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# **Practices of Submersion Education and Readiness of Teachers to Teach in a Culturally Diverse Classroom on the Case of Georgia<sup>1</sup>**

## **ABSTRACT**

In this article will be introduced the teaching practice and challenges for one of the most popular education programs in Georgia, the Submersion Bilingual Program. The practice of submersion bilingual education includes the learning and teaching process of linguistic majority and minority students together, in the same classroom environment, with the same curriculum in the majority language.

The existence of a submersion bilingual program in Georgia is conditioned by the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the country's population. The article is based on a qualitative research in which I studied the attitudes of teachers in submersion schools and their professional readiness to teach in a multilingual classroom. The research analyzes the difference between teachers' expectations towards minority and majority students and the impact of teachers' attitudes and preconceptions on the process of forming expectations towards ethnic students. The article below also highlights the challenges specific to submersion schools, the methodological knowledge and intercultural skills of teachers, and their practices for effective teaching in a different language environment. At the end of the article the author's conclusions and recommendations are provided which are based on the research findings in order to improve teaching practice.

**Keywords:** *Classroom environment, Multilingual, Expectations, Different language, Intercultural sensitivity*

## **1. Introduction**

Every child has the capacity to learn and develop. Having high expectations is especially important for the most vulnerable children, so that, they can achieve better outcomes. Some children need additional support during different learning experiences (VEYLDF, 2016). It is especially important to support students which live and study in diverse communities and schools. This article

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discusses the issue of minority students studying in majority schools on the example of Georgia.

Georgia is a multi-ethnic country with religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity. According to the 2014 census of Georgia, about 12% of the population represents different ethnic groups (Georgian National Department of Statistics, 2019). The most numerous are Armenian - and Azerbaijani-speaking populations. Teaching the Georgian language to ethnic minorities and ensuring quality education while preserving their native language and culture is one of the most important challenges in Georgian education policy.

This issue is directly related from the need of implementing bilingual teaching practices in Georgia. The issue of bilingual education has become more essential in Georgia in recent years, and therefore, approaches and strategies of state intervention are gradually changing. In order to promote state language teaching for ethnic minorities from 2004 to the present, various events were held, changes were made in this direction, both - the legislative framework and pilot schools were introduced and various bilingual/multilingual educational programs were implemented. Also, Georgia has a pluralistic approach to linguistic minorities: there are state-funded language minority schools, but in most non-Georgian language schools are provided the weak bilingual programs, for example: Teaching the state language as a second language (Tabatadze, 2010).

Currently, out of 2085 public schools operating in Georgia, 208 public schools are non-Georgian, mostly located in densely populated regions with ethnic minorities (Georgian National Department of Statistics, 2019). In addition to this program, in Georgian language schools, students of ethnic minorities study within the Georgian general education program and according to general observations, their number is increasing in different Georgian schools from year to year. This practice is called as submersion education instructed in the majority language, and it is one of the most common form of bilingual education (Baker, 2006/2010). The challenges of the implementation of submersion education in Georgia are the research topic of this paper. For a broader understanding of the issue, I consider the importance between providing short and comprehensive information about submersion education, its effectiveness, and the role of teachers in this program. Accordingly, in the next subsection, I briefly discuss the purpose and role of submersion bilingual teaching practice in terms of education and integration of language minority students. However, for the purpose of this article, I conducted a qualitative study, the results and findings will be given below in the paper.

### **1.1. Discussion on the effectiveness of submersion bilingual teaching practices**

As mentioned above, submersion is a form of educational practice in which minority students attend schools where the majority language is used as the language of instruction and the minority

language students learn with the majority students (Baker, 2006/2010).

The goal of submersion is to force students of immigrants or linguistic minorities to learn the language of the majority as quickly as possible (Baker, 2006/2010). This goal is related to the political goal, while linguistic assimilation is more profitable for the state, where the representatives of different language groups live. For example, linguistic diversity was often perceived as a threat to the unity of a country in the United States. Consequently, one language is associated with a unified system of values, attitudes, or goals (Baker, 2006/2010). In addition, one of the important factors contributing to submersion education can be considered the motivation of parents to make their children learn the language of the majority quickly.

This motivation is driven by the belief of immigrant parents that getting a quality education is only possible in the majority language and therefore, it is related to career advancement and social integration (Tago & Ots, 2010).

