

UNIVERSITY OF SZEGED  
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

**ASSESSING 6<sup>TH</sup> AND 8<sup>TH</sup> GRADES STUDENTS'  
READING SKILLS AND LITERACY  
IN KAZAKH, RUSSIAN, AND ENGLISH LANGUAGES  
IN KAZAKHSTAN**

SUMMARY OF THE PHD DISSERTATION

**AIGUL AKHMETOVA**

**Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Benő Csapó**



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## **THE CONTEXT AND PROBLEM OF THE STATEMENT**

Over the last two decades, Kazakhstan is under the great challenge to implement better education policy and international standards to increase and improve the quality of education in each level of the system. Several International reports and surveys facilitate to intensify confirmation in school policies, teaching and training processes, early childhood education. Review of Policies to Improve the Effectiveness of Resource Use in Schools (carried out in cooperation with the World Bank), the OECD Review of Policies for Vocational Education and Training (Skills Beyond School), and the OECD Country Review of Early Childhood Education and Care have highlighted weak points in education system of Kazakhstan (OECD, 2014a, p. 3). These reports have suggested reducing the gaps between the schools in urban and rural areas in case of policy, resourcing and teaching effectiveness.

To boost the quality of education system in Kazakhstan is the main purpose in the Core Curriculum standard of the Republic of Kazakhstan which was developed in July 27, 2017 regarding Article 56 “the Law of Education” (MESRK, 2017). The standard of Core Curriculum for secondary education has several requirements and objectives. One of them is the quality of education, which should provide improvements in academic and practical area. This focuses on subject as well as building necessary conditions for organization educational process in Kazakh as the first (KL1) or the second (KL2) language, Russian as first (RL1) or second (RL2), and English as the foreign language (EFL) to the number of compulsory languages in education from August 23, 2012 regarding decree No.1080 (MESRK, 2012).

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Reading is a very complicated decoding, cognitive (Meneghetti, Carretti, & De Beni, 2006) activity with further interaction, comprehension and communication of the reader and the author of the script (Brantmeier, 2005; Grabe & Stoller, 2001). Reading is a core domain in any subject as “proficient reading comprehension is crucial for success in every academic domain” (Wigfield et al., 2016, p. 190). Researchers (Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001; Smith et al., 2000; Wigfield et al., 2016) identify that in later childhood and adolescents the reader has to be “fluent in decoding and recognizing words, continually expand their vocabulary and knowledge base, and learn to use elaborate cognitive strategies to make inferences and analyze text critically”. However, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) observed a decline among 4th and 8th grade students in 2015. They investigated that the difficulties with reading comprehension of children could be a reason for the decline in the proficiency level of reading in the future. This means that if the increase of illiteracy is observable this could cause lower reading

comprehension, which later on prevents students in gaining academic achievements and career goals.

PISA points *reading* domain is among the majors and represents it as “*reading literacy*”. Reading literacy means that this is “an individual’s capacity to *understand, use, evaluate, reflect on and engage* with written texts, in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential, and to participate in society” (OECD, 2018, p. 27). The word to “evaluate” means that students also have to assess a written text while reading process. As reading is a difficult cognitive process of decoding the written text and assessing information. Literacy is an ability to interpret what the written symbols represent. “Achievement in reading literacy is not only a foundation for achievement in other subject areas within the education system, but also a prerequisite for successful participation in most areas of adult life (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Smith et al., 2000)” (OECD, 2017). Hulme and Snowling (2013) describe learning to read as “a key objective of early education and difficulties in learning to read can have serious adverse consequences” (Hulme & Snowling, 2013, p. 1).

Wigfield et al. (2016) claim that “Proficient reading comprehension is crucial for success in every academic domain”. They also identify that in later childhood and adolescents a reader has to be “fluent in decoding and recognizing words, continually expand their vocabulary and knowledge base, and learn to use elaborate cognitive strategies to make inferences and analyze text critically” (p. 190).

According to PIRLS reading framework assessment–“*Reading literacy is the ability to understand and use those written language forms required by society and/or valued by the individual. Readers can construct meaning from texts in a variety of forms. They read to learn, to participate in communities of readers in school and everyday life, and for enjoyment*” (PIRLS-2021, Mullis et al., 2019, p. 6). Pivotal aspect in PIRLS survey while indentifying the term “reading literacy” establishes the foundation of the student’s individual development and his or her academic prosperity as well as testifies the instruction of the curricular standards in the certain educational program.

