



EMPOWERING INCLUSIVE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETIES: INTEGRATING MEDIA LITERACY IN UNIVERSITY-LEVEL LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN THE USA AND KAZAKHSTAN

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ABSTRACT. *This research explores the integration of media literacy into university-level language education. It compares the perspectives of language educators in the USA and Kazakhstan, focusing on their potential to empower inclusive knowledge societies by fostering equitable access to critical thinking and media engagement skills. The study aims to uncover how educators perceive media literacy's importance, the extent of its integration, and the social and institutional challenges they face. Employing a comparative survey-based approach, data was collected from the USA and Kazakhstan language educators, addressing the significance of media literacy, integration practices, barriers, and benefits. The data offered a comparative analysis of the two educational contexts.*

Findings reveal significant differences between the countries. Educators in the USA report advanced integration of media literacy, supported by institutional frameworks, while their counterparts in Kazakhstan face challenges like resource limitations, insufficient training, and digital inequality. Despite these barriers, educators in both contexts recognize media literacy as a transformative tool for fostering critical thinking, social awareness, and active citizenship.

This comparative analysis illuminates the potential of media literacy to bridge digital divides, promote equitable education, and prepare students for active participation in sustainable, knowledge-sharing communities.

KEYWORDS: *educator perspectives, language learning, media literacy, social inclusion, sustainable education, comparative study.*

INTRODUCTION

In the era of rapid digital transformation, media platforms have become a pervasive force, influencing every aspect of life, including education, knowledge sharing,

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communication, and information delivery. Today's labor market requires professionals to transform into leaders by thoughtfully and responsibly navigating media platforms. They are encouraged to utilize social media's potential for participation and creativity, showing how it can be used to express concerns, address needs, and support others (Masterman, 1989; Buckingham, 2007). This transformation has significantly altered the education landscape, particularly in language learning, and it underscores the importance of Media literacy as an essential competency for navigating this complex environment (Pegrum, 2019; Godwin-Jones, 2021; Gabdullina et al., 2024). Media literacy, which encompasses accessing, analyzing, evaluating, creating, and communicating media across various contexts and forms, equips learners with abilities to engage critically with the information and communication technologies that shape contemporary life (Hobbs, 2020). Its integration into language education is increasingly urgent as educational institutions strive to prepare students for future challenges (Yelubayeva et al., 2023), empowering learners within inclusive knowledge ecologies.

Inclusive knowledge ecologies are environments that recognize, value, and integrate diverse knowledge systems. These ecologies promote equity, diversity, and sustainability by ensuring language learners contribute to creating collective knowledge (UNESCO, 2018). Thus, media literacy has become essential to education in today's digitally connected world, especially in language learning. It helps language learners acquire the skills to critically engage with various media formats, promoting linguistic proficiency and critical thinking.

This research explores *how language educators in the USA and Kazakhstan perceive and incorporate media literacy into university-level language education and what challenges and practices are associated with this integration in each context*. By comparing their perspectives, the study seeks to identify differences, challenges, and opportunities for enhancing media literacy integration in different educational contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media Literacy (ML) has been defined in various ways. ML involves analyzing media representations, understanding how media influences culture and society, and developing the skills to critically engage with media content (Buckingham, 2007; Jolls & Wilson, 2014). For Buckingham (2007), ML is "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication" (p. 112). Jolls and Wilson (2014) expand this definition of literacy to include all forms of media, focusing on critical thinking and the ability to make informed decisions about media consumption and production. Potter (2022) refers to the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that allow individuals to critically analyze the daily messages aimed to announce, entertain, and sell to media consumers. In the context of our research, *ML is an ability to critically evaluate, analyze, and utilize media content relevant to their specific professional fields. It encompasses the skills to discern credible sources, understand media biases, and apply information effectively in professional contexts*.

The importance of media literacy in education has been growing, with scholars highlighting its role in fostering critical thinking, informed citizenship, and practical communication skills (Hobbs, 2020; Potter, 2022). Jolls and Wilson (2014) believe

incorporating media literacy into language education can boost students' interaction with real-life language usage and enhance their capacity to navigate and evaluate intricate media landscapes.