Different education researchers in the context of different countries study the results of submersion education and the factors that prevent the student from simultaneously learning the language and getting a quality education. For example, we can review Collier's studies in this field. Collier (1995) presented a conceptual model of second language acquisition as part of a review of the effectiveness of a submersion learning program, consisting of four critical components: sociocultural, linguistic, academic, and cognitive processes, which are interrelated and complex phenomena. Analyzing this model, Collier concludes, that the development of each component separately, neglecting any other component or inconsistent principle, hinders the language acquisition process as a whole process and considers the role of the first, or native language, as an important basis of these processes of language development.

Cummins also examined the academic achievement of immigrant children in the United States and the records of their teachers and school psychologists concerning specific children who had to study in a submersion environment. Cummins in the study discusses the comments of teachers and psychologists about the cognitive-developmental delays and academic failure of immigrant children. In particular, there are cases, where teachers talk about a child's low level of development and learning failure, while the same teachers emphasize that these children do not have a problem communicating in English. Examining teachers' written assessments, Cummins found that teachers' expectations were low in terms of academic achievement of linguistic minorities (Cummins, 1981, 1984).

In the United States, within various bilingual programs, including submersion ones, students achieved certain language competencies and it was believed, that they could already master the subjects in English, which in turn led to students' academic failure (Baker, /2006/2010). Concerning this

issue, Cummins emphasized that second language learners have not yet achieved sufficient linguistic competence to be able to master the learning materials / programs in the second language. These findings of the study played an important role in the practice of language minority students' evaluation process in later years (Timmermans & Rubie-Devies, 2018).

Tago and Ots conducted a study with fourth-grader bilingual and monolingual children in Estonian primary schools. Bilingual children were taught in submersion programs, in a majority language in schools that differed from their native/spoken language. Research has shown that students whose language skills are high, achieve higher academic results and have higher cognitive skills than students whose language skills are not sufficiently developed (Tago & Ots, 2010). In general, researchers in bilingual education have come to the general conclusion, that the cognitive development and academic success of a bilingual person increases with the development of his or her level of proficiency in both languages (Baker, 2006/2010).

Valdes points out, that understanding the definition of academic language proficiency is important for school administrators and teachers in planning the learning process and approach and setting appropriate expectations for students. Valdes points out those teachers' expectations have a large impact on students' performance in terms of their capabilities. This last one in many cases even determines their learning effectiveness (Valdes, 2010). In an earlier study, Valdes identified and highlighted the factors, that prevent a student from mastering academic language at an appropriate level. These factors are relatively passive teaching strategies, students of mixed language competencies studying in one class and their joint work, overly simplified content of the subject, and use of simplified forms of language by teachers. It is important to note that teachers and the school, in general, are not to blame for this process, as the situation in the school system is largely due to the dominant structure in the society, which directly affects both teachers' expectations and students' perspectives (Trinidad, 2018).

The findings of the studies discussed above show, that many factors affect the cognitive and academic success of a language minority student, including School readiness with availability of resources, infrastructure and technology, teachers' expectations towards students, their beliefs and attitudes, relevant assessments, and teaching approaches. Each of these details are important so that the submersion program of bilingual education has certain effective results, both for the students of the linguistic minority and for the linguistic majority. The focus of this article is to study the teaching process in Georgian submersion schools, to understand the problems in submersion education classrooms and to determine the expectations of teachers, their attitudes towards linguistic minorities.

## 2. Research Methodology

Within the framework of the desk research, I have processed the statistical data obtained from the regional educational centers of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia and public schools. According to the data, the submersion education program is mainly implemented in two regions of Georgia: Kakheti and Kvemo Kartli. These two regions, along with the Georgian-speaking population, are mostly populated by Azerbaijani-speaking people. Consequently, in the Georgian schools of these two regions, among the Georgian-speaking students also learn Azerbaijani-speaking students. According to the statistics, there are a total of, exactly 119 Georgian schools in these two regions, where submersion education practice is provided and for the 2016-2020 academic year, the total number of non-Georgian speaking students in these schools was 38.48%. By 2020-2021, the total number of non-Georgian speaking students in Georgian schools has increased even more, up to 41.17%. Based on the results of the desk research, I selected four schools for the study, two of which are presented with a small number of students and two schools - with a large number of students.

To study of the issue, I chose a qualitative research method, namely as a focus group of teachers. And as research instrument, I developed and used a focus group protocol.

RQ1: How high are the expectations and how positive attitudes have the teachers towards non-Georgian speaking students in Georgian schools?

RQ2: Do teachers' expectations for Georgian-speaking and non-Georgian-speaking students differ?

RQ3: How high is the professional readiness to teach in a linguistically diverse classroom environment and what types of hindering factors exist for teaching?

