English Oral Communication in Public Secondary Schools in Kazakhstan: Understanding its Practice and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The teaching of oral communication (OC) has been addressed in different ESL and EFL contexts, though mainly in a university setting. However, it has received little attention in the Central Asian context. This paper will provide preliminary insights into the practice of teaching English OC and the challenges associated with it in public schools in Kazakhstan (KZ), a country in Central Asia. For the pilot study reported here, data was collected from 18 KZ learners from 9 different schools via e-mail interviews. The study was guided by a theoretical model representing three levels of influence on OC practice: micro, meso, and macro. The current OC activities were found to be lacking in spontaneity, too teacher-centred and individual-oriented. At the micro level, emotional constraints were considered to have a greater impact on female students' oral performance, while limited linguistic repertoire affected male students' oral production. At the meso level, females found a lack of emotional support from their teachers, while males preferred to have out-of-class help from their friends to practise English. At the macro level, males were found to be more influenced by a wider sociocultural context than females. Firstly, the findings reveal the gap between the actual and preferred OC practices in KZ public schools, which can be further addressed by the stakeholders. Secondly, they illustrate how gender influences the way learners engage in OC activities. And lastly, they underline the importance of examining OC in relation to learners' self, their social communities and the overarching context that shapes their attitude towards a language.

Keywords: EFL context; Asian learners; gender; spontaneous speaking; affective factors

INTRODUCTION

In today's era of globalization, using English language as a "bridge" between diverse nations has considerably increased. It is therefore not surprising that many non-English speaking countries have top-down policies in embarking on measures to enhance learners' oral communication skills in English.

Yet, a bottom-up implementation of an education reform often faces challenges. This is evident from recent studies which explore the phenomenon of oral communication (OC, henceforth) in various Asian ESL and EFL contexts, such as Bangladesh (Kirkwood 2013); China (Li 2016); Cyprus (Vrikki 2013); Indonesia (Mahmud 2017); Iran (Tavakoli & Davoudi 2017); Japan (Leeming 2017); Malaysia (Singh, Singh & Lin 2015); Pakistan (Alam & Bashiruddin 2013); Saudi Arabia (Alhaysony 2016); South Korea (Kim 2014); Sri Lanka (Samaranayake 2016); Taiwan (Wang 2017); Thailand (Bruner, Sinwongsuwat & Radic-Bojanic 2015); and Vietnam (Tran, Moni & Baldauf 2013). Notably, previous studies have scrutinized various constructs embedded in the notion of OC that reflect its multifaceted nature, for example, teaching OC practices (Alsaedi 2012); speaking anxiety (Chan, Ain Nadzimah Abdullah & Nurkarimah Binti Yusof 2012); OC strategies (Mirzaei & Heidari 2012); codeswitching in OC (Vrikki 2013), willingness to communicate (Mahdi 2014),

corrective feedback in OC (Zhang & Rahimi 2014); motivation (Kim 2014); participation in oral activities (Zhou 2015); communication apprehension (Wang 2017); self-efficacy (Leeming 2017), and communicative styles (Mahmud 2017). Despite focusing on different principal constructs, the researchers have strived to contribute to one common goal: to enhance local learners' OC skills either by understanding the reality or transforming it via practical interventions. However, most studies have been carried out in a university setting, and little attention has been paid to the school context. This is disappointing, as school education sets the basic foundation for the learners, which subsequently directs their future development (Hall 2017). Furthermore, English OC learning appears to be less investigated in the Central Asian context, which includes such countries as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Thus, the present study takes public schools in Kazakhstan as the research site and it seeks to investigate the current practices of English OC and its challenges at the grass roots level – through the perspectives of local learners.

English in Kazakhstan has the status of a foreign language. The imperative role of English OC skills among Kazakhstani (KZ, henceforth) citizens has been elucidated in two of the country's top-down initiatives. The first is the "Trinity of languages" project (2009), which aimed at making KZ people equally fluent in Kazakh, Russian and English. Here, English received the status of a "language of integration into the global economy". The second is the National Plan called "100 steps towards realization of 5 institutional reforms" (2015), where the President highlighted the need to use English as a medium of instruction in high schools and universities not only to make KZ youths more competitive, but also to attract students from abroad. Henceforth, in the methodological guidelines developed by the Ministry of Education and Science, English teachers in KZ public schools have been encouraged to focus on the development of learners' communicative competence in the foreign language. However, as mentioned earlier, there are likely discrepancies between the government's goals and their actual realization in practice.

