International Conference on Education and Educational Psychology (ICEEPSY 2012)

Formation of the language environment: A factor in the development of an individual’s culture in a multicultural society

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Abstract

Research has shown that language, which represents the accumulated experience of a particular nation’s people and encompasses the fullness and variety of their lives, is well grounded in their consciousness. In each new generation, an estimation of social values indicates the effectiveness of how particular ethnic groups learn the language attached to that group through the collective experience and knowledge of reality, vulgarity, or rejection by other people. Therefore, language has an impact on each individual’s experience, behavior, and level of civility. Thus, identification of areas that are key to the formation of a language becomes the primary factor in an individual’s cultural identity in a multicultural society. We study these areas in the context of the Kazakh language.

1. Introduction

Kazakhstan has changed dramatically in more than 20 years of its independence. The changes have occurred not only in the socio-economic, territorial, moral, ethical, and spiritual life but also in the culture of the people of various ethnicities who live in Kazakhstan. Following the concept of consolidating the position of the state

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language, President Nursultan Nazarbayev has played a major role in the development of civil society and its inherent culture (The doctrine of national unity in Kazakhstan). He has stressed that strengthening the position of Kazakh as the state language does not mean that the language should dominate those of other ethnic groups. For example in the U.S., people from all ethnic groups call themselves American and share the English language. In France, more than one hundred ethnic groups are united by the French language. This language policy is aimed at uniting all ethnic groups, while maintaining their cultures and languages.

According to Humboldt, language is one of the phenomena that reflect the character of a people (Humboldt, 1980). However, spiritual characteristics define the national identity of peoples’ languages. The Kazakh language holds the position of the official language simply because it is the language of the indigenous ethnic group that, like any ethnic group, should have its own territory and country. However, the status of a language in a region has no bearing on human thinking.

Human thinking is considered to be an intermental phenomenon that exists in the form of signs and meanings (or designations) (Zinchenko, 1996). Cultural differences in personality imply a historically and culturally conditioned education system (Bulletin of Moscow State University, 1988). In the last century, much work by researchers such as Leontiev, Zinchenko, and Vygotsky was devoted to consciousness. According to Leontiev, consciousness is a human activity that has three key components: the sensations, value, and meaning (Leontiev, 1975). The term “multicultural society” implies that ethnic designations are a set of signs related to stable features of culture, consciousness, and language, which refer to a historical community in a certain area that has common cultural personality traits and consciousness (Leontiev, 1993). The consciousness of the people of a nation, including their way of thinking, philosophy, science, art, and literature—everything that encompasses “the spirit of the people”—defines the outlook of the nation, which is reflected in language.

Many scientists have studied the national-cultural specificity of language awareness of both individuals and ethnic groups as a whole. Language is a means of cultural expression and also a component of culture and its individual and social consciousness (Kolshansky, 1975). By expressing the social consciousness in its entirety, the language accumulates people’s life experiences and exists as a type of “intermediate world,” located between the people and the surrounding objective world (Brief psychological dictionary, 1985). According to Steinthal, an individual has mental formations and complex ideas, which exist irrespective of the influence of others. Based on his theory of linguistics acting through the phenomena of individual psychology, Steinthal sought to understand the “laws of spiritual life” in various collective entities—including nations and political, social, and religious communities—and to establish links with the types of linguistic thinking and spiritual culture of the people of all nationalities (Tarlanov, 1993). In our multicultural society, the psychology of social consciousness plays an important role in ethnic relations. In particular, social psychology represents the interests of different social groups, including individuals’ emotional relationships with others or to different events in public life; it also indicates the prevalent social idea of the state language. As a whole, our social psychology is our mentality and acts as a storehouse of various mental properties, qualities, characteristics, and symptoms (Ferdinand, 1916).

The problem of developing a particular language presents a great problem for the state, people, and particularly scientific community. The state language presents a problem to any society, not just to Kazakhstan. Some psychologists have argued that the most significant human problems derive from the fact that important features of human behavior are rooted in the phenomena of the surface and deep structure of language (The language law of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2005). The formation of culture and social consciousness—from the birth of ideas to their public statement—is based on the social communication of an individual or a group. Let us consider the example of Israel. In the early 1950s, very few Israelis had mastered Hebrew because the country’s population was almost entirely composed of immigrants who had previously lived in Europe, Asia, and Africa. However, within 20–30 years, Hebrew was revived from a forgotten to a contemporary language, and it has now gained the status of state language. This was made possible by a very effective policy in Israel, whereby Hebrew was popularized as the mother tongue and a common property of all Israelis. In this situation, switching to Hebrew placed no psychological pressure on the people because psychological characteristics of all Israeli citizens were taken into consideration.