Various principal models exist in media literacy, each providing a distinctive perspective and approach. Buckingham (2007) emphasizes the significance of integrating media literacy into the classroom to enrich the learning experiences of children and young people. The scholar suggests that teaching media literacy involves more than just analyzing media texts; it should also involve actively engaging students in creating media. By involving students in media production activities, Buckingham aimed to enhance their critical thinking and problem-solving skills by understanding how media shapes public opinion, influences behavior, and reflects societal values. Buckingham provides practical methods for teaching media literacy, including critically analyzing media texts and comprehending media production processes. He emphasizes the significance of involving students in useful, contextualized learning experiences rather than relying solely on analytical approaches. Buckingham's assertion that "media literacy is not just about protecting oneself from harmful content; it is about gaining empowerment through informed understanding and active participation." This emphasizes the potential of media literacy to empower individuals to navigate the media landscape confidently and responsibly. Buckingham calls for a change in educational practices to integrate media literacy better, preparing students to navigate and influence the media landscape critically and creatively. Additionally, he emphasizes the crucial role of educators and the necessity for continuous support and training to teach media literacy effectively (Buckingham, 2007). However, educators encounter obstacles such as rapidly evolving media technologies, opposition from conventional educational institutions, and constrained resources.

Hobbs (2021) highlights the importance of integrating media literacy into educational curricula, arguing that it equips students with critical thinking skills necessary for navigating today's complex media landscape: the ability to deconstruct media messages, understand media construction, and recognize the impact of digital and social media, algorithmic bias and misinformation, and the role of big data. This approach aligns with Jenkins et al. (2009), who emphasized the need to integrate ML into school curricula at all levels and presented a practical framework for media literacy education, including key concepts such as authorship, format, audience, content, and purpose. This framework is helpful for educators looking to implement media literacy programs in their classrooms.

Yeh and Swinehart (2022) emphasize the importance of social media literacy for ELLs, making a compelling case for its integration into language education curricula. Additionally, they introduce a comprehensive framework for social media literacy, encompassing technical, cognitive, and sociocultural competencies. This approach provides a comprehension of ELLs' challenges, from navigating platform interfaces to critically evaluating content within its cultural context. These scholars' study suggests that educators should incorporate activities that develop technical skills, enhance cognitive evaluation abilities, and cultivate an understanding of sociocultural norms in online environments. These recommendations are crucial for preparing learners for

the digital age and directly affect language education. However, this study has some areas for improvement. Firstly, while diverse, the study's sample size of sixty-six participants is relatively small. The authors acknowledge this limitation, which affects the generalizability of the findings. Future research with more extensive and varied samples could provide more definitive insights. Secondly, the interaction with Reddit was limited to a single discussion thread. While this offers a snapshot of the participants' initial challenges and strategies, it needs to capture the development of their skills and perceptions over a more extended period. Longitudinal studies would be beneficial to understand how social media literacy develops over time. Thirdly, there needs to be a more in-depth cultural analysis. Although the article touches on sociocultural pragmatics, analyzing cultural norms and their impact on ELLs' interactions is somewhat superficial. A deeper exploration of specific cultural challenges and how learners navigate these would enrich the study. Lastly, relying on self-reported data through questionnaires may introduce bias, as participants might need to recall or assess their experiences accurately. Triangulating these findings with more objective measures, such as direct observation or interaction logs, could strengthen the validity of the results.

In the United States, media literacy is well-established in educational policies, emphasizing its integration across curricula, including language education (Jenkins, 2006; Hobbs, 2021). Several studies highlight the successful incorporation of media literacy in language programs, noting improvements in students' analytical abilities and language proficiency (Coşkun, 2021; Pennington et al., 2024; Westman, 2019).

Kazakhstan is currently in the early stages of integrating media literacy into education. While recent national efforts have highlighted the importance of media literacy, challenges such as inadequate teacher training, limited resources, and varying levels of institutional support persist (Gabdullina et al., 2024; Hajar et al., 2024; Yelubayeva et al., 2023b). The literature on Kazakhstan stresses the necessity for more structured approaches and resources to support media literacy education.

Despite these variabilities, both country's language instructors acknowledge the importance of media literacy in providing students with the essential skills for the digital age. This study adds to the existing literature by comparing how media literacy is integrated into language education based on educators' perspectives from the USA and Kazakhstan.

RESEARCH METHODS

Participants

The study used a survey-based approach, collecting responses from 11 USA and 110 Kazakh language educators. Participants from various universities in Kazakhstan were chosen to ensure a diverse representation of language education practices, while American tutors represent UCSD.

