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Multilanguage Strategies in Tertiary Education (Using the example of Georgia)

Abstract

This paper discusses the issues of multilingual education in Georgia using the example of teaching Georgian as a state language and English as a foreign language to the representatives of ethnic minorities of Azerbaijani and Armenian origin. The data are based on the findings of the project “Elaboration of Multilingual strategies for integration of ethnic minorities into society (using the example of Georgia)” carried out at Tbilisi State University.

Having explored the problems and challenges students of ethnic minorities face in Georgia, the article offers several recommendations.

Key words: *Language teaching, Multilingual strategies, integration of ethnic minorities into society.*

Introduction

As is well known, in order to have a good command of a language (whether it is a state, regional, foreign or a minority language), the policy employed must be based on certain principles in accordance with the state policy regarding the issue. Georgia, as a multi-ethnic and multilingual country, faces such a problem and therefore is interested in the integration of ethnic and language minorities into Society.

Since 2006 the provision of multilingual education has been one of the major challenges of the Language Policy in Georgia. Therefore, it can be claimed that the issues regarding multilingual education have already been recognized and the first steps have been made to identify and deal with them. However, it is clear that the issue has not been finally resolved.

Clearly, in non-Georgian schools the methodology of teaching both Georgian as a State Language and English as a foreign language needs to be enhanced and recommendations based on the research have to be implemented in schools as well as at the University level.

At the moment, although it can be stated that the Ministry of Education and Sciences has implemented a number of measures in terms of enhancement of multilingual education in schools, it is also vitally important to elaborate strategies and major directions regarding the tertiary stage of education.

As is known, The European Commission promotes language learning and linguistic diversity across Europe so as to improve basic language skills and due to this, enable citizens to communicate in two languages other than their mother tongue. This "Barcelona objective" was agreed in 2002 by the EU's heads of state and government.

The 2008 Communication "Multilingualism - an asset for Europe and a shared commitment" outlines the Commission's activities in this area.

Against the background of these decisions, the current situation in Georgia is as follows: representatives of national minorities are presented with an opportunity to enroll in Georgian Universities on the basis of the results of the testing in a general ability test taken in their own native language. After the exam the students take an intensive course in the Georgian language which should equip them with sufficient knowledge to continue studies at the University of their Choice in Georgia. Consequently, the Georgian language preparation educational program aims at providing the non-Georgian speaking students with communicative skills.

A trial program aiming at facilitating enrollment in Georgian Universities for national minorities (1 + 4) was adopted in 2010. This program played a considerable role in the process of integrating national minorities into society. However, during the six years of its implementation a number of issues arose, the description and analysis of which are crucial for enhancing the Program.

It is worth noting that the situation tends to be difficult regarding two of these issues - teaching Georgian as a state language to the students mentioned above and regarding teaching English as a foreign language. A project "Elaboration of Multilingual strategies for integration of ethnic minorities into society (using the example of Georgia)" was carried out at TSU in 2016 and was focused on revealing issues related to the learning and teaching of Georgian as a state language and English as a foreign language to such students. (Rusieshvili et al 2016a; Rusieshvili et al, 2016 b) As well as this, the analysis of the data and provision of recommendations embracing the challenges such students face were also provided. The project data were collected based on field research the aim of which was to explore initial, linguistic competences and the factors hampering the process of achieving the competence in the state language (Georgian) as well as the foreign language (English) of the non-Georgian speaking students applying to the BA of English Philology at TSU via the Program. As is known, TSU offers students the opportunity to learn Georgian as a state language and one or more international languages (most often, the choice falls on English). However, the scientific foundations of this approach as well as specific issues accompanying this process had not yet been studied. The questions on the questionnaire included questions aimed at revealing not only linguistic but also extra linguistic factors which enhance or hamper the origins of multilingual education in Georgia.

Based on the goals of the research, two main tasks were outlined:

1. Determination of the level of their competences in Georgian at the starting point of the Program and revealing the issues hampering their progress in this language
2. Determination of initial competences of the students in English at the moment of their start at the BA program of English Philology and revealing the reasons hampering achieving the desired standard.

In addition, one of the goals of the research was providing recommendations regarding the issue for schools, universities and the Ministry of Education of Georgia.

The participants of the project were 432 students learning Georgian on the original 6 year Program. It is also worth noting that not only students, but also 30 teachers involved in the program participated in the survey. The questions posed to the students and teachers were used as control tools for the students' self-assessment. In addition, the questionnaires included questions about the approaches, strategies and methodology regarding the issue of improving language competences.