Carver (2000) determines reading skills and reading as a global and active process of humans’ development and defines them in his theory of *input and storage* where “the reading process was conceptually divided into two primary components, *input and storage*. The differences between being able to (i.e., input– the words in a sentence), and being able to comprehend or understand (i.e., store– the complete thought in the set of words which make up a sentence) (p. 3) have been taken into the very glance of Carver. Carver’s findings were also shown in his book “The causes of high and low reading achievements” (2000), by name. The researcher mostly concentrates on some important factors that influence students to read, and what students can take from reading during the school year as well as what the teachers are able and not able to do in order to increase students’ rate and level of reading. He also confirms that the fusion of psychometrics and experimental psychology indicate the low and high reading achievements. Thus, one

should say that reading literacy is the core development of the human being and a dependable part in education. Likewise, LaRusso et al., (2016) explain that beyond reading skills fluency and efficacy in the middle school obtain a reasonable benefit and advantage at the end of reading process.

## **THE STUDY AIMS AND METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Aim**

This research study aimed to assess and explore the problems of poor reading literacy skills of young learners in Kazakhstan in the middle school as well as to develop a modified framework for teaching and learning reading skills in native language and English as a foreign language. The term reading literacy in the national curriculum in Kazakhstan for middle stage of education is not clearly underpinned, thus, it requires developing and modifying the educational framework for reading literacy in the middle stage while teaching, learning, and studying the languages. Hence, we first focused on studying the languages as the native language (Kazakh and Russian), and then English as the foreign. This could help us to define the main core problem of Kazakhstani learners.

As reading is a cognitive process (Ehri, 2000, 2005; Kintsch, 2012; Cain, Compton, & Parrila, 2017; Perfetti, 2007; Perfetti & Stafura, 2014) which requires a number of skills and abilities from the reader in order to acquire knowledge, gain information, understand, reflect and evaluate the written text (OECD, 2017, 2019a, 2019b). Regarding “*PISA for development assessment and analytical framework: reading, mathematics and science*”–“*reading literacy*” is simply defined as “*reading*” where “a wide range of cognitive competencies, from basic decoding, to knowledge of words, grammar and larger linguistic and textual structures and features, to knowledge about the world” (OECD, 2018, p. 28).

### **Research methodology**

The longitudinal study focused on developing a framework for modifying teaching and learning process of the learners in the middle grades. All studies were cross-sectional and cross-cultural as well, because students from Grades 6 and 8 with various ethnic backgrounds (i.e. Russian, Ukraine, Polish, German, Belarusian, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tatar, Chechen, Azerbaijani, etc.) participated in the assessment. The current study was cross-sectional and as Kazakhstan has started to take part in the international surveys such as PISA, TIMMS, and RILRS, the results in reading literacy of 15-year-olds are declining every time, concluding that students from Kazakhstan are two years behind their average peers from OECD countries. For this reason the research study was mainly focused on (1)

facilitating reading skills, and literacy of 12 and 14-year-old students in Kazakh, Russian, and English as FL. As there are Kazakh and Russian medium classes and schools in Kazakhstan, this study is also (2) providing features and evidences for further efficient application and implementation of the adapted frameworks for teaching and learning reading literacy and skills in these classes in the middle school as well as to reveal factors, which would suppose affecting reading achievements.

## **Samples**

The participants were from seven randomly chosen secondary schools in Pavlodar, in northern Kazakhstan. The assessed schools have both Kazakh and Russian as media of instruction. The sole medium of instruction in Schools A, B and C is Kazakh, whereas the four other schools (Schools D, E, F and G) have both Kazakh- and Russian-medium classes. As the assessment survey conducted during three years 2018-2020 in the winter term in January-February the total number of the students from Grades 6 and 8 included 4274 (49.9% - boys, 51.2 % - girls) participants.

## **Instruments**

The survey used the background questionnaire that was adapted from Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA) and included twelve items referred to socio-economic status (SES) regarding age, gender, grade, home language, mother tongue, the effect of mother's and father's highest level of education, internet access at home, desk, room, number of books, having computer or lap-top at home.

The reading comprehension tests in English for Grades 6 and 8 were adapted from the Hungarian language experts and researchers (for more details see Csapó & Nikolov 2009; Nikolov & Csapó, 2010, 2018).

The questionnaire for reading attitude based on the National Literacy Trust (NLT) of Children's and Young People's Reading Habits and Preferences (cf. Clark & Foster, 2005).

