

"Language for Peace"
Kazakhstan
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Sayatty.com

Summary

Project "Language for Peace" aims to facilitate and make the study of the Kazakh Cyrillic and Kazakh Latin languages more accessible to solve the acute conflict in Kazakhstan between the different ethnic groups.

Project Description

Kazakhstan is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in Central Asia, with a very substantial non-Kazakh population. Despite the fact that Kazakh is the official state language, the historically and geographically inherited Russian language holds its position as the main language of interethnic communication and is spoken by the vast majority of the country. The Kazakh government never took any active steps to purposefully displace the Russian language and implement the Kazakh language into the everyday lives of the population. Leaders of the Soviet Union were cultivating the idea of a single "Soviet" identity in the country, which was home to hundreds of different nationalities, and the Russian language was the only possible means of communication between different ethnic groups. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many countries faced an issue with national and language identity, and this issue is still visible in modern Kazakhstan. Only half of the population can fluently speak Kazakh in the country; the second half only speaks Russian, and this often leads to disagreements between the two groups. The situation started to get worse after 2014–2022, as Russia started a war on Ukraine, and the Kazakh government started to take action to be less dependent on Russia and develop the usage of the Kazakh language in Kazakhstan by switching to the original Latin alphabet that was used before Soviet times.

Due to the fact that the Kazakh and Russian languages belong to completely different language families (Slavic and Turkic), knowing one of the languages does not help with comprehension and understanding of the other one. Back in the USSR, the government nearly erased the history, culture, and language of the Kazakh people in order to fully assimilate ethnic Kazakhs. The effects of the USSR's political strategies can be felt even today, as now many people who are ethnically Kazakh and really want to learn the Kazakh language find it extremely difficult since there is very little information available on the internet on how to learn the Kazakh language.

Things are getting worse, as due to the war, more than 200 thousand Russian citizens immigrated to Kazakhstan after the full-scale war started in 2022¹. While it becomes nearly impossible to live in Kazakhstan without knowing the Kazakh language, you can't get a high-paid job, get documents, study in school or get into university. At the same time, it is extremely difficult to learn the Kazakh language due to the scarce availability of resources. These people are struggling immensely, as most of them immigrated from the hopelessness of the Russia-Ukraine war that they didn't start nor chose.

Project Products

Citizens of Kazakhstan who are fluent only in the Russian language are exposed to pressure from the government and community, while no one actually helps them to learn the language. We decided to interfere and did our best to help them learn the language. Our aim was to create something that will be used and that will have a broad audience. The best solution for that was to create an online tool that can be accessed everywhere, upgraded over time, and doesn't require huge investments. After gathering with a team and analyzing our options, we identified 3 main criteria for the future product: demand for the product, uniqueness of the product; and, of course, the importance of the product in the learning of the Kazakh language.

Sayatty.com - Educational Website

I and other volunteers created a fully responsive educational website that can be accessed on all platforms. The website acts like an educational platform and it has several goals:

- Help users learn the Kazakh language through hosting and navigation of different educational tools.

¹Tengrinews, https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/200-tyisyach-rossiyan-vyehali-kazahstan-3-mesyatsa-468136

- Host a Blog where my team worked on educational articles that helps users to learn the Kazakh language without any background knowledge.
- Serves as a platform where community members can be either a volunteer that helps with the project by helping with or creating content or a learner that can send feedback.
- Holds a Place that motivates readers to learn the Kazakh language through different tools.
- Describes the project's aim and future goals.

Kazakh Latin Language [Converter](#) - Website Tool

The converter has a detailed design, works on all platforms, and supports two-way translation and Kazakh speech recognition. We have created a unique converter that changes Kazakh Cyrillic writing into Kazakh Latin writing. Even for me, as a native Kazakh language speaker, it is hard to read sentences in the new alphabet. In the process of doing content in the Kazakh language, we understood that a converter that supports Kazakh Latin translation and at the same time has good functionality and design simply doesn't exist. That's why we decided to create it, as without a proper converter, learning the Kazakh Latin language becomes an extremely difficult objective.

