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Bilingualism in the educational environment of the Republic of Belarus[1]

Abstract

The article deals with the detailed description of the bilingualism in the educational system of Belarus. The author presents the reasons for unpopularity of the Belarusian language and reveals the cardinal changes of the Belarusian language policy, which took place after the country obtained its independence. The difficulties which the citizens faced after the introduction of the language policy of belarusization, have been described. The author highlights the contemporary language situation in the educational sphere and analyzes the representation of state languages in it claiming obvious disproportion in use of Russian and Belarusian.

Keywords: bilingualism, linguistic situation, the Russian language, the Belarusian language

The historical coexistence of the Russian and Belarusian languages in the territory of Belarus has led to the unique linguacultural situation, which is defined as closely related Russian-Belarusian bilingualism. The specificity of its appearance has been determined by the country's long stay in the structure of the USSR, where, alongside with the national languages, Russian was widely used as the main language of interethnic communication.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union Belarus became an independent state. The parliament of the republic proclaimed its independence on August 25, 1991. Prior to that, on January 26, 1990, when Belarus was still part of the USSR, Language law was passed according to which Belarusian was proclaimed to be the only official state language in the country.

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The law was a reaction to the situation that emerged in Belarus in the 1980s when the national language practically disappeared from the main spheres of people's lives – very few Belarusian schoolchildren studied in the native language. More than 95% of all scientific and fiction publications in the country were in Russian, there were no Belarusian films or television channels and only three of the Republic's fifteen theaters performed in Belarusian[2].

The new law was supposed to stimulate a much broader use of the Belarusian language thus enabling it to become the language of daily interaction of people. Foreseeing that the switch to the national language couldn't happen at once the Supreme Council of the Republic adopted an accommodative approach towards language acquisition in its Resolution, which determined that the implementation of the law should be gradual. It was expected that Belarusian would soon gain popularity and become the language of science, culture, and the media[3].

Understanding the significance of the educational system in the increase of the prestige of Belarusian and trying to maximize the scope of its use, on October 29, 1991 the government adopted the Law on Education, which supported the spread of the national language in the educational system of Belarus[4].

During 1990-1994 secondary schools experienced a large-scale switch to Belarusian. More than 75% of pupils came to be taught in the national language often without the consent of schoolchildren and their parents. The same situation was observed in kindergartens and universities.

These drastic changes led to serious problems – there weren't enough Belarusian-speaking subject teachers, as well as there was lack of material resources – a shortage of methodical literature and textbooks on subjects. The Ministry of Education made desperate attempts to consolidate Belarusian in the educational system by offering a ten-percent increase in salaries to encourage teachers to conduct their disciplines in Belarusian and facilitated the creation of new textbooks. However, this resulted in the decrease in the quality of education and a complete rejection of the national language by teenagers and young people[5].

The undertaken measures to introduce the Belarusian language into the educational environment and thus promoting it in the society were very forceful and painful for Belarusian citizens accustomed to using Russian in everyday

[2] Sanford, G. *Nation, State and Independence in Belarus «Contemporary Politics»,* volume 3, number 3, 1997, p. 236.

[3] Постановление Верховного Совета Республики Беларусь «О порядке введения в действие закона Республики Беларусь О языках в Республике Беларусь».

[4] «Об образовании» Закон Республики Беларусь.

[5] Бунос, А. В. *Моўная палітыка ў галіне народнай адукацыі (1990 – 2010 гг.)* «История, философия, политика, право: Научные труды преподавателей гуманитарных дисциплин», Вып. 2, 2012. С. 16-20.

communication, that's why this ill-conceived and unbalanced language policy didn't contribute to the popularization of Belarusian and caused negative attitude of citizens to their mother tongue, which was revealed in the survey conducted in 1993 throughout the republic. 60.2% of the respondents showed their support of the idea of proclaiming the Russian and Belarusian languages as state ones.

Taking into account other countries' negative historical experience of radical changes in the linguistic sphere, the growing dissatisfaction evident from the results of the survey and the escalation of the language conflict the authorities decided to hold a referendum on May 14, 1995, during which 88.3% of the participants voted for assigning the Russian language the status equal to Belarusian. So the referendum constitutionalized bilingualism in Belarus by designating both the Belarusian and Russian languages as the state languages of the Republic of Belarus.

But legal equality of languages is not always a sufficient condition for their actual balance. So despite the same legal status of Russian and Belarusian, the bilingualism in the territory of Belarus is unbalanced.

According to the census held in 2009 the vast majority of the respondents (70.2%) claimed Russian as the language of their daily communication, while Belarusian was marked in this role only by 3% of the population, predominantly by teachers of the Belarusian language and literature, philologists and representatives of creative intelligentsia. The survey also revealed that 53.2% of the respondents named Belarusian as their mother tongue[6]. The given data indicate that the Belarusian language has cultural and symbolic significance to the citizens of Belarus as it reflects their ethnicity and identity.