The reading tests were based on the present program of the core curriculum for teaching Kazakh, Russian and English languages in the secondary education (MES, 2013); as well as the PISA framework requirements were taken into consideration. All rubrics in the tests were familiar to the students; the format and level of the tests were corresponded to A1-A2 Levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001).

Metacognitive Awareness of Reading Strategies Inventory (MARSİ) - a 30-item questionnaire Version 1.0 by Kouider Mokhtari and Carla Reichard (cf. Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002) was applied for the first time to young adolescents in middle school. The original version of MARSİ has been translated twice from English to Kazakh and from

English to Russian languages. Then the back and forth translation were compared to the original in English. The translation version of MARSII in Kazakh and Russian languages demonstrated ( $\alpha=.89$ ) Cronbach's coefficient alpha of the total sample.

## **Procedure**

The tests and questionnaires were delivered online by the Electronic Diagnostic Assessment System, the eDia platform (Csapó & Molnár, 2019). The instruments were administered in the computer rooms at the participating schools with the Internet connection available there and using the operating system and browsers, the participants normally use and are familiar with.

## **Data Analysis**

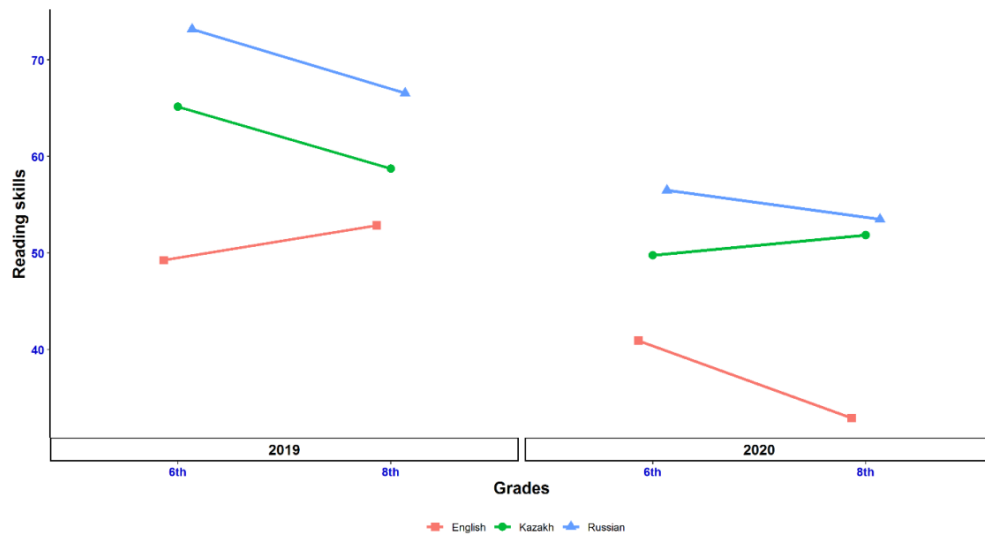
The data were analyzed with the help of IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 23 and the Analysis of Moment Structure (AMOS) version 24, Mplus, ConQuest, and RStudio. The process of our analysis started from checking common method bias, exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis, invariance analysis, and regression. In addition to, the reliability and validity of the instruments were showing further. Tests performances of sixth and eighth graders were not compared to each other although while defining the factors of the model both grades were analyzed together.

## **THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY**

The results showed that middle school learners in Kazakhstan had poor reading skills in the target languages. Interestingly, young learners have a positive attitude towards reading, but this did not have any impact on their performance. The analysis revealed that young adolescents a low influence of reading attitude on the reading tests in the three languages. Factor analysis found a three-factor model in the sixth grade and a four-factor model in the eighth. Factor loadings in both grades correlated well, and reliability coefficients for these factors ranged from .71 to .86; the models fitted well to the data in both grades: the sixth ( $\chi^2=154.33$ , CFI=.95, TLI=.93,  $df=51$ , RMSEA=.05, SRMR=.04) and eighth ( $\chi^2=148.33$ , CFI=.97, TLI=.95,  $df=48$ , RMSEA=.06, SRMR=.04).

