

LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION AND CULTURAL IDENTITY FORMATION
IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN AZERBAIJAN

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Thesis Prepared for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS IN EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT

ADA UNIVERSITY

May 2024

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ABSTRACT

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By

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The study explores the role of the language of instruction in the process of cultural identity formation within the context of fresh graduates of public secondary schools in Azerbaijan. Predetermined by the post-colonial post-Soviet context, the Azerbaijani educational system still possesses a multilingual framework with two major mediums of instruction, Azerbaijani and Russian. While the state language as a medium of instruction is a standard feature, the utilization of the Russian language allegedly contributes to social dissatisfaction and heated debates. To explore the cultural aspect of the phenomenon, the study investigates the role of the language of instruction based on the perceptions of fresh graduates of public secondary schools currently pursuing their bachelor's degrees in Azerbaijan. Guided by the Vygotskian sociocultural theory and the state policy of multiculturalism, the study explores the perceived effect of the language of instruction on the students' values and beliefs. As a result of qualitative research conducted through a set of interviews with fresh high-school graduates of both language streams, the study shows that the students do not consider the language of instruction an important factor in their cultural identity development process. The study participants who were educated in Russian also do not culturally identify themselves as Russians. However, the findings demonstrate that there are still differences in the students' cultural identity. The findings, however, establish particular dynamics between the language of instruction and cultural identity

expressed through the features highlighted as characteristics of the students of different streams.

The study contributes to the existing literature on mechanisms of cultural identity and the role of the language of instruction in the post-colonial and post-Soviet context of the modern Azerbaijani education system.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, cultural identity, medium of instruction, public secondary education, education system, language policy.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The educational setting in Azerbaijan presents a complex research phenomenon. Various historical events have shaped the educational structure and continue to impact the educational process through policies, methodologies, traditions, and common beliefs. Among current educational issues, there are educational streams divided based on their medium of instruction. Additionally, Azerbaijan, due to its geographical location and rich cultural history, is home to over a dozen ethnicities and the community is very diverse (Meshadikhanum & Kuliyeve, 2008; Nuruzade, 2019). The process of identity formation, due to its perpetual nature, has not finished yet but was significantly stimulated by the 2nd Karabakh War which caused a great rise in national and cultural motives (Filou, 2021).

Historically, education in Azerbaijan was influenced by the Russian language. Since the 19th century, as a result of the Russian presence in the Caucasus, Tsar Russia had a great impact on the educational system in Azerbaijan by opening secular schools and adapting pedagogy typical for Russian education in the Caucasian territories (Rzayev, 2021). One of the obstacles to organizing a profound educational process in Azerbaijani was its difficult Arabic letters-based alphabet and long acquisition process, further promoting education in Russian (UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning, 1984). The Russian language has never left the educational setting in Azerbaijan ever since, continuing to exist in the Soviet period and even during the Independence one.

Nevertheless, in modern history, the Russian language and its instructional role are often under broad public discussion. Currently, there are three major sectors divided based on their language of instruction, Azerbaijani, Russian, and Georgian (*Law on Education*, 2009). While

the Georgian stream does not concern the public, the Russian one does. Although statistically, the Russian sector takes only 10% of the total school students (roughly 140,000 out of 1.5m school students in total), it gives a sound ground for public discussion (The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2023). The issue of cultural identity formation in the setting of diverse mediums of instruction is dramatically undermined by various assumptions and stipulations in the community (Isayev. 2022).

Language is a pillar of cultural identity formation (Abbasov & Aslanova, 2016), and overlooking the existing differentiation based on teaching medium presents a gap in academic research. Additionally, society may not positively perceive the existence and utilization of different mediums of instruction due to predispositions broadly shared and discussed in the community. To explore the ideas existing in Azerbaijani society, specifically focusing on the experiences of educational stakeholders such as teachers, students, parents of the students, and administrators, the study focused on the stakeholders' perceptions of the teaching medium's effect on their cultural identity development.

The key stakeholders of the issue under discussion are various, variously powerful, and interested, groups of the Azerbaijani community. Students, teachers, and parents, as the most involved in the process of education, should have a right to a decent education. Based on the Education Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2009), students are free to choose the language of their instruction (art.32.3.2). Sometimes, due to various reasons that are going to be discussed further in this paper, they make specific choices for and against different mediums of instruction. As they are major stakeholders and are directly engaged, they may serve as a great source of insights to enhance the research, and at the same time be the greatest beneficiaries of its findings. Then, the government educational authorities, as they have the major source of power in the

issue, develop policies (including curriculum) and allocate the resources based on the demands and needs of the society. The society, in its turn, leads the discussion of the language-based differentiation in education. Its conditioned interest can serve as a stimulator or an obstacle for further language policy amendments. Last comes academia getting the research findings and being the ultimate beneficiary of scientific research. The need for the production of high-quality scientific materials about Azerbaijan and its contextual issues is high due to the great speed of the country's development and the need for well-educated citizens. The societal cohesion that is vital for a prosperous coexistence is another pillar of the research reasoning. Furthermore, culturally enriched education and analysis of the existing differences in the cultural identity formation process may significantly benefit the major stakeholders of education in Azerbaijan (Cornell, Karaveli, Ajeganov, 2016). Students, teachers, and parents deserve to have a culturally conscious approach to education and motivate their language choice on a more profound basis.

These actors and stakeholders regularly discuss the need for the Russian educational sector, still they rarely refer to statistics or facts. Rather, speculation and stereotypical assumptions create a basis for further dissatisfaction (Rahimov, 2018). However, academic resources prove that language and cultural identity formation are significantly affected by education due to the nature of the educational process. A child spends at least nine years in an educational institution and corresponding learning environment and acquires not only curriculum-defined materials but also cultural norms and values (Kennedy, 2019).

The Definitions of Key Terms

Major variables that are employed in the study are language of instruction and cultural identity. Although both of them and other important notions related to the issue under study will

be covered in the Literature Review part below, the operationalization of the terms is needed to make sure further discussion is properly delivered and understood.

Language of instruction (also known as medium of instruction) is generally defined as language or languages “used to convey a specified curriculum in a formal or nonformal educational setting” (UNESCO, 2006, p.420). The selected language of instruction may have a significant impact on students’ learning, as well as on their identity formation process, especially in a post-colonial context (Castillo, Wagner, Alrawashdeh, & Gidra, 2023; Williams, 2006).

Cultural identity, as a constituent part of complex identity nature, refers to self-identification with a particular cultural context. In basic terms, it demonstrates the difference between “our” and “their” values and ideals, while still teaching intra- and intercultural competencies (Rodríguez-Tamayo & Tenjo-Macias, 2019). It necessarily implies the aspect of belongingness to the group, because culture, and cultural identity, accordingly, may be experienced solely in a group setting (Zhu, Cheng, & Fan, 2022). Among other aspects, it includes language, religion, traditions, values, and beliefs (Berry & Candis, 2013; Yuan & Fang, 2016).

The Study Objectives

Considering the long tradition of multi-language instruction in Azerbaijan, the study aimed to explore the perceptions on the relationship between the language of instruction (namely, Azerbaijani and Russian) and the formation of the cultural identity of young Azerbaijani citizens, specifically focusing on their perceptions of values and beliefs. It strived to understand how the choice of language of instruction affects students’ sociocultural development. The objectives of the study were to find whether there are any differences between the students’ perceptions of the

impact of different language sectors on their cultural identity through values and beliefs. The study explored the perceived nature of those differences and how different factors affect the students' self-identification from a cultural perspective. One of the important reasons for the present paper was to study the perceived cultural identity concept in Azerbaijani society, as well as evaluation of the cultural identity of school graduates from different streams, and how this process was affected by receiving education in different educational settings.

Research Questions

The research is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the students' perceptions on the role of language of instruction in shaping the cultural identity of fresh graduates of public schools in Azerbaijan?
2. How is the language of instruction perceived to influence students' understanding of their cultural identity?
3. Are there any differences in the cultural identity perceptions of Azerbaijani students receiving their education in different mediums of instruction?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Cultural identity in education and the role of language in this paradigm have been widely discussed in academic literature. The very core of the issue is in its intangible and thus hardly measurable nature. The following literature review section presents a critical analysis of existing sources covering various aspects of language, cultural identity, and education. Despite the broad existing research, there are some gaps to be covered in the present paper. The literature review for the thesis was written using such databases as Google Scholar and ERIC. Search strategies included keyword searches and references of appropriate works. Through looking over historical and culturological aspects, the sections are divided as follows: theoretical framework; the role of cultural identity in the post-colonial world and the post-Soviet space in particular; Azerbaijan from the perspective of culture and education; the role of culture in the educational setting; the role of language in the development of cultural identity.

Theoretical Framework

To guide the research process, a theoretical framework is needed. The process of exploring and describing personal experiences requires proper navigation and theoretical background to establish connections and coherence between the existing ideas and the study findings (Schutt, 2012). To address the peculiarities of cultural identity formation and the role of the medium of instruction in this process, the sociocultural cognitive development theory by Vygotsky was chosen.

The sociocultural cognitive development theory was developed by a Soviet educational psychologist Lev Vygotsky in the early 1900s. He based his idea of a child's development on the

sociocultural environment around them which includes beliefs, values, and behavioral norms. This process includes internalization and acquisition of cultural elements that a child is exposed to, as well as a “more knowledgeable other” (such as a teacher or a parent) that conveys the culture to the child. Language plays a great role in this process due to the nature of sociocultural communication and the role of contact in cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978).

