

Language and Identity: The Situation in Kyrgyzstan and the Role of Pedagogy

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Dear Mr. Ekeus, Naken Kasievich, and participants,

After the interesting and informative speech of the High Commissioner, allow me to contribute my thoughts on language, identity and the role of pedagogy, which have evolved during my work in our project “Multilingual Education in Kyrgyzstan”.

The Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities have two major implications. First, they state that it is crucial for the identity of national minorities to have the possibility to learn their mother tongue during the educational process and recommend that part of their education should be taught in their mother tongue. Secondly, *the Hague Recommendations* say that at the same time, representatives of national minorities should have the opportunity to learn the State language properly in order to assure integration into the broader society.

It seems that these recommendations are already realised in Kyrgyzstan. There are schools that teach in Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Russian, Tajik, Turkish, German and other languages, and in all of these schools, the State language (Kyrgyz) and official language (Russian) are taught as compulsory subjects. Of course, there is the problem of minorities who do not live in discrete areas, but who are dispersed. In such cases this right may not be realised for every individual representative of a minority group because economic factors do not allow for a special school. One of the tasks of our round table is to work out realistic possibilities for mother-tongue education for such groups.

However, I would like to draw your attention to a few other things.

Why is it that so many Kyrgyz parents and parents of children of other ethnic backgrounds try to send their children to a school with Russian as language of instruction and accept the fact that their children will not develop high language skills in their mother tongue, or even forget it?

It is not because they do not consider knowledge of the mother tongue as important. On the contrary: it is no secret that ethnic Kyrgyz who do not know the Kyrgyz language feel ashamed and guilty. The same applies to representatives of other ethnic groups – it is considered a shame to not know one’s mother tongue. But the fact is that a good command of Russian is crucial in order to have access to full information (be it on TV, via the internet, or through other media), higher education, and interesting job opportunities, as well as connections to the economic region of the NIS.

This puts parents choosing a school for their children into a practically unsolvable dilemma: either they send their children to a school with mother-tongue instruction, thus ensuring the sound development of their children’s ethnic identity, but putting their educational opportunities and professional future at risk. Or they can choose to send their children to a Russian school, with the risk that their children will forget their mother tongue.

I have just now been talking about “Kyrgyz and other ethnic groups”. This might seem strange, because the topic of today’s event is language education for national minorities. Although demographically, the Kyrgyz are an ethnic majority in Kyrgyzstan, the Kyrgyz language is the State language of Kyrgyzstan. But the very fact that Kyrgyz parents face the above-mentioned dilemma when choosing schools for their children shows that psychologically, the Kyrgyz language is subordinate to Russian. There are many other signs that confirm this statement. For example, the fact that people always switch to Russian as soon as there is a single person who does not speak Kyrgyz. This does not, however, happen the other way around. Another example is the fact that this seminar is being held in Russian. In this sense, the Kyrgyz language can be compared to languages of national minorities, and most of what I am going to say about the teaching of Kyrgyz is also true for the teaching of minority languages.

With all of this in mind, it is clear that the young generation needs all languages: Russian, Kyrgyz and their mother tongues.

So where is the problem, if there are schools that use all the needed languages of instruction and both Russian and Kyrgyz are taught in all of these schools? Why is there an urge for everyone to get educated in a Russian school, if the language is taught in every school of the country?

Although Russian is being taught as a subject in schools where the language of instruction is Kyrgyz or another language, the results are not satisfying. In the schools that use another language of instruction than Russian, the children do not get enough language skills in order to communicate in Russian.

The same applies for the teaching of Kyrgyz language in Russian schools: although Kyrgyz is taught as a subject from the first class onward, Children speaking another language at home are usually not able to communicate in Kyrgyz after they finish their education. Worse yet, many children complain about Kyrgyz lessons, saying that they are boring and developing a very negative attitude towards both the language and the people – even if they are ethnic Kyrgyz themselves (This, of course) disturbs their learning process. For representatives of other ethnic groups this leads to a logic that in effect prevents them from learning the State language, Kyrgyz: The commonly heard argument is, “why should I learn Kyrgyz, if the Kyrgyz people do not know their own language?” In this situation it is very difficult to realise *the Hague Recommendation* on the “proper knowledge of the State language.

However, the problem lies not in the State’s lack of will to guarantee proper knowledge of all crucial languages. In practice, the opportunities are given and all of these languages are being taught. The problem has more of a psychological nature and lies in attitudes prevalent in society and in the pedagogy and methodology predominating in the schools.

I argue that because mother tongue denotes the language of ethnic belonging, and has a symbolic rather than a communicative function, creates these constraints. When I first came to Kyrgyzstan, an ethnic German told me that she didn’t know her mother tongue. For me, this was incomprehensible as in Western Europe “mother tongue” is the language a person knows best and usually communicates in. With this understanding of “mother tongue,” it is possible for one’s mother tongue to change throughout the course of one’s lifetime, In this context the statement “I do not know my mother tongue” is a paradox – it is simply impossible not to know one’s mother tongue. In Kyrgyzstan, “mother tongue” has a very different meaning: it is primarily a symbol of ethnic belonging and not a means of communication. It is this ethnic definition of “mother tongue” which creates psychological and pedagogical problems that make it difficult to resolve linguistic problems in Kyrgyzstan.

As a result of this ethnic definition, people who do not know their mother tongue are not considered full members of their respective ethnic group and feel ashamed, even though they are not at fault for not knowing it.