**Figure 1**

*Development of young learners' reading skills in 2019 and 2020*

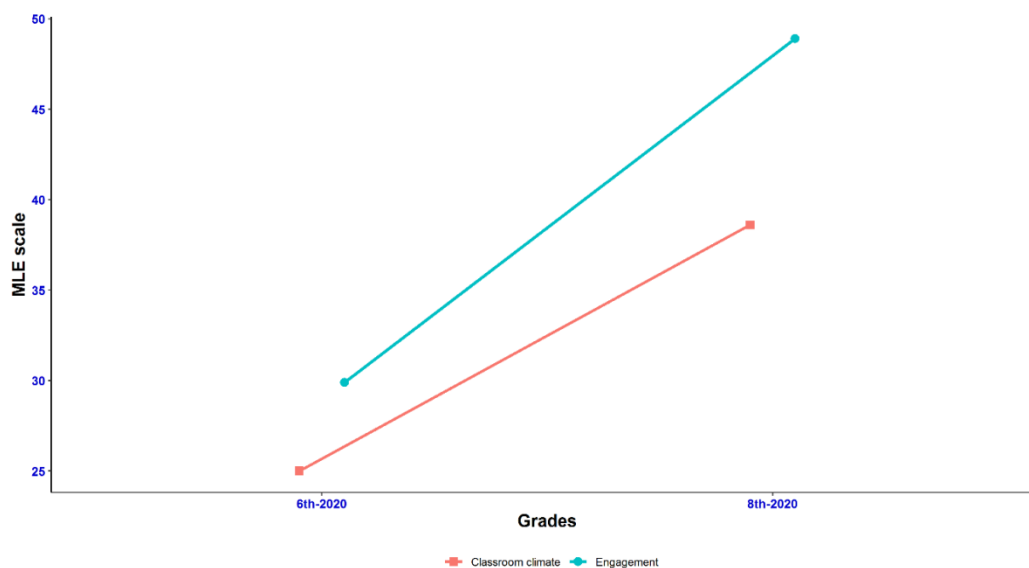


Significant correlations were found between factors in Grades 6 ( $r=.21$ ,  $p<.01$ ) and 8 ( $r=.33$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Despite a positive attitude towards reading, the regression analysis found weak relations between reading attitude and reading achievement in the targeted languages in both grades.

The problem for this issue may relate to the OECD Reviews of School Resources (OECD/The World Bank, 2015) in Kazakhstan indicating the gaps in the system of secondary education and suggesting teachers, parents, principles, and other stakeholders to be more careful and put a significant attention on the process of choosing textbooks for reading, which should meet students' interests in middle school. In addition to this, among sixth-grade students the correlation of factor (1) Climate of feeling at school with the factors (4) Student-teacher relationship, (5) Interest & enjoyment of English learning, and (7) Interest of using ICT found non-significant and showed no relationships. While factor (7) Interest of using ICT revealed negative poor correlation with factor (3) Classroom climate by student, as well as no relation between factor (8) Anxiety of ICT and (4) Student-teacher relationship.

**Figure 2**

*Performance difference in difference grade levels*



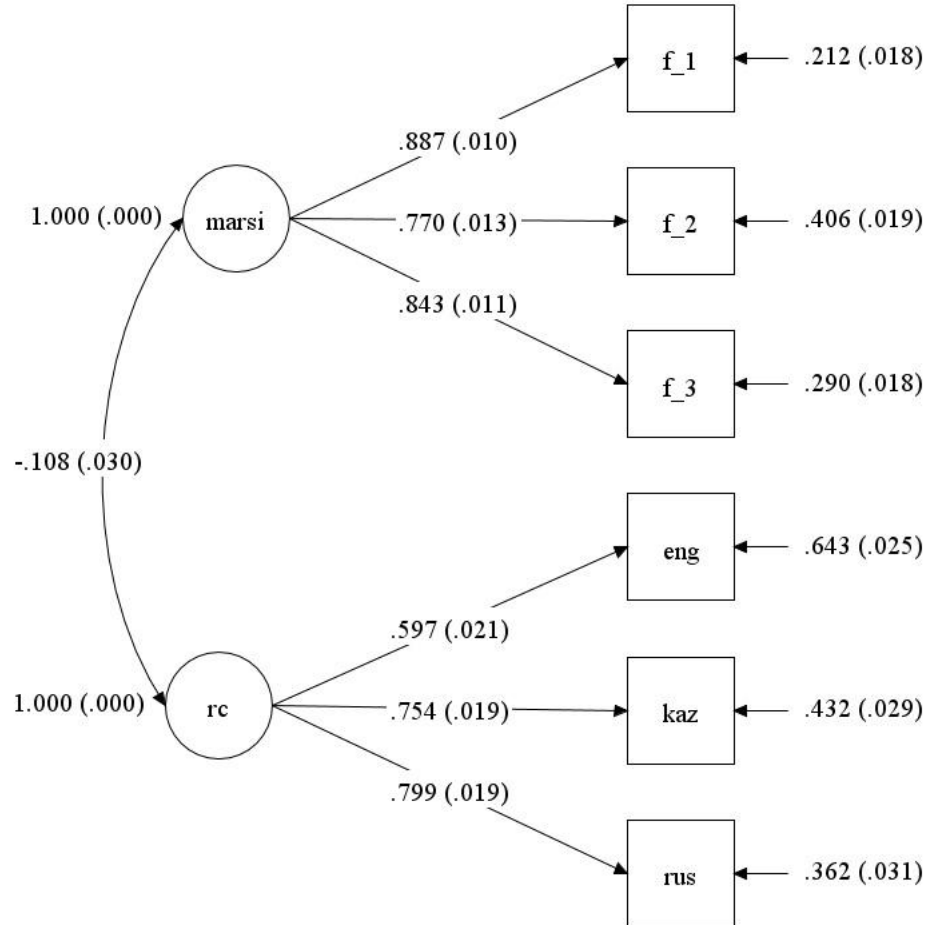
The role of teachers and school administration should be motivated and let young learners root ideas, contribute, and develop views in the process of teaching and learning. Students should be able to decode and comprehend the information in the languages they are learning. Although comparing the findings of sixth and eighth grades in 2019 and 2020 years the decrease in three languages was obvious (Figure 1).