Data Collection

The study findings were presented in two stages to gather data. In the first stage, a questionnaire survey was conducted to collect general data from participants. The six-question survey explored integrating media literacy education into the language

learning curriculum for adult learners at the university level. The second stage employed interviews to capture insights from participants regarding their personal experiences, beliefs, and attitudes regarding ML in ESL classrooms.

A structured questionnaire was developed to assess educators' perspectives on media literacy integration. The survey included closed and open-ended questions, allowing for both quantitative analysis and qualitative insights. The critical sections of the questionnaire focused on:

- Participants rated the *importance of integrating media literacy into language education* on a Likert scale.
- Educators provide details on the extent and *methods of media literacy integration in their curricula*, including specific activities and resources.
- Respondents identified the main challenges they face in integrating media literacy, such as the need for *more resources, insufficient training, and institutional barriers*.
- *Perceived Benefits*: Educators shared their views on the benefits of media literacy for language learners, including improved critical thinking, language skills, and cultural awareness.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data compared the responses from educators in the USA and Kazakhstan using the formula below:

$$P = \left(\frac{F}{N} \right) \times 100$$

Where:

P = Percentage of participants who selected a specific response

F = Frequency of the particular response (the number of participants who chose that option)

N = Total number of respondents (the total number of participants who answered the question)

The qualitative data of the open-ended questions were coded and thematically analyzed to identify recurring themes and insights related to the challenges and benefits of media literacy integration.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

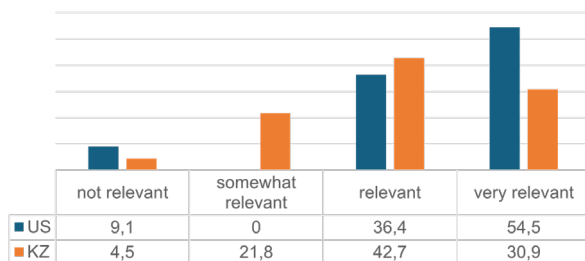
This section presents a comparative analysis of survey responses obtained from language educators in the United States and Kazakhstan, explicitly focusing on integrating media literacy into university-level language education. The study will examine three primary areas: the perceived relevance of media literacy, effective integration strategies, and the challenges associated with implementation.

Question 1 asked educators about the relevance of integrating media literacy into the language learning curriculum. The survey revealed that the responses across various questions indicate that U.S. educators consider media literacy highly relevant. 30.9% of Kazakhstani educators rated media literacy as "very relevant," while 63.6% rated it as "relevant." This shows a strong consensus on the importance of media literacy

in language education, with only a small percentage of educators viewing it as less relevant.

Both US and Kazakhstani educators recognize the importance of media literacy, though Kazakhstan's emphasis reflects a slightly more cautious yet growing appreciation of its relevance. The broader context in the U.S., where media literacy has been integrated for longer, contributes to the more ingrained perception of its critical role (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Relevance of Media Literacy Education for Adult Language Learners

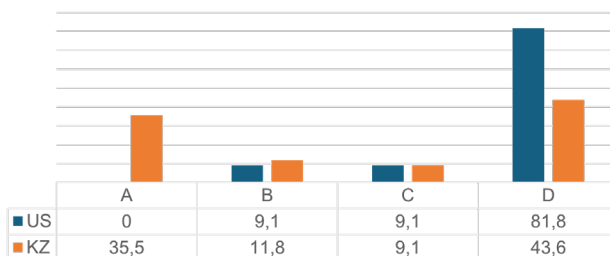


Source: compiled by the authors

Question 2 asked participants to define media literacy in the context of language learning among the following options:

- a) the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media in various forms
- b) understanding how media influences opinions and behaviors
- c) the skills to critically engage with media content
- d) all of the above

Figure 2. Definition of media literacy in the context of language learning



Source: compiled by the authors

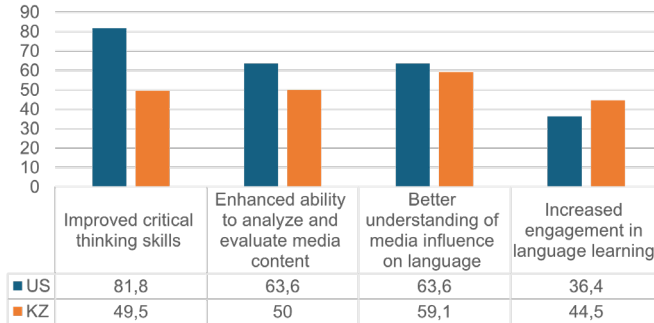
In response to **Question 3**, U.S. educators expect the following primary learning outcomes from integrating media literacy: 81.8% anticipate improved critical thinking skills, 63.6% expect enhanced ability to analyze and evaluate media content, another 63.6% foresee a better understanding of media influence on language and communication, and 36.4% anticipate increased engagement and motivation in language learning.

