

Language policy at the micro-level: Challenges teachers face in the multilingual and multicultural classroom in Moscow

The present study looks at the micro-level language policy and how it is implemented in the state Moscow school with a high degree of ethnically diverse students. More specifically, we analyze the measures that the school administration takes as well as teachers' educational practices when it comes to immigrant children's linguistic and cultural integration into the Russian education system. On the one hand, the school has to stick to the official curriculum where the language of instruction is exclusively Russian, and on the other hand, it has to linguistically and culturally socialize and adapt students whose proficiency in Russian is either low or non-existent. Taking into account the fact that the vast majority of teachers of the Russian language and literature have not had any training on how to teach in culturally and linguistically diverse educational settings, the present research aims to identify the major challenges that teachers face working such conditions.

Keywords: language policy, education, identity

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Introduction

Over the last three decades Moscow has grown to be seen as a linguistically and ethnically diverse city (see also Fedorova and Baranova 2018). Today, it is home to a large number of immigrants, the vast majority of whom come from the former republics of the Soviet Union (Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Armenia, and Ukraine among others). At the same time (limited) knowledge of the Russian language (which is considered as the linguistic and cultural legacy of the Soviet Union) makes it possible for the immigrants to settle in Moscow (Koryakov, 2017). Insufficient knowledge of the Russian language, however, could potentially limit immigrants' economic opportunities and hinder their and their children's integration into the Russian society. As a consequence, many immigrant parents, in an attempt to improve their children's future career opportunities and/or provide them with basic education, enroll them into state schools where they have the chance not only to master the Russian language but, most importantly, obtain school diplomas.

However, the question is whether the Moscow schools are ready to accept children with poor command of Russian taking into account that the only language of instruction available is the state language - Russian. As a response to this challenge, the Moscow government proceeded to the implementation of new educational practices. A consequence of that was the appearance of schools with an ethnocultural (Georgian, Armenian, Greek etc.) component that were believed to tackle the problem of incoming children of immigrants with low (or no) proficiency in the Russian language in the 1990s and 2000s. The main aim of such schools was, on the one hand, to take the burden of teaching ethnic minority children where the teaching staff were either speakers of the respective minority language or were themselves members of the community, following the Russian curriculum (Zoumpalidis and Mazurova, 2020), while on the other hand, in the so-called 'ethnic' schools, children attended classes where their ethnic language, literature and other cultural practices (national dances, celebrations etc.) were taught (Arefiev, 2015). Nonetheless, after the 2010s the education policy of Moscow undergoes substantial changes. The new trend is targeted at the unification of the education system which resulted in the decline and the consequent closure of schools with an ethno-cultural component. In other words, the Moscow department of education, in an attempt to bring uniformity to the secondary education, eliminated schools where children belonging predominantly to one ethnic group studied, or rather, 'attached' these schools to other Russian ones but where the 'ethno-cultural component' was no longer present in any form.

In the present study, we investigate the language policy of the Moscow state secondary school with a high rate of children of different ethnic and cultural background (many of whom come from immigrant families) and whose fluency in Russian is either low or nonexistent. More specifically, we look at the educational practices of teachers in their attempt to facilitate immigrant children's smooth linguistic and cultural integration into the Russian education system. On the one hand, the school has to stick to the official curriculum where the language of instruction is exclusively Russian, and on the other hand, it has to linguistically/culturally socialize and adapt immigrant students. Taking into account the fact that the vast majority of teachers have not had any training on how to teach in a multilingual and multicultural classroom the present research aims to identify the major problems teachers face working under such conditions. In other words, we are interested in identifying the linguistic and pedagogical practices of teachers, their class organization skills by analyzing the challenges these teachers confront at different levels of the primary and secondary levels of education. We likewise propose measures that could be employed by the teachers and the school administration in order to make the teaching of the Russian language to immigrant children more effective and productive.

