

TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN A MULTICULTURAL BILINGUAL SOCIETY

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Abstract

The cultural diversity presents certain problems when speaking about teaching of foreign languages due to peculiar demands of multiethnic plurilingual groups that a teacher faces in their everyday practice. The educational landscape formed by a range of cultures and religions require special training and approach to the whole system of teaching.

Our experience is based on teaching the Spanish language to bilingual groups presented by Russian and Tartar nationalities with numerous representatives of national minorities in the Republic of Tatarstan (Russia). These poliethnic groups not only differ in their nationality but also in religion what complicates the task of a teacher. The teacher of a foreign language is not only expected to increase awareness of students of their national and religious diversity but to take into account peculiarities of bilingual approach to learning languages.

Bilingual students in general are considered to have different from monolingual students mechanisms of learning foreign languages due to their specific mechanisms of code-changing and various social contexts that require code-changing.

Moreover, bilingual students in multiethnic communities show amazingly higher results in learning other foreign languages. Investigations prove that bilingual children that enter a community with a different from their mother tongue language adapt easier and in shorter time.

Another point to consider about bilingual students is their emotional intelligence diversity what reflects in a variety of linguistic resources used to express different emotional states.

Bilingualism in the Republic of Tatarstan (Russia) has a specific character. Bilingual children develop a balanced bilingualism in the first years of their life in case of poliethnic family. Upon entering a monolingual social space (nursery and primary school) their bilingualism tends to become social, marked by a social context that bilinguals have to deal with. Skills in one language may decline though the speakers acknowledge that they continue "switching" automatically from one language to another.

A teacher of a foreign language in this situation may come across various interferences that a bilingual student produces while learning a foreign language. These interferences are even more intensive when a teacher uses one of the mother tongues in order to explain some difficult points in the process of education. Enquiries showed that bilinguals allude to these explanations as possible reasons of the difficulties in studies. Moreover, the situation may be complicated by the fact that emotional component of the students' speech can be affected by the second mother tongue.

On the other side, bilingual students show better results in language skills and it takes them less time to acquire a good command of a foreign language. Bilingual students are better able to focus their attention on relevant information and ignore distractions. In case of adults, bilinguals are less predisposed to brain aging which helps them to acquire a foreign language with less efforts and disappointments.

In many ways, having a bilingual group of students is a challenge for a teacher of a foreign language and requires some specific technics and methods in order to deal with the difficulties and to take advantage of the benefits of teaching the bilinguals.

Keywords: Bilingualism, multiethnic society, national minorities, teaching foreign languages.

1 LINGUISTIC SITUATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF TATARSTAN

The Republic of Tatarstan is one of the dynamically developed regions of Russia, characterized by complex ethnic and linguistic situation. The region presents two majoritarian languages – Russian and Tartar (39,7 % and 53,2% of population respectively) and a number of minoritarian languages (Chuvash, Udmurtian, Mari, Bashkir, etc).

The main phenomena of linguistic interaction in the Republic of Tatarstan are diglossia and bilingualism. Diglossia is characterized as a simultaneous coexistence of two languages used in different functional contexts when one of them has a higher social status than another [1]. Bilingualism can be defined as a distributive use of two languages within one cultural community characterized by cultural pluralism.

Education in the Republic of Tatarstan is unilingual with obligatory learning of the Tartar language in secondary schools. Most of the Tartar-speaking communities use their mother tongue in every day communication though researches show that families prefer using the Russian language due to its active usage in social contexts [2].

Republic of Tatarstan has a multinational ethnic structure. This heterogeneity leads to distributive usage of Russian and Tartar as *linguae francae*, or the language of international communication inside a limited territory.

The unique linguistic situation conditions a variety of factors that influence significantly didactic and methodic challenges that a teacher of a foreign language faces in a multicultural audience.

1. Tartar-speaking students: usually bilingual on the level of free switching from one language to another, so called coordinative type of bilinguals
2. Bilinguals of subordinative type, students graduated from Russian-speaking schools where Tartar is taught as a separate subject, do not dominate mother tongue on a functional level
3. Russian-speaking students that learn Tartar as an obligatory subject, dominate comprehensive and elementary communicative usage of Tartar.[3]

In the present days Tatarstan is developing a new strategy for linguistic education that includes bilingual education aimed to teach communication in both languages despite relative level of competence, age and way of learning. Bilingual education in this case excludes teaching languages as separate disciplines, but involves learning in both of them.

2 PECULIARITIES OF TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN MULTICULTURAL SOCIETIES

Bilingual multicultural societies are characterized by specific intercultural situation.

In case of diglossia a bilingual has certain cultural vision formed on the basis of social, linguistic and life experience. Learning foreign languages in this situation performs some difficulties that if not supported by adequate methodological strategies can cause a number of difficulties.

Culture and language interaction is significant when a teacher develops methods and strategies of learning foreign languages, as national specifics is not absolutized but at the same time we face a situation of double national awareness. Bilinguals that live in poliethnic societies usually show more cultural flexibility and accept new culture with less rejection.