The survey data did not explicitly outline the expected learning outcomes reported by Kazakhstan educators. However, the high percentage of them recognizing the relevance

of media literacy implies similar expectations for enhancing critical thinking, media analysis, and language skills.

Both groups anticipate that media literacy will enhance critical thinking and media analysis. However, educators in the U.S. tend to prioritize its impact on increasing student engagement and understanding of media's influence on communication. This contrast stems from the extended history of integrating media literacy in the U.S., where educators have had more opportunities to observe these outcomes in action (Figure 3).

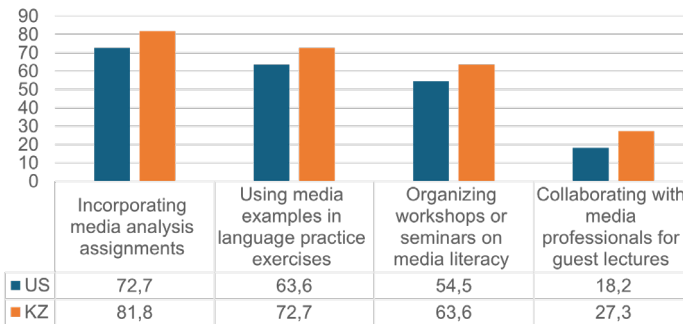
Figure 3. Expected Learning Outcomes from Integrating Media Literacy



Source: compiled by the authors

Question 4 requested the identification of effective strategies for integrating media literacy. Educators in both countries have pinpointed similar strategies for integrating media literacy into language curricula, although the emphasized specific methods vary (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Effective Strategies for Introducing Media Literacy



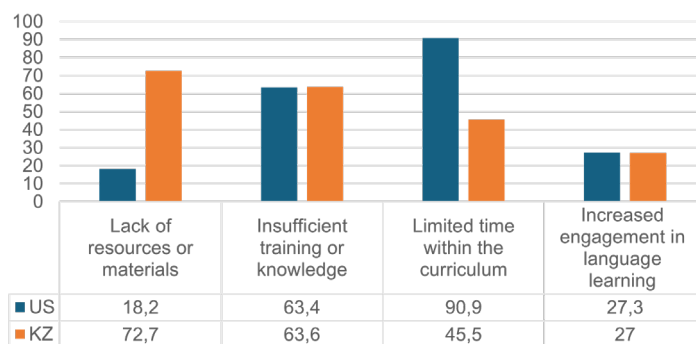
Source: compiled by the authors

U.S. educators frequently advocate the implementation of media analysis assignments (72.7%) and the integration of media examples in language practice exercises (63.6%) as their most commonly recommended strategies. Moreover, there is noteworthy backing for arranging workshops or seminars on media literacy (54.5%). These findings indicate a proclivity toward hands-on, pragmatic methodologies that enable students to interact with media content directly.

Kazakhstani educators have a strong preference for including media analysis assignments (81.8%) and using media examples in language practice exercises (72.7%), which closely aligns with the preferences of U.S. educators. However, a higher percentage of Kazakhstani educators (63.6%) consider workshops or seminars on media literacy as an effective strategy, indicating a greater perceived need for formalized, structured learning opportunities around media literacy. Additionally, more Kazakhstani educators (27.3%) favor collaborating with media professionals for guest lectures compared to their U.S. counterparts (18.2%), reflecting a potential need for external expertise in media literacy.

Question 5 asked about the challenges in integrating media literacy. The challenges identified by educators in both countries highlight distinct barriers based on their educational contexts.

Figure 5. Challenges in Integrating Media Literacy



Source: compiled by the authors

For educators in the U.S., the primary challenge cited is the limited time within the curriculum (90.9%), which indicates that existing curricular demands leave little room for additional content, such as media literacy. Insufficient training or knowledge (63.6%) is also a significant concern, suggesting that while media literacy is valued, educators feel unprepared to teach it effectively. A smaller proportion of educators mention a lack of resources or materials (18.2%) as a challenge, reflecting a relatively well-resourced educational environment.

