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BETWEEN NATIONAL IDENTITY AND GLOBALIZATION: THE CHANGING SOCIOLINGUISTIC ROLES OF UZBEK, RUSSIAN AND ENGLISH IN SECONDARY EDUCATION IN UZBEKISTAN

Fazilat Masharipova

Abstract

This article examines the changing sociolinguistic roles of Uzbek, Russian and English in the context of secondary education in Uzbekistan. Rather than treating the three languages as competitors occupying a single hierarchy, the article conceptualizes their relationship as a differentiated multilingual configuration in which languages acquire distinct forms of symbolic and instrumental value. The analysis revisits the empirical component of the author's 2020 Master's research, combining an online questionnaire completed by 150 students in grades 9–11 in Khorezm region and Tashkent city with 20 semi-structured interviews involving parents, teachers, a student and school administrators. The dissertation evidence indicates that Uzbek had a clearly established institutional and national-language role, while Russian retained strong social and professional significance and English was increasingly associated with international education, employment, globalization and future mobility. Among questionnaire respondents, English was selected by 85% as a foreign language they would like to learn well, compared with 78% for Russian. The qualitative evidence also indicates that Russian was perceived as prestigious and practically useful, whereas English was valued as an aspirational resource for future educational and economic opportunities. The article argues that the rise of English should not be interpreted as a straightforward replacement of Uzbek or Russian. Instead, Uzbekistan's language-policy environment is better understood through a layered model: Uzbek is associated primarily with statehood, national identity and institutional legitimacy; Russian retains established communicative, professional and symbolic capital; and English increasingly represents internationalization, mobility and global opportunity. Recent policy developments, including the 2025–2026 programme for the development of the Uzbek state language, reinforce the continuing importance of Uzbek while contemporary scholarship documents the growing social value of English. The article concludes that an effective language policy for secondary education should pursue additive multilingualism, strengthen the functional capacity of Uzbek, recognize the continuing social value of Russian, and expand equitable access to high-quality English education without framing these goals as mutually exclusive.

Keywords: language policy; linguistic identity; multilingualism; Uzbek; Russian; English; globalization; secondary education; language ideology; Uzbekistan

1. Introduction

Language policy in Uzbekistan cannot be understood through a simple opposition between a national language and foreign languages. Since independence, the country has simultaneously pursued the institutional consolidation of Uzbek as the state language, maintained a multilingual social environment in which Russian continues to perform important functions, and increasingly expanded English education in response to globalization, international mobility and perceived economic opportunity. Secondary schools are a particularly important site where these processes intersect because students encounter the three languages through different curricular, social and aspirational pathways.

The post-independence strengthening of Uzbek represents an important dimension of nation-building. The Law on the State Language identifies Uzbek as the state language while also recognizing citizens' rights to use their mother tongues and to receive education in other languages. Thus, the formal policy position is not inherently monolingual. It establishes Uzbek as the language of statehood while leaving space for multilingual educational and communicative practices.

The empirical study underlying this article was conducted in February–March 2020 and focused on upper-secondary students and adult participants in Khorezm region and Tashkent city. The dissertation examined national and foreign-language policy in secondary education, including the status and importance of Uzbek, Russian and English. The present article narrows that broader study to one

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analytical question: how do the three languages occupy different positions in the linguistic imagination of students, parents and educators, and what does this reveal about the relationship between national identity and globalization?

The central argument is that the linguistic configuration observed in the study is layered rather than zero-sum. Uzbek, Russian and English are not valued for exactly the same reasons. Uzbek derives its centrality from state status and national identity; Russian has accumulated social, professional and symbolic capital through historical and contemporary use; and English increasingly carries the symbolic value of global participation, educational mobility and future economic opportunity. The growing attractiveness of English therefore does not automatically imply the disappearance of Russian or the weakening of Uzbek as a national language.

The article asks three research questions: (1) How are Uzbek, Russian and English positioned within the language-policy and educational environment described in the study? (2) What forms of symbolic and instrumental value are attached to each language by students, parents and educators? and (3) What does the coexistence of these values imply for language-policy design in a globalizing Uzbekistan?