Despite the promotion of English speaking skills in the country's educational sector, the reality does not seem to be promising. For example, from the EF English Proficiency Index ranking results for 2017, Kazakhstan's score was 45.95, which is considered as a "very low proficiency" band. Besides, Akimenko's (2017) study revealed that KZ students favoured private tutors over school teachers, claiming that the former were more supportive and creative in the learning process, which helped them to improve their confidence in speaking English. This, in turn, raises doubts about the effectiveness of public schools in equipping learners with adequate communication skills in the foreign language. Hence, there is a need to explore the current situation in local EFL classrooms. On top of that, relatively little research has been carried out to examine learners' challenges associated with the practice of spoken English in KZ schools. Thus, the study posits the following research questions (RQ, henceforth):

1) How is English OC practised in the public school classroom?
2) What are the challenges that learners face in practising English OC?

This paper presents the results of a pilot study that was conducted in August 2017 with 18 KZ students via e-mail interviews, and follow-up telephone interviews with only 4 of the participants.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The notion of *oral communication* has many interpretations, and among the most frequently used words to describe it are "transmission", "understanding", "interaction", "meaning making", and "symbolic process". It is generally defined as a process where participants interact with one another for the purpose of creating and exchanging meaning. Nevertheless, since the present study views this phenomenon within the framework of EFL context, in our work we use the term OC to refer to a range of activities – speaking practices – that learners are engaged into during the lessons in order to develop their communicative skills in English.

As Richards and Renandya (2002) claim, there is a common assumption that speaking skills can be developed simply by asking students to talk on certain topics. However, the existing literature on OC shows that learners' production of oral language is shaped by various factors, which can be categorized into three groups: learner-related, teacher-peers-family-related, and sociocultural factors. In a similar vein, Douglas Fir Group (2016) has recently developed a framework representing three levels of influence on second language learning in general: micro (individual's social activities), meso (sociocultural institutions and communities), and macro (sociocultural ideological structures). In our study we adapt this delineation and view OC within the framework of a three-level influence: *micro* (learner's self), *meso* (relations and interactions with others), and *macro* (educational policy and culture).

At the *micro level*, Burns (2016) distinguishes cognitive and affective factors that affect the learner's willingness to participate in speaking practices. The former set signifies the learner's formulation of speech and selection of ideas to be articulated based on his/her linguistic and background knowledge, while the latter relates to the learner's feelings and emotional reactions. Although emotions in the learning process are rarely given much attention, they have recently begun to be the focus of study in SLA (Pavlenko 2013, Dewaele 2016). This can be explained by the power of psychological anxiety in diminishing learner's confidence to engage in classroom activities. As highlighted by Arnold (2002), anxiety is one of the main factors that hinder the learning process. An umbrella term for emotional constraints in OC is communication apprehension (CA, henceforth), which is defined as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey & Beatty 1986, p. 279). The authors explain that the higher the learner's CA, the lower is his or her desire to interact with others. For example, the study of Chan, Ain Nadzimah Abdullah, and Nurkarimah Yusof (2012) revealed that 55.6% of 631 Malaysian undergraduate students experienced nervousness when speaking English to native speakers. This could be attributed to the students' fear to be seen as less knowledgeable in front of more proficient users of language. This means that the learners' CA increases depending on the type of interlocutor. On the other hand, Mahdi (2014) discovered that introverted Saudi Arabian undergraduate students were less willing to participate in interactions not only in English, but also in their mother tongue, whereas extroverted students were ready to communicate in different types of situations. In this case, learners' individual characteristics are seen to come into play. Thus, the above examples show that each learner brings his/her own personality into the classroom with different fears, desires, and goals, which should not be overlooked as they may affect his or her oral performance.