Kazakh Latin Language Converter "[Sayatty](#)" - Google Extension

After receiving feedback from students who were using a website version of a converter, we understood that it was not comfortable for people who constantly needed a converter for writing in the Kazakh Latin language or for content creation purposes. So, we moved forward with the converter and decided to create it in the form of a Google extension. It supports all the functionality that a website converter has, but it is more accessible for people who are frequently working or studying through Google Chrome.

Automatic Kazakh Latin Language Translator "[LatynTranslate](#)" - Google Extension

During the process of creating content in the Kazakh language, we figured out that there still doesn't exist an automatic translator of Kazakh Latin language on web pages, so we decided to create one. It helps the readers to practice the Kazakh Latin language by reading web pages in the Kazakh language. The translator supports translation from Kazakh Cyrillic to Latin on all websites.

Challenges

There were many challenges with the project. The main difficulty was that the team I built only included two computer science students who were able to create IT solutions; me and Damir Zhumataev, a volunteer from KAIST University. We are both first-year students and didn't have much knowledge or experience in creating a professional website or Google Extension. We both had to take our first baby steps in the creation of web solutions in parallel to actually creating them. Another extreme challenge was that Kazakhstan is not well developed in the IT segment. We were unable to find any well-made open source projects or code that was aimed at learning the Kazakh language. That's why we were creating everything mostly from scratch, and it took much more time and effort compared to if we would have done it in any other language. In addition to that, most IT giants like "Google" do not provide service to creators from Kazakhstan in order to publish a Google extension or a website. That's why we were using billing addresses from the USA or Korea that my team had in order to pay for their services. In conclusion, it is extremely difficult for the software creators in Kazakhstan to create something even if it is free and aimed only to help citizens.

Changes

There were a few changes from the original plan. Firstly, I changed the implementation of our main goal. Instead of creating a large number of educational videos, after discussion, my team and I decided that it would be better to spend time and money on creating innovative IT tools that will be more helpful in learning the Kazakh language. After a discussion with the students that we recruited in order to test our learning articles and videos, we understood that IT solutions are much more in demand in Kazakhstan. There are only a small number of software programs that are aimed at learning the Kazakh language, as Kazakhstan has a lack of software engineers who can create quality products that people are willing to use.

Support

We received a good amount of support from the local business owners and students. "*Alma-Ata*" Women's Club" and "*KoreanMobile*" organizations provided different support in terms of funding and services, while students helped with the creation of the content in the Kazakh language and IT products. Moreover, we

were invited to participate in a start-up competition by "AstanaHub Digital Technopark" and the Kazakhstan government to receive additional funding this December. We believe that we will be able to receive additional funding from the government as our product is unique and it touches a very important part of the Kazakhstan community in order to make it a peaceful place.

Reflection

Peace is a very difficult term, and everyone defines it differently these days. For me, it is a condition where people live sustainably together, where everyone respects and understands each other no matter what background is behind them. It is clear that the majority of Kazakhstan's citizens are trying to return to their original language, which was destroyed by the Soviet Union. It is their right as an independent country to establish their own official language, and I, as a person who holds the nationality of Kazakh, fully support that decision. On the other hand, in Kazakhstan, more than 40% of the population of different ethnicities are not fluent in the Kazakh language, and every year their rights are abused. Moreover, there are not enough resources for them to learn it and live a peaceful life in Kazakhstan. With the help of my project, I am trying to assist people in learning the Kazakh language so they will encounter fewer barriers. Based on the feedback from citizens and based on my personal educational experience, it was clear that IT solutions are the fastest way to learn the language, especially when there is a lack of educational online content in the country. We finished all the products only in the middle of August, and in this short period of time, we were not able to attract a huge number of users as we started our marketing campaign only at the beginning of September. However, we already have more than 3000 visitors on the website, and I am sure that this number is only going to increase. The more important part is that in the process of doing a project, I found a lot of enthusiasts and volunteers who helped with the project and were ready to continue providing their help. In the long term, I am sure that the project will continue to develop as the conflict it targets is one of the most acute issues in Kazakhstan. As for now, we are continuing to work on the marketing of the project and we are also working on the mobile phone app translator that will work both on IOS and Android platforms. In conclusion, my team will continue working on the project. We see huge potential in solving the language barrier in Kazakhstan.

Personal Statement

"The key to peace is through understanding that can't be done without language". - Abylay Aitkazy