

MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION FOR INCREASED INTERETHNIC UNDERSTANDING IN KYRGYZSTAN

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ABSTRACT :

In this paper the two authors argue, that in Kyrgyzstan interethnic dialogue is still based on the conscience of the superiority of Russian culture and language, which was formed during Soviet times. After Kyrgyzstan gained independence in 1991, teaching of the Kyrgyz language and its culture become obligatory in all educational institutions. These measures could not however reverse the language and culture shift that had taken place during Soviet rule. We will show that increased interethnic dialogue can be achieved by introducing a new model of co-education, where children *experience* co-existence, rather than *learning* it as an element of knowledge.

Keywords: *Interethnic dialogue, language policy, education policy, multilingual education, Central Asia, transitional society.*

LINGUISTIC AND ETHNIC SEPARATION IN EDUCATION AND SOCIETY

The educational system in the Soviet Union emphasised the importance of competence in Russian by praising it as the language of Lenin and the language of internationalism. By the 1970s many non-native Russian speakers had adopted the belief that Russian is not merely an instrument for communication and professional advance, but that a certain beauty and truth is inherent in the Russian language. Many Kyrgyz were convinced that only with Russian competence would they be acceptable as complete human beings. The system of education with either Kyrgyz or Russian instruction schools was introduced early during the Soviet rule. Since the late 1950s parents have had a choice in the language of instruction for their children – however, socio-economic and ideological pressure to send children to Russian speaking schools was high and the number of Kyrgyz schools in the urban centres was limited (Kirkwood, 1991). With independence in 1991, the Kyrgyz government tried to turn the inferiority-superiority perception around by making Kyrgyz the only state language. Russian schools were turned into Kyrgyz schools, regardless of the staff's language competence and the teaching material available. The teaching of the Kyrgyz language and culture became obligatory in all educational institutions. By 1994 it had become clear that Russian remained the language for official communication and higher education. Language shift was not as easily achieved as initially thought. Although many Russian and Kyrgyz speakers now express an attitude of acceptance towards speakers of the other language, this often remains lip service paid to political correctness. Many Russians insist on their linguistic superiority and refuse to make any effort in Kyrgyz language acquisition. Many

Kyrgyz speakers either overemphasise their linguistic background or feel ashamed to use Kyrgyz in public. A number of bilinguals use either language, depending on the corresponding situation and attach less symbolic value to their linguistic behaviour.

The Soviet system of instruction in either Russian or Kyrgyz was never questioned by the newly independent Kyrgyz government. Children continued to go to separate schools, according to their ethnic backgrounds and the wishes of their parents. While the Russian schools continue to enjoy high prestige and are attended by children of different linguistic backgrounds, the Kyrgyz schools are attended exclusively by Kyrgyz children. Parents are often not aware that their Kyrgyz speaking children undergo a linguistic submersion shock in the all-Russian surroundings, and that their primary language Kyrgyz is neglected. Very often parents only realise this when their children no longer speak Kyrgyz. This may happen after just a few of years of Russian schooling. The Kyrgyz schools in turn usually have a reputation for providing education of a lesser quality, a legacy of Soviet rule, where teacher education in the rural, dominantly Kyrgyz speaking regions, was neglected. Kyrgyz educated students are clearly less privileged, when it comes to educational opportunities, due to their weaker Russian competence (Korth, 2001a). Hence, the division into Kyrgyz and Russian educated students, which was intended to provide mother-tongue education to Kyrgyz speakers, rather than facilitate the formation of a society divided along linguistic lines, whereby Russian speakers occupy the higher positions (Korth, 2001b). Many Kyrgyz educated students refer to their schooling in terms of *“I went to a Kyrgyz school, this is why I have problems at University”*, while Russian educated students say of themselves *“I find it easy, because I know Russian well”* (Korth, unpublished). This division hinders inter-lingual and interethnic communication. Although many bilingual speakers can function as intercultural interpreters, the socialisation of students in different language groups results not only in linguistic but also cultural differences, which are very often commented upon disrespectfully by the other group. Nevertheless, Russian-speaking Kyrgyz, who are taught in Kyrgyz groups for a certain period due to administrative constraints, often remember this experience as enriching. The educational system has however, not institutionalised education opportunities in Kyrgyz for all. The Kyrgyz teaching style is commonly said to be authoritative and does not encourage reflection, while many Kyrgyz speakers perceive the Russian teaching style as bold and not respectful of the teacher’s authority (Ibraeva, 2003). This is often explained by the cultural values of Kyrgyz, where questions are asked top-down, and where the right to speak is monopolised by the person of higher social status.

