ENGLISH AS A PREFERRED FOREIGN LANGUAGE: STUDENTS' AND PARENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract

This article examines students' and parents' attitudes towards foreign language education in Uzbekistan, with particular attention to the growing preference for English alongside the continuing importance of Russian. Drawing on the empirical component of the author's 2020 Master's research, the study uses a mixed-method design comprising an online questionnaire completed by 150 upper-secondary students and 20 semi-structured interviews with parents, a student, teachers and school administrators. The findings indicate a strong social orientation toward foreign-language learning: 60% of questionnaire respondents reported being very interested in learning foreign languages, while only 1% reported no interest. English was the most preferred foreign language (85%), followed by Russian (78%); German, Korean and Chinese were selected considerably less frequently. The data suggest that students associate English primarily with future educational and economic opportunities, while Russian retains perceived prestige and practical value in social and professional life. Parents also strongly favored English: interview evidence showed that some parents resisted school arrangements requiring their children to study French or another foreign language because they preferred English. At the same time, language preferences were connected to instrumental pressures, particularly university entrance examinations and the widespread use of extracurricular language courses. The article argues that foreign-language preferences should be understood not simply as individual choices but as language ideologies shaped by educational policy, perceived economic opportunity, examination structures and the multilingual sociolinguistic environment of Uzbekistan. The study further shows that grassroots preferences can reinforce, but can also diverge from, formal language policy.

Keywords: language attitudes; language ideology; English; Russian; foreign language education; parents; students; Uzbekistan; language policy; multilingualism

Key empirical indicators from the 2020 study

Indicator	Result
Questionnaire respondents	150
Semi-structured interviews	20
Students very interested in foreign-language learning	60%
Students somewhat interested	23%
Students learning mainly for entrance examinations	16%
Students not interested at all	1%
Preferred English	85%
Preferred Russian	78%
Preferred German	24%
Preferred Korean	23%
Preferred Chinese	7%
Students attending extracurricular language courses	73%

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1. Introduction

Language education policy does not operate only through legislation, curricula and institutional decisions. It also operates through the beliefs and choices of learners, parents and communities. When families decide which languages their children should learn, which courses they should attend and which languages are associated with future success, they participate in the formation of language practices. Understanding these attitudes is therefore essential for understanding how language policy works in practice.

Uzbekistan provides a particularly interesting context for examining these processes. The country has experienced a shift from a strong post-independence emphasis on the Uzbek state language toward an increasingly prominent foreign-language education agenda, especially English. Russian, however, continues to have practical and symbolic significance. English has increasingly been associated with international education, employment and globalization, whereas Russian remains relevant in communication, professional life and access to established social and informational networks.

The present article focuses on the attitudes of upper-secondary students and parents toward foreign-language learning. It asks why English has become particularly attractive, how Russian is positioned alongside English, and how family preferences interact with formal school language policy. The analysis is based on data collected in 2020 and is deliberately framed as an empirical study of attitudes during that period rather than as a claim about the current national situation.

The article addresses four research questions: (1) What level of interest did students report toward foreign-language learning? (2) Which foreign languages did they prefer, and what meanings were attached to these preferences? (3) How did parents perceive the relative value of English and other foreign languages? and (4) What do these preferences reveal about the relationship between official language policy and grassroots language ideology?

2. Theoretical Perspective: Language Policy, Ideology and Grassroots Choice

The analysis draws on Spolsky's (2004) conception of language policy as an interaction among language practices, language beliefs and language management. In this framework, official government decisions represent language management, while the preferences and beliefs of learners and parents form an important part of the belief dimension. Actual choices—such as studying English rather than French, attending private language courses or using Russian for particular social purposes—constitute observable language practices.

Shohamy (2006) further emphasizes that language education can function as a mechanism through which language policy is transformed into everyday practices. Educational institutions do not operate in isolation: learners, parents, teachers, examinations and private education providers all influence the meaning of a policy. A language may therefore become socially dominant in education not only because the state promotes it, but also because communities perceive it as valuable.

The concept of language ideology is especially useful here. A language preference is rarely only a matter of linguistic taste. It can reflect assumptions about modernity, prestige, employability, international mobility, national identity and educational opportunity. The preference for English found in the study can therefore be interpreted as an instrumental and aspirational ideology, while the continuing preference for Russian illustrates the persistence of established sociolinguistic value.