At the *meso level*, learners are influenced by their teachers, classmates, family and friends, with whom they constantly interact. However, it is worth noting that this impact can be facilitative as well as inhibiting. For example, a negative atmosphere in the classroom, where there are tense relations between students, can result in learners' reluctance to express their ideas verbally. This is illustrated in Yanagi and Baker's (2016) study which found that

one of the most significant inhibitors of OC in English classes for Japanese students is the "fear of losing face" in front of their peers. Besides, in some circumstances, speaking English in a Japanese context might be considered as "showing off" (e.g. Tomita & Spada 2013). Such an atmosphere can also affect learners' self-esteem, because the way we feel about ourselves is determined by how others treat us (Cathcart, Samovar & Henman 1996). Apparently, learners with lower self-esteem might be unwilling to communicate due to the fear of negative reaction from their fellow classmates (McCroskey & Richmond 1990). In this regard, Billson and Tiberius (1991) encourage teachers to shift students' mind from competition to cooperation. The authors believe that in a climate where students support one another and work together, they feel safe and comfortable to demonstrate their knowledge and weaknesses. However, in contrast to this view, the study of Cho (2015) demonstrated that collaborative learning can also have a negative effect on students, one of which is ignorance of independent learning. For example, the researcher explains that when Korean learners encountered unknown words during collaborative activities, they prioritized the group's common goal and disregarded new vocabulary. In a similar vein, Bruner, Sinwongsuwat and Radic-Bojanic (2015) found that in the Thai university context, 91.7% of English OC activities consisted of group work. The setback to this was the lack of independence in the learning process, because students relied too much on one another when working together. These findings underline the importance of looking at the two sides of a coin: it is crucial to consider both positive and negative aspects of a learning activity and to find a balance between them. In summary, creating a favourable environment for learners that supports their willingness to communicate freely requires a great deal of attention and observation from teachers. As facilitators in a classroom, teachers should be attentive to the relationships among students, how students act and what role they play in collaborative activities, and what their strengths and weaknesses are.

Lastly, at the *macro level*, learners' perceptions about a language are shaped by the overall educational policy and cultural values that exist in the society they belong to. This, in turn, can determine how motivated or reluctant students can become to acquire communicative skills in another language. Not only that, but also lack of mutual consensus between the stakeholders can also create challenges for learners. For example, the study of Zhou (2015) illustrated how inconsistency between the national language policy and university curriculum in China can affect learners' acquisition of OC skills. According to the policy requirements, greater emphasis should be placed on the development of speaking and listening skills in English. However, the study revealed that the necessity to pass Chinese CET-4 National English proficiency examination compelled teachers to prioritize the improvement of learners' reading and writing skills, giving less attention to OC. As a result, Chinese students do not have enough opportunities to practise oral skills. Analogously, the study of Kirkwood (2013) highlighted the mismatch between the national communicative-oriented curriculum and the reality of undermining OC in English classes to meet the requirements of writing-oriented school examinations in Bangladesh. In other words, the studies demonstrate a mismatch between policymakers, targeted recipients of a policy – learners, and instruments to implement this policy – schools. As for cultural values, in Alsaedi's (2012) study, the majority of local teachers affirmed the importance of English in the Saudi Arabian context as a 'window to western culture', while students emphasized the opportunity to use English as a means to 'spread the concept of Islam' and promote its true meaning to different parts of the world. This therefore shows how a cultural factor can reinforce learners' motivation to develop their communication skills in a foreign language.

What is interesting about the discussed literature is that it places OC in a so-called nested system, where OC is a core, surrounded by three layers: micro, middle and macro. However, these levels of influence can operate and relate to one another differently,

depending on the environment where learning unfolds. As Han (2016) argues, it is not a new discovery that learning is shaped by an overarching context. However, what still remains unclear is which are the components of this context, and how exactly they affect learners from different environments. Thus, drawing on this three-level perspective of OC as a theoretical framework, the present study seeks to show how these influences are reflected in the context of Kazakhstani public schools.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design was employed to conduct the pilot study in order to gain preliminary insights into the practice of English OC in public school classrooms in Kazakhstan. Thus, OC is viewed as a central phenomenon requiring investigation and understanding (Creswell 2011). Semi-structured e-mail interviews were carried out with 18 participants from 9 different public schools in Almaty, the largest city in Kazakhstan. Also, a follow-up telephone interview was conducted with 4 students from the total number of respondents to elicit additional information. The reason for resorting to e-mail and telephone interviews was that these were the most practical and reliable methods considering the researcher's distance from the country of study at the time of data collection.