PEDAGOGICAL PROBLEMS

Alongside the structural separation of linguistic and ethnic groups in education, basic pedagogical views, which were developed and adopted during Soviet times and still live on in Kyrgyzstan today, impede intercultural and interethnic communication from the very beginning of schooling. These pedagogical views are based on a behaviourist worldview, which presupposes that knowledge is something absolute, obtained only from an authority (teacher, book, specialist). Personal experience, communication with persons on the same or a lower hierarchical level or common sense have no value for learning or personal development in such an educational theory. Together with the superiority-

inferiority perception of the languages, this makes it practically impossible for a Russian speaking person to learn Kyrgyz.

The authoritative pedagogy has found its shape in a thoroughly centralised school system in Kyrgyzstan. This system works in two ways: top down, by providing centralised teaching plans and control and thus producing dependent teaching staff, who in turn demand more detailed and centralised instructions from above. As a result everything from teaching content, through to teaching methods and motivation for learning, is centralised and reduced to a simple formula. This formula should be a “recipe” for teachers to teach what is true, independent of the class composition, region or other factors. At the same time it should be apt for control from above. The result is an abstract and hollow common denominator, which is not relevant to the individual learner or teacher, as it has nothing to do with their realities and does not correspond to their needs. Nevertheless, in practise the teachers do work with the teaching plans and methods provided by the state, either because they are prevented by strict control from above to vary their teaching, or because they are simply not capable of working independently, or because they do not have the necessary skills, literature or other sources of information to do so.

STEREOTYPICAL TEACHING CONTENTS

During Soviet times, typical Russian symbols, such as the bird tree, the church bell and Pushkin were the content of language training. A high number of Kyrgyz students in the eighth grade internalised these symbols as theirs, so that they found it natural to identify with blond and blue-eyed heroes (Kreindler, 1991). These symbols continue to be applied in Russian schools, while the Kyrgyz schools and Kyrgyz teachers in Russian schools now emphasise Kyrgyz traditions, language and folklore. In Kyrgyz classes, students may be asked to repeat the necessary materials in order to build a Yurta (the traditional felt house) or the teacher explains the differences between Kazakh and Kyrgyz shoe ornaments to teenagers (Korth, unpublished). Particularly in urban regions, where Kyrgyz children grow up in concrete buildings and wear tennis shoes, they may thus question the value and necessity of Kyrgyz, and the validity of the teachers’ message. Teachers respond in turn with reference to the moral obligation to know the language and culture of one’s ethnic background (see below). Russian children, who are presented with folkloristic contents, find little of relevance for their communicative needs. Thus they may consider Kyrgyz a language for people with an anachronistic lifestyle: a language with no direct value for urban life. A very common argument used to convince those students to learn Kyrgyz again is the moral obligation to know the titular language of the state they live in.

MOTIVATION - WHY WOULD SOMEONE WANT TO LEARN KYRGYZ?

Since Kyrgyz became the state language in 1991, it has implicitly been an obligation for every citizen of Kyrgyzstan to know the language. Kyrgyz became a compulsory subject in all educational institutions, regardless of the language of teaching.

Nevertheless it has not become a widely used means of communication, which is partly due to the inappropriate teaching methodology and lack of teaching material. One major problem, however, is the ambiguous and predominantly symbolic way in which the language is perceived: On the one hand it should serve as a state symbol, which unifies all citizens of the country, on the other hand it is clearly the language of one ethnic group – the Kyrgyz, thus being a separating factor. In this constellation the motivation for learning Kyrgyz is merely a moral obligation, whereby the ethnic Kyrgyz – being both citizens of Kyrgyzstan and members of the titular nation – are more obliged to know it than other citizens. Paradoxically this turns into an excuse for Russians and other minorities for not having to learn the language, by saying that not even all Kyrgyz know it.