3. Methodology

The article revisits the empirical data from the author's Master's dissertation. Data were collected in February–March 2020 using a mixed-method design. The quantitative component consisted of an online

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questionnaire completed by 150 students, while the qualitative component consisted of 20 semi-structured interviews.

The questionnaire was distributed in Uzbek, Russian and English among students in grades 9–11 in Khorezm region and Tashkent city. Respondents were predominantly 15–20 years old; 54.4% were male and 45.6% female. Ninety-two percent identified Uzbek as their mother tongue, and 92% reported studying English and Russian as foreign languages at school.

The interview component included five parents, one 11th-grade student, two school administrators and twelve language teachers. Nineteen interviews were conducted in Uzbek and one in English. The interview protocol asked participants about the status and importance of Uzbek, Russian and English, the effectiveness of foreign-language policy, parental attitudes, language-learning challenges and possible improvements.

The present article uses descriptive quantitative analysis and thematic interpretation of the interview evidence. Because the sample was geographically limited and was partly recruited through social networks and personal contacts, the findings should not be generalized statistically to all students or parents in Uzbekistan. They are interpreted as evidence of attitudes within the studied population.

4. Students' Interest in Foreign-Language Learning

The first notable finding is the high level of student interest in foreign-language learning. Sixty percent of questionnaire respondents described themselves as very interested in learning foreign languages. A further 23% were somewhat interested. Sixteen percent reported learning a foreign language primarily because of university entrance examinations, while only 1% reported no interest at all. The distribution indicates that foreign-language learning was highly salient in the lives of the students surveyed.

The findings also suggest that motivation was both instrumental and aspirational. The original study interpreted foreign-language learning as connected to entry into a globalized world, future employment and personal success. This is particularly relevant to English, which students could associate with educational mobility and economic opportunity. At the same time, examination requirements created a more immediate instrumental motivation for a smaller but significant group of respondents.

The coexistence of long-term aspirations and short-term examination pressure is important. A student may value English because it symbolizes international opportunity while simultaneously learning it because it is useful for admission to university. These motivations are not mutually exclusive; rather, they reinforce the perceived value of English within the educational environment.

5. English and Russian as the Dominant Foreign-Language Preferences

English emerged as the most preferred foreign language in the questionnaire. Eighty-five percent of respondents selected English as a language they would like to learn well. Russian followed closely at 78%. German was selected by 24%, Korean by 23%, and Chinese by 7%. Because respondents could select more than one language, these percentages represent overlapping preferences rather than mutually exclusive categories.

The predominance of English was interpreted in the original study in relation to educational and economic opportunities. English was associated with access to international education, professional advancement and participation in a global environment. This interpretation is consistent with more recent scholarship describing younger respondents in Uzbekistan as increasingly positive toward English and associating it with education and economic opportunity, while Russian remains more strongly preferred among some older generations.

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Russian's high score is equally important. The result demonstrates that the growing importance of English did not eliminate the perceived value of Russian. In the original study, Russian was described by respondents and interview participants as prestigious and practically useful in employment and social life. The coexistence of 85% preference for English and 78% preference for Russian therefore points toward a multilingual orientation rather than a simple replacement of one language by another.

This pattern is theoretically significant. It suggests that language hierarchies in Uzbekistan are layered. Uzbek retains its central national and identity-related role, while Russian and English carry different forms of instrumental and symbolic capital. English is strongly connected to internationalization and future opportunity; Russian remains connected to established communication and professional networks. The two foreign languages can consequently be valued simultaneously.

6. Why English? Educational and Economic Aspirations

The data suggest that English is preferred largely because of what students believe it can provide. The questionnaire itself asked respondents why they wanted to learn a particular language, including whether it was important for their future, connected to cultural interest or necessary for university entrance examinations. The dissertation's interpretation emphasizes the association between English and educational and economic opportunity.

This finding should not be reduced to a purely economic calculation. English also functions as a symbol of modernity and global participation. Parents were described as encouraging children to begin foreign-language learning early not only for examination purposes but also to improve their future prospects. English thus acquires value before learners enter the labor market: it is imagined as a resource for a future educational and professional trajectory.

