The Role of Multilingual Education in the Process of Kazakhstani Identity Formation

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Abstract

In recent decades the problem of identity has attracted an increasing attention of many scholars who have variously described the nature and mechanisms of its formation. Modern Kazakhstan tends to establish an optimal balance between the rights of ethnic minority groups (and each citizen) to know, maintain and develop their own native culture and language as well as to provide the integration of their representatives into the Kazakhstani society as the equal state (Kazakh) language-speaking members. In this respect, the new approaches to the formation of the Kazakhstani identity have been developed to improve the citizens’ social, economic and cultural life in the country. In the meantime, along with the maintenance of national values and the development of spiritual culture of different ethnic groups, today Kazakhstan pays a special attention to the implementation of multilingual education as one of strategic steps in the formation of the state identity (State Programme 2011-2020). In this paper the role of multilingual education in the context of Kazakhstani identity formation is considered. Features of the developing language situation and its influence on the processes of language modernization in the sphere of education are described. How successful will this process be for multinational and multicultural Kazakhstan? Is it possible to develop a complete language educational policy strengthening the state language and maintaining a language variety at the same time? On the basis of results of sociological and sociolinguistic research, the attitudes of Kazakhstani citizens towards conducted reforms in the country are revealed.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of CY-ICER 2014.

Keywords: Multilingualism, language policy, identity, language situation, language modernization;

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1. Introduction

Socio-cultural, political, demographic and economic changes taking place in Kazakhstan, the current language situation cause a difficult mechanism of new Kazakhstani identity formation. According to the Kazakhstani sociologist Bekturganova (2004), the Kazakhs go through different ways of integration, since they were divided into two subnations, i.e. Russian-speaking (“Russified”) and the Kazakh-speaking. Their mentality and identity are different. The attempts to combine these two subnations into the one monolithic national community are still poorly implemented. The inflexibility of ethnic stereotypes and differences in behavior are shaped complex range of problems in today’s globalizing Kazakhstan. According to ASIP surveys for the period from 2000 to 2006, at least one third of Kazakhstan is still not understood, what is more important in Kazakh identity - ethnicity or citizenship. It was not easy to change an identity, to go to the free market and democracy, based on the European model of the “nation – state”. The attempts of the young state to combine the need for revival ethno-Kazakh identity with the need to create a new identity for the Kazakhstan-based general civil led to the appearance of the population’s problems associated with the functioning of ethnic identity (Bekturganova, 2013). Therefore, the analysis of active ethnolinguistic processes and language priorities allows the concepts concerning language policy and the language situation, which have been developed since independence to be better understood.

The purpose of the paper is to analyse the process of the introduction of multilingual education in Kazakhstan and to examine the attitudes of the Kazakhstani people towards the influence of Kazakh, Russian and English in the sociolinguistic space of the country.

To achieve this purpose the following research tasks have been formulated, which are addressed in turn in this paper:

- To define the role and a place of a language in the process of Kazakhstani identification formation;
- To monitor the process of multilingual education introduction in the Republic of Kazakhstan and to define whether the programme planned by the state is successful;
- To reveal the respondents’ attitudes toward the multilingual policy that is being implemented.

2. New aspects of Kazakhstani linguistic education

Educational development of the republic is guided by common strategic orientations of the education system modernization, including socio-cultural one, aimed at consolidation of the society, the growth of the country’s competitiveness, the formation of civic identity of representatives of different groups and national cultures as a basis for the development of a democratic society, the successful socialization of the individual.

Of course, all these processes put new challenges in front of Kazakhstan’s education system. Therefore, Kazakhstan’s educational environment is experiencing a period of significant transformation. With the adoption of the State Programme for the Development of Education in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2005-2010, the education sector has moved to a new stage of development and operation (State Programme, 2005), in which an important place is given to the integrated development of multilingual education.

Substantial reforms are being conducted for implementation of high-quality transition to trilingualism in higher education in Kazakhstan, in particular, the promotion of English in secondary education. At present there are six “Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools”, with an enrolment of 4000 students, 33 «Murgat» specialized schools where the study is conducted in three languages (Kazakh, Russian, English), with an enrolment of about 5,000 students. Since 2004, the experiment to study English form the second grade in the amount of 2 hours a week has been introduced in 32 schools. In 2011, its number reached 115 with the total contingent of over 51 thousand people. And more than 15,000 children are studying in Kazakh-Turkish lyceums, where teaching is conducted in four languages (Kazakh, Russian, English, Turkish) (Ospanova, 2012).