The aim of the research is to identify teachers' expectations towards non-Georgian speaking students, also to assess their attitudes towards the linguistic and ethnic diversity in the classroom, and to study teachers' professional readiness to teach in a linguistically and culturally diverse environment.

Research objectives are: 1. To find out how high the expectations of teachers are towards non - Georgian-speaking students. 2. To compare whether these expectations differ from the expectations towards Georgian-speaking children. 2. To study the professional readiness of teachers, to teach effectively in a linguistically diverse classroom environment and school preparation to instruct in a logistically and technically arranged classroom.

A total of 4 focus groups were conducted. A total of 18 teachers participated in the focus groups (15 female and 3 male participants). Teachers were selected from all major subjects from the school curricula. The teachers participating in the study teach at the secondary education level. The study was conducted remotely to reduce the risks of the Covid-19 pandemic. A-Zoom platform was used for the focus group interview.

## 2.1 Analysis of research results and important findings

The focus groups with the teachers were interesting and interactive, which allowed to make important findings related to the research questions. The analysis and findings of the research results according to the research objectives are briefly presented below.

*The expectations of the teachers of the target schools towards the non-Georgian speaking students are lower in terms of learning. Teachers have much higher expectations towards Georgian-speaking students.* - Teachers at all three target schools openly state, that they have lower expectations for non-Georgian-speaking students than for Georgian-speaking students. Teachers explain their low expectations towards the non-Georgian speaking students through long experience and relationships with this group of linguistic minorities, particularly the Azerbaijani-speaking community. It is noteworthy that teachers strongly emphasize that their parents also have low expectations towards their children in terms of learning and getting a better education. They point out that learning the Georgian language only at a conversational level is the goal of parents and that is why they enroll them in Georgian schools.

"An Azerbaijani parent does not want to give the child a better education. It is enough for them to learn the Georgian language, so that they can use and communicate in the hospital or in the market ... In an everyday situation, when needed"- says one of the teachers.

Teachers' low expectations towards non-Georgian-speaking Azerbaijani students are reinforced by cultural differences and traditions. They highlight the low chances of continuing their further education for Azerbaijani girls and explain this by their early marriage traditions.

"Girls are not encouraged by their parents to study well. It is not their request for a girl to be educated. Especially, with higher education. They should get married soon. Sometimes girls are appointed even before leaving school. Neither the husband's family should bring a highly educated girl"- Tells one of the school teachers.

Interviews with teachers during focus groups showed that teachers try not to interfere and do not change parents' expectations. Moreover, according to the expectations of the parents, their expectations towards the students are low as well. Teachers prefer to distance themselves from the issue of raising motivation for students' learning, as they relate parents' attitudes towards girls' education traditions, and when it comes to get a quality education for boys, teachers say they get the education they need to run easy business relationship in the country. In addition to the reasons mentioned above, teachers point out, that their low expectations are also since a large number of non-Georgian students are not interested in getting higher education in Georgia and living here in general,

as they go to work in neighboring countries: Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Russia.

In this regard, it is very interesting to study the motivation of students, why they choose a Georgian language school even when some of them do not plan to continue their education and further life in Georgia, which may be the subject of my further, more extensive research. Contrary to the low expectations of teachers towards non-Georgian speaking students, the expectations towards Georgian-speaking students are much higher. Teachers explain their attitude by a relatively high involvement of Georgian-speaking parents in the educational process, also the interests of parents and their children go in line with each other: to continue students' education in higher educational institutions.

It should be noted, that in the regions where the target schools are located, the Georgian-speaking population lives in the neighborhood of the Azerbaijani-speaking population. Most of the Azerbaijani-speaking population does not speak the state language, or few of them speak it very poorly. Teachers especially emphasize the role of mothers in supporting students; they emphasize the fact that, unlike Georgian parents, Azerbaijani parents, especially mothers, do not have the opportunity to help their children because of not knowing the language of instruction.

Although, teachers are well aware that the increased motivation and interest of Georgian children in learning is related to the active involvement of their parents in the learning process. The study found, that teachers and the school administration did not apply any additional mechanisms to increase the involvement of non-Georgian-speaking parents in the educational process. They note that it is difficult to communicate with non-Georgian-speaking parents, and it would be helpful for everyone to have their courses for teaching the Georgian language, but the school itself does not consider offering the same courses.