Consecutive researchers confirm the importance of the role of language in the sociocultural development of a child. For example, the idea of cultural mediation described by Rublik (2017) relates culture and language to the process of identity recognition and the way a child cognizes and chooses different values and behavioral patterns based on the cultural environments they are exposed to. Such cultural learning is supposed to happen while comparing native and foreign classrooms, specifically in the cases of identity formation of international students. The notion of identity is also covered in the article by Gómez-Estern, Amián, Sánchez Medina, and Marco Macarro (2010). As far as identity is “created through social interaction and mediated by cultural tools” (p.233), they suggest that cultural identity is shaped through educational dialogue – and is based on the language of instruction – thus being closely connected to the cultural environment in an educational facility.

As a separate aspect, Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev, and Miller (2003) draw attention to multiculturalism and the nature of communication in a multicultural environment. They claim that the notions of culture, language, and learning are inseparable and cannot be treated independently. Cognitive education in a multicultural environment provides students with educational integration and additional psychological mechanisms to perceive and grasp

information. It is also stated that monocultural education makes the very phenomenon of culture invisible as there is no chance to compare and contrast different values and beliefs.

Based on the Vygotskian sociocultural theory and findings of further research studies, the major framework for the present thesis suggests that language as a cultural tool has an impact on cultural identity formation, especially in the educational setting.

Cultural Identity in the Global Post-Colonial Context

Cultural identity is an undervalued concept that still is a crucial element for decolonized nations (Rodríguez-Tamayo, & Tenjo-Macias, 2019). The culture and language of colonizers were used to drastically divide the society into the superior ruling elites and the compliant underdeveloped (from the perspective of colonizers) local population. Any form of social mobility (a rank or promotion in the governmental system) was completely impossible without fluency in the colonizers' language. From the colonizers' perspective, this language instillation was seen as "civilizing" and bringing enlightenment to the nations seen as not as developed as theirs (Dascomb, 2019; Shakib, 2011). In Haiti, for example, native language dialects were prohibited for the sake of French and were considered only slaves' prerogative to be used (Dascomb, 2019).

The hidden notion of superiority is considered to be still present in the context of post-colonial nations (Dascomb, 2019). The famous notion of Orientalism by Said (1979) suggests that any division in terms of culture and civilization leads to even deeper differences that are further instilled through generations. The very concept of cultural identity is based on the contrast between the group of 'us' and the group of 'them', 'our', and 'their' values. Oppressed by the superior colonizing powers, local nations were simultaneously deprived and strongly

limited in the development of their identities, should they be national, cultural, or ethnic. In the post-colonial age, the newly independent nations struggled to revive and support their identities while adopting old new cultural norms through traditions, ideals, and language (Nunan & Choi, 2010).

Still, cultures and languages can be revived. The cases of multiple decolonized nations prove that depending on the nature of policies designed by governments, there are chances for outcomes that can maintain and protect identities. The examples of post-colonial Samoa, Vietnam, and Mozambique demonstrate the importance of cultural identity in the process of establishing newly acquired sovereignty. While all the articles that discuss the above-listed post-colonial perspectives restate the idea of the negative effect of colonization on their culture and language, there are differences in the analyzed post-colonial policies. The strategy of Samoan authorities is hybridity meaning the colonizing (in their case, Germany, and New Zealand) and local cultures mix and continue to co-exist without any radical attempts to eliminate the instilled elements. Educational practices now also attempt to incorporate traditional local culture in combination with Western practices in Samoa (Tuia, 2019). Vietnam, in turn, had a long history of colonization by China and France, then was a subject of dispute during the Cold War. Since 1986, after employing the “Open Door” policy, they have switched to hybridity, just like Samoa, to avoid radical changes although still striving for revival of their local culture and sovereignty. Just like in the case of Samoa, Trinh (2018) claims that hybridity significantly impacts the educational system through its structural adjustments. Adopters of hybridity in both cases were striving for a moderate-paced and incremental development of national ideas and the national community to get ready for the following reinstitutionalization of their native culture and language on an official level. In Mozambique (Chimbutane, 2018), on the contrary, after a half-a-

millennia Portuguese colonial hegemony, Portuguese remained the official language and the only medium of instruction at schools. Mozambique is known for its wide ethnic and tribal variety, and the preservation of Portuguese was seen as a tool for stabilization and homogenization in the post-colonized context. African languages and cultures were formally introduced only at the very end of the twentieth century. Now, unlike the method of hybridity, this political move was intended to recognize the multicultural and multilanguage nature of the country and appreciate its resistance to a monolingual environment through 'retraditionalization'. Overall, despite various practices, decolonized countries in different parts of the world came to the idea of appreciating their native languages and associated cultures while keeping the legacy of colonizers. These practices are claimed to maintain social stability, encourage international cooperation, and stimulate educational activities.

Cultural Identity in the Post-Soviet Context

In the post-Soviet space, where the nations restored their sovereignties a bit over thirty years ago, the issue of cultural identity formation and the role of the language of instruction in this process is of the utmost importance. During the Soviet times, the issue of language in education was constantly present in state policy and public discourse (Shrapova, Litvinenko, & Shakirova, 2019). National language development and cultural preservation policy in the national republics stopped soon in the early years and then served only political purposes of bureaucracy and propaganda. The Russian language continued to be the lingua franca all over the Soviet space. Although there was a freedom of choice of medium of instruction, some parents were consistently choosing Russian as the language that, as they believed, would bring more social, political, and economic opportunities to their children in the future.

Such a legacy of language prestige still prevails even in Russia itself. In Tatarstan, as Wigglesworth-Baker (2015) claims, the prevalence of the Tatar-Russian language contradiction is still obvious; Tatar speakers are viewed as backward and unintelligent. Urban areas in Tatarstan, as much as in other ethnic parts of Russia, are mostly Russian speaking. Meanwhile, outside of Russia, in the post-Soviet countries, Russian is also still present on an official level, in daily life, and educational settings. In Georgia, although Russian is still recognized as a medium of instruction, the community sees it as a privilege and oppression at the same time. Due to local conflicts that led to the self-determination of Abkhazia and South Ossetia under the protectorate of Russia, Georgians perceive the Russian language and culture as discriminatory and oppressive (Tabatadze, 2022). In Kyrgyzstan, another post-Soviet republic located in Central Asia where Russian is one of the state languages, Russian is still seen as a privilege tool and a means for better job opportunities. Social pressure and concerns about the future encourage students to prefer Russian as their medium of instruction. As in the case of Tatarstan, the use of the Russian language still shows a person as educated and modern compared to Kyrgyz speakers. The fact that Russian is still widely spread all over the post-Soviet space makes these students strive for its learning to ensure better future opportunities in the broader job market in Russian-speaking countries. (Gul, 2019).

Another important marker of the Soviet Union was their attempt to create a Soviet identity rather than support the multinational, multicultural, and multilanguage community. As the Soviet epoch started, for a short time, the variety of ethnicities and associated cultures were encouraged. However, as soon as the authorities realized the challenges of such a diversified context, the Soviet government started creating the Homo-Sovieticus notion deprived of ethnic and cultural identity and cultural agency (Knopik & Oszwa, 2020). The government realized that

as they strive for global rule it will be difficult for them to rule peoples of unique linguistic and cultural features. The major language and cultural heritage were set for Russian (Rannut, 2023; Smith, 2012). Unification and ultimate “russification” of national republics was a long, brutal, and merciless process. Patriotism, adoption and proclamation of communist claims, unity, and equity were declared new universal values. Instead of religious, national, and linguistic differences, the authorities instilled “russification”, command type of planning of cultural events, and absence of self-identification (Shelestyuk, 2019). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a unified Homo-Sovieticus identity dissolved as well. Instead, newly independent nations were supposed to reinvent and spread new old cultural practices that were brutally eradicated for over 70 years (Breslauer, 1996). In the case of Azerbaijan, it included introducing the concept of Azerbaijanism (Goyushov, 2021). It included recreating a national narrative and history, reestablishing the connection with religious artifacts and beliefs, developing new educational policy, reviving traditional holidays, cultural practices, and art, and importantly replacing the Soviet state symbols with new, independent ones (Ergun, 2022; Garibova, 2019). As a part of sovereign cultural restoration, there was a list of linguistic reforms to regain the Turkic roots and get introduced to the global arena. The conflict between Russian, Turkish, and Azerbaijani reflected through linguistic and cultural preferences was and is quite present in community life (Ergun, 2022).

Azerbaijan from the Perspective of Culture and Education

Azerbaijani educational system still keeps Russian both as a medium of instruction, the first and the second language that students can learn in an official and unofficial educational setting (Moskvitcheva & Abdullaev, 2020). Among the major reasons for the continuous popularity of the Russian language, are economic opportunities (in Azerbaijan and abroad, in the

CIS countries); limited amount and quality of academic resources, and “slipped standards” of education provided in Azerbaijani (Mammadova, 2013; Valiyev, Amirova, Mammadova & Alasgarova, 2023); family traditions and conditions and family culture (Abbasov & Aslanova, 2016). Once independence was regained, the government changed the Soviet standardized educational structure (including curriculum and educational materials) to meet the needs of the newly sovereign state (Garibova, 2019). Azerbaijani language was declared the state language and became the main medium of instruction. Although the Law on Education (2009) claims the Azerbaijani language as the major medium of instruction, it also recognizes the right of educational institutions to accommodate the learners’ language needs and apply any other language they find appropriate (art.7.1, 7.2).