Also because of the ethnic definition of “mother tongue”, representatives of minority groups are prevented from learning the State language. As long as Kyrgyz is primarily considered to be the language of the ethnic Kyrgyz, it will not be compelling for a Russian person (for example) to learn this language since he does not identify with the Kyrgyz as an ethnic group. The legal recognition of Kyrgyz as the State language 14 years ago did not have much impact on this symbolic perception of Kyrgyz, even though Kyrgyz is being taught in all schools.

In addition, this symbolic perception of language is also reflected in the way languages are taught at school: For example, children learn Kyrgyz-language poems and songs, which talk about the life of the Kyrgyz people in “jurtas”. Although I do not deny the beauty and importance of poems, I would nevertheless like to stress that this kind of curriculum does not present a realistic picture of what the Kyrgyz language and culture are. Most Kyrgyz people no longer live in jurtas, but they are nevertheless real Kyrgyz people!

Another major part of the current school curriculum is concerned with grammar. The scientific approach that this assumes also does not have the required effect: If very young children were able to differentiate between subject, object, and predicate, they might understand that they are dealing with something complicated and serious, but they will not be able to communicate. As it is, however, they feel intellectually overcharged with something they cannot see the use at their age, and which they objectively do not need to know. This approach destroys their natural interest and curiosity in

language learning and they start to detest the language. This prevents them from ever being able to learn it.

What is lacking in the way languages are taught in Kyrgyzstan today is the real-life use of these languages, or *communication*.

In order to diffuse confusion about the meaning of “mother tongue,” I will adapt the *Hague Recommendations on Language Education Rights* as follows: “The right of any person to maintain their identity can only be fully realised if they acquire a proper knowledge of their first language (or the language they learn from their parents) and/or their mother tongue during the educational process.” This definition also reflects scientific findings that children can fully develop their overall linguistic skills only if at least part of their education takes place in the first language they acquire – even if it is not the language which corresponds to their ethnicity. Only if the language children speak at home is used in schooling situations can they perceive it as something useful and positive. Only then can they maintain a positive attitude towards the language, and only then can they develop a sound personal identity.

Allow me to summarise the main points of this paper thus far:

1. Because of economic pressure in Kyrgyzstan, many parents deem it more important for their children have a good command of Russian than of the language they speak at home.
2. Because the Russian language skills taught in non-Russian schools are not satisfactory, many parents attempt to send their children to a Russian school.
3. Parents accept that their children will have a very hard time being totally immersed in a new language at school. They also accept that the children might forget their first language and that it will be difficult for them do develop a sound personal identity.
4. Because the State language is perceived as the language of one ethnic group (i.e. the Kyrgyz), it is difficult for members of other ethnic groups to learn this language.
5. Schools in Kyrgyzstan do not provide enough time or methodology for children to learn to communicate in various languages.

In response to these issues, the “Multilingual Education Project” proposes a new approach to language and teaching in which Kyrgyz, Russian, Uzbek or any other language is considered *a means of communication* rather than a *symbol for ethnic belonging*. Toward this end, the project has introduced a new model of education in 9 kindergartens and 7 primary schools throughout the country. In these institutions, languages are not taught in the traditional way. Instead, two or three languages are used as languages of instruction and means of communication. This means that there are two or three educators or teachers working in one linguistically and ethnically mixed group. For example, one pedagogue speaks to a class of children only in Kyrgyz, while another speaks with them only in Russian. In Jalal-Abad, there is a trilingual kindergarten with a third educator talking to the same children only in Uzbek. In order for this to be effective, it is crucial, that the teaching employs interactive, child-centred methodology that creates real-life situations for communication. For children of this age (kindergarten and primary school), it is perfectly natural to acquire a new language through mere communication. After a few weeks, they already understand and start speaking automatically. In this way they acquire the second and third languages in the same way that they acquired their first language: by constantly hearing it and wanting to communicate in it.

This simple reorganisation of classes and languages has a vast impact on children’s attitude towards the languages: nobody has to explain to them that it is important to learn one or the other language. Every day, they experience the use of all of these languages and unconsciously make the necessary efforts to acquire them. Having undergone multilingual education, the children are equipped with all the languages which are crucial for them: the State language, which is crucial for State identity, Russian, which is important for gaining access to educational and professional opportunities, and their mother tongue spoken at home, which is crucial for their self-esteem and sound personal development.

In addition, these children are not only multilingual and able to communicate across ethnic borders. They also have better intercultural understanding and are more tolerant. Together with learning the languages, they also experience the different cultures and ethnic groups as being equally important and useful. This in turn has a positive impact on their attitude towards other ethnic groups.

The vision behind this project is to foster integration in Kyrgyzstan by fostering a living multilingualism and multiculturalism in schools and, in result, creating a future generation which is multilingual and has high intercultural skills. It aims to create a generation in which individuals perceive themselves as “Kyrgyzstani” in the first place, as well as representatives of one of this country’s ethnic groups. It envisions the education of generation will no longer perceive other ethnic groups as an unknown and suspicious threat because they do not understand each other, but will rather understand the rich linguistic and cultural resources of their country as a unique chance for enrichment.

During the next day and a half of this round table, we will discuss the possibilities for further development of the idea of multilingual education for national minorities will be discussed with representatives of the education system in Kyrgyzstan, with representatives of minority groups and with various organisations concerned with language, culture and integration.

I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to this very important event. First of all I would like to thank Mr. Rolf Ekeus, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, for the great honour of having him here and hearing his speech. I thank his team for their invaluable support. I am grateful to all representatives of government structures and international and local organisations for their concern for the topic and for coming here today, and to Deputy Alisher Akhmedovich Sabirov for his support. Finally, I thank Naken Kasievich Kasiev for the warm welcome to Osh and all of you for your attention.