In contrast, educators in Kazakhstan have identified a need for more resources or materials (72.7%) as the most pressing challenge. This underscores the need for greater access to media literacy resources. Insufficient training or knowledge (63.6%) is also a concern, highlighting the need for professional development in media literacy in both countries. Limited time within the curriculum (45.5%) is considered a challenge. Still, it is less of a barrier in Kazakhstan than in the U.S., possibly due to differences in curriculum structure or flexibility.

For the "other(s)" option in Question 5, participants considered including the following potential challenges that educators might face, which are not covered by the suggested options:

- resistance to change
- cultural sensitivity issues
- lack of administrative support
- overcrowded curriculum
- difficulty in assessing media literacy skills
- student digital literacy levels
- institutional policy constraints
- limited access to technology
- language barriers
- time-intensive preparation.

This analysis reveals commonalities and differences in how U.S. and Kazakhstani educators integrate media literacy into language education. Both groups recognize its importance and agree on effective strategies, but they face different challenges based on their specific educational contexts. U.S. educators are primarily constrained by time, while Kazakhstani educators are more concerned with resource availability and the need for structured support. These findings suggest that tailored approaches are necessary for each country's language instructors' needs, ensuring that media literacy can be effectively integrated into language curricula.

Next, we invited instructors to participate in an interview as part of this study. Sixteen Kazakh language instructors and two U.S. instructors agreed to join the interview. This interview aimed to gain deeper insights into their experiences and perspectives on integrating media literacy into language education at the university level. We (interviewers) were particularly interested in understanding the long-term impacts on language learning outcomes, exploring how media literacy can enhance students' ability to contribute to sustainable futures, and gathering practical examples from their teaching practice. Additionally, the interview focused on identifying effective strategies and support mechanisms to overcome challenges in implementing media literacy in the curriculum.

The interview **Question 1**: "How do you perceive the long-term impact of media literacy on language learning outcomes?" showed that specific instructors initially interpreted "media materials" to refer mainly to news. However, after explaining that media materials include various media products such as articles, social media posts, podcasts, videos, and other formats, the conversation progressed more smoothly and yielded more valuable insights.

After fully understanding the notion of "media materials", the instructors emphasized that they viewed media literacy as having a significant long-term impact on language learning outcomes. They pointed out that students skilled in media literacy develop more advanced language abilities and become critical thinkers navigating modern communication's complexities. This dual development of linguistic and analytical skills is crucial for students to excel in academic and real-world settings. A good example was Instructor 11's answer: *"Incorporating various media formats such as videos, audios, podcasts, and social media has a notable impact on language learning.... With exposure to diverse formats, students improve their language skills and become proficient in comprehending and producing language. This is essential in the digital age and enhances their ability to critically evaluate information, which is beneficial in all aspects of life."*

Similarly, Instructor 9 noted, *"I recognize that media literacy can affect students' communication skills. They learn to interpret and create content across different*

platforms, which helps them become more versatile communicators. This will benefit their careers in the long run, particularly where clear and effective communication is essential."

For **Question 2:** "Can integrating media literacy into language education enhance students' ability to contribute to sustainable futures? How?" the instructors agreed that integrating media literacy into language education significantly enhances students' ability to contribute to sustainable futures. They emphasized that media literacy equips students with the tools to critically engage with various media forms, making them more aware of global challenges such as climate change, social justice, and cultural diversity. This awareness empowers students to become active participants in creating solutions and advocating for sustainable practices, both locally and globally. For example, Instructor 1 claimed, *"When students practice assessing social media campaigns or environmental documentaries critically, they improve their language skills and become more informed citizens. They use their enhanced media literacy to advocate for sustainable practices and share accurate information within their communities, which is crucial for driving long-term change."*

Instructor 19 supported Instructor 1's position: *"When students engage with various media formats, like creating podcasts on climate change or analyzing viral videos on social justice, they develop a nuanced understanding of global issues. This knowledge fosters students' meaningful contributions to discussions about sustainability, both in academic settings and the broader community."*

For **Question 3:** "Can you share specific examples or experiences where integrating media literacy into your language teaching has empowered students to participate more actively in knowledge-sharing communities?" instructors shared that integrating media literacy empowers students in multiple ways. For example, Instructor 14 stated: *"I introduced a project where students analyzed news articles and social media posts on climate change. They had to present their findings and discuss the different narratives in these media formats. This exercise was incredibly impactful. It improved their language skills and motivated them to join online communities focused on environmental advocacy, where they actively participated and shared their insights."*