Theoretical considerations

The intensified processes of globalization as well as the increased mobility of population over the last two decades have contributed considerably to the formation of high linguistic and cultural diversity, or what Vertovec (2007) calls, superdiversity. However, as multiculturalism has become a norm in the society of the 21st century, the rights of the migrant population are not always safeguarded. In this regard, Castles (2009: 57) points out that migrants should be able to "participate as equals in all spheres of society, without being expected to give up their own culture, religion, and language, although usually with an expectation of conformity to certain key values". Additionally, multiculturalism implies "both willingness of the majority group to accept cultural difference and state action to secure equal rights for minorities" (Castles, 2009: 57). In order to secure equal rights, including language rights in education, it is necessary to resort to and examine the concept of language policy.

Language policy has been an influential field in the study of language planning, language in education, and language ideology as parts of the wider sociolinguistic inquiry. Spolsky (2009) identifies different domains ranging from supra-national organizations (e.g. the EU) to army, business, media, education, and family, in which language management occurs, and language

policy and its components (actual language practices, language ideology and language management) can be studied. In distinguishing these three components, Spolsky (2004: 5) notes:

(..) language practices – the habitual pattern of selecting among the varieties that make up its linguistic repertoire; its language beliefs or ideology – the beliefs about language and language use; and any specific efforts to modify or influence that practice by any kind of language intervention, planning or management.

The language policy adopted by the educational system is one of the most powerful forces in language model construction (see Schwartz, 2013). Here, the concept of language policy will be discussed at the micro-level, through the prism of a specific Moscow school administration and teachers' views on educational practices.

Another concept that will be relevant in the data analysis in the present paper is *motivation*. Motivation can be seen as a force that prompts a person to perform a certain action and helps him/her to maintain the continuation of that action (see Schrodt et al., 2000; Elliott and Dweck, 2005). Similarly, when it comes to education, Brophy (2004) defines motivation as a tendency to find meaningful and useful learning activities so as to make sense of the information that is available to a student, to relate this information to prior knowledge and to try to acquire the knowledge and skills of the activity. Motivation in the sphere of school education can be divided into external and internal. The former relates to educational activity that is supported by external circumstances (i.e. good marks, teacher's praise etc.), while the content of the subject studied is not the primary interest to the student. The latter type of motivation is associated with satisfying the need for cognition where the student genuinely enjoys the process of acquiring new knowledge and skills that directly stem from various learning activities both in and outside the classroom (see Kerssen-Griep, 2001; Brophy, 2004).

However, in conditions when children are equipped with limited linguistic resources it is rather difficult for the teacher to create conditions for the fostering of both external and internal motivation. According to Lemberger's (1997) study on bilingual pedagogy, the teachers in an attempt to solve similar dilemmas, tended to rely mostly on their own language ideology and experience in so far as they have never been given any special courses on bilingual instruction or training when it comes to teaching in an ethnically and linguistically diverse classroom (see also Conteh, 2007; De Palma, 2010).

Relatively little research has been conducted to date on the Russian teachers' views on the challenges stemming from working in a class with a large number of children of different ethno-

cultural and linguistic background, as well as teachers' reflections on and evaluations of language policy at the micro-level. The present study, therefore, addresses this knowledge gap in an attempt to provide answers to the daily dilemmas teachers face on how to teach under these conditions.

Methodology

In total fourteen teachers of the Russian language and literature took part in the study. The data come from semi-structured group (n=5) and individual (n=2) interviews. In total five hours and fourteen minutes of recordings of qualitative data were available for the analysis. All the teachers, with a varying degree of teaching experience, work in a Moscow school with a high number of immigrant children. The informants were selected on the basis of their professional specialization, i.e. the subjects that they taught: Russian language and literature, that are directly related to the development of reading, writing, speaking and comprehension skills in Russian. It is noteworthy that only two out of fourteen teachers have had special training to work with bilingual children in educational settings. All the interviews were conducted in June 2021, via the ZOOM online platform.

The interview guide consisted of questions that were targeted at eliciting information on teachers' experiences and their views on teaching practices in a multilingual and multicultural classroom as well as challenges they faced. All real names have been substituted by pseudonyms.

Results and Discussion

Migrants' relationship with classmates and teachers

All the teachers who took part in the interviews claim that there are almost no conflict-driven issues between the Russian children and migrants at school. There used to be some problems based on children's ethnic background around two decades ago, however, now, when Moscow is turning to a more complex multicultural society, it has practically become inconceivable to have such arguments on the grounds of ethnic origin, language, nationality, or religion. Moreover, as one of the interviewees reports, "in the new Moscovian neighbourhoods everyone is a newcomer. All

people are equal”. It should be stressed, however, that with a high number of incoming immigrants today, at least outside educational institutions, instances of discrimination are not uncommon.