A steady trend of multilingual education formation that promotes both professional fulfilment and civic integration of personality, leads to the need for training personnel with multilingual education for higher school of Kazakhstan. According to the State Program of Education Development for 2011-2020, from 2011, English-
speaking teachers for secondary, technical and vocational education and higher education will be trained by an international scholarship “Bolashak” (State Education Development Programme, 2011). Kazakhstan universities began the transition to multilingualism on a pilot basis. Since September 1, 2012 in 32 high schools of the Republic of Kazakhstan special departments with a contingent of students of more than 5.5 million people were opened. One of the successive steps in solving the problems of language training of future specialists of Kazakhstan is to increase the credits in Kazakh, Russian and foreign languages in a series of basic subjects with changes to the standard curriculum.

Today, it is possible to say with certainty that given the logic of Kazakhstan’s development and international integration processes, multilingual education programmed are in a highly demand in Kazakhstani educational system. This can be explained by a high academic motivation of students and professionals due to the desire to increase their professional competence and competitiveness in the context of international integration of Kazakhstan.

3. Methodology

The methodological basis of the research is a complex analytical approach based on a combination of the critical discourse-analysis and sociolinguistic methods. Texts of articles from Kazakhstan electronic and printed periodicals for 2002–2012, texts of government programmed, legal acts and Internet resources served as the material source for the research.

Two focus groups were selected as participants of the research: (1) Kazakh repatriates (oralman) and (2) school and university students. The choice of these given categories of citizens was prompted by the following facts:

Surveying and interviewing were conducted between March 2011 and February 2013; there were 670 participants.

550 Kazakh repatriates taking part in the questioning lived in the cities of Astana and Almaty. The age range of the repatriates varied from 17 to 62 years old. Of those taking part in the questioning, 59.3% were women and 40.7% were men; 61.3% of respondents were students from higher educational institutions, and 22.2% were employees.

Interviewing was conducted with 100 repatriates and 70 school and university students of Astana, Akmola region and Almaty – Kazakhs by their ethnicity – of the age of 16 to 24 years. The interviews, which had an informal character, consisted of questions prepared in advance that were logically connected with each other. The conducted interview gave the opportunity to reveal valuable orientations, and the social perspectives of the Kazakhstani youth towards a Kazakhstan policy of multilingualism. As is known, youth refers to a category of the citizens characterized by active formation of their own social, ethnic, political and ideological representations.

The methodology of similar researches has allowed us to observe the process of the introduction of multilingual education to the Republic of Kazakhstan, and also the realization of the main problems of the functioning of the State Programme for the Development of Languages for 2011–2020.

4. Results

4.1. Attitudes of Kazakhs-repatriates towards development of Kazakh, Russian and English in social life

Immigrants who arrived in Kazakhstan, one way or another, face the peculiarities of the language situation and language policy in Kazakhstan. The main problem in this situation is the language barrier. We have distributed all respondents into 4 groups, based on the classification of the language group, to which participants refer themselves in the survey and individual interviews. The result showed two extreme categories: Kazakh-speaking and Russian-speaking (foreign language) people and two intermediate positions: bilinguals, who prefer to speak in Russian (or another language), and bilinguals, who prefer to speak Kazakh. At the next level of classification, we have added items such as willingness to engage in communication with speakers of other languages, opinion on the language policy of the state, the impact of language on ethno-linguistic identity, etc.

According to socio-cultural and linguistic orientation, the first type of repatriates is characterized by rejection,
alienation from the Russian linguistic and cultural space, demonstrated in communication (especially with those who speak Russian more often). Emotionalism and irrationality of language perception of “their” people suggests that the latter is a significant factor in shaping the ethnic identity, its broadcast channel and expression.

We refer to the second type of repatriates includes mainly those living in Kazakhstan for more than 5-6 years, the most assimilated socially, culturally and linguistically. Analysis of qualitative and quantitative parameters of language functioning in the linguistic community of repatriates indicates that this group, along with the Kazakh language, is committed to active learning of Russian and English.

The third type includes repatriates who knows both languages sufficiently and do not experience difficulties in adaptation. This type can be defined as consciously bicultural one. The most important feature of ethnolinguistic consciousness of this type, in our view, is that it does not involve the displacement of one language/culture through the development of the other. Native language and acquired language are not competing with each other within this type of personality in a situation of bilingualism. Gaining linguistic, social, cultural and other recognition, which is inevitable in active integration and socialization, is carried out differently among representatives of this type. For them, the goal of integration is obviously not to “become a Kazakh” (at the cost of knowledge of Kazakh and at the cost of lack of knowledge in Russian)/ “to be part of them” (by learning not only the language but also the values and patterns of social and cultural behavior). They try to perfect the knowledge of the new languages and cultures, without losing the original language and cultural competence.