2. The present study
The present study primarily investigates how an individual thinks of him/herself in a particular socio-ethnic environment. By using a single questionnaire item—“In what language do you think?”—as the dependent variable, we considered independent variables such as age, region, education, and nationality. The psychological state of language environment, which expresses the culture of an individual in a society, has allowed us to explore a highlight of our common culture in a multicultural society with more than 130 ethnic groups, where each group has a subjective attitude in terms of its priorities with respect to its knowledge of the Kazakh language as the official language. In this regard, we formulated the basic question of ethnic psychology: What defines the need to master the Kazakh language?

The survey clarified that most people wanted to learn the Kazakh language. The strengthening of the position of the state language begins with the birth of today’s children and is strengthened by the learning of the public and native languages from kindergarten (Paul, 1880). People have formed a stereotype of the “prestige of the Kazakh language,” which clearly reflects in this study’s results.

This research demonstrates that in our society, people can rarely oppose the rules and regulations established by the dominant ethnic group and will show no contempt for the primary culture. First, the research indicates that all members of the various ethnic groups in a multicultural society fit into our community and promote harmony. One individual’s relationship with another as a subject with a single worldview and attitude is realized in cooperation. Interaction, in this case, is the controlling factor for self-esteem, level of education, intelligence, and behavior of the individual in society (Zharikbayev, 2002).

In the study, we interviewed a total of 1396 individuals (age range: 18–67 years) from all regions of Kazakhstan. The study used a multistage quota sampling method. The analysis considered the respondents’ ages (18–23, 24–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–60, 61 and over) and level of education (higher, secondary, incomplete secondary education, etc.). The factor of urbanization of settlements was not considered.

Figure 1. Responses to the question “In what language do you think?”

An analysis of the respondents’ answers to the survey question (Figure 1) shows that 41% of the respondents think in the Kazakh language. This implies that the country’s language situation has changed in recent years. The study of the Kazakh language has garnered increased interest with its growing demand in various spheres of social life.
Figure 2. Regional division of respondents who reported thinking in Kazakh

Among the people surveyed, 52.1% from the southern region, 48.4% from the eastern region, and 39.5% from the cities think in the Kazakh language. Further, 38.9% people from the central region, 29.3% from the northern region, and 26.0% in the western region think in the Kazakh language and also report thinking in the Russian language at the same time. The highest rate in the southern region suggests that most southerners are traditional ethnic Kazakh people, who are religious and committed to the traditional Kazakh culture. They revere to this day the centuries-old traditions, which in other regions are less respected.

The psychology of the ethnic groups differs according to their place of residence. In the case of Kazakhstan, we can point to geographical determinism, whereby the main determinant of social development is the geographical location. From the responses of different ethnic groups, we found that representatives of eastern nationalities have a desire to not only understand but also study Kazakh as the state language. This desire seems to arise from the fact that both the Kazakh language and the languages of these other nationalities have the same eastern Turkish roots (State program operation and development of languages for 2001–2010, Kazakhstan). The representatives of the Slavic nationalities comprise about one-third of the total population, and the desire to learn Kazakh as the state language prevails in those respondents. The proportion of other ethnicities was small because of their migration to different countries.

The education levels of the respondents to our survey question were as follows: 47.8% of the respondents had completed mid-level education, 45.2% had completed higher education in the humanities, 38.9% had completed secondary education, and 36.4% had completed higher technical education. Furthermore, 37.5% had not yet completed their higher education, while 18.8% had advanced degrees.

3. Conclusions

This study demonstrates the respondents’ desire to learn the Kazakh language; that is, to become bilingual or trilingual in a multicultural environment where a language is a measure of a person’s emotional intelligence. In this study, motivation to learn the state language defines the social significance of the individual and his individual peculiarities.

In this study of the status of language environment as an indicator of cultural identity in modern Kazakhstan, we have used a single questionnaire item as the dependent variable. The study suggests that over the past 20 years of independence, there has been a change in Kazakhstan with respect to the psychology of consciousness. The psychology of linguistics provides an indicator to the direction of integration of cultural identity, which in turn is a determinant of the next stage of the transformation process, as shown by the finding that 41.6% of the people
surveyed think in the Kazakh language. This confirms the relationship between the culture of ethnic groups and a psychological determinant of the general mentality in Kazakhstan, which includes elements of the ordinary and theoretical consciousness of all of its citizens (Kozyrev, 2009).

In this case, we can say that a common culture of all ethnic groups represents a common national psychology based on a tradition that has been entrenched in the course of historical development. Further harmonious prosperity of the ethnic groups depends on the relevance and flexibility of their protective mechanisms (The concept of the language policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 1996). Individuals within a society can use all the available communication processes, while respecting cultural differences and showing empathy toward others. Consequently, linguistic processes within our society contribute to psychological knowledge and promote the relationship of language, sensory perception, thinking, and the unity of consciousness. This relationship emphasizes the social nature of individuals and defines language as a condition for the formation of self-identity in a multicultural society.

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