PARTICIPANTS

The participants of the study were selected through purposeful sampling. The researcher used homogenous sampling technique prior to data collection and snowball sampling technique after data collection had started. Firstly, using the homogenous technique, the researcher requested a local teacher in Kazakhstan (via telephone) to give contact numbers of students meeting the following criteria: they should be secondary students of Grade 9 in public schools and they should be Kazakhs. The rationale for selecting public schools is that their funding and operation is under the government's jurisdiction, whereas the choice of Grade 9 students is due to the Ministry's methodological guidelines (mentioned earlier), in which Grade 9 students are expected to be able to produce logical speech in the foreign language without relying on any auxiliary materials (for example, key words or sample templates). In other words, by the end of Grade 9, learners should be able to communicate in a spontaneous and meaningful manner.

After obtaining the contact numbers of two students, the researcher briefed them about the aim of the interview, and upon their agreement to participate, she emailed them the interview questions. Later, using the snowball sampling technique, the researcher asked the initial interviewees to recommend other potential participants. Thus, the participants contacted their friends and acquaintances with the same defining characteristics and distributed the questions to them. As a result, the total number of participants who provided their feedback via e-mail reached 18, and all were from 9 public schools. Additionally, after obtaining data from the respondents, 4 of them (2 male and 2 female participants) volunteered to be interviewed via telephone to respond to further follow-up questions. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1 below. Following the students' request to preserve the confidentiality of their institutions, the names of schools are given codes from 1 to 9 as shown in the table.

TABLE 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants of the study

No. of participants	School	City	Grade	Nationality	Gender
7	School#1	Almaty	9	Kazakh	Female
2	School#2	Almaty	9	Kazakh	Female
2	School#3	Almaty	9	Kazakh	Female
2	School#4	Almaty	9	Kazakh	Female
1	School#5	Almaty	9	Kazakh	Male
1	School#6	Almaty	9	Kazakh	Male
1	School#7	Almaty	9	Kazakh	Male
1	School#8	Almaty	9	Kazakh	Male
1	School#9	Almaty	9	Kazakh	Male
Total: 18					

In sum, all 18 participants were Kazakhs, Grade 9 students of public schools in Almaty. Of these, female interviewees outnumbered male interviewees (13 and 5, respectively).

INSTRUMENT

A qualitative interview aims to look at the world from the respondents' perspectives, to unveil the meaning of their experiences (Kvale 2008). In the pilot study, the interest was in the perspectives of KZ school learners regarding the current practices of English OC (RQ#1) and challenges associated with it (RQ#2). Open-ended questions were designed with the view to obtain data to answer the study's research questions, and were framed by the three-level theoretical model discussed earlier.

First of all, to understand how OC was practised in their EFL classrooms, participants were asked about the *type of speaking activities* they had in their English classes. Also, they were asked about the *changes they would like* in the way OC was practised in their classrooms. Their responses would help in understanding OC in relation to the learners' own needs. In other words, their responses would show to what extent the current classroom OC practices were aligned with the students' preferences.

Secondly, the participants were asked about the *challenges* they experienced during the practice of OC in their English classes. In order to allow students to respond "from their own perspective using their own frame of reference and ideas" (Edwards & Holland 2013, p. 30), none of the pre-determined levels of influence on OC were provided. However, the participants' responses on this matter were analysed based on these levels. The students were given a choice to respond to the questions in English or in their first language. All of them preferred to use the Russian language for convenience of expression.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was conducted based on the guidelines for implementing thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Notably, this method was also used by Norafini Zulkurnain and Sarjit Kaur (2014) in analysing focus group interviews that researchers carried out with 16 diploma students in Malaysia to obtain information about difficulties they faced during English OC activities, the focus similar to that of the present study.

As Braun and Clarke argue, there are two approaches that guide a thematic analysis: inductive (data-driven) or deductive (theory-driven). In this study, the former approach was applied in analysing responses related to RQ#1 (type of activities and preferences), and the latter in the analysis of the learners' challenges (RQ#2). The rationale for this is that in exploring actual and preferable OC activities, there was no intention to fit the data into a pre-existing frame, whereas in examining students' challenges, the analysis was guided by the pre-determined three-level framework.