In terms of cultural identity, Azerbaijan generally has never experienced a strong urge for its purposeful formation. Throughout history, there was a significant influence of Turkic, Arabic, Persian, and Russian cultures (Priego Moreno, 2005). During different periods, through invasions and deliberate connections, Azerbaijan was experiencing cultural, religious, and linguistic flows caused by the multiethnic and multicultural structure of the region (Huseynov, 2012; Kerimova, 2009). Still, before the Democratic Republic period (1918-1920), predominantly, there was only a religious identity, meaning most of the population identified themselves as Muslims (Goyushov, 2021). During the Soviet period, neither attempts for cultural self-identification were recognized and supported by the central authorities, nor any side support was sought, for example, from Türkiye (Yilmaz, 2013). After the dissolution of the USSR, Azerbaijan executed a cultural transformation through the adoption of the Latin alphabet instead of Cyrillic. In the early Soviet period, the authorities introduced first the Latin and then the Cyrillic alphabet for the Azerbaijani language. One of the crucial reasons for employing the

Cyrillic alphabet was to make Azerbaijan separated from Türkiye and its powerful influence in the region (Mammadova, 2020). Compared to other countries in the region, Georgia and Armenia, the independent position Azerbaijan found itself in was more challenging. While those neighbors have never experienced any formal alphabet changes and thus were able to transmit their cultural and linguistic identity, Azerbaijan had to instill all the sovereignty elements and recreate the independent cultural identity (Melikyan, Veliyev, Sartania, & Abdullazade, 2018).

Nowadays, Azerbaijani cultural identity simultaneously faces two contradicting processes, globalization and growing interest in the local culture and language. Globalization, as for most indigenous cultures and local communities all over the world, poses a threat to the self-identification of, especially young, Azerbaijanis (Kerimova, 2009). Among the influential factors of globalization, there is a high interest in foreign music, films, and the English language. Growing interest in employment and educational options abroad makes English a popular choice. At the same time, the national language is still the most widespread in the country (Nuruzade, 2019). Since the dissolution of the USSR, Azerbaijani has become the state language, the major language of instruction, the language of bureaucracy and daily life, as well as a supporting element of cultural and linguistic identities. The strive for independence and long-awaited sovereignty has promoted the use of the national language for the purposes of unity and recognition of national and cultural selves. The government through various legislation mechanisms (such as the assigned status of the state language in the Constitution and the status of the major medium of instruction in the Law on Education (2009)) has promoted the formation of the concept of an Azerbaijani and citizen (Moskvitcheva & Abdullaev, 2020).

Studies Conducted in the Azerbaijani Educational Setting

There are a few prominent studies that have been completed in the educational context of Azerbaijan concerning the choice of the medium of instruction and its effect on various identities. Donohoe Luscombe and Kazdal (2014) discovered the correlation between the language of instruction and the linguistic identity of Azerbaijani youth. The sample of 277 participants studying in Azerbaijani, Russian, and English completed a survey on the priority of languages used. The study findings demonstrate that Russian is still perceived as an elitist language, and Azerbaijani serves as a tool for self-identification with Azerbaijani culture and sovereignty. While there are still some inclinations towards Russian and English as major linguistic identities, most of the respondents consider their Azerbaijani linguistic identity the crucial one. Although the studies by Abdurrahmanova (2023) and Abbasov and Aslanova (2016) are not that dense in terms of the number of participants, still present peculiar findings. Abdurrahmanova (2023) claims that the instruction in and general knowledge of Russian is still quite widespread in society due to future employment opportunities, academic careers, and mundane intercultural communication. Parents still find it beneficial and prestigious for their children to pursue their education in Russian (sometimes even not speaking Russian themselves at all) for better future opportunities. Abbasov and Aslanova (2016) conducted a survey of 188 high school students to explore the process of the cultural identity formation of Azerbaijani youth. The major focus of the study was to compare the values of the Western and Azerbaijani cultures. Contrasting the values in the survey, they have discovered that globalization tendencies have a very strong impact on the Azerbaijani youth in terms of communication style, work and study ethics, self-consciousness, and self-expression. Ultimately, although all the analyzed studies demonstrate exclusive findings about the nature of the Azerbaijani youth community, the

issue of the cultural identity formation affected by the Russian and Azerbaijani mediums of instruction remains understudied.

Culture in the Educational Setting

The main means for the cultural identity creation and maintenance is still education (Altugan, 2015; Mercuri, 2012). Values and beliefs generally transmitted through official frameworks, curricula, and daily practices shape the notion of cultural identity. The more the child is surrounded by the cultural environment supported by the multiple actors around them, the more intangible elements of belonging are developed through this communication. Curriculum is considered to be one of the greatest tools for sharing and spreading national values (Rodríguez-Tamayo, & Tenjo-Macias, 2019). Furthermore, while introducing elements of cultural identity from an early age educators not only support children's interpersonal skills, but also improve their academic results through community cohesion (Haris, Rosi, & Yahya, 2018).

Cultural identity in education is mostly supported by the language (Parajuli, 2021). Language in the paradigm of cultural education presents a great variety of developmental tools. Following the discussion of the post-colonial setting, the legacy of colonizers in the educational sector and the choice of medium of instruction were often perceived as unimportant. The curriculum and general educational approach, medium of instruction, and materials remained unchanged even after gaining independence and sovereignty (Choi, & Nunan, 2010). Surely, language acquisition allowed for various international exchange and developmental programs. However, as national languages were either revived or completely recreated, the majority of the population was again excluded from the prestigious and superior language knowledge. That is how, even after a long and hard decolonization process, some colonizing languages keep their

status of superiority and respect (Dascomb, 2019; Shakib, 2011). Furthermore, the presence and superiority of colonizers' language prevents local languages from regaining the status of major national and cultural tools in a quotidian setting. The case of Nepal (Poudel, Jackson, & Choi, 2022) demonstrates that introducing through educational policies a language different from the state one leads to cultural and linguistic inequalities. At the same time, state language as a medium of instruction encourages communal equality and unity.

Language in the Development of Cultural Identity

Language in its essence is a source of valuable input and a marker of cultural identity belongingness (Mercuri, 2012; Parajuli, 2021). As a tool for group self-preservation, it, together with the cultural identity, serves as a glue for the community. Language, as well as the variety used in the context of a nation, then demonstrates any privileges, hierarchy, and superiority of cultures. The political and social life of the community then is also dependent on the freedom of language use in daily life, in an educational setting, and on official level (Orekhovskaya, Zamaraeva, Shikh, Galushkin, Platonova, & Ishmuradova, 2019). At the same time, as Shrapova, Litvinenko, and Shakirova (2019) show, any language serves connecting and distinguishing purposes at once, which is especially crucial in the context of globalization and forced self-determination.

Language in the development of cultural identity is a pillar, not an option. Arynbayeva, Dmitryuk, and Stycheva (2022) in the discussion of psycholinguistics of teaching Russian emphasize the complex and comprehensive nature of language learning. They propose such elements as linguistic personality and linguistic consciousness that necessarily appear for any learner of a language, should it be a native or a foreign one. Learning a language is a much more

complex and deeper process rather than just memorizing words and grammar rules. Therefore, any language learner gets involved in the associated culture. Then, as far as cultural identity formation is a lifelong and continuous process, they may develop aspects or a completely different cultural identity from what they had before. Kennedy (2019) defines it as a relational cultural identity. As the number of connecting elements with the target culture grows, the complexity of the relationship with the language and culture increases. Therefore, the impact of educational setting and curriculum is crucial in this process. At the same time, according to Preusche and Göbel (2022), there also can be a bicultural identity. The use of two languages (especially exercised in a family and an educational setting) encourages the development of different mindsets affected by both languages a child is exposed to. This may be the case for minorities who have to speak the state and their ethnic language, people whose cultural heritage includes a language, and immigrants. Regardless of the reason, there is a necessary process of acculturation happening in this case when a person gets impacted by the target culture. Among various agents of acculturation, the main ones are educational institutions. Bilinguals (or, as defined above, biculturals) choose the language they want to communicate in a given period depending on their socialization, while one of their cultures can be dominant over another (Çetintaş, 2020).

Conclusion

The theoretical framework, the Vygotskian sociocultural theory, suggests that language plays one of the main roles in the process of cultural identity development in learning as it is a part of educational communication. The reviewed literature demonstrates the role of culture in education in the post-colonial countries that the post-Soviet states belong to. The promotion of

national language and its importance in the cultural identity development process are emphasized by multiple authors. There is a need for further exploration of the phenomenon of the emerging states of recent sovereignty.

The theoretical framework also promotes the peculiarity of multicultural educational settings and the exposure of its students to different cultures at the same time, which broadens their choice options of values, ideas, and behavior patterns. In the case of Azerbaijan, the state officially developed a multiculturalism framework that promotes the protection and use of minority languages and cultures on the state level, prohibits and condemns any discrimination, and encourages their active representation (Baku International Multiculturalism Centre, 2020). The theoretical framework basis, the academic works, and the state multiculturalism policy suggest the exploration of cultural identity formation among fresh graduates of public secondary schools in Azerbaijan in a qualitative study and being guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the students' perceptions on the role of language of instruction in shaping the cultural identity of fresh graduates of public schools in Azerbaijan?
2. How is the language of instruction perceived to influence students' understanding of their cultural identity?
3. Are there any differences in the cultural identity perceptions of Azerbaijani students receiving their education in different mediums of instruction?