2. Conceptual Framework: Language Policy, Ideology and Linguistic Capital

The analysis draws first on Spolsky's (2004) understanding of language policy as an interaction among language practices, language beliefs and language management. This framework is useful because the Uzbek case demonstrates that formal decisions do not fully determine social language practices. State policy may assign Uzbek an official status and introduce English through school reforms, while families and communities continue to attribute different forms of value to Russian and English. Policy, therefore, operates through both formal management and socially circulating beliefs.

Shohamy (2006) further emphasizes that educational institutions are powerful mechanisms through which language policy is translated into de facto language practices. Schools allocate instructional time, determine which languages are offered, implement curricula and connect language learning to assessment. However, students and parents also interpret these arrangements. Their choices may reinforce policy, modify it or create pressure for different language priorities.

The concept of language ideology is particularly relevant. A language becomes valuable not only because people can communicate through it, but because speakers associate it with particular identities, social groups, institutions and futures. In the present case, Uzbek is linked to national belonging and state legitimacy; Russian is linked to established communication, professional life and prestige; and English is linked to international education, employability, modernity and globalization. These meanings are not mutually exclusive.

Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital provides an additional lens. Languages can function as resources whose value depends on the social field in which they are used. The same language may have limited value in one domain and high value in another. This helps explain why Uzbek can have the strongest formal status while Russian may retain high practical value in some professional or interpersonal contexts, and English can acquire increasing value in internationally oriented education and employment.

The article therefore distinguishes between formal status and social value. Formal status refers to the institutional and legal position assigned to a language. Social value refers to the benefits, prestige, identity and opportunities speakers associate with using or learning that language. The gap between these dimensions is central to understanding the Uzbek case.

3. Methodology

The article revisits the empirical component of the author's Master's dissertation, which used a mixed-method design. Quantitative data were collected through an online questionnaire completed by 150 students in grades 9–11 in Khorezm region and Tashkent city. The questionnaire was available in Uzbek, Russian and English. 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.

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The qualitative component consisted of 20 semi-structured interviews: five parents, one Grade 11 student, two school administrators and twelve language teachers. Nineteen interviews were conducted in Uzbek and one in English. The interview protocol included questions about the status and importance of Uzbek, Russian and English, the effectiveness of foreign-language policy, language-learning challenges, parental preferences and possible improvements.

The present analysis uses descriptive quantitative evidence and thematic interpretation of the interview material. It does not attempt inferential statistical testing. Because the questionnaire was geographically limited and partly distributed through social networks and personal contacts, and because only five parents were interviewed directly, the findings cannot be generalized statistically to the whole population of Uzbekistan. They are best understood as evidence of language attitudes and policy perceptions within the studied population.

A further limitation is temporal. The empirical data were collected in 2020. Consequently, the findings describe a particular stage of Uzbekistan's language-policy trajectory and should not be presented as a 2026 national survey. Recent scholarship and policy documents are used below to contextualize the historical findings, not to replace them.

4. Uzbek: State Language, National Identity and Institutional Legitimacy

The dissertation presents Uzbek as the central national-language component of post-independence language policy. The State Language Law establishes Uzbek as the state language, and the dissertation describes mother-tongue education as a core part of the school curriculum. Uzbek received the highest allocation of compulsory language-lesson hours in the curriculum examined by the dissertation, and knowledge of the mother tongue was also connected to higher-education entrance requirements. From the perspective of language management, these measures represent a sustained effort to strengthen the institutional position of the national language.

The dissertation also interprets the strengthening of Uzbek among post-independence school generations as a major policy achievement. A large majority of young people educated after independence were described as competent in the national language. This is significant because national-language policy is not limited to symbolic recognition: it seeks to create a generation capable of functioning through the state language in education and public life.

At the same time, the dissertation identifies a distinction between formal status and practical social significance. Uzbek possesses the strongest legal position, yet participants' accounts suggested that Russian could carry greater practical prestige in some domains. This distinction is important for language-policy analysis. A language may be institutionally dominant while another language retains high social capital in particular networks or professions.