For defining the relation between independent and dependent variables structural equation modeling was conducted (Schumacker & Lomax, 2010). The following statistical procedure found correlations of the three factors on reading comprehension test in the target languages were first analyzed separately - sixth and eighth grades and then the whole sample. The results demonstrated the following in Grade 6 ( $\chi^2=6.172$ , CFI=1.00, TLI=1.00,  $df=8$ , RMSEA=.00, & SRMR=.01) the prediction was of reading strategies on the tests was non-significant; in Grade 8 ( $\chi^2=45.152$ , CFI=.98, TLI=.96,  $df=8$ , RMSEA=.08, & SRMR=.04) the prediction was significantly negative ( $\beta=-.340$ ,  $p<.000$ ). For the whole sample ( $\chi^2=37.250$ , CFI=.99, TLI=.99,  $df=8$ , RMSEA=.04, & SRMR=.02). The R-squared in the whole sample showed the prediction of the factors in the Russian reading (64%), in Kazakh reading (57%), and in English (36%). However, the prediction of the MARSF factors on the reading comprehension tests was significantly negative ( $\beta=-.108$ ,  $p<.000$ ). SEM analysis of both grades is illustrated in more detail in Figure 3.



**Figure 3**

*Structural equation modeling of reading strategies and reading achievements (the whole sample, 2020)*



Regression analysis with the five factors in reading strategies confirmed in CFA, predicted reading achievements tests in three languages of the whole sample size (6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades). The goodness of fit indices showed a good fit to the model in both grades ( $\chi^2=1358.158$ , CFI=.92, TLI=.91,  $df=470$ , RMSEA=.04, & SRMR=.03). However, the regression analysis showed that R-squared did not equal zero, albeit the correlation between the model and the dependent variables were statistically significant in English ( $R^2=.041$ ,  $p=.033$ ), in Kazakh ( $R^2=.045$ ,  $p=.010$ ), in Russian ( $R^2=.086$ ,  $p<.001$ ). The findings indicated that reading strategies of the of the whole sample (6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders) affected reading outcomes but probability of using several other strategies by the students while performing reading tests was obvious. The standardized beta coefficient of reading

strategies showed that in English, only factor 1 ( $\beta = .333$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and 2 ( $\beta = -.270$ ,  $p < .05$ ) predicted reading achievements but from factors 3 ( $\beta = .084$ ,  $p = .439$ ), factor 4 ( $\beta = -.091$ ,  $p = .331$ ), and factor 5 ( $\beta = -.083$ ,  $p = .278$ ) the prediction was not statistically significant. Although the prediction for the factor 2 was negative will be that probability of using reading strategies in factor 2 was not efficiently provided in the studying process.

## DISCUSSION

The low impact of reading attitude on reading outcomes is underlined in the literature (McKenna, 1994, 2001; McKenna et al., 2012), confirming that reading attitude declines significantly as children grow older. Firstly, in exploring the results of reading achievement in both grades considerable differences were demonstrated on the Kazakh- and Russian-language tests than on the ones in Kazakh and English, on the one hand, and Russian and English, on the other.

On the one hand, on the background questionnaire, half of the students mentioned that the problem was a lack of free time and the absence of interesting books at home and in the school library. On the other hand, the results assumed that young learners in Kazakhstan in general have a positive attitude towards reading, but they read less as they move onto the upper grades. We also consider that this may be because the quantity of subjects and homework grows significantly and they have less free time for pleasure reading.