The aspirational character of English helps explain why parents sometimes preferred English even when school policy offered another foreign language. In such situations, the parental choice can be understood as a grassroots response to perceived language value. The state may organize foreign-language provision through several options, but families may rank those options according to their own understanding of future utility.

7. Parents' Attitudes: Grassroots Preferences and Policy Alignment

The parent interviews reveal strong support for foreign-language education, particularly English. Teachers reported that parents generally wanted their children to study English because of its perceived advantages. In one interview, a teacher described a school where English and French were offered: approximately 70% of the group studied English and 30% French, yet parents of students assigned to French reportedly preferred that their children study English instead. This example illustrates a gap between institutional allocation and family preference.

The significance of this finding lies in the relationship between top-down and bottom-up language policy. Formal policy may define a range of foreign-language options, but families can exert pressure through their preferences, requests and choices. In the studied case, English had acquired such strong perceived value that parents did not necessarily regard alternative foreign languages as equally beneficial.

At the same time, the interview evidence should not be generalized to all Uzbek parents. The study included only five parent interviews, and the reported parental preference is qualitative evidence. It is best interpreted as an indication of a strong ideology among the interviewed families and teachers' observations rather than as a nationally representative percentage.

The parent interview protocol itself demonstrates the breadth of the issue: parents were asked which languages were important for their children's future, the advantages of English, Uzbek and Russian, which languages should receive greater instructional time, whether school English was sufficient,

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whether school English could support university entrance, and whether their children attended additional language courses. These questions show that parental attitudes connected language choice with identity, education quality, examinations and future opportunity.

8. Examination Pressure and the Expansion of Extracurricular Language Education

Language preferences cannot be separated from the educational competition surrounding university admission. In the original questionnaire, 73% of respondents reported attending extracurricular foreign-language courses, while 27% did not. Interview evidence similarly described private tutoring as widespread among upper-secondary students preparing for entrance examinations.

This pattern is important because it shows that language ideology is reinforced by institutional incentives. If students believe that school English alone is insufficient for high-stakes examinations, they may seek additional provision. More recent research on Uzbekistan also documents substantial participation in English private tutoring and reports that students can perceive private tutoring as a response to declining trust in mainstream school English teaching.

The relationship should nevertheless be interpreted cautiously. The 73% figure comes from the author's 2020 sample and should not be treated as a national prevalence estimate. It does, however, provide evidence that extracurricular language education had become a normal part of the educational pathway for many of the surveyed students.

Private tutoring also strengthens the instrumental value of English. When a language is tied to high-stakes examinations, families have a concrete reason to invest additional time and money in it. Consequently, examination structures can contribute to the reproduction of a particular language hierarchy even when official policy provides several foreign-language options.

9. English, Russian and the Multilingual Language Hierarchy

The findings point toward a multilingual hierarchy rather than a simple English-versus-Russian competition. English was the most preferred foreign language in the student questionnaire, but Russian was almost as highly valued. The difference between the two appears to lie less in whether they are valuable and more in the kinds of value they represent.

English is primarily associated in the study with international mobility, education, employment and globalization. Russian, by contrast, is described as having an established role in communication and professional life within Uzbekistan. These different functions allow students and families to value both languages simultaneously. The resulting linguistic repertoire is additive in aspiration: learning English does not necessarily imply rejecting Russian.

The position of Uzbek is different. The questionnaire and interview instruments explicitly asked participants about the status and importance of Uzbek, reflecting the distinction between national-language policy and foreign-language education. The present article does not attempt to reproduce the dissertation's full analysis of Uzbek language policy; instead, it recognizes Uzbek as the national-language context within which English and Russian acquire their respective meanings.

This multilingual configuration is consistent with recent scholarship describing Uzbekistan as a setting in which English is increasingly valued by younger generations while Russian continues to retain social and practical significance. The implication for language education policy is that English promotion operates within an already complex sociolinguistic ecology.

10. Discussion

The findings support three main interpretations. First, foreign-language learning has become strongly normalized among the students in the study. With 83% describing themselves as very or somewhat interested, the data indicate that foreign-language learning was not perceived as a marginal

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school subject. Second, English had acquired exceptional symbolic and instrumental value. Its 85% preference rate was substantially higher than that of the other non-Russian languages listed. Third, Russian remained highly valued, with 78% selecting it, demonstrating the persistence of a multilingual orientation.