Apart from propagating this patriotic obligation – which turns out to be an own goal – nothing substantial has been done to make Kyrgyz a widely used means of communication. In schools children learn by heart the new patriotic and intercultural doctrines, and during Kyrgyz lessons a teacher might explain the reasons for having to know Kyrgyz – in Russian!

This propagation of the language as a mere symbol alongside the Soviet inheritance of Kyrgyz as an inferior language prevents it from being perceived or used as something interesting and relevant for life, or as a real means of communication.

LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODOLOGY

In the late 1970s a new language learning approach, the communicative approach, was introduced into Western language teaching. This approach takes into account that language is more than a set of grammar rules and lexical items, but that it is a means of communication. The method was referred to as the question-answer method, when it was introduced in Soviet schools and is applied in language teaching in Kyrgyzstan today. Although teachers are convinced that this method encourages communication, they did not abandon the idea that specific questions are to trigger a prescribed answer. Hence dialogue often merely refers to a memorised form of verbal interaction. The answer to the question “What is the weather like?” does not necessarily say anything about the outside weather conditions. Questions thus only serve to verify if the students have learnt the answers. They do not stimulate reflection or verbal interaction. This teaching style is based on behaviourist approaches and the stimulus-response model, where teaching efforts equal conditioning children (Mitter, 1986; Grant, 1983; Kirkwood, 1991). Besides memorised answers and grammar rules, knowing songs and poems by heart was considered a sign of high oral language skills. Many students are able to utter complex sentences without understanding their meaning. Although the authors do not dismiss the value of poems and songs in language teaching, we consider the differentiation between communication and memorisation as crucial. A differentiation that, up to today, is not made in Kyrgyzstan. Consequently students are assigned language competence on the base of their reciting skills.

The fact that language is taught as an element of knowledge rather than a means of communication becomes especially apparent in Kyrgyz lessons for Russian classes: The teachers give their explanations and instructions exclusively in Russian. With this behaviour the children implicitly learn that one cannot really communicate in this language.

This approach had its legitimisation in the centralised Soviet educational system, where teachers had little room for experiments, but where their task was to condition the Soviet citizens. In young independent Kyrgyzstan these teaching approaches are still dominating the classroom, alternatives are desired, but due to a lack of commitment and know-how they are difficult to implement.

INTERETHNIC COMMUNICATION THROUGH MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION

In the project schools and kindergartens of the “Multilingual Education Project” children are taught in Russian *and* Kyrgyz, independent of their ethnic or linguistic background. There are two teachers in each class or group, one speaking only Kyrgyz, the other exclusively Russian. In order to have both languages used as real means of communication, the teachers are forbidden to use translation to make themselves understood. For most teachers working in Russian this is nothing new – non-Russian speaking children have always been taught in Russian without any help in their mother tongue. In addition, most teachers teaching in Russian do not know Kyrgyz, so there is no “danger” of them switching to give supposed help. For the teachers working in Kyrgyz this prohibition is an aid to overcoming psychological barriers: It prevents them from the urge to demonstrate that they also know Russian – which is still perceived as the language of prestige and education. And it helps them to speak in Kyrgyz to Russian-looking children, as appearance seems to be a crucial factor in the use of language. For example, nobody would address a European-looking person in Kyrgyz.

This organisation of classes and languages urges the teachers to use a more communicative approach to education. The project teachers have to use means of making themselves understood other than translation, for example pictures and gestures. The children are automatically more challenged, because the ones who are learning a second language have to find ways to understand, while the ones who are learning in the first language are included as mediators and mentors. This breaks up the traditional hierarchies and strengthens the children’s communication skills among each other, especially across ethnic borders, as well as their general communicative abilities. Teachers are forced to use a more child-oriented methodology and pedagogy, which strengthens their position as decision takers for method, teaching materials and curriculum. Since they are working out their own plans and teaching material, the teachers take as a starting point the children’s social environment, which makes the teaching much more suitable for them than traditional methods on the basis of a governmental program.

By this more constructivist approach to teaching and learning, teachers and children experience languages and cultures as natural and useful, and they can eventually become part of their identity.

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