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The present study focuses on analyzing the current cultural trends existing in Azerbaijan through addressing the experiences of fresh public school graduates. The educational system of the country, due to its systemic peculiarities discussed above, presents a great field for exploring the assumed perceptions between the medium of instruction and cultural identity formation. Public debates triggered by the continuous existence of Russian as the medium of instruction in public educational institutions provoked my research interest. The research pointed to the nature of the language and culture dynamics in Azerbaijani public secondary educational institutions. The study aimed to further explore the differences in the perceptions of cultural identity and its formation process among the students receiving their education in Azerbaijani and Russian. This chapter includes a description of the chosen research method, site, sampling and participants, data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations, as well as the reasons why specifically these options, and not others, were chosen.

Operationalization of Concepts

The study has two major concepts under study that need a precise definition for further work on the research (Creswell, 2014). Since the concepts under study may seem quite vague, operationalization is needed to ensure consistency of research and clarity of findings.

Language of instruction, for research purposes, is defined as language or languages “used to convey a specified curriculum in a formal or nonformal educational setting” (UNESCO, 2006, p.420). Azerbaijani legislation guarantees education not only in the state language (Law on

Education, 2009). Therefore, in the study, the focus was on the two most popular languages of instruction, Azerbaijani and Russian.

Cultural identity, despite the complexity of the concept that includes language, religion, traditions, values, and beliefs (Berry & Candis, 2013; Yuan & Fang, 2016), in the present study is referred to as the difference between “our” and “their” values and beliefs and participants’ connectedness to them (Rodríguez-Tamayo & Tenjo-Macias, 2019). The study aims to explore and compare the understanding of Azerbaijani values as “ours”, while “theirs” is seen as any variation and inclination to other cultures (in this case, Russian culture specifically).

Study Design

The design of the study should be meeting its needs. Due to the limited time frame, access to educational institutions, and the researcher’s language barrier, it is more reasonable to opt for the qualitative methods. Qualitative methods allow us to discover and explain social phenomena based on the participants' first-hand experiences and reflections (Schutt, 2012). As the main purpose of this study is to explore the perceived nature of cultural identity formation depending on the language of instruction in public secondary schools in Azerbaijan, the qualitative research design specifically may serve the needs of the study. The relationship in question may be supported by the reviewed academic literature but needs to be explored specifically in the study setting to explore individual experiences (Creswell, 2014). As qualitative studies are subjective in their nature, they allow us to investigate multiple and diverse personified thoughts. Inspired by interpretivism and constructivism, qualitative research tries to describe and understand meanings (Tubey, Rotich, & Bengat, 2015).

Research Site

The research location selected for this study is the territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Due to the limited access to educational institutions and the strive for a broad variety of the student body, the researcher decided to address fresh graduates of public secondary schools currently pursuing their bachelor's degrees at ADA University (Baku, Azerbaijan).

Study Participants

Participants of the study, as mentioned above, are fresh graduates of public secondary schools in Baku and different regions (for example, Ismayilli), Azerbaijan. The participants are supposed to identify as Azerbaijani by citizenship. Students of foreign origin are excluded from the study. Although socio-psychological studies show that children start recognizing their cultural identity as soon as they start talking (Lara, 2020) or, later, at the age of 4 (Braslasu, 2017), adolescence is the time when children develop their values system (Baumert, Becker, Jansen, & Koller, 2023; Wu & Ou, 2022). The set age limit of over 18 years is defined for the study purposes to achieve the proper understanding from the participants' side and give them a chance to take a detached observation stance as they are no longer in that environment. The number of participants was expected to be from 8 to 10; as a result of snowball sampling the total number has reached 12 students.

Sampling Methods

The qualitative design aims to describe unique experiences and ideas. Therefore, it is important to set the sample as informative as possible. The sampling strategy in this case is non-probabilistic to ensure a broad variety of ideas and increase the validity of the results. The principles of convenience and snowball sampling were used to achieve maximum variation. Convenience sampling allowed for addressing the participants willing to share their experiences,

while snowball sampling helped to reach more participants to reach the saturation point (Creswell, 2014).

Data Collection

The data collection method chosen for the study in question is an interview. An interview is a type of qualitative research method that allows for the collection of unique and personalized data from a limited audience. It allows a researcher to discover a broader variety of exclusive ideas rather than testing the hypotheses. For the study purposes, a set of face-to-face open-ended one-on-one interviews was employed, meaning the study was conducted through a series of personalized interviews allowing the participants to share their perceptions (Maruyama & Ryan, 2014). The interview questions were developed based on the Cultural Internalization Scale (Lynch, 2020) and inspired by the Ethnic Identity Scale (Umaña-Taylor, Yazedjian, & Bámaca-Gómez, 2004) to assess the perceptions of the participants on their cultural identity development back at school. Serving the needs of a detailed study, an interview as a data collection method helps to develop a unique understanding of the issue under study. However, the interview design may lead to fallacies due to improper question design (for example, leading or repetitive) or participants' challenges to recall something or feel comfortable enough to share their personal data (Creswell, 2014; Maruyama, & Ryan, 2014). To eliminate the risk of the former, the researcher conducted a pilot test with 2 participants that led to some minor changes in the questions' design. In terms of the latter issue, the researcher tried to establish possible rapport and trust with the participants (apparently, it turned out to be quite successful as participants shared their personal facts such as biases, stereotypes, and even dating experiences). To achieve

this, the researcher communicated through online methods first and had a few minutes before each interview for small talk to ensure a safe environment.

Data collection started with developing the interview protocol and defining and contacting the study participants. Then, the procedure with each participant looked the following way: contacting the participant and agreeing on a suitable date and time; meeting the participant; signing the consent form; obtaining answers from the participants; asking for the closing remarks and comments; thanking and presenting them with a chocolate bar for their time and effort. After the interview, the participants had a chance to continue the online communication with the researcher in case of questions, concerns, or any points they wanted to add. Every interview was recorded using the voice recording function on the researcher's smartphone. The original recordings and their copies are stored on the smartphone and the laptop of the researcher, respectively. The safety of the data was ensured through the use of passcodes on the devices.

Data Analysis

Data analysis serves the needs of answering the research questions and getting to completing the research objectives. It started simultaneously with the interview completion. As the qualitative research method implies obtaining unique data, it is crucial to start the data analysis process during the data collection to avoid repetitiveness and detect the point of saturation. The process started with manually transcribing the interviews, reading through, and coding. The coding process continued with the theme development, detecting major and minor themes. Using the themes and individual responses, the answers to the research questions were found (and presented in the following chapter) (Creswell, 2014). The data collection and data

analysis timeline initially were approximately calculated as five to seven weeks and took five weeks.

Reliability and Validity

To ensure data feasibility, there was a pilot version of the interview protocol on a small sample, specifically, two students. It allowed to test the chosen data collection method and make sure it could meet the study needs (Creswell, 2014). Further, the study should be reliable and valid. Reliability of the study means that the chosen study method is stable and can be proven by multiple test attempts, while validity appeals to the method being suitable for the study's purposes. Validity and reliability will be achieved through various methods: test-retest; clear instructions; consistent data collection; pilot testing; and expert review (Creswell, 2014; Schutt, 2012). All of these methods allow to development of the most appropriate research instrument and general study design.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations should be employed at every stage of the research. Data collection was necessarily conducted with proper confidentiality considerations guaranteed by informed consent and usage of pseudonyms instead of the participants' names. The participants were informed about the study's benefits and that no harm was intended through getting acquainted and signing the consent form. The questions themselves were developed with reasonable cautiousness due to the potential sensitivity of the issues under study. Cultural sensitivity and respect are crucial for the research's effectiveness. Respect for the location and the research site was achieved by following researcher behavior norms and ethical rules. Data reporting was also

free of any potential data manipulations from the researcher's side. Once the results were obtained and formulated, the participants received a preliminary copy of transcription (Creswell, 2014; Maruyama, & Ryan, 2014).

Limitations

Limitations of the study are presented by but not limited to the following: language barrier of the researcher due to her foreign origin; access to schools and study participants; culture- and nationality-based bias (both from the researcher's and the participants' sides); external validity concerns (as the study was conducted in a peculiar cultural setting and public educational sector); incomplete data (as the students might not have shared all their ideas); causality and correlation concerns (due to other factors such as family and society not being under study); time limitations (as looking for the participants was a time-consuming process); researcher's expertise limitations.

Study Timeline

The overall study timeline covered the period from September 2023 to May 2024.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of the study was to understand the differences in perceptions of cultural identity formation between students of different mediums of instruction among fresh graduates of public schools in Azerbaijan. The study aimed to explore the variety of experiences related to cultural identity formation while also comparing and contrasting them between the students of different instructional mediums. For the study's purposes, a qualitative study in the form of a series of semi-structured interviews was conducted. The interviews were conducted in English and covered various aspects of the cultural identity formation process, the role of the language of instruction in this process, and how the languages of instruction under study are perceived to trigger differences among the students. Throughout the data collection and analysis steps, a list of various themes was discovered.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the students' perceptions on the role of language of instruction in shaping the cultural identity of fresh graduates of public schools in Azerbaijan?
2. How is the language of instruction perceived to influence students' understanding of their cultural identity?
3. Are there any differences in the cultural identity perceptions of Azerbaijani students receiving their education in different mediums of instruction?