Instructor 9 stated, *"In one of my classes, I had students create video blogs (vlogs) on topics related to social justice. They shared these vlogs on the YouTube platform and engaged with viewers through comments. This experience empowered them to participate in broader discussions about these issues online and in class. They realized their voices could contribute to larger conversations, empowering them."*

For **Question 4:** "What strategies or support are essential to overcoming the challenges of integrating media literacy into the curriculum?" instructors identified several strategies and supports necessary for successful integration. They emphasized the importance of professional development opportunities covering all media materials. Additionally, they stressed the need for interdisciplinary collaboration between language and media studies departments to develop well-rounded curricula. Access to diverse media resources, flexibility in curriculum design, and ongoing dialogue with students to understand their interests were also highlighted as critical factors

for overcoming challenges. Instructor 17 explained this: *"Collaboration with other departments is essential to effectively integrate this broader range of media literacy into language education. For example, working with media studies, experts can help us design interdisciplinary courses covering language and media literacy. Additionally, having access to professional technology and media production tools, like video editing software, can greatly enhance the learning experience for students."*

The interview results reveal insightful perspectives on integrating media literacy into language education from U.S. and Kazakhstani language instructors, emphasizing the broader understanding of media materials. The interview results provided diverse viewpoints that align with the findings from the questionnaire, and together, they provide a comprehensive understanding of the research.

U.S. and Kazakhstani instructors have emphasized the significance of integrating media literacy into language education. They believe this integration significantly enhances students' ability to contribute to sustainable futures. According to them, media literacy equips students with the critical tools to navigate and engage with pollution, climate change, and social inequality. This empowers students to become informed and active participants in knowledge-sharing communities. The instructors have also highlighted specific examples where the integration of media literacy led to increased student engagement and active participation in broader discussions, both online and offline. They have shared successful projects, such as analyzing environmental news across different media formats and creating social justice-themed media content, which motivated students to contribute meaningfully to discussions on sustainability and social change.

Instructors in both countries have recognized the similar need to integrate media literacy into the curriculum. They have stressed the importance of professional development, interdisciplinary collaboration, and institutional support. This insight aligns with Kellner's mindset (2021), which states that providing educators with comprehensive training covering various media materials, access to diverse media resources, and flexible curricula to accommodate media literacy components is crucial.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the critical importance of media literacy in language education to foster inclusive knowledge societies. Media literacy equips students with essential critical thinking and communication skills, enabling them to engage effectively with the complexities of the digital age and contribute actively to knowledge-sharing communities. The findings reveal a marked disparity in progress between the United States and Kazakhstan. While the United States demonstrates a more advanced integration of media literacy, supported by institutional frameworks and resources, Kazakhstan remains in the nascent stages of adoption, hindered by resource limitations and insufficient training. Despite these challenges, educators in both countries recognize media literacy's transformative potential for enhancing educational outcomes and fostering societal equity.

To empower inclusive knowledge societies through integrating media literacy in university-level language education in Kazakhstan, the following actions are recommended:

- 1) Develop and implement national-level comprehensive professional development programs to enhance educators' competencies in integrating media literacy into language instruction.
- 2) Design flexible and innovative curricula incorporating media literacy components aligned with national educational standards to promote critical thinking, digital literacy, and language proficiency.
- 3) Prioritize investments in educational technologies and resources to ensure equitable access to media literacy tools for educators and students, particularly in remote, underserved regions.
- 4) Establish interdisciplinary collaborative frameworks between language education and media studies experts to foster interdisciplinary approaches and enhance the effectiveness of media literacy integration.
- 5) Advocate for including media literacy as a strategic priority within national education policies, ensuring sustained administrative support and financial resources for its implementation.
- 6) Initiate awareness campaigns to emphasize the importance of media literacy among educators, policymakers, and the broader public, fostering a collective commitment to its integration.

Future research should focus on evaluating the impact of these interventions, exploring contextually and culturally appropriate teaching methodologies, and investigating the broader societal benefits of media literacy integration. By addressing these recommendations, Kazakhstan can accelerate progress in embedding media literacy into language education, equipping students with the skills to navigate an interconnected, digital world while contributing meaningfully to sustainable and inclusive knowledge societies.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

PY: conceptualization, methodology, validation, formal analysis, investigation, data curation, writing - original draft preparation, writing - review and editing, supervision, project administration, funding acquisition; LF: validation, formal analysis, data curation, writing - review and editing; TO: conceptualization, formal analysis, resources; ZG: software, validation, investigation, resources, visualization. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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