Before the analysis, all the interview responses from 18 participants were compiled into one document and were read through to get an overall picture of the data. The participants were given codes for referencing purposes: for example, "P1(f)" means "Participant 1 (female)" or "P2(m)" means "Participant 2 (male)". Since the participants' answers were given in Russian, they were translated into English. Then the translated data was categorized into 3 *a priori* themes, which served as a "basic skeleton outline for preliminary categorization in order to begin the exploration of data" (Gibson & Brown 2009, p. 133). The *a priori* themes were identified based on the focus of interview questions and were given code names as follows: (*1) types of OC activities (OCA), (2) learners' preferences (LP), (3) challenges (Ch).* In the next phase, the data was coded within the first two themes to further categorize them into potential sub-themes drawing on the inductive approach, and the data within the third theme – on the deductive. We discuss the inductive coding first, which resulted in the emergence of several categories in themes OCA and LP.

In the first theme *"type of OC activities"(OCA),* the following categories were identified: oral retelling of textual materials, Q&A discussions between teacher and students, oral presentation of pre-composed monologues and dialogues. They were given code names "OCA1", "OCA2", and "OCA3" accordingly. Category OCA1 was constructed from activities that participants were given to practise speaking in English classes, such as by describing the content of a given text (a story, a newspaper article or a fairy tale) or explaining its meaning verbally. Category OCA2 included expressing their opinions orally about the questions that a teacher raised in class. The third category OCA3 included students' practice of OC by oral reproduction of the text, which they created on their own in advance (individually or in pairs).

The second theme *"learners' preferences"(LP)* was found to be represented by such categories as: more spontaneous speaking (LP1), more freedom to choose speaking topics (LP2), and more collaborative activities (LP3). Category L1 was created from the participants' statements that they would like to have speaking discussions with no prior preparation and planned scripts. This indicated the learners' desire to be able to formulate their thoughts quickly to articulate them in different real-life conversations. Category LP2 was constructed when the participants stated that they would like teachers to go beyond the school curriculum and agree to consider the topics of students' own interests. And lastly, category LP3 was developed from the respondents' remarks about their wish to engage more often in the activities with their classmates. This refers to the students' wish to socialize with their peers.

Coding of the data embedded in the third theme *"challenges" (Ch)* was driven by the theoretical framework of the study which represents three levels of influence on the production of OC. Thus, the data items were categorized into the following pre-determined categories: micro (Ch1), meso (Ch2), and macro (Ch3). Each data item was assigned a code "Ch1" if it related to learners' linguistic/background knowledge, or to the affective factors, "Ch2" – if it was associated with learners' teacher, classmates, family, or friends, and "Ch3" – if it dealt with language policy, cultural values or beliefs.

Next the generated categories were analysed to examine how they could be combined to produce an overarching theme and to identify the relationships between them. As a result, several themes were developed. First of all, OC activities were defined as individual-oriented, lacking in spontaneity, and teacher-centred. Secondly, the analysis of learners' challenges within the three-level framework revealed the following themes:

i.   At the micro level, females regarded affective factors, while males saw their limited linguistic knowledge as an inhibitor in OC activities;
ii. At the meso level, females wanted more emotional support from their teachers, while

males preferred to seek help outside of the school context – from their friends;

iii. At the macro level, males were more influenced than females by a wider sociocultural context.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The present study sought to answer two research questions: (1) How is English OC practised in public school classrooms? (2) What are the challenges that learners face during the practice of English OC?

RESEARCH QUESTION 1

The participants' responses demonstrated that the most prevalent English OC activities were oral retelling of textual materials (66%), Q&A discussions between teacher and students (44%), and oral presentation of pre-composed monologues and dialogues (27%). Not surprisingly, the students expressed a wish to have more frequent practice of spontaneous speaking, more power in selecting topics for oral discussion and more group work. Thus, the current OC activities were found to be lacking in spontaneity, teacher-centred and individual-oriented. This therefore answers the first research question.

OC ACTIVITIES ARE LACKING IN SPONTANEITY

Consider the following data extracts in Table 2 below:

TABLE 2. Data extracts representing "spontaneity-lacking" factor

Participant	Data extract
P9 (m)	Sometimes I wish we had *unexpected* activities. You just come to class and teacher says "Today we are going to practise spontaneous speaking." And when it happens, you will have to *improvise*. It will be cool.
P5 (f)	When we work in pairs to compose a dialogue, we write down our speech on a paper, and then when teacher asks us to present it orally, we just memorize what we have written and say it in oral form. So, there is no practice of *natural speaking*.
P13 (f)	We learn grammar all the time, but they do not teach us how to use language in real situations when you have to *think and speak fast*.