The fourth type includes those who are those for whom the lack of knowledge of the native Kazakh language creates difficulties for full integration into society. The language competence in Kazakh is poorly expressed for this category of repatriates - more than half of the respondents understand, but cannot explain in Kazakh, or do not speak it at all. They prefer to communicate primarily in Russian than Kazakh among their friends and relatives or there is no such an alternative, and they use only Russian to establish communication contacts. They prefer to think mainly in Russian. They would like to improve their knowledge of Kazakh in the future, considering it as a mother tongue. However, there are respondents who have considered Russian as their native language, or have not decided on this point. Awareness of the special significance of language as an integrator of the ethnic group is much weaker for this group of returnees.

4.2. The attitude of Kazakhstani pupils and students towards the development of Kazakh, Russian and English in social and public life

To obtain a more complete picture, revealing a personal attitude of Kazakhstani people towards the functioning and prospects of development of Kazakh, Russian and English, we interviewed pupils and students of Kazakhstan (Kazakh nationality), asking each of them the following questions:

- How do you feel about the introduction of multilingual education in our country?
- In your opinion, what impact will the promotion of English have on the development of Kazakh and Russian?

The answers had the form of reasoning and revealed the subjective views of informants, their value orientations and attitudes. More than half of informants were in favour of the promotion of English (for them, they regard the introduction of the policy of multilingualism in the country as the promotion of English). For them, English is the language that contributes to the successful development of the state and personal growth. Respondents also point to the importance of English as a world language, emphasize the role of developed countries and the importance of science and technology in the promotion of English. Nevertheless, many of Kazakh-speaking students voiced their concerns on the issue. Development of English and Russian, along with Kazakh, in their opinion, could lead to a weakening of the position of Kazakh. They believe that firstly, it is necessary to study Kazakh, then one can proceed to the study of foreign languages.

The majority of respondents (54%) believe that Russian will retain its position, as it is the language of international communication. Some part (15%) of the respondents believes that English can replace Russian in the linguistic space of Kazakhstan in the future.

In general, almost all informants (91%) believe that English will strengthen its position in education of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Despite pessimistic forecasts of some respondents, though most of them are optimistic about the prospects of development of the Kazakh language, believing that the position of the state language will be
further strengthened in the future.

Thus, Kazakhstan advocate the development of multilingualism in the country: this is evidenced in the result of sociolinguistic research. The language policy of the state, which implies the development of multilingualism and multilingual education in Kazakhstan, finds support among young Kazakh youth.

5. Conclusion

Socio-cultural, political, demographic and economic changes are taking place in Kazakhstan, the current language situation condition on a difficult mechanism of formation of new Kazakh identity. The study of language preferences, attitudes toward the reforms and the changes taking place in society is an important component of the research that contribute to the functioning of the language policy of the country, particularly in the formation of Kazakh identity as a whole.

One of the key aspects of transformations taking place in Kazakhstan is the development of issues related to the implementation of polylingualism policy, according to which every citizen of Kazakhstan should know a minimum of three languages: Kazakh, Russian and English.

We selected two focus groups - Kazakh repatriates and Kazakh youth - as participants of the study. We believe that the study of the attitudes of these particular categories of citizens towards implementation of polylingualism in the country allows understanding the process of formation of the state and ethno-linguistic identification better.

The results of the research showed that the majority of respondents believe that the implementation of the state policy of multilingual education is the right policy. According to respondents, Russian in Kazakhstan is necessary to integrate and maintain relationships in the post-Soviet space, and English is important for the integration into the world economy. It becomes obvious that the growing popularity of English, due to its relevance in different areas of the country's citizens, is related to its value in terms of progress in society, achievement of a more prestigious position. At the same time the wide spread of English exacerbated the contradictions of modern language system, activated its dynamics.

For example, some respondents treat the wide spread of English ambiguously. They believe that this may adversely affect the development of other functioning languages, primarily the state (Kazakh) language and the languages of minorities. Undoubtedly, the manifestation of such a reaction is due to historical background and the current language situation in Kazakhstan. The on-going policy of Russification of the Soviet Union led in due time to the fact that the Russians were demographically a majority group and Russian was dominant in almost all spheres of life.

Thus, the strategies of civil society development implemented by the government policy (social, cultural, economic, linguistic, etc.) and ways of its realisation are one of the factors motivating the change of values and attitudes of citizens’ identity. Conducted interviews showed that today we are observing changes in the state and linguistic identity of people under the influence of socio-historical, globalization transformation of society, changing the traditional ideas, difficult process of state formation and ethnic identity.

References