The data collection was conducted at ADA University in February-March 2024. The purposeful snowball sampling was used to find and contact the potential interviewees. Once the interview questions and interview protocol were developed, the data collection started.

During the data collection stage, I interviewed twelve students, fresh graduates of public schools currently pursuing their bachelor's degrees at ADA University. The total number of

students consists of an equal proportion of female and male students, as well as representatives of different mediums of instruction. Furthermore, among the students, there also was an internally displaced person from Aghdam; a student who moved from Russia and started school in Azerbaijan in the 9th grade; a student who studied in three mediums of instruction (Azerbaijani, Russian, and English); a student who spent his pre-school years in Russia and then started school in Azerbaijan; as well as people who studied outside of Baku (for example, in Ismayilli). Although the study location is a limitation, the diversity of the study participants demonstrates a variety of opinions and backgrounds. The gender/medium of instruction groups are therefore represented by three students each. The purposeful sampling and estimation of participant numbers allowed for data saturation and the involvement of different groups. The pseudonyms used reflect the participant's language of instruction (A or R for Azerbaijani and Russian, respectively), gender (B or G for a boy and a girl, respectively), and the number representing the order of them being interviewed (1, 2, or 3). Therefore, the reader should understand any pseudonyms as language-gender-order, for example, AG1 means "Azerbaijani – girl – the first".

Research Question 1

The first research question that guided this study is "What are the students' perceptions on the role of language of instruction in shaping the cultural identity of fresh graduates of public schools in Azerbaijan?". The interview questions that were developed to explore the perceptions of the students on the role of the medium of instruction they had back in school focus on their personal experience, on the factors that affected the development of their cultural identity, specifically the role of language of instruction, the language of instruction affecting the students'

understanding of cultural norms and values, and whether the language of instruction affected the students' choice of books, movies, and music.

The answers collected to address the first research question show that the majority of the students do not view the language of instruction as a foremost factor in their cultural identity formation. However, some of the students regardless of their medium of instruction support the importance of the language of instruction in their process of cultural identity formation. One of the male students of the Azerbaijani stream, AB2, refers his ideas to the process of cultural identity formation starting at an early age and the role of teachers in this process. According to his idea, "she or he expresses his thoughts to students more affected by Azerbaijani culture (...) but if he or she speaks in Russian and expresses his thoughts in Russian language or, I don't know, French, English language, he can express his feelings more affected by Western cultures". AB2 also mentions that "the people who studied in Azerbaijani language at public or private schools are more, how can I say, are more, you know, they can feel more Azerbaijani than (...) the students who studied at Russian, English, or French languages (...) (because) they mostly use Russian words, Russian sentences in their speech. And actually, most of them nearly forgot their own language, Azerbaijani language". Participant AB3 shares his perspective on the importance of the language of instruction in the cultural identity formation process referring to the closeness of language to culture; he also believes that the language of instruction plays a great role in cultural identity development as it is a tool for self-expression.

Other participants also support the idea of the language of instruction affecting the process of cultural identity formation during schoolyears. One of the female participants from the Azerbaijani stream (AG2) and students of both genders from the Russian one (RB3, RG1, and RG2) mention that the students of the Russian stream embrace Russian culture through language

use, literature read, holidays celebrated, and notions discussed. The students state that, in their opinion, the language of instruction implies greater immersion in the cultural domain (e.g., literary works by Russian authors) (AG2 and RG1); development of Russian cultural aspects at school (while still being into Azerbaijani culture at home) (RB3); and general effect of Russian culture influencing the students directly and vicariously (as through communication with teachers and consuming various educational information because, as the students confess, they had much more Russian at school than Azerbaijani) (all three students).

RG2 also mentions that at some point, due to the amount of the Russian language used at school and in private communication, she started to forget Azerbaijani as she was not using it enough:

“And also the language, for example, when you study in Russian, all the things you do, they are only in Russian. You are watching TV or talking with someone only in Russian. And there is a point that at a moment I began to forget the Azerbaijani language because I switched only to Russian. And that was always affecting my cultural identity, how I was feeling by myself. I am Azerbaijani, but I can’t talk Azerbaijani normally. Those are the points that were concerning me.”

AG3, when answering the question about the role of the language of instruction in the cultural identity formation process, presented such an idea: “I’m Azerbaijani and I don’t know Azerbaijani language. If I don’t know Azerbaijani language, I lose cultural identity.” AG3 and RG2, therefore, recognize the impact of language of instruction on their cultural identity.

Among additional factors that the students listed, there are holidays (such as Nowruz and Ramadan) celebrated at school that were mentioned by AG1, as well as various classes, for example, literature, history, and art classes, mentioned by AB3.

The factors affecting the cultural identity formation process that almost every participant mentioned during the interview are family and the environment the student has outside of and in school. The role of family and relationships outside of the school was mentioned by the majority of the participants as they believe them to be defining in the process of cultural identity formation during their childhood and adolescence. RG3 reckons that school (let alone the language of instruction) had no effect on her identity in general, and it is exclusively about the role of family in her case. AB1 shares a conjecture that even the students of the Russian stream may use Azerbaijani at home. AG2, in addition to the previous answer on the role of language, believes that both family and school in general affect the process of cultural identity formation through instilling values and beliefs that shaped her cultural identity, as a result.

RB3 shares his idea of the combined effect on his cultural identity formation at school and home: “At school, we can take the culture of Russians, but at home, when we are talking to our grandmothers, grandfathers, fathers, we can develop our Azerbaijani skills, Azerbaijani culture.”

Friends and classmates are also among the factors affecting language proficiency and consequently cultural identity formation. As RG2 mentions. The environment (at school and outside of it) affects the development of the student’s cultural identity through communication and information consumption.

Still, while listing the benefits of Azerbaijani as the language of instruction, AB3 mentions that a person who speaks Azerbaijani fluently is more likely to be involved in the cultural life and cultural environment as they understand the intrinsic meaning of traditions, values, and beliefs:

“If you study in Azerbaijani, the Azerbaijani language will affect your understanding of the norms. That's, first of all, you will understand, for example, there is a tradition, let's say, when you learn Azerbaijani language, and you learn, for example, about that tradition, you will most probably understand the terms related to tradition, and if you learn also the etymology, which is very related to Azerbaijani language, you will more deeply understand that tradition. [...] For example, there is something in Nowruz, and you go to somewhere, and first I think it was like that. You think about, like, you dream something, and you wish something, and then you go to a door and listen there, and if there is something positive, your dream will come true, and if not, it will not. Let's say, if you are an English person, first of all, how can I translate this to you? And secondly, let's say I translated after that, I have to explain it one by one. You do this, you do this. But in Azerbaijani, it's easier.”

Also, as AB3 mentions, there are many more resources about culture in Azerbaijani rather than in any other language. A person able to grasp this material is more likely to properly understand the peculiarities of the Azerbaijani culture. At this point, it is the language a person speaks per se, rather than the language of instruction they have at an educational institution.

In comparison, the students do not believe the language of instruction is an important factor that affected their understanding of various cultural norms, values, and beliefs back at school. Answering this question, most of the students appeal to the fact that, regardless of the language of instruction, the students continue to enjoy the same cultural environment outside the school. The phenomenon of Azerbaijani cultural identity, according to the participants, does not evolve in the classroom. As RG2 shares:

“I think not that much, because even if I'm taught in Russian, it doesn't mean that I'm not Azerbaijani, you know, so, like, there are some points about your nation, about your motherland that you're feeling from your heart, and you perceive them, like, from, not your logic, not your mind, not language, but, like, from heart you feel them. For example, it was very intense during the Second Karabakh War, like, when I was reading the, how to say, some periods of history that was very tough for our nation, I was feeling that from the depth of my heart. Language, in this case, I think it doesn't matter, you feel it, like, anywhere.”

RG3 approves the idea of the role of society, “Even though the language was different, the society was the same. And it made no difference for us.”

AB1 and RB1 also support the absence of major differences between the students of different mediums of instruction. The medium of instruction is not believed to have any significant effect on the understanding and acquisition of Azerbaijani cultural beliefs. AB1 shares: “I think it's the same. In traditional perspectives, if we take Russian sector and Azerbaijan sector, because I think they're family from Azerbaijan or Russian, but in Azerbaijan, they should follow the same rules.” His counterpart from the Russian stream, RB1, supports this claim: “Because, like, although I studied in Russian stream for 7 years, I'm still integrated into the general culture, so I'm capable of communicating, of cooperating with people from Azerbaijani stream, from private schools as well.”

At the same time, the majority of students mentioned that the language of instruction became a crucial factor in encouraging their choice of books, movies, and music back at school, as well as consumption of any other kind of information (e.g., mass media and news, social media trends).

AB2 reaffirms the role of Azerbaijani in his cultural life: “Azerbaijani is my native language and, of course, I know Azerbaijani language is better than any language and that determines my book, film, music choice, absolutely.”

