants showed their high satisfaction with the content, structure, and quality of the course. The participants liked the availability of materials for learning and consolidating language skills, mentors who were native speakers, clarity, and saturation of the course. As ways to improve the course, the study participants suggested increasing the duration of the course, adding more language practice, and cultural material in the form of poems and songs.

Discussion

The results of this study present compelling evidence that targeted, culturally responsive instructional interventions such as the *Kazakh for Heritage Speakers Course* can significantly improve heritage language proficiency among ethnic Kazakhs living in diaspora. The combination of quantitative outcomes and qualitative feedback provides a multidimensional understanding of how heritage language learners respond to pedagogical programs designed around their specific linguistic and cultural needs.

The significant increase of 5.5 points in average test scores between the pretest and posttest clearly demonstrates the course's efficacy. This improvement is not merely statistical; it suggests meaningful development in learners' functional language skills, including listening, reading, speaking, and writing. These gains are especially important in the context of heritage language education, where learners often enter with asymmetrical proficiency, typically stronger in receptive than productive skills (Montrul, 2018). The results therefore highlight the potential of structured interventions to bridge these imbalances and support well-rounded linguistic competence.

Moreover, the extremely low baseline frequency of Kazakh language use in daily life (with 80% of participants reporting rare or no use) underscores the urgency of such educational programs. These patterns are indicative of language shift, a well-documented phenomenon in heritage language communities where the dominant societal language replaces the heritage language over generations (Fishman, 1991). The study supports prior research that identifies a lack of opportunities for meaningful interaction in the heritage language as a primary barrier to maintenance and development (Guardado, 2018; Polinsky & Scontras, 2020).

The high level of participant satisfaction, as expressed in interviews, further reinforces the value of pedagogical approaches that are learner-centered, culturally meaningful, and technologically accessible. Learners appreciated the clear structure, the scaffolded tasks, and the support from native-speaking mentors. Their feedback highlights that effective heritage language programs must go beyond grammar and vocabulary instruction to include dialogic engagement, cultural narratives, and real-life communicative scenarios, elements found to strengthen both language learning and cultural identity (Carreira & Kagan, 2018; Curdt-Christiansen, 2008).

Importantly, the results speak directly to the practical knowledge gap identified in heritage language education literature: the lack of field-tested and empirically evaluated interventions tailored to specific linguistic minorities. While there is growing attention to heritage languages such as Spanish, Mandarin, or Korean in global contexts (Zhou, 2022; He, 2010), Kazakh as a heritage language in the Russian diaspora has received limited scholarly attention. This study helps to fill that empirical and geographic gap by offering both data and pedagogical insights specific to this underrepresented community.

The participants' desire for more interactive and culturally immersive components such as poems, songs, and conversational activities points to the importance of expanding the curriculum beyond traditional literacy models. Such requests align with the principles of critical sociolinguistic pedagogy, which emphasizes the role of language in expressing identity, fostering belonging, and negotiating cultural knowledge (Duff & Doherty, 2019). By integrating cultural materials and oral traditions, heritage language programs can deepen learners' emotional connection to the language and increase their motivation to maintain it across generations.

Furthermore, learners' reflections on the need for family and community support to sustain their language development echo calls in the literature for ecological approaches to heritage language learning. Language acquisition does not occur in isolation but within complex sociocultural ecosystems involving home, school, and broader society (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2016). This study reinforces the need to view heritage language maintenance not merely as an educational issue, but as a community-wide responsibility.

Lastly, the study's methodology, combining a statistically sound single-group experimental design with qualitative inquiry, demonstrates a robust model for evaluating heritage language interventions where random assignment may not be feasible. The consistent use of validity-enhancing strategies (e.g., pilot-testing instruments, inter-rater reliability checks, member

checking for interviews) strengthens confidence in the findings and their implications for both researchers and practitioners.

Conclusion

In response to the critical need to preserve and revitalize Kazakh as a heritage language among diaspora communities, this study evaluated the effectiveness of the *Kazakh for Heritage Speakers Course*, a pedagogically structured and culturally responsive program designed for ethnic Kazakhs living in the Russian Federation. The intervention was grounded in ethnocultural units, integrating linguistic content with cultural narratives and communicative tasks relevant to heritage learners. This study explored the dynamics of Kazakh as a heritage language among ethnic Kazakhs living in the Russian Federation through a comprehensive investigation of language use patterns, proficiency development, and learner perceptions. In doing so, it addressed the urgent need for effective heritage language pedagogies that not only improve linguistic competence but also strengthen cultural identity and intergenerational transmission.

The first research question examined the patterns of Kazakh language use among heritage speakers. Results revealed that a significant proportion of ethnic Kazakhs in Russia rarely or never use the Kazakh language in their daily lives. Language use was largely confined to interactions with parents and grandparents, and motivations for using Kazakh centered on cultural connection and communication with native speakers. These findings highlight a decline in intergenerational transmission and the risk of heritage language attrition, a concern echoed in global heritage language literature.

To address this challenge, the study implemented the *Kazakh for Heritage Speakers Course* and evaluated its effectiveness through a pretest-posttest design. The second research question focused on whether participation in the course led to measurable gains in proficiency. The results showed a statistically significant improvement: average scores increased from 9 (pretest) to 14.5 (posttest), and the null hypothesis was rejected at the $p < .001$ level. These findings confirm that structured, culturally relevant instruction can effectively enhance heritage language competence among second- and third-generation learners.

The third research question explored participants' perceptions of the course. Qualitative data from interviews demonstrated high levels of satisfaction with the course structure, instructional clarity, availability of native-speaking mentors, and supporting materials. Participants also suggested

improvements, such as extending the course duration, adding more conversational practice, and incorporating cultural content like songs and poems. These insights emphasize the importance of designing heritage language curricula that are immersive, interactive, and culturally authentic.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that well-designed, culturally embedded heritage language programs like the *Kazakh for Heritage Speakers Course* can produce statistically significant and pedagogically meaningful gains in language proficiency. Moreover, the course contributed to learners' cultural affirmation and personal motivation, reinforcing the dual linguistic and identity-building goals of heritage language education. The *Kazakh for Heritage Speakers Course* serves as a model for developing effective language revitalization strategies and offers practical implications for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers working to preserve minority languages in multilingual societies.

This study contributes to bridging several gaps in heritage language research, particularly empirical and pedagogical gaps related to Kazakh as a minority language in a diasporic setting. It affirms that heritage language education can benefit from interventions that are context-specific, linguistically scaffolded, and culturally grounded.

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations of the study comprise the participants from one geographical area – the Russian Federation – which should be addressed in the future studies widening the participants geography. The results offer several actionable implications for Practice and Policy. Curriculum developers should incorporate audio-visual materials, cultural texts, and real-life dialogue simulations to enhance learner engagement. Policymakers and educators must recognize the importance of offering heritage language courses in diaspora settings as a form of linguistic and cultural equity. Community organizations can play a vital role in sustaining language use outside formal education by organizing clubs, media channels, and intergenerational events in the heritage language.

Future efforts should aim to scale such interventions, develop longitudinal models of evaluation, and explore the role of community-based supports in sustaining heritage language use across generations.

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