The research included filling in the structured questionnaire by the students of the program and by the students learning at a BA program of English Philology. The questionnaire included questions about the communicative skills and knowledge of Georgian as well as the English language obtained at a school level and about the possible reasons behind a low level of competences in Georgian.

- a) Assessment of the knowledge in the Georgian and English languages, general aspects of learning and teaching;
- b) Providing the learning environment and resources;
- c) Qualification and professional development of the teachers involved in the Program;
- d) non-academic and integrating activities;
- e) Issues connected with the Program.

Results of the research

One of the major issues is the low level of State as well as the English languages at the point of enrolment at the University (A1 - A2) and the reasons for this, as pointed out, are low levels of teachers of both the

languages at schools, the lack of effective textbooks, the national academic plan and a resistant language environment in their region, village and town.

As is known, out-of-class activities are of major importance in the process of learning a second language. It is also worth mentioning that the language environment in the regions inhabited by non-Georgian speakers does not encourage enhancing competence in Georgian (and English) As expected, the teachers as well as the students pointed out that there is no social communication between the teachers and students outside of the classroom although both parties were positive about the availability of academic consultations (both individual as well as group) when needed.

On the other hand it was also obvious that Azerbaijani and Armenian students have difficulties integrating with Georgian students and the reason for this is, as indicated, a low level of knowledge of Georgian,

From this point of view, it would be advisable for the universities to plan more events in order to enhance integration of minorities in the Institution.

The research regarding the issue of learning the state and foreign (English) languages revealed the necessity for several important recommendation below:

1. In different universities the preparation programs in the Georgian language are designed differently – there is no common standard. It is necessary that the Ministry of Education determines officially the levels of Georgian language knowledge (according to the Common European Framework for Languages) and standardizes the outcomes for the 1-year preparation programs in the Georgian language.

2. It is necessary to develop strategies, methods and materials for teaching English to non-Georgian speaking students, taking into consideration the specific features of their native language.

3. It has been noted that the teachers of Georgian as a second language lack the necessary qualifications and experience: most of them are not aware of the newest methods and strategies. Therefore, it is necessary to arrange training sessions for the teachers of Georgian at schools and at higher education institutions both at the ministry and the university levels.

4. It is necessary to create guidelines for the multilingual teachers, which will help them to use contemporary methods and strategies in teaching. A special group of acting teachers and professors/researchers should be established to work on this Guidebook.

5. It is important to develop and modernize teacher professional development programs (strategies and methodology for teaching a second language) at the university level, in teacher education programs.

6. It is necessary to make the “universal courses” more diverse and to cater for the students’ needs: to implement different modules (at least 3) for different language levels (low, intermediate, high); the length of study to be determined according to the pre-test points to cover the appropriate module – by 4, 3 and 2 semesters for low, intermediate and high level students respectively.

7. It is desirable to create multilingual textbooks (English – Georgian - Armenian/Azeri languages) for school pupils and university students for different language levels.

8. It is necessary to diversify and enrich teaching resources with different themes and contents and with approaches aimed at developing social skills.

9. It is necessary to create academic support centers at the Faculty to provide cognitive and academic support in learning Georgian to not only non-Georgian speaking students who are citizens of Georgia, but also to foreign students, who study on the Georgian programs.

10. It is important as well that academic support centers coordinate the work of the English language teachers who have non-Georgian speaking students in their groups. These centers will host regular meetings of students and teachers, where they will share their suggestions, approaches and good practices.

11. To implement individual and group consultations within the preparatory program.

12. It is desirable to offer English language courses at the preparatory program, in particular for the students, who intend to continue their studies at the English Philology department.

13. Half of the students and the majority of professors think it is necessary to combine Azeri and Armenian speaking students, as they will have to communicate in Georgian or English, which will help them in learning both languages.

14. Solving language problems of non-Georgian speaking students is only one step to integrate them fully into the society. It is necessary that teachers promote joint out-of-class activities with and for students.

15. It is important to implement technology in the learning/teaching process – to provide full and equal access to the existing and newly designed electronic resources.

16. It is important to unite separate programs for different ethnic minority students and to implement a common “Program in the Georgian language”. It will enable grouping Armenian, Azerbaijani, Ossetian and Abkhazian students together. This will promote the process of integration of these students in the Georgian environment, as well as enhance intercultural education.

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