Some of the students agreed that the language of instruction at university, as well as at school, has played a great role in their cultural identity formation. As AB2 shares, his cultural environment back at school was fully Azerbaijani which allowed him to develop his cultural identity.

Importantly, some of the participants who received their secondary education in Russian confess that it is quite challenging for them to understand the materials in Azerbaijani, should it be a formal and official language or a literary one. Although all of them do speak Azerbaijani, it is not so easy to enjoy the cultural resources due to their limited language knowledge. RB2 states that it is hard for him to understand Azerbaijani books as well as he can do it in Russian.

RG3 claims that her understanding of the content in Azerbaijani is not as good as in Russian. Although she quite understands the content of artworks, it is still more convenient for her to read and watch movies in Russian.

Summary

The first research question analyzed the students’ perceptions of the role of language of instruction in shaping the cultural identity of fresh graduates of public schools in Azerbaijan. During the interview process, it was discovered that the language of instruction is not considered to be the major factor in cultural identity development. Still, the study participants defined the language of instruction as an important cultural identity development factor due to the closeness of language to culture and the cultural experiences that we share when speaking a language in an

educational environment. Among other factors that, according to the participants' view, influence the process of cultural identity development are family, educational environment, friends, and holidays. In addition, the students mentioned that the language of instruction did not significantly affect their understanding of cultural norms, values, and beliefs. However, it did affect their information consumption such as books, movies, and music, as it appears to be more challenging for the students of the Russian stream to grasp the materials in Azerbaijani.

Research Question 2

The second research question of the study is “How is the language of instruction perceived to influence students’ understanding of their cultural identity?” and helps to explore the students’ views on the effect the language of instruction back at school had on their cultural identity development. The interview questions, in this case, addressed the students’ cultural identity, how they understand the Azerbaijani cultural identity, and what the Azerbaijani cultural values are.

The questions in this block appeared to stimulate students’ cultural consciousness and they provided some peculiar answers. While most of the students identify themselves as Azerbaijani, regardless of their language of instruction, some of the students from the Azerbaijani stream identify themselves as Turks (sometimes specified as Azerbaijani Turks).

AB2 refers to his ideas of history and the origin of the Turkic nations. He shares that it is important for him to identify specifically as “an Azerbaijani Turk” due to the geographical position, historical events, and the effect that Russia and Iran have (“trying to make us forget our cultural identity”; the same applied to the attempts of the Soviet authorities to eliminate Azerbaijani cultural development).

AB3 also appeals to the notion of Turkic origin and patriotic feelings to his Turkic origin. He believes that Azerbaijanis are a part of the Turkic world, and he feels “like a nationalist” (specifically using the Turkish word *milletçilik* – nationalism).

AG1, an internally displaced person from Aghdam, believes this idea of Turkish cultural identity understanding comes from her family: “So my father and mother was patriotic. They preserved our cultural identity. I mean, Turkish identity, not the Arabic and Persian identities.” Further, she elaborates on her definition of being a Turk:

“If you are Azerbaijani, you can be also Persian. You can be, I don't know, Russian, because from the history, we have also Russians. They settled in some parts of Azerbaijan. For example, in Ivanovka, it's Russian world. So, Ivanovka. So, from the pronunciation, you can see it's Russian. But being Turk is only consist of Turks.”

This division and emphasis on the Turkish root appeared to be confusing for one of the participants. The student under the pseudonym AB3 first mentioned that he is an Azerbaijani Turk and there is not much difference between Azerbaijanis and Turks for him, then changed his opinion and added some details to clarify his point.

“Ok, so your cultural identity now is? - Cultural identity, Turk. - Turk, ok. - Yes, and... - Alright. Not Azerbaijani Turk, but just Turk. - I don't feel much divide. - Not divided, ok, alright. So, being Azerbaijani is being Turk for you? - Yes, being an Azerbaijani means... We know that a few minutes ago I said that I don't divide Azerbaijan into Turks, and I feel like a Turk, but being an Azerbaijani doesn't, as you know, doesn't mean being a Turk, because in Azerbaijan also there are Talysh, Lachis, or others. Being an Azerbaijani means loving our country, loving Azerbaijan, and first of all trying not to divide it into parts.”

One of the participants from the Russian sector, RG3, criticized such an attitude: “First of all, you are Azerbaijani, and later you’re Turk; your roots come second, and your nationality matters. When you’re abroad, you’re not answering that you’re Turk. You’re saying, I’m Azerbaijani.”

Nevertheless, the majority of the students mentioned similar ideas while describing what being an Azerbaijani, Azerbaijani culture, and cultural values mean to them. The cultural features that the students identify as essential for the Azerbaijani culture appear to be the same regardless of the medium of instruction. The students mention such notions as bravery, courage; hospitality, tolerance, family relationships, respect – in general and to parents, children, and elderly; nationalism, patriotism, national pride, dedication to the Motherland; patriarchal structure of the society; various beliefs – religion, and superstitions; attention to money and others’ opinion, attention to others’ behavior and clothing; interest in sports, especially football.

Remarkably, students of both streams independently mentioned religion as a part of the Azerbaijani cultural identity and associated values. AG2 and RB3 both believe that religion is one of the important cultural values of Azerbaijani cultural identity.

The points on patriotic values and dedication to the Motherland were continuously repeated by the students of both mediums of instruction. AB3 shares that he strives to be “a better Azerbaijani” by loving his country and not trying to divide it into parts but perceiving it as a whole.

Although none of the students mentioned their cultural identity being Russian at any point, still, some of them agree that they have developed a mixed identity of Azerbaijani and Western, or European, cultures. They believe it is expressed through their being more open-minded and tolerant compared to their Azerbaijani counterparts.

“Because for their sector, I think their subjects are somehow related to Russian culture also. Therefore, it's their aim to learn also that culture, and from the time to time they can also take, put the two cultures.” (AG2).

“I have something from Russian culture and I have something from Azerbaijani, mostly from Azerbaijani culture, but I have something from Russian also. So, yeah, I would believe that there are now lots of families that are speaking Russian in Azerbaijan. But they live in Azerbaijan. They also, I believe, have this kind of choice between two cultures. Yes, and here I believe the language that they speak from the beginning, it matters for them.” (RB2).

Representatives of both sectors agree that the students of the Russian stream differ from the students of the Azerbaijani one. These differences are believed to be demonstrated through various values and beliefs that the students acquire: attitudes to the educational process, romantic and casual relationships, freedoms and rights, as well as general behavioral patterns. The students of the Azerbaijani stream, particularly AB1 and AG3 share that the students of the Russian one have a much more relaxed attitude to their studies and communication with instructors. At the same time, RG2 and RB2 mention that there is more respect for the rules and the instructors from the students of the Russian stream compared to the Azerbaijani one.

RG3 shares her experience:

“And I believe that we are free-minded compared to them. And that maybe we are more flexible. In terms of world view, I guess, because we are more open-minded. For example, when it comes to the clothing, we don't differentiate between women when they are not covered. However, in our school, it was obvious that they are judgmental towards this type of dressing. As well as overall, for example, we had situations where they were

not allowing their girls from Azerbaijani sector to go out from the class during breaks. Because they were afraid that some guys will see them. However, when it comes to us, Russian sector, we are not that influenced and we are free. Even though we were children, it was affecting us in that sense.”

AB3 supports this idea and mentions that girls in the Azerbaijani stream are not encouraged to participate in the same activities as boys, even in group work. Then he also adds to the points differentiating between the students of different streams that there are more resources available in Russian (both academic and informal) compared to Azerbaijani, and varying tastes in music, books, and movies also deepen this segregation.

Other differences that the students mention include different attitudes (and acceptance) of romantic relationships, going out (to places such as nightclubs), and moving out as soon as the person turns 18.

RB3 and RG3 mention that the students of the Russian stream are more inclined to recognize and enjoy various freedoms, such as freedom of clothing or having a romantic relationship. AB2 draws attention to human rights and freedoms instead:

“For example, the main trait of Western culture, for example, the freedom, democracy, for example, freedom of speech, freedom of everything. I think the people who studied in different languages, the Western languages, they can feel themselves more free. They can value their freedom and their rights. They can think and they can talk about their rights, that I have rights, you can't violate them.” (AB2).

Additionally, one of the students of the Russian medium of instruction, RG2, addressed existing categorization among the students of the Russian sector. She mentions that there are four main categories among the students of the Russian stream from their values and beliefs

perspective: respecting Azerbaijani culture; a mixed or combined cultural identity; not admitting their Azerbaijani cultural identity; and ethnically Russian students.

Summary

Broadly, all of the participants share quite a similar understanding of the cultural identity, specifically the Azerbaijani cultural identity. Answering the question about the typical Azerbaijani cultural values, the participants of the study mentioned the list of cultural phenomena that were repeated throughout the interview process. Notably, some of the students of the Azerbaijani stream mentioned that their cultural identity is Turk rather than Azerbaijani, and this view was criticized by a student of the Russian stream. Among the important notions associated with cultural identity, the students mentioned respect, hospitality, patriotism, and tolerance. Even though no one mentioned their cultural identity being inclined to Russian, one of the students shared the existing division between the students in the Russian stream. Nevertheless, the students believe that the students of the Russian medium of instruction may develop an identity that is different from the students of the Azerbaijani one. The students believe them to be more open-minded, outspoken, and tolerant. Furthermore, the students of the Russian stream allegedly are more aware and protective of their rights and freedoms. They are also believed to have a different attitude to relationships of any sort, education, and lifestyle.