These results can be understood through Spolsky's distinction between management, beliefs and practices. Government reforms represent management; students' and parents' language preferences represent beliefs; and choices such as English study, Russian study and participation in private courses represent practices. The three dimensions interact. Policy can promote English, but its social success is strengthened when families independently perceive English as useful. Conversely, social preferences can put pressure on schools to privilege English even when several foreign languages are formally available.

The parent evidence illustrates this bottom-up influence particularly clearly. Parents' preference for English over French in the reported case demonstrates that educational language policy is not simply imposed on families. Families interpret the relative value of languages and can attempt to shape their children's educational pathways accordingly.

At the same time, the strong preference for Russian complicates any narrative of straightforward Englishization. The study suggests that English and Russian occupy different but overlapping domains of value. A policy that promotes English effectively therefore does not necessarily require a reduction in Russian. A more context-sensitive approach would recognize the distinct functions and symbolic meanings of each language while preserving the central role of Uzbek as the national language.

The findings also have implications for equity. When English is perceived as necessary for university access and future employment, families with greater resources may be better able to purchase additional language education. The 73% participation rate in extracurricular language courses in this sample illustrates how language preference can become linked to private educational expenditure. Recent research similarly calls attention to the relationship between English private tutoring and trust in mainstream schooling.

11. Implications for Language Education Policy

1. Recognize language preferences as policy-relevant evidence. Student and parent attitudes should be systematically collected when foreign-language options are designed or revised.

2. Promote English without framing other languages as obsolete. The simultaneous high preference for English and Russian indicates that families may seek multilingual competence rather than a single dominant foreign language.

3. Distinguish instrumental motivations from broader educational goals. Examination preparation is a powerful driver, but language policy should also support communicative competence, intercultural learning and long-term educational mobility.

4. Address the relationship between school education and private tutoring. If extracurricular provision becomes necessary for large numbers of students to meet perceived examination requirements, policymakers should investigate the underlying alignment between curriculum, teaching quality, assessment and learner expectations.

5. Maintain a context-sensitive multilingual approach. English can be promoted as a language of internationalization while Russian continues to serve important social and professional functions and Uzbek remains central to national language policy.

6. Include parents in language-policy communication. Where families strongly prefer English over alternative foreign languages, policymakers and schools should communicate the purposes, benefits and

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pathways associated with different languages rather than assuming that formal allocation alone will determine participation.

12. Limitations

The study has important limitations. The questionnaire included 150 respondents from Khorezm region and Tashkent city and was distributed online; the sample was not nationally representative. The qualitative component included only five parents. Some conclusions about parental ideology therefore come from a small qualitative sample and from teachers' observations of parents. In addition, all empirical data were collected in February–March 2020. The article should consequently be read as a historical and empirical account of attitudes during that period, not as a direct measurement of attitudes in 2026. The recent sources cited in the discussion are used only to contextualize the original findings and do not replace the dissertation's empirical evidence.

13. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that language education policy in Uzbekistan is shaped not only by government decisions but also by the preferences and aspirations of students and parents. Foreign-language learning was highly valued among the surveyed students, with 60% reporting very high interest and only 1% reporting no interest. English was the leading preference at 85%, while Russian followed closely at 78%. These figures reveal both the rapid rise of English and the continuing importance of Russian.

English's attractiveness was associated with educational and economic opportunity, internationalization and future career aspirations. Russian retained value because of its established practical and social functions. Parents reinforced the preference for English, sometimes even resisting school arrangements that directed their children toward other foreign languages. This demonstrates that grassroots language ideology can interact with and potentially reshape formal educational provision.

The broader conclusion is that language preference should be treated as a component of language policy rather than as a private matter outside policy analysis. Students and parents are active participants in constructing language hierarchies through their choices. In Uzbekistan, the resulting hierarchy is multilingual and differentiated: Uzbek represents national language identity, English increasingly represents international opportunity, and Russian retains established social and professional value. Effective policy should recognize these overlapping meanings rather than assuming that the rise of English entails the disappearance of other languages.

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