While the words "unexpected", "improvise", "natural speaking", and "think and speak fast" clearly render the learners' desire to communicate effectively in an authentic foreign context, they also reflect the opposite characteristics of the current classroom activities: planned, prepared beforehand, and oriented towards memorization. These characteristics, in turn, are attributed to the traditional methodology inherent in the educational system of the Soviet era, and still widespread across the public schools in Kazakhstan, the former Soviet republic. This is also evident from the Asian Development Bank's report (2004), where the process of learning in secondary education in Kazakhstan is described as not corresponding to the present goal to teach learners how to apply their knowledge in practice (Yakovets & Dzadrina 2014). Because conventional methodologies teach language skills such as grammar, lexis or pronunciation in isolation, students later experience difficulty in using the language as a whole outside the academic setting. It is therefore important to equip learners with sufficient knowledge and skills which can be applied in authentic communication settings (Larsen-Freeman 2012).

OC ACTIVITIES ARE TEACHER-CENTRED

The participants were also found to be willing to have a control over the choice of themes for classroom discussions. The data extracts in Table 3 below illustrate it:

TABLE 3. Data extracts representing "teacher-centred" factor

Participant	Data extract
P2 (f)	We are not allowed to choose what we would like to do for our English speaking practice. For example, I would like to learn how to use English in *daily activities*, such as cooking, cleaning, or shopping. But unfortunately we only discuss topics which are given in our school curriculum.
P3 (f)	Some of the topics are boring for me. Therefore, I prefer to keep quiet. I wish we could discuss something of my own interest. For example, *popular movies*, *music or fashion*.
P15 (f)	We keep learning formal English. But for me, I would like to speak some *youth slang* in English. I think it sounds so cool.

As can be seen from the italicized words, the students were interested in discussing meaningful and personalized topics, which they were not permitted to propose in class. Since Grade 9 learners are usually aged 15-16, it is not uncommon for teenage students to be inquisitive about popular culture among youngsters. Students therefore would like their classroom learning to be as close to the outside context as possible, resembling the real world. However, if learners' interests and needs are ignored, it can lead to a lack of motivation and unwillingness to participate in classroom interactions. In addition, if learners are constantly controlled by a teacher in the production of oral language, they will not be able to make their own decisions in using it for interactional purposes (Wilkins 1974). Eventually, students usually choose either of two options: to abstain from speaking or to speak because a teacher requires it (Arnold 2002). However, there is another option that learners can select: to speak because they really want to do it. In this case, teachers should be flexible in integrating topics of students' preference in the curriculum.

OC ACTIVITIES ARE INDIVIDUAL-ORIENTED

Looking at the most frequently used activities, such as retelling of a text, responding to a teacher's questions or presenting a written script, it is apparent that these activities do not encourage collaborative learning among students. This resonates with the study of Moldasheva & Mahmood (2014), who revealed that collaborative learning is not usually practised among undergraduate students in Kazakhstan. It can be attributed to the sense of competition among the learners to achieve higher marks. However, the following extracts in Table 4 demonstrate the participants' interest in socializing with their classmates to practise the foreign language:

TABLE 4. Data extracts representing "individual-oriented" factor

Participant	Data extract
P6 (f)	It would be great to have debates or role play games, where all students in class can *do something together* to practise English.
P11 (f)	Sometimes we work in pairs, practise dialogues. But we rarely have *group activities*. I prefer working with others, rather than by myself, because your classmates can help you, if you have difficulties.
P15 (f)	I wish we had some interesting competitions between several *teams in class*. It would be very entertaining and also helpful for our speaking skills.