Research Question 3

The third research question in this study is “Are there any differences in the cultural identity perceptions of Azerbaijani students receiving their education in different mediums of instruction?”. The questions asked during the interview covered the perceived differences in the

cultural identity formation of students of different mediums of instruction, whether the students of the Russian medium of instruction can develop a mixed, combined, or conflicting cultural identity; whether the students of different mediums of instruction perceive the cultural norms differently; and whether the language of instruction contributed to or challenged the development of the students' cultural identity.

The present part of the interview demonstrated various conflicts and issues that the students relate to the language of the instruction. Some of the students appeal to the same cultural environment that the students of different mediums of instruction live in. Still, some of the answers suggest that the language of instruction creates different settings for the students to develop their values and beliefs.

The students agree that due to the different mediums of instruction, the students may (and do so) develop mixed and combined cultural identity, rather than a conflicting one. While some of the students mentioned that there are no cultural values and beliefs treated differently by the students of the different mediums of instruction, however, there is a list of the norms and behavioral patterns that may be perceived variously.

AB2 shares peculiar ideas on the extent to which students of different mediums of instruction may or may not feel Azerbaijani from the cultural perspective. He shares: "They may feel not 100% Azerbaijani. I think the studying process is one of the main important periods of a person's life. And when you study in different languages, you may feel that you belong to this culture." He brings examples of the students studying in Russian and not feeling patriotic and nationalistic enough. He continues: "I face this kind of situations that I have my friends that who studies in Russian language. And they, you know, their culture, their ethic and cultural values is more affected by Russian and Western cultures."

The students of the Russian stream also share their views on the differences. RG3 believes that religion is a strong value associated with the cultural identity of the students of the Azerbaijani sector, while the students of the Russian one value career and work-life balance more. RG2 describes her cultural identity as a mix of Azerbaijani and European values and does not define herself fully as an Azerbaijani from the perspective of her values and beliefs.

Notably, some of the students mention that being exposed to two languages and cultures at the same time may have (and actually has had) a positive effect on the cultural development of a student. They admit that learning other languages and cultures (especially in the form of a language of instruction) is a positive phenomenon as it allows for more developmental opportunities. For example, AB2 shares his conjecture that the students of the Azerbaijani sector face only Azerbaijani culture, language, and traditions, while the students of the Russian sector have a chance to explore other cultures, too. He believes it to be a positive experience. At the same time, AB3 appeals to the availability of resources and exchange of information as the students have a chance to interact with each other, feel the cultural differences, and learn new cultures. A Russian-medium-of-instruction student, RG3 supports this idea by referring to her personal experience:

“I believe that it contributed to me because even though the language was Russian, the society was Azerbaijani. And despite growing up there, I had an opportunity to learn Russian and expand my knowledge. And, yeah, I believe that it was beneficial. And growing up, learning two languages at the time helped my brain to develop the skill to learn other languages as well.”

RG2 mentions that this absence of opportunity to compare the cultural realm may negatively affect the cultural identity development of students:

“Because I think that in Russian sector, people, they have what we have and what we compare to. But in Azerbaijani sector, they have only what they have. They don't want to compare it. For example, we, as Russian sector, I'm watching Russian movies, I'm watching Russian TikTok, Russian news, and I have what to compare to my experience. But Azerbaijani sector, they are only seeing everything in the limit of Azerbaijani, in the limit of Azerbaijani language and experience and national identity. They are not trying to compare with something and to see in other things.”

Interestingly, the students of different mediums of instruction share their understanding of values and beliefs in the form of stereotypes, as well. Stereotypes and biases became a peculiar notion in independent answers. AB3, a male student from the Azerbaijani stream, and RG3, a female student from the Russian stream, touch upon the stereotypes that the students have from the cultural perspective. AB2 openly talks about the existing predispositions as a part of Azerbaijani cultural identity, for example, gender stereotypes and potential achievements that women may gain. On the contrary, RG3 also mentions existing cultural patterns. Her values include equal rights and opportunities for both genders in career and private life.

Summary

Despite some of the norms that are perceived to be treated differently, none of the students mentioned any significant difference in cultural affiliation among the students of different mediums of instruction. The students believe both sectors develop a similar or at most mixed cultural identity regardless of the language a student studies. Moreover, none of the students mentioned Russian as a medium of instruction challenging their cultural identity formation process at any point. Nevertheless, there are some points of differences between the

streams that the students mention. For example, the experience of different behavioral patterns at school; being more religious or secular; open or closed to the interactions between genders, casual or romantic; stereotypes. Some of the students mentioned that being exposed to two cultures simultaneously may have a positive effect on a student's cultural development.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study aimed to discover the perceptions that the fresh graduates of secondary schools in Azerbaijan have regarding their cultural identity development (as values and beliefs) back at school; what the role of the language of instruction is in this process, as well as the differences in those perceptions between the students of two different mediums of instruction, Azerbaijani and Russian. The research process was based on a qualitative study in the form of twelve semi-structured interviews among fresh graduates of public schools. The major themes discovered during the study process include different views on the role of the language of instruction on the cultural identity development process, the phenomena of Azerbaijani cultural identity, and the differences in the cultural identity development associated with different languages of instruction, as well as differences in values and beliefs of the students.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the students' perceptions on the role of language of instruction in shaping the cultural identity of fresh graduates of public schools in Azerbaijan?
2. How is the language of instruction perceived to influence students' understanding of their cultural identity?
3. Are there any differences in the cultural identity perceptions of Azerbaijani students receiving their education in different mediums of instruction?

The literature review in Chapter 2 presented an overview of the ideas associated with the notion of cultural identity and its development. It starts with the theoretical framework (the Vygotskian sociocultural cognitive development theory), an overview of the general idea of

cultural identity, how it was and is affected by colonization, how different post-colonial nation-states preserve their cultural identities, the phenomenon of the cultural identity in the post-Soviet space, the unique experience of Azerbaijan in this field, the roles of culture in education and of language in the cultural identity development. This chapter aims to compare and contrast the literature findings with the study ones.

Theoretical Framework and Study Findings

The major theoretical framework (the Vygotskian sociocultural cognitive development theory) suggests that language (especially language of instruction) plays a crucial role in the development of cultural identity, specifically in an educational facility due to the constant communication and cultural environment it is derived from. The study participants do not support this idea as they do not find the language of instruction (in our case, Azerbaijani or Russian) to be a central element of their cultural identity development at school. Nevertheless, they do recognize the importance of the language of instruction due to its closeness to the cultural context and their cultural experiences. Following Rublik's findings (2017), the students agree that being exposed to more than one culture allows them to develop a mixed cultural identity and have a broader choice of options for values and beliefs. Similarly, they confirm the ideas of Gómez-Estern et al. (2010) on the role of social interactions in the process of cultural identity formation through social interactions at school and outside. The notion of a multicultural educational setting (Kozulin et al., 2003) is emphasized by some of the study participants and is seen as one that has a positive and broadening effect on the development of the values and beliefs of the students.

Perceptions of the Role of the Language of Instruction in Cultural Identity Development

The literature findings suggest that not all of the post-Soviet countries have the same attitude to the presence of Russian in the educational context, besides the national language. In the example of Georgia, there is a controversial attitude toward the Russian language and culture as a symbol of both privilege and oppression at the same time (Tabatadze, 2022). The interview participants share that in Azerbaijan the attitude to the Russian language and its speakers, although Azerbaijani by origin, is also quite sensitive.

In addition to the discussion of the controversial attitude to the Russian language, the literature suggests the role of the Soviet epoch and the attempts of the Soviet government to promote the notion of Homo Sovieticus instead of local cultures and languages (Knopik & Oszwa, 2020; Rannut, 2023). A few interviewees from the Azerbaijani stream specifically drew attention to the Soviet period and the cultural challenges it brought to Azerbaijan. The interviewees discuss the significant role of the Soviet policies in this process and how the Azerbaijani culture and cultural identity were altered. It also causes ambiguous feelings in the educational setting and society in general.

Family traditions are mentioned as one of the most important factors affecting the cultural identity development of school students (Abbasov & Aslanova, 2016). The overwhelming majority of the respondents mentioned the role of the family in their process of cultural identity development, unlike school. Additionally, the role of family traditions was emphasized by the students as the unifying tool for the preservation and compliance with the cultural norms in Azerbaijani society. The interviewees believe that regardless of the language of instruction the students still reside in the same cultural environment and mostly follow the same rules. At the same time, there is a list of various cultural differences associated with families. Based on the

cultural background of the family, the students may or may not follow some of the cultural norms.

Perceptions of the Differences in Understanding Cultural Identity

The literature suggests a strong presence of Turkic identity in Azerbaijan (Ergun, 2022; Garibova, 2019). The study participants emphasize the bonds with the Turkic roots of Azerbaijanis and the values that are associated with them. The fact that some of the students of the Azerbaijani stream culturally identify themselves as Turk rather than Azerbaijani is a peculiar fact that may be an interesting point for further research.