On the other hand, bilingual students possess different mechanisms of switching from one language to another. The automatic mechanisms involved in switching from one mother tongue to another can result inefficient in case of learning foreign languages or even make it more difficult.

An enquiry held on base of two language centres that included a test group (30 bilingual students of Spanish, TG) and a control group (30 monolingual Russian-speaking students of Spanish, CG) showed the following peculiarities:

1. Bilingual students face more difficulties in switching from their mother tongue to a foreign language (TG - 35%, CG – 23%)
2. Bilingual students perform better results in grammar use, acquiring new grammar structures, according to tests and personal observations of students. 45 % of bilingual students confirm having less problems in understanding grammar patterns and their further usage in speech (CG – 32%)
3. Bilingual students show high results in reading skills and comprehension tasks, which can be partly explained by extended use of contextual comprehension in everyday situations when students have to deal with communication problems caused by incomplete domination of one of the languages. Most frequently, bilingual students acknowledge having situations of incorrect

comprehension with elder monolingual relatives that force them to use contextual strategies of comprehension in order to solve this problematic communicative cases.

3 TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR MULTICULTURAL SOCIETIES

Teaching strategies for bilingual multicultural students can be centred around 3 main clusters:

1. Multicultural students must be taught taking into account their background, intercultural communication and linguistic interface.
2. Students must be given an opportunity to avoid choosing one of their mother tongue as priority language for communication with a teacher.
3. A teacher should be aware of possible interferences caused by interaction of mother tongues and cultures in the process of education.

Our experience shows that multicultural students usually have preferences in choosing one or another language in the process of education, especially when their academic background was not bilingual, or, in other words, when they had to choose one or another language as the priority language for education. Although nowadays bilingual education is becoming predominating in the Republic of Tatarstan [3] due to new Strategy of, practice confirms that many students of foreign languages continue choosing one priority language in the context of social bilingualism.

Mother tongue is not only natural communication means, but also a way of cognition, according to Sepire-Warf hypothesis. Learning of a foreign language is realised with the help of a mother tongue that offers a student a ready-to-use system of meanings for acquiring a new language. Due to this fact a student inevitably compares a foreign language with their mother tongue, notices and remarks phenomena that are similar in their language and a foreign language and usually ignores those that are different or not typical for it. Nevertheless, an adequate command of a foreign language can be achieved only when a student is aware of systemic differences between languages.

In case of bilingual students, the situation is complicated by the presence of two languages that can bear systemic differences, belong to different language families and usually cause interferences in the process of learning a foreign language. [4]

In case of Tartar-Russian bilingualism, these difficulties are conditioned by structural differences between languages, one of them belonging to Indo-European family of languages with predominating synthetic structures that express grammatical meanings, polysemy of affixes and free word order, another (Tartar) belonging to Turkic languages with agglutinative character of grammatical forms and rigid word order. These factors cause interferences that must be taken into account by a teacher of a foreign language.

Bilingual students experience a spontaneous impact of their mother tongues. 67 % of them confirm that they initially formulate an idea in one of their mother tongues, sometimes without switching to a priority language for education. That's why orientation on the priority language must be avoided as it can not contribute to conscious dominating of a foreign language.

One of the examples of such interferences can be observed while teaching unusual grammar patterns and structures. Russian speaking students of Spanish usually face great difficulties in using past tenses in speech, as Russian language does not have such a detailed structure of the past as the Spanish language has. Nevertheless, bilingual Tartar-Russian students show less difficulties in this area as one of their mother tongues possesses a system of tenses for the past that presents similarities with the grammatical meanings of the Spanish language. Up to 67 % of bilingual students found it easier to compare learned structures with their Tartar mother tongue and transfer familiar meanings to new speech patterns. This is also known as a case of transference that, in contrast to interference, can have a positive effect on the process of learning.

These considerations must lead us to the idea that a bilingual student with multicultural background should avoid situations when an explanation of some linguistic facts is given in one of their mother tongues. Moreover, the communicative approach that avoids using the mother tongues in teaching foreign languages also contributes to this strategy.

As has been noted above, a bilingual student shows better results in some areas of studies, such as reading comprehension, writing and integrative skills, which is confirmed by level tests in a TG in

comparison to a CG. In these groups we have implemented various technics that could have probably improved the results shown by the TG. Among them there are:

- Highly interactive classrooms with preferable use of the Spanish language in any case of problem-solving;
- Challenging tasks set in predictable, peaceful and tolerant environment;
- Transcultural texts included in learning process. This type of texts make easily recognized allusions to a familiar environment of a bilingual student without having to use any of mother tongues.
- Bilingual students are more predisposed to focus their attention on relevant information what usually give better results in written and oral comprehension. That's why any kind of analytical tasks can contribute to the final succeeding of a student.

Another point to concern is that bilingual students of the third and fourth age are supposed to be less predisposed to brain aging due to the fact that being bilingual may help slow our rate of cognitive decline. Empirically, bilingual students of that age seem to have better results in learning foreign languages, although this presumption needs further investigations and experiments.

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