The dominant role of Russian in modern Belarusian society is explained by the fact that the vast majority of Belarusians, regardless of their ethnic origin, master it at an early age in natural linguistic environment, whereas Belarusian is studied at school as an academic subject[7].

Moreover, for some people the Belarusian language carries some of the negative associations as a language of «uneducated countrymen» and it is also coloured by the political opinions about the Belarusian language as a product of bourgeois nationalism[8], so its use in the public sphere is considered to be a political statement.

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[6] Перепись населения 2009 Режим доступа: http://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/bazy-dannyh/baza-dannyh-po-statistike-naseleniya/perepis-naseleniya-2009-goda/ [dostęp: 28.01.2020].

[7] Гринберг, С. А. *О коммуникативной витальности русского и белорусского языков в условиях билингвизма*, «Филологические науки (Научные доклады высшей школы)», 2014, № 3 (май), С. 32-40.

[8] Gapova E. *The Nation In Between, Or Why Intellectuals Do Things With Words: Over the Wall* «After the Fall: Post-Communist Cultures Through the East-West Gaze», Indiana Univ. Press, 2004.

The language imbalance of the state languages is clearly reflected in the modern educational system. According to the Law on Education parents or caretakers of children who start attending nursery or secondary school have the right to choose a language of their education.

Today 81% of Belarusian children study in Russian. The majority of schools, where schoolchildren are taught in Belarusian are located in rural areas, they usually aren't well-equipped and are thought to provide low-quality education. Their number has been steadily decreasing in recent years due to two significant reasons. Firstly, because of optimization or their closure due to low number of pupils, which is the result of the rural population decline. Secondly, due to the refusal of parents to send their children to Belarusian-language schools because of the absence of further opportunities to continue their education in Belarusian.

Despite the legal possibility of studying in the Belarusian language at all levels of the education system, in fact, it can be done only at the preschool and school levels, since there aren't any secondary specialized or higher institutions in the republic where the learning process is conducted in Belarusian.

To prove that let's consider the educational possibilities of the city of Grodno. There are 69 kindergartens. Only three of them – kindergartens № 45, 54 and 65 – have Belarusian-speaking groups. Among 41 secondary schools none provides education in the Belarusian language. Yet schools № 32 and № 34 have Belarusian-language classes, but still they aren't very popular and only few pupils – 41 and 20 correspondingly take advantage of this opportunity[9].

In 2016 students of the Grodno State Medical University made an attempt to organize Belarusian-language studies, however, they failed as there wasn't a sufficient number of students to form a group – only 6 applications were submitted.

The linguistic imbalance is also proved by applicants' choice between the Russian and Belarusian languages as a compulsory entrance exam. In 2019, according to the Republican Institution of Education, an examination in the Belarusian language was passed by 24908 applicants, in Russian – 66907. Applicants also have an opportunity to take exams in other subjects in Belarusian. However, last year in the Grodno region only 565 tests (3%) out of 18777 were passed in the national language.

In opinion of N. B. Mechkovskaya the mentioned figures definitely determine a prospective linguistic situation, which is unlikely to change in the nearest future. She claims that the knowledge of both state languages and their popularity

[9] Будзеніс, В. Г.*Сацыякультурная дэтэрмінацыя білінгвізму ў Рэспубліцы Беларусь канца XX – пачатку XXI ст*. «Веснік ГрДУ імя Я. Купалы. Сер. 1, Гісторыя і Археалогія. Філасофія. Паліталогія». Вып. 1 (271), Гродна, 2019, С.84-91.

by tomorrow's adult population depends on the degree of involvement of the Belarusian language in the educational system[10]

The steady decrease in Belarusian-speaking children testifies to the fact that there is no continuity of generations, which gave UNESCO grounds to add the Belarusian language to the Atlas of Endangered Languages in 2001, marking it with the symbol «potentially endangered language».[11]

V. I. Samarin thinks that the main reason for the decline in interest to the Belarusian language in the Belarusian society is explained by the lack of requirements for proficiency in both state languages at the level of legislation[12]. The Constitution requires fluency in both official languages from only from government officials. For other citizens not employed in this field, knowledge of both Russian and Belarusian isn't required. Moreover, Article 14 of the Law of the Republic of Belarus «On Citizenship» obliges everyone who wants to obtain the citizenship of Belarus to know only one of the state languages.[13]

To find out whether there is need to expand the use of Belarusian a survey has been carried out recently. Realizing the serious threat of the disappearance of their national language, 56% of citizens answered positively. Among those who supported the strengthening of its role in the society, 64% mentioned the need for its greater introduction into the educational system and science. A significant part of the respondents – 42.5% were in favor of increasing the use of the Belarusian language in the media and culture, 35% – in public administration. One in five respondents (20%) would like to expand the use of Belarusian in the sphere of service[14].