From the extracts, students' willingness to engage in collaborative learning can stem from their desire to learn from others. This is called 'collective scaffolding', where students help each other in implementing a task, thereby sharing their knowledge with less capable

learners and concurrently mastering their own skills (Moll 1990; Donato 1994). This type of scaffolding has a positive impact on the learning process, because "if one of a dyad undergoes developmental change, the other is also likely to do so" (Bronfenbrenner 1979, p. 65). In other words, students progress by learning from their peers and, in reverse, by teaching them as well. However, learners' preferences in cooperation can vary. For example, in the study of Tavakoli and Davoudi (2017), Iranian EFL learners were found to be less reluctant to practise communication in dyads or in a group of classmates, favouring interactions with a teacher instead. This can be related to the type of relations between students in class or between students and their teacher. Overall, in second and foreign language learning, collaborative learning is believed to be beneficial in fostering learning opportunities, such as increased motivation, student talk or positive atmosphere in the classroom (Liang, Mohan & Early 1998). Therefore it is vital to give learners an opportunity to acquire OC skills by engaging in frequent interactions with others.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2

Surprisingly, the analysis of the participants' responses revealed that the challenges associated with the practice of English OC were reflected differently across the three levels (micro, meso and macro), depending on gender.

MICRO LEVEL

At the micro level, which deals with a learner's self, female students highlighted the influence of emotional anxiety on their oral performance, while male students focused on their inadequate command of vocabulary. Consider the data extracts in Table 5 below:

TABLE 5. Data extracts representing challenges at the micro level

Participant	Data extract
P12 (f)	When I come to the board to present my monologue in front of the class, I don't feel confident, because I'm afraid that other *classmates will be laughing at my mistakes.*
P8 (f)	I feel nervous when I'm presenting a speech or dialogue in English, because every time I think about how my *teacher will be disappointed if I make a mistake*. Thus, sometimes I don't even think about my speech, but about the reaction of my teacher, and it actually blocks my thoughts and I get stuck.
P9 (m)	Sometimes I want to express my opinion on certain topics, but I keep silent because once I start talking, *I will not have enough words* to continue my statement. Maybe it would be better if we learn synonyms to use them in speech when we get stuck.
P14 (m)	Even though our teacher wants us to retell a text using our own words, usually I just memorize the entire text word-for-word, because *I don't have enough vocabulary* to rephrase and explain in a different way.

As shown in the table, female participants (P12 and P8) experienced nervousness in delivering oral presentation due to the fear of negative reaction from their peers and teacher, whereas male learners (P9 and P14) worried about lack of vocabulary to express their ideas. This finding suggests that female students tend to be more sensitive and vulnerable to criticism. For males, the focus lies in the message itself. This echoes the finding of Mirzaei and Heidari (2012) who investigated the use of OC strategies by Iranian university students and found that females were more concerned about gaining control over their emotions during communication, while males prioritized clear negotiation of the intended meanings. In general, women's sensitivity and men's toughness is traditionally inherent in an Asian culture, where the former are portrayed as shy and fragile, and the latter as strong and resilient. Therefore it is crucial to be aware of differences in emotional reactions among female and male students during the learning process.

MESO LEVEL

At the meso level which relates to learner's relations and interactions with their surroundings, females were found to lack emotional support from their teachers, while males preferred to have out-of-class help from their friends. Below in Table 6 are some examples from the participants' responses on that matter:

TABLE 6. Data extracts representing challenges at the meso level

Participant	Data extract
P11 (f)	In my class we *don't have a close relation with our teacher*. There are boundaries that we cannot cross. But sometimes I wish I could just talk to her about anything that bothers me, ask for her advice. It would have helped me to be more confident in class.
P6 (f)	Our *teacher is very strict*. We can't ask her any questions, which are not related to the subject. Sometimes she yells at us. It really discourages me from being active in classroom activities.
P17 (m)	To be honest, I am a very lazy person. What is more, my *friends are not really interested* in learning English. That is why after school I don't have any motivation to practise it, because most of my free time I spend with friends.
P18 (m)	It would be cool to *practise English with friends*, in an informal atmosphere. Wish they could speak fluently to help me with that. It's always good to use language beyond the classroom.