Nevertheless, the study participants do not prove the idea that the language of instruction or language, in general, serves as a tool for self-identification with Azerbaijani culture and sovereignty (Abbasov & Aslanova, 2016). Regardless of the language of instruction, the study participants associate themselves with Azerbaijani and/or Turkic cultural identity. None of the participants self-identifies as a Russian. Still, some of the Western, European, or Russian cultural features were mentioned by the study participants as the ones developed by the students of the Russian stream. For example, open-mindedness, self-expression, and protection of rights and freedoms.

Among the features of Azerbaijani cultural identity, the researchers define language and religion (Goyushov, 2021). The interviewees emphasized the role of the Azerbaijani language in the process of cultural identity development as well as a major aspect of Azerbaijani cultural identity. Religion as a part of Azerbaijani cultural identity was emphasized by two students from both Azerbaijani and Russian streams.

Perceptions of the Differences Associated with the Language of Instruction

The limited amount of academic resources and academic affairs, in general, is suggested by the literature as one of the factors that affect the preference of Russian over Azerbaijani as the language of instruction (Valiyev, Amirova, Mammadova, & Alasgarova, 2023). AB3 mentioned it as one of the benefits that the students of the Russian stream get; nevertheless, when it comes to the resources on culture and cultural identity, Azerbaijani is preferable.

Various literature suggests that being exposed to more than one language in an educational setting leads to the development of an aspect or a completely different cultural identity of a student (Preusche & Göbel, 2022). The phenomenon of acculturation happens through exposure to the associated culture (Arynbaeva, Dmitryuk, & Stycheva, 2022). The student gets affected by the culture they are exposed to and therefore may also develop a bicultural identity. The study participants share similar ideas as they believe that the cultural identities of the students of different languages of instruction are not similar. As the interviewees share, the alterations include the students of the Russian stream being more open-minded, career-oriented, and outspoken, especially about their rights and freedoms.

The students also share a similar point with the literature on the role of language in sovereignty construction. The primary role of language and its importance from the perspective of a sovereign cultural identity is emphasized by the study participants. Not only does it serve strong uniting purposes, but appears as a mundane communication tool (Abdurrahmanova, 2023). However, the study findings contradict the idea that the colonizers' language may prevent the national language from becoming the primary national and cultural communication tool (Dascomb, 2019; Shakib, 2011). As the study participants suggest, the role of the Azerbaijani language is strong despite the Russian language being an additional language of instruction. At

the same time, the study findings contradict the idea of state language as a medium of instruction stimulating communal unity (Poudel, Jackson, & Choi, 2022). The students emphasized differences in cultural identity formation process and outcomes due to the different languages of instruction. Each study participant mentioned the variance in the cultural identity of the students of different streams.

Implications

The present study may serve as an initial research case for future inquiries on the peculiarities of cultural identity formation and the role of the language of instruction in Azerbaijan for research implications purposes. Considering the variety of educational streams in the Azerbaijani educational realm, the study may inspire future researchers to explore the differences between other languages of instruction and their role in the cultural identity development process. As the present study was limited to the fresh graduates of public secondary schools currently pursuing their higher education at ADA University, prospective research may expand the study participants pool by including private schools and other universities. Similarly, future studies may also involve high school students and add observations and document analysis to data collection methods.

Implications for practice may inspire curriculum discussions and serve as a basis for governmental discussions in the field of language of instruction and cultural identity formation, separately or combined. Teachers as educational stakeholders may receive more cultural training and develop their cultural sensitivity. Parents may make their decisions on the educational stream in a more conscious and informed way.

Limitations

Nevertheless, the study has a list of limitations. Since the researcher is a foreign student and does not speak Azerbaijani fluently enough, the study was conducted in English, therefore limiting the potential pool of candidates with valuable insights but without sufficient knowledge of English. In addition, the study was conducted at one site only, namely ADA University. Due to the limited expertise in the field of study, the questions may not have fully reflected the topic under study and its peculiarities. Time limitations may also have limited the number of interviewees and their relevant experience and knowledge. Correlation and causation issues may also be concerning limitations as the study exclusively focused on the educational aspect of cultural identity formation while there are also other important factors affecting the cultural identity development process (such as family and cultural environment mentioned by the majority of the students).

Conclusion

The dissertation findings emphasize the perceptions of fresh graduates of public secondary schools of the role of the language of instruction in the process of cultural identity formation. The objectives of the study were to fill the gap in existing research by finding whether there are any differences between the students' perceptions of the impact of different language sectors on their cultural identity. Through the series of 12 semi-structured interviews and based on the Vygotskian sociocultural cognitive development theory, the differences between the values and beliefs of the students of different mediums of instruction were found.

As described in chapters 4 and 5, the majority of the students do not believe the language of instruction is an utmost factor in the process of cultural identity development. Instead, they

draw attention to the role of society, family, and environment as the foremost factors. Furthermore, regardless of the language of instruction, the students culturally identify themselves as Azerbaijani (with rare occasions of (Azerbaijani) Turk). None of the students associate themselves only with Russian culture, however, the majority of the students reckon that the cultural identity that the students of the Russian stream develop has a strong influence on Western, European, and Russian values. The students mention such values as open-mindedness, free self-expression, being more career-oriented, and flexible, and speaking up about their rights and freedoms to be distinctive features of the students of the Russian stream. The students consider these differences to originate from the language of instruction and their being exposed to the Russian culture at school. As such an educational environment presents a multicultural setting, the students find it to be beneficial for the students of the Russian stream as they are exposed to various cultures, and it may enhance their worldview.

APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

Hello, dear participant.

Let me start our conversation by sharing my personal background information. Currently, I am a second-year ADA University Master of Arts in Educational Management student. I am conducting an interview as a part of my master's thesis. The purpose of my study is to understand the differences in perceptions of cultural identity formation between students of different mediums of instruction among fresh graduates of public schools in Azerbaijan. You will be asked a few open-ended questions. You may choose to answer or not to answer any of them. The interview will last approximately twenty minutes and will be audio-recorded and then transcribed.

Your identity will be masked by replacing your real name with a pseudonym. The transcription of the interview will be shared back with you. You have already signed the consent form which states that your participation is voluntary. Could you also please verbally confirm your voluntary participation?

Thank you. You are encouraged to share only the information you are comfortable sharing with. As a reminder, your privacy will be protected through the use of a pseudonym which in our case is "A/R – B/G – 1/2/3", and you can choose to withdraw at any point. With that being said, we can start.

- Please introduce yourself. Mention your age and gender.
- What school (type) did you finish and when?

- What language did you study in at school?
- What factors do you think affected the development of your cultural identity back at school?
- Do you think the language of instruction has affected your sense of belonging to the Azerbaijani cultural identity?

How?

Why do you think so?

Could you bring any examples of that?

Do you think the language of instruction affected your understanding of cultural norms, beliefs, values, and symbols?

- Can you provide any examples of the language of instruction affecting your choice of books, music, movies, etc?
- How do you identify yourself? (= How do you describe yourself?)

How would you describe your cultural identity?

- What does it mean to be Azerbaijani?

Do you use 'we, us, our' when you talk about Azerbaijani cultural identity?

- What are some characteristics of Azerbaijani culture you identify in your cultural identity?

What do you believe to be Azerbaijani cultural values?

Do you participate in Azerbaijani holidays, traditions, etc?

Can you name the ones you practice?

- Do you feel there are any cultural differences between students of different languages of instruction?

- Do you think students of the Russian language of instruction may develop a mixed/conflicting/combined cultural identity compared with the students receiving their education in Azerbaijani?

How and why?

Can you give any examples?

- Do you think you treat/perceive cultural norms differently from the students of the 'other' language of instruction?

If yes, what do you think has influenced those differences?

Can you provide any examples?

- How did the language of instruction contribute to or challenge your understanding of cultural identity?

Closing Comments

- What would you like to change to improve the cultural identity formation of students of different languages of instruction?

- Would you like to add anything to your answers?

- Is there any question you would like me to ask you?

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent Form for a Study Participant

Dear Participant,

I am Iana Samoilova, a second-year educational management master's student at ADA University. I am conducting research aimed at exploring the perceptions of the fresh graduates of public secondary schools in Azerbaijan of the influence of the medium of instruction on their cultural identity formation process. The purpose of this interview is to get insights into the cultural identity formation process. The research process is conducted under the supervision of Dr. Vafa Kazdal. Your participation is highly appreciated.

This is an invitation to participate in the study. The interview process will last approximately 45 minutes, depending on how detailed your responses are.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may say no or you may choose to answer only the questions you feel comfortable answering. Any direct identification information, such as your name, will be removed from the data when the responses are analyzed. After your responses are analyzed and built into themes, they will be compiled into a paper as part of a master's thesis research study.

Because all the possible measures will be taken to keep participant identity private, this study poses no risk to the individuals. Participants may feel unnecessary pressure to partake in this study because of administrative or political pressure. However, this type of involuntary participation is completely discouraged as it violates the participant's rights. Your voluntary

participation will benefit you through the self-reflection on your cultural identity formation. The obtained data will be password-protected, stored on the personal computer of the researcher, and kept for at least 5 years.

A final copy of the study will not include your identification information. Your responses or decision whether or not to answer some questions will not affect your status as a student. At any point, you may withdraw as a participant from the study.

Thank you for participating!

I agree to participate in this study. In addition, by signing below I agree to allow my responses to be audio-recorded for research purposes of this study.

Signature _____

Date _____

Name:

Pseudonym assigned:

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