The 2025 presidential decree on additional measures for the further development of the state language demonstrates that this issue remains active in contemporary policy. The decree identifies objectives including more effective use of Uzbek in public life, improvement of Uzbek-language teaching, strengthening its status as a language of science, integration with information technologies and artificial intelligence, and enhancement of its international status. It also approves a 2025–2026 implementation programme within the broader concept for the development of the Uzbek language and improvement of language policy.

These contemporary developments reinforce an important conclusion: strengthening Uzbek does not require treating multilingualism as a policy failure. The State Language Law itself combines the status of Uzbek with recognition of citizens' linguistic rights. A modern national-language policy can therefore seek to expand the functional capacity of Uzbek—especially in science, technology, education and digital communication—while simultaneously allowing other languages to perform complementary functions.

5. Russian: Established Social and Professional Capital

The position of Russian in the dissertation is analytically different from that of Uzbek. Russian does not possess the same formal status as the state language, yet it retains considerable social, professional and symbolic value. The dissertation describes Russian as important in administration,

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business, inter-ethnic communication, science and technology, and reports that respondents associated knowledge of Russian with employment opportunities in governmental and prestigious private-sector contexts.

The questionnaire evidence supports this interpretation. Seventy-eight percent of respondents selected Russian among the foreign languages they would like to learn well, making it the second most preferred language after English. Because respondents could select multiple languages, this should not be interpreted as a choice between English and Russian. Instead, the result indicates that many students could assign high value to both languages simultaneously.

The qualitative evidence further suggests that Russian carried prestige. The dissertation describes Russian as associated with educated and elite groups and notes the normalization of Uzbek–Russian code-switching in everyday communication. Such practices illustrate the difference between formal language status and lived linguistic ecology. A language can remain highly influential without occupying the top formal position in the language-policy hierarchy.

This pattern also complicates a simple post-Soviet narrative of linguistic replacement. The strengthening of Uzbek after independence and the expansion of English do not necessarily eliminate Russian. Rather, Russian can persist through accumulated networks, professional practices, media, interpersonal communication and symbolic associations. Recent research similarly reports that older generations in Uzbekistan tend to retain stronger positive orientations toward Russian, while younger respondents increasingly associate English with education and economic opportunity (Ersaidov, Cho, & Oh, 2025).

For education policy, the implication is not that Russian should necessarily be restored to a formally dominant position. Rather, policymakers should recognize that learners enter schools with existing linguistic resources and social expectations. Ignoring the practical value of Russian can produce a gap between formal curriculum and the multilingual reality experienced by students.

6. English: Global Opportunity, Modernity and Aspirational Capital

English occupies a different position from both Uzbek and Russian. The dissertation documents the emergence of English as the most preferred foreign language among the surveyed students: 85% selected English as a language they would like to learn well, compared with 78% for Russian, 24% for German, 23% for Korean and 7% for Chinese. The figures are overlapping preferences, not mutually exclusive rankings.

The dissertation links the strong preference for English to educational and economic opportunities. Students and parents associated English with future careers, international education and participation in a globalized world. English therefore has both instrumental and symbolic value. It is a practical skill, but it also functions as a representation of a desired future.

This aspirational dimension helps explain why English can become socially influential even when learners are not yet using it extensively outside education. The value of English is partly prospective. Students learn it not only because it is needed for present communication, but because they expect it to increase future educational and professional possibilities. English consequently acquires what may be described as aspirational linguistic capital.

The preference for English also illustrates the interaction between bottom-up beliefs and top-down policy. The state has promoted foreign-language education through reforms that expanded early instruction, curriculum development, teacher incentives and assessment. Yet policy becomes more socially powerful when families independently believe that English is valuable. The dissertation's evidence of parental preference for English over French in one school illustrates this bottom-up reinforcement of English.