As I found out, during the research, teachers do not know how much their expectations and expectations of parents and school administration could determine the students' expectations towards themselves, their responsibilities, self-confidence, and motivation for the learning process. The study showed that teachers do not give much importance to this and indicate only the low motivation of non-Georgian students to study due to their culture and traditions. The named problem is closely related to teachers' prejudices about the Azerbaijani-speaking community and their culture. They have low expectations of Azerbaijani students from the very beginning, as they have a pre-established belief, the family of an Azerbaijani girl will not continue their education in higher educational institutions. Also, Azerbaijani boys continue their family activities, which are mainly related to gardening and vegetable selling.

It is noteworthy, such attitudes towards the ethnic Azerbaijani community of teachers are

explained by the experience of the relationships, which teachers have with them, or know from others. Having similar attitudes and prejudices towards a particular community, culture, or ethnic group may indicate low intercultural competencies of teachers, resulting in lower expectations of teachers towards different cultures and language groups. The above-discussed level of intercultural sensitivity of teachers can be a significant hindering factor to the effective teaching process in a diverse classroom environment.

As the study clearly showed, low expectations of teachers towards non-Georgian speaking students are one of the important factors in their willingness to teach in a diverse classroom environment. However, in addition to these expectations, the quality and results of learning are also greatly influenced by the professional readiness of teachers, knowledge of teaching methods, and the maintenance of school infrastructure. Accordingly, the next important finding based on the research objectives is related to school preparation and teachers' readiness to teach in a diverse environment.

*As the study shows the professional readiness of teachers in schools with a submersion education program to teach in a diverse classroom environment is low. The target schools are characterized by unsupported infrastructure for teaching, poor teaching materials, and inaccessibility of technology* - Two of these four target schools have just been renovated, two schools are still very damaged and teachers and students have difficulty even creating basic learning conditions at the school, such as warmth, good lighting, and classroom equipment. Those two schools, which have been renovated for only a few months, were in the same conditions as the other schools with a completely disorganized and unsuitable teaching infrastructure. Teachers point out that schools have only limited access to technological materials such as computers, projectors, etc. They underline - there is a computer class in school, but computers are insufficient due to the number of students - only computer technology lessons are taught in the computer class, and other teachers rarely have access to the Internet and computers during the learning process.

However, teachers also underline the importance of technology in the teaching process, especially in languages and subject teaching, and pointed out-they often use their smartphones to show students any videos or pictures related to the lesson topic. Teachers themselves reflect on their approaches insufficient to integrate technologies into the learning process and agree the idea it would be very helpful in the submersion classes to have in each classroom a computer, projector, and high-speed Internet. An internet connection is also problematic for rural settlements and consequently for the schools located there.

My research has shown, the target schools are characterized by a lack of much-needed laboratories for science classes, as well as a lack of visual materials, posters, illustrations, or various



learning cards. For the positive evaluation of the teachers of this school, we must emphasize the next fact- they try to fill the lack with necessary teaching materials, buy materials at their own financial expense, or create, paint or sculpt educational resources with the help of students. They point out, without visual materials it is very difficult for non- Georgian students to understand the content of the lesson, to understand new words. However, they emphasize, the visual resources they create, are not enough to realize the materials thoroughly.

At the same time, the usage of visual materials are one of the methods which teachers apply in the teaching process, and they say, the next - it has a positive effect on learning in a linguistically diverse classroom, as the visuals make the issue more interesting and more perceptible for all students at all levels of learning. Teachers also pointed out, teaching in a linguistically diverse classroom is a challenge for them, as it is difficult to explain lesson material to children with different language proficiency levels in classroom so that, it is understandable and fascinating for every student.

"How can I be not aware of different teaching approaches? But there is a language barrier between students in my classroom. What should I do in this case? For example, I want to plan group work. It also takes a long time to explain to an Azerbaijani student and after they analyze what to do.

Meanwhile, the Georgian child loses interest and tries to make noise. I can understand him too, he/she's a child as well, and he/she's tired of these boring instructions. Sadly, I often cannot achieve the goal of the lesson at all, and I am forced to either stop the activity or change the purpose of the activity." -Shared me her experience of using the methods of one of the teachers.

Focus group interviews revealed that teachers themselves feel, they do not possess teaching methods in a linguistically diverse classroom properly, so the lesson does not become too simplistic and boring for Georgian-speaking children, while they try to explain the issue in simplified language to the Azerbaijani student. As the research showed, the teachers mainly use the method of adapting and simplifying the content of the lesson and at the same time use as language translators those Azerbaijani-speaking students who are relatively fluent in Georgian. When using the approach of involving language translators, teachers cannot control the quality of the material comprehension or the relevance of the content delivery. They point out, this is not an effective method, however, they consider and apply it as one of the alternative approaches in the existing learning environment.