The results of the survey are quite optimistic – the citizens of Belarus do understand the importance of their national language and want to preserve it. It's obvious that the process of widening the spheres of its use is to start with the educational sphere, where the number of classes of the Belarusian language must be increased and start at the kindergarten.

The gradual acquaintance with the language should begin at the age of 2–3. It is important to use Belarusian in different types of children's activities

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[10] Мечковская, Н. Б. *Социальная лингвистика: Пособие для студентов гуманитарных вузов и учащихся лицеев,* Москва, 2000, 86 с.

[11] Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing / Editor: Stephen A. Wurm (2nd edition), UNESCO Publishing, 2001, p. 55.

[12] Самарын, В. І. *Да пытання аб забеспячэнні роўнасці дзяржаўных моў у Рэспубліцы Беларусь* «Веснік Канстытуцыйнага Суда Рэспублікі Беларусь : навуковае і інфармацыйна-прававое выданне», 2007, № 3, С. 67–74.

[13] О гражданстве: Закон Республики Беларусь

[14] На мове общается 3% населения, на трасянке – 49%. Все больше белорусов считают русский язык родным // TUT.BY. Режим доступа: https://news.tut.by/society/625621.html. [Дата доступа: 8.02.2019].

to promote receptive and reproductive bilingualism. Teaching to create independent statements in Belarusian begins at the age of 3–4 and must be based on the association «one person in a situation of communication – one language».

Teaching the Belarusian language to children is based on the principle of integrating the first (Russian) language, aiming at the practical mastery of the second (Belarusian) language. This allows to control the process of comparing languages, facilitates fair comparison and helps to avoid errors. Comparison allows a child to distinguish between the peculiarities of the Belarusian and Russian languages.

During the senior preschool age studying certain linguistic phenomena of the Belarusian language and comparing them with the Russian ones is introduced against the background of the formation of children's orientation in the language; with that the material in the Russian language should be superseded by that in the Belarusian language.

An important role in children's language learning is the development of a differentiated outlook enabling them to make appropriate decisions whether to use Belarusian or Russian in a variety of communicative situations.

Methods of teaching preschool children different verbal skills combine techniques applied in native and second language teaching. With the help of the former, the linguistic phenomena happening in both, the Belarusian and Russian languages are introduced. This is particularly important for teaching Belarusian vocabulary and pronunciation skills. The bigger the difference between Belarusian and Russian thematic vocabularies, phonetics, and grammar, the bigger the need to teach the second language by applying the communicative approach.

The receptive and reproductive nature of the closely related bilingualism allows for a wide use of entertaining language material in the Belarusian language (poems, riddles, songs etc.) in the teaching process. These texts provide examples of ambiguous words, synonyms and antonyms, the use of prefixes in word formation, peculiarities of pronunciation etc.

Many teachers introduce elements of Belarusian folk games and discuss the content of teaching materials exclusively in Belarusian. The methodology of teaching the Belarusian language is linked with the development of the national viewpoint among children. Therefore, the educational process is based on a linguacultural approach.

Due to the proximity of the two linguistic systems, the Russian speaker understands Belarusian relatively easily. Literary works in Belarusian create psychological conditions for discussions of the content of the studied material in the national language. Thus the aim of symmetrical teaching of the Belarusian and

Russian verbal heritage is to mobilize pupils' awareness of the separation between the two extremely close languages by encouraging children to discover unique characteristics of each.

As for secondary and higher education, the purpose of the current school system of Belarus is to educate children as completely balanced Belarusian--Russian bilinguals, stimulating their interest to literature and offering some subjects in the national language.

In conclusion we would like to mention that despite being officially enshrined in the Constitution Russian-Belarusian bilingualism is unbalanced as there is a clear disparity with the predominance of the Russian language. Belarusian functions an ethnic symbol of the country. Realizing the importance of their native language, the citizens of Belarus are in favor of expanding the use of the Belarusian language in all spheres of life. To achieve this aim, the government should reform educational system first and increase the number of classes of the Belarusian language and literature. Teaching Belarusian from an early age will contribute to the formation of bilingual outlook of children and establishment of a balanced bilingualism, which will certainly have only a positive impact on the development of our society.

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Dwujęzyczność w środowisku edukacyjnym Republiki Białoruś

Streszczenie

Artykuł dotyczy szczegółowego opisu dwujęzyczności w systemie edukacji na Białorusi. Autorka przedstawia przyczyny niepopularności języka białoruskiego i ujawnia kardynalne zmiany białoruskiej polityki językowej, które nastąpiły po uzyskaniu przez kraj niepodległości. Opisano trudności, z jakimi zmagali się obywatele po wprowadzeniu polityki językowej białorusizacji. Autorka podkreśla współczesną sytuację językową w sferze edukacyjnej i analizuje reprezentację języków państwowych w niej, twierdząc, że wykazuje oczywistą dysproporcję w użyciu języka rosyjskiego i białoruskiego.

Słowa kluczowe: dwujęzyczność, sytuacja językowa, język rosyjski, język białoruski