At the same time, the rise of English should not be described as automatic 'Englishization' of the whole society. The coexistence of strong English and Russian preferences indicates that learners may seek an additive repertoire. Recent research continues to describe English as increasingly associated with education and economic opportunity while emphasizing the persistence of Russian and the need to protect national linguistic and cultural identity (Ersaidov et al., 2025).

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7. A Layered Multilingual Hierarchy

The combined evidence supports a layered model of language value rather than a single vertical ranking. A conventional hierarchy might assume that one language is 'above' another. The Uzbek case is more accurately represented as a set of partially overlapping domains.

The table below summarizes the principal functions identified in the dissertation and the contemporary context.

Language	Primary value identified in the study	Main educational/policy implication
Uzbek	Statehood, national identity, institutional legitimacy, mother-tongue education	Strengthen functional capacity in education, science, technology and public life
Russian	Established communication, professional networks, prestige, social and informational capital	Recognize continuing social value and support meaningful multilingual pathways
English	International education, employment, globalization, mobility and aspirational capital	Expand equitable, high-quality English education without subtractive language policy

8. From Competition to Complementarity

The layered model changes the policy question. Instead of asking which language should dominate, policymakers can ask which linguistic capacities students need and how the education system can provide them equitably. Uzbek, Russian and English can serve different purposes without being treated as mutually exclusive.

For Uzbek, the priority is functional expansion. National-language policy becomes stronger when Uzbek is not only the language of official identity but also a robust language of science, technology, higher education, digital communication and contemporary professional life. The 2025 policy programme explicitly moves in this direction by emphasizing science, technology, information technologies and international status.

For Russian, the priority is recognition of social reality. Students who possess Russian as a family or community language should not be understood as linguistically deficient. Russian can function as an additional resource for communication, professional networks and access to information. Recognizing this does not undermine the state status of Uzbek; it acknowledges the multilingual ecology in which Uzbek policy operates.

For English, the priority is equitable internationalization. If English is increasingly associated with university access, employment and international mobility, then high-quality English education becomes an issue of educational equity. The dissertation found that 73% of surveyed students attended extracurricular language courses. Although this figure cannot be generalized nationally, it indicates that many students in the sample were already supplementing school provision. If access to private language education becomes an important route to English competence, socioeconomic differences may translate into differences in linguistic capital.

The policy goal should therefore be additive multilingualism: strengthening Uzbek, maintaining meaningful opportunities to develop Russian where socially relevant, and expanding high-quality English education. Such an approach treats multilingual competence as a cumulative resource rather than as a competition for limited linguistic space.

9. Discussion

The findings contribute to three broader debates in language-policy research. First, they demonstrate the difference between official language status and social language value. Uzbek is

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institutionally central, but Russian retains significant practical and symbolic capital. This is consistent with Spolsky's observation that formal policy does not automatically determine everyday practices.

Second, the findings show that globalization does not necessarily produce a simple shift from local to global language. English gains value because it represents access to international opportunities, but learners can simultaneously maintain strong interest in Russian and attachment to Uzbek. Globalization therefore adds another layer to the linguistic repertoire rather than inevitably replacing existing languages.

Third, the case demonstrates that language policy is shaped by language ideologies from below. Parents and students do not merely receive policy; they interpret it according to their expectations about education, employment, prestige and identity. The preference for English over French in the reported school case is a small but revealing example of this process. Formal multilingual provision can be re-ranked by families according to perceived future value.

Recent literature broadly supports the direction of this interpretation. Ersaidov, Cho and Oh (2025) report generational differences in attitudes toward English and Russian and argue for context-responsive policy. Ibrakhimova (2024) similarly emphasizes the need to balance national identity with linguistic diversity when considering Uzbek, Russian and English. A 2025 critical analysis of English in the Uzbek national curriculum also frames English as simultaneously connected to globalization, modernity and questions of cultural identity (Toshkinboev & Abdullaev, 2025). These studies do not replicate the present dataset; rather, they provide contemporary context for interpreting the 2020 findings.