It is noteworthy that teachers also use the pair working method. When using the method, teachers pair an Azerbaijanian-speaking student with a Georgian-speaking student to help the Azerbaijanian-speaking student in understanding. Working in pairs helps bringing together culturally diverse students and integrate linguistic minorities into the school environment. Teachers point out that the method of working in pairs is also rarely used, especially in the last two years, as pandemic

recommendations require keeping students at a distance from each other.

Research has shown the next result: teachers attended a variety of subject training for professional development, although they have never been offered training about teaching in a linguistically diverse classroom. However, they do not consider themselves incompetent to teach in a submersion education program school, they see this as a problem to be solved by the school administration, the Ministry of Education, or even Azerbaijani-speaking parents. Teachers think that the following activities will help them a lot in their teaching process and for their students in learning: the good arrangement of submersion education schools in terms of infrastructure and equipment (including the purchase of appropriate laboratories and other visual materials), providing additional compensatory lessons for Azerbaijani students in Georgian, increasing parental involvement, arranging libraries, where additional reading materials in Georgian will be available.

To summarize the results of the research, interviews with teachers showed that submersion schools do not have good technological equipment at this stage, which hinders the effective conduct of the learning process, while the readiness and knowledge of teachers to use effective methods for teaching in a multilingual classroom is low and insufficient. Based on the results of the research and the analysis of the relevant findings, in the article, I have proposed conclusions and several recommendations on key issues, which are addressed to the school administration, teachers, as well as the Ministry of Education.

### **3. Conclusion and Recommendations**

The aim of the current research was to study how high the expectations of teachers are towards non-Georgian-speaking students and whether these expectations differ from the expectations of Georgian-speaking children. The research question, which included teachers' expectations of language minority students, was answered as a part of the study. A qualitative method study of the issue showed that the expectations of teachers in submersion schools towards linguistic minorities are low, and it differs from the expectations towards linguistic majority students.

Teachers' low expectations of linguistic minorities are reinforced by prejudices against the culture of the ethnic Azerbaijani community, indicating teachers' low intercultural sensitivity. As studies and teaching practices show, teachers' expectations may correlate with students' academic success. Therefore, it is very important to plan appropriate measures in this direction. In particular, I would suggest to the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia to take into account the results of current research, as well as to plan and study the level of intercultural sensitivity of submersion school teachers and determine their beliefs and attitudes towards different cultures.

Based on the results of the research, teachers should be offered seminars focused on tolerance- and diversity-oriented pedagogic, which will aim to increase teachers' intercultural sensitivity and expectations towards linguistic minority students.

The involvement and support of the school administration will also be significant in this regard, as a tolerance-oriented pedagogical approach must be fully understood by the whole school community.

Based on the results of this study, I would recommend to teachers to search and share each other additional methodological resources and materials, as well as to get acquainted with the submersion-classroom teaching practices of other countries, which will allow them to see their approaches from another perspective and be able to flexibly change teaching strategies, share and try different teaching methods.

The second part of the research aim, which included to study the proper infrastructural and logistical support of schools and the professional readiness of teachers for the effective implementation of the submersion program can be considered answered through in-depth analysis and information gathering process. We can conclude that in one part of the surveyed schools, which has been renovated, various learning resources are partially available, however, in the other part - which is not newly renovated - learning resources, except for textbooks, aren't available. However, we can say on the example of all schools that the use of the Internet and technologies is problematic and limited in the school, which creates discomfort for teachers in the teaching process.

However, I should also mention here, my research had limits. Foremost, it was qualitative research in which I studied the issue in-depth, although it is important to increase the coverage area of the research. In line with the findings of the study, I consider it critical, schools implementing the submersion bilingual education program should be declared by the Ministry of Education as priority-schools in terms of infrastructural improvement, necessary equipment, and technology.

I believe that the implementation of this recommendation will make teaching in these schools more effective, which will be one of the supporting factors to increase the school engagement and motivation of both Georgian and non-Georgian students.

In response to the third research question, the professional readiness of teachers to teach in a linguistically diverse classroom is low, I think it is an essential indicator for the effective planning and implementation of the current process of submersion education in the regions of Georgia. I would suggest, in addition to tolerance-oriented pedagogical training, we also would offer them quality training and seminars to apply modern teaching methods and approaches in the diverse environment tailored to the needs of the students. I think, education is a versatile process, which also takes into

account the experience of other countries and requires the involvement of various actors in the field of education to implement it effectively.

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