Conceptual model was based on literature research tested by several educators and researchers (Pianta et al., 2008; Reyes et al., 2012) in the field of assessment in education, classroom climate, and engagement. The model examined mediation effect of engagement between school classroom climate and the students' reading outcomes in English, Kazakh, and Russian languages. In Grade 6 full mediation effect were in Kazakh and Russian, and no mediation in English, albeit in eighth grade, partial mediation revealed in Kazakh and Russian, and full mediation in English. These results may prove the existence of mediation effect in the middle school of Kazakhstan, where classroom climate and engagement could play a significant role as children move to the upper grades i.e. from grade six to grade eight. Difference in the classroom climate in sixth and eighth grades was obvious - from negative to positive.

The evidence of students' decreased reading literacy could be worrisome for the education system, economic progress and the welfare of Kazakhstan in general. In 2018, Kazakhstan showed declining results in reading literacy ( $M=387$ ) compared to 2009 ( $M=390$ ) and 2012 ( $M=393$ ) (OECD, 2019a, 2019b). Kazakhstan has participated in PISA since 2009. Furthermore, the PISA2018 survey has reported that most 15-year-old students from 79 countries prefer reading digital messages to books (OECD, 2019a). Besides most other digital resources, the students read texts on their smart phones,

tablets, and chatapps. A large number of the students mentioned that they read when they have to and only use online resources to search for and learn more about certain information; in addition, it was noted that reading attitude and reading enjoyment for these young learners are on the decline (OECD, 2019a, 2019b).

## LIMITATIONS, FUTURE RESEARCH, AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

There are several limitations of this study. The first is the location of the randomly selected schools. Based on the PISA surveys, students in rural Kazakhstan scored low and were one year behind those in urban schools (OECD/The World Bank, 2015, p. 42), which may be tied to school resources and facilities. The second limitation is the socio-economic background of the students, as the study did not provide any information on students from disadvantaged families or on those who are at risk of dropping out. The study population assessed bilingual and monolingual students in the sixth and eighth grades from seven randomly chosen public secondary schools in Pavlodar city (northern Kazakhstan). In addition, the study suffers from the absence of a qualitative analysis (i.e., interviews with teachers, parents and other stakeholders on the language situation in Pavlodar schools) as well as assessing the quality of teaching and learning languages in Kazakh- and Russian-medium classes.

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## PUBLICATIONS RELATED TO THE DISSERTATION

### *Journal articles*

- Akhmetova, A.B., Imambayeva, G. E., & Csapó, B. (2021). Development of reading skills and motivation in learning English as a function of young learners' previous language background: Kazakhstani context. *ҚазҰУ Хабаршысы. Филология сериясы (Eurasian Journal of Philology: Science and Education)*, *1*(181), 152-161. <https://doi.org/10.26577/EJPh.2021.v181.il.ph17>
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Akhmetova, A. B., Imambayeva, G. E., & Csapó, B. (XXXX). Young learners' reading-writing skills in English as FL in Kazakhstan. *Л.Н. Гумилев атындағы Еуразия ұлттық университетінің хабаршысы. Филология сериясы (Bulletin of the L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University. Philology Series)*, (accepted)

#### *Conference presentations*

Akhmetova, A. B., Imambayeva, G. E., & Csapó, B. (2022). *Reading activity of young learners in the middle school in Kazakhstan*. Paper accepted at the 18th Conference on Educational Assessment (CEA), 21–23 April, 2022, Szeged, Hungary.

Akhmetova, A. B., Imambayeva, G. E., & Csapó, B. (2022). *Reading strategies and reading performances of young adolescents in Kazakhstan*. Paper accepted at the 18th Conference on Educational Assessment (CEA), 21–23 April, 2022, Szeged, Hungary.

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#### *Manuscripts under review*

- Akhmetova, A. B., Soeharto, S., Imambayeva, G. E., & Csapó, B. (XXXX). Assessing and validating young Kazakhstanis’ reading skills in English, the classroom climate, and their engagement. (under review)
- Akhmetova, A. B., Imambayeva, G. E., & Csapó, B. (XXXX). A study of reading attitude and reading achievement of young learners in middle school. (under review)
- Akhmetova, A. B., Imambayeva, G. E., & Csapó, B. (XXXX). Reading strategies and reading achievements in the middle school: Kazakhstani young learners. (under review)