The most important analytical implication is that language policy should distinguish language status, language function and language aspiration. Uzbek may have the strongest formal status; Russian may have strong established social and professional functions; and English may have the strongest aspirational orientation among younger learners. Treating these dimensions as if they were identical can produce misleading conclusions about language competition.

10. Implications for Secondary-Education Language Policy

1. Strengthen Uzbek through functional domains. Policy should continue to expand the capacity of Uzbek in science, technology, academic writing, digital communication and professional education, not only in symbolic or administrative domains.

2. Promote additive multilingualism. English promotion should not be framed as requiring the marginalization of Russian, and strengthening Uzbek should not require denying the social value of other languages. Students can develop complementary linguistic repertoires.

3. Integrate language planning with educational equity. If English is strongly linked to university admission and employment, access to quality English instruction should not depend primarily on a family's ability to pay for private courses.

4. Include students and parents in policy design. Attitudes toward language should be monitored systematically. Families' language preferences provide evidence about how policy is interpreted and where formal provision may diverge from perceived social needs.

5. Avoid a single-value model of language. Languages should not be evaluated only by the number of speakers or their legal status. Policy analysis should consider identity value, communicative value, professional value, educational value and international value.

6. Treat multilingual competence as an educational asset. The simultaneous value assigned to Uzbek, Russian and English suggests that students may benefit from additive rather than subtractive language learning pathways.

7. Monitor generational change. Contemporary research suggests that younger and older generations may attach different meanings to English and Russian. Longitudinal attitude studies would help policymakers distinguish durable changes from temporary trends.

8. Improve school-based English provision. The high participation in extracurricular courses in the 2020 sample suggests that schools should examine whether curriculum, teaching quality, assessment

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and learner expectations are sufficiently aligned. Private tutoring should not become the only realistic route to high-level English competence.

11. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The study has several limitations. The quantitative sample was limited to students in Khorezm region and Tashkent city and was collected online. The qualitative sample was small, particularly the group of parents. The study also focused on perceptions rather than direct observation of language use across different social domains. Consequently, claims about national language hierarchies must remain cautious.

The most important limitation is temporal. The empirical data were collected in 2020, whereas Uzbekistan's language-policy environment continues to evolve. The 2025–2026 state-language development programme demonstrates that Uzbek-language policy has continued to develop after the original study. Future research should therefore combine historical datasets such as the present study with new nationally representative surveys.

Three directions are especially promising. First, longitudinal research could examine whether English continues to gain value among younger cohorts and whether Russian maintains its professional and social functions. Second, research could compare urban and regional schools, including minority-language and Russian-medium educational settings. Third, researchers could investigate how Uzbek, Russian and English are actually used in digital communication, higher education, employment and professional networks. Such evidence would allow researchers to move beyond reported attitudes toward observed multilingual practices.

12. Conclusion

The evidence examined in this article suggests that the language-policy environment of secondary education in Uzbekistan is best understood as multilingual and differentiated. Uzbek, Russian and English do not simply compete for the same social space. They carry different forms of value that have emerged from different historical, institutional and global processes.

Uzbek occupies the central position of state language and national identity. Its continued development is a core component of national language policy, and recent policy initiatives show an intention to expand its functional capacity into science, technology, digital communication and international cooperation. Russian, despite lacking the formal status of the state language, retains substantial social, professional and symbolic capital. English has rapidly acquired aspirational and instrumental value, particularly through its association with international education, employment, globalization and future mobility.

The 2020 empirical evidence is especially revealing because English and Russian were both highly valued: 85% of surveyed students selected English and 78% selected Russian as languages they would like to learn well. This coexistence challenges a simple replacement model. The findings instead support an additive interpretation in which students can value Uzbek as a national language, Russian as an established social and professional resource, and English as a gateway to international opportunity.

The policy implication is therefore not to choose one language at the expense of the others. A sustainable approach is to strengthen Uzbek's functional capacity, recognize the continuing social value of Russian, and provide equitable, high-quality English education. In this sense, the future of language policy in Uzbekistan may depend less on establishing a single linguistic winner than on constructing a coherent multilingual education system in which each language has a clearly supported and socially meaningful role.

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