From the table we can see that female participants (P11 and P6) would like to have a closer bond with their teachers to be more actively engaged in the learning process. This accords with the above micro level, where females were found to be affected by the anxiety-provoking situations. It is not surprising therefore that female students need to feel emotionally safe and supported in the classroom. And since teachers play the most important role in a class, female students expect them to create that safe environment. Conversely, male participants (P17 and P18) are inclined to consider friends as facilitators of their language learning, rather than teachers. More importantly, here they are driven not by the desire for emotional attachment, but rather by the wish to practice their OC skills outside of a school setting. However, it is still vital to engage male learners in the classroom activities. In this respect, a construct that emerges here is affinity seeking. Bell and Daly (1984) define it as a process, where individuals try to get others to have a positive attitude towards them. In a classroom context, it implies that teachers can use various affinity-seeking strategies in order to attract learners' attention and raise their interest in OC activities. For example, teachers can present themselves as equal, be supportive, entertaining, encouraging, show empathy, improve students' self-esteem, etc. It is very likely that students who have a high affinity for their teacher become more interested in the subject matter, and as a result, actively participate in classroom activities and have less behavioural problems (Andersen 1979). Thus, positive teacher-student relations play an important role in OC classroom practices.

MACRO LEVEL

Lastly, at the macro level which includes a country's educational policy and cultural values, male students were found to be more affected by an overarching sociocultural context than females. Consider the following data extracts in Table 7 below:

TABLE 7. Data extracts representing challenges at the macro level

Participant	Data extract
P17 (m)	I am not quite interested in learning English. I think there should be more attention on the *promotion of our native language*, because many Kazakhs do not speak their own mother tongue.

P18 (m)	If we become proficient in English speaking, we can attract many foreign investors from different countries to *boost economy of our country*.
P4 (f)	I am not actually aware of the government's reforms on English language. For me, I want to be fluent in English to be able *to travel around the world and or to meet new friends*.
P10 (f)	I am a shy person, but when I speak English, I feel that I become more confident. It gives me an opportunity for *personal growth*.

The table above illustrates two different ideas. Firstly, it shows that male participants view English in relation to the broader goals of the country (P17 and P18), while females view it as an instrument to pursue their personal ambitions (P4 and P10). This suggests that males are more concerned about benefits and disadvantages that the English language can bring to the country in general, whereas females are driven by the possibility for broadening their horizons and exploring new things. Interestingly, extracts from the participants P18 and P17 demonstrate how the educational policy can have both positive and negative impact on learners' attitude towards another language. While the former participant approves the promotion of English in the country, the latter argues about its overshadowing effect on the nation's native language. Thus, it is important for the top-down initiatives to be adequately promoted, comprehended and accepted among the citizens for further successful integration in society.

CONCLUSION

The present study aimed at gaining preliminary insights into the practice of English oral communication in public schools in Kazakhstan. The phenomenon was investigated from the local learners' perspectives, drawing on the three-level theoretical framework as a guide. The findings of the study shed light on two issues: characteristics of the current speaking activities in schools and challenges associated with their practice.

The current speaking activities were found to be traditional-oriented with limited practice of impromptu speaking, lack of collaborative work and ignorance of learners' interests and needs. These findings seem predictable, taking into consideration the fact that Kazakhstan is a former Soviet Republic, where rote learning was a bedrock of the educational system. However, what is important is that the findings showed the gap between the actual and preferred OC practices, which can be further addressed by the stakeholders. What is interesting is how differently females and males expressed their difficulties in the practice of OC. The findings indicate that emotional constraints have a greater impact on female students' oral performance, which, they seek to overcome with the help of their teachers. Male students are inhibited, on the other hand, by a limited linguistic repertoire, which they would like to enrich by mastering speaking outside of school with their friends. In addition, the government's promotion of English language was found to be known and supported among male students, rather than female students, who were revealed to be more concerned about using English in attaining their personal aspirations. Thus, the findings illustrate how gender can affect the way learners engage in the learning process, which requires teachers to be attentive and observant to learners' behaviour and attitude. Furthermore, the findings underline the importance of examining language learning in relation to learner's self, his/her social communities and a wider sociocultural context, in order to understand its pitfalls.

However, it should be noted that the results cannot be broadly generalized due to the study's moderate sample size tailored for a pilot study. Also, the use of e-mail interviews appeared to have some disadvantage due to the fact that some of the participants did not provide explicit responses, and the researcher's further requests for clarification were not responded to. We therefore conclude that it would be better to conduct face-to-face

interviews with the participants to be able to obtain more elaborate feedback. Besides, English OC in this study was investigated through the perspectives of learners only. It is crucial to explore this phenomenon from teachers' and parents' perspectives as well. And lastly, to obtain richer data, it is also vital to conduct classroom observations to study the phenomenon as it unfolds in a natural setting.

ACKNOWLEGMENT

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