Regrettably, the teachers who have been interviewed are reluctant to reveal their relationship with students. In most cases they stress that they do not have any issues or any specific attitude to migrant students. It can be true to a certain extent, nevertheless, it could be clear to the interviewers that teachers just cannot express their point of view explicitly, or simply they cannot (are not allowed to) speak out. It could be partially connected with a fear of being biased or saying something that would put the school in a negative light. Thus, it may be taken as their way of saving a positive face, according to the politeness theory. They try to support positive social values in interaction (see Spencer-Oatey, 2008).

“I have not had any problems with them”, “There are no stereotypes” - that is what teachers usually say. And there is a teacher who expressed an opinion of being biased towards migrants *before* teaching in Moscow, however, later her attitude underwent some transformation.

However, it must be true as well, the fact that there are no negative attitudes to migrant students or assumed stereotypes on the teachers’ part. The reason to assume this is that the informants also stress the fact that now there are a number of migrant teachers at school: they are either from the Russian national republics or come from ex-Soviet republics. They can celebrate such national holidays as Uraza-Bayram and Kurban-Bayram together, treat each other with sweets and national food, and it all happens in the atmosphere of respect, as the informants point out. It can be argued that this is credited to teachers of this school, in so far as they are the ones who create this atmosphere of mutual respect.

What is more important is that teachers raise the awareness of students in various ways. They show both students and their parents how multicultural their school has become. For instance, one of the interviewees reports that their school created a special book about nationalities and languages. Each student could contribute to this book by telling something about his/her culture and a local language. While another teacher claims that once they arranged a literature class which was out of the ordinary: students learnt by heart or read poems in their respective mother tongues, which made them really happy and proud of themselves. After all, they had an opportunity to express their identity, as well as to show that they know something — a language — which others do not. This shows that the grass-root initiatives of the teachers foster positive attitudes of students towards their identities, which has a positive effect on forming internal learning motivation.

Some teachers also highlight the fact that students often use their mother tongues in classes or during breaks. Very few teachers admit and discuss this point without being afraid of saying something 'wrong'. Others have different views on the matter: one teacher, for example, states that he does not approve of that: "We are in the Russian-speaking school, would you be so kind to speak Russian while you are here?". This particular example can also reveal the attitudes and language ideologies of the teacher himself who seems to rigidly follow the official state language policy.

Similarly, some teachers expressed the idea that migrants who speak their language at school tend to behave in a provocative manner, they can be loud and aggressive at times. "Kids' parents come to school to collect their kids, why should they hear that?".

Whereas other teachers claim that non-Russian-speaking students do not sound aggressive at all when speaking their mother tongue. Moreover, it could be the case that these teachers might be biased expressing this idea, just because the languages they are talking about belong to a different language group. They may sound different and unusual to teachers in fact, which they regard as aggression.

However, students can also use their mother tongue as a secret language or an anti-language (see Halliday, 1976) in order to prevent others from understanding them. We asked a teacher about their attitude to this. "If students are speaking their mother tongue in class to some of their classmates, I say that I feel uncomfortable and I don't understand what is going on. I ask them to speak their language when the class is over." This shows specific language management put in practice by the teacher. This could also be seen as a deviation from the established norms of language behaviour but also local language regulation based on the teacher's language ideologies ("I feel uncomfortable"). Another teacher reports the case when a migrant student tried to persuade another migrant student not to use their mother tongue in class. Unfortunately, the teacher did not elaborate on the reasons behind this behaviour. However, most teachers emphasize that most migrant students try quite hard to acquire the Russian language and make active attempts to integrate fully into the Russian society, and this could potentially be the explanation for this conscious language behaviour decisions on the students' part.

As to the relationship among classmates themselves, it varies considerably. It was reported that communication among boys only is easier compared to that between boys and girls. It means that Russian boys and migrant boys have regular contact with each other, whereas Russian girls and migrant boys or girls do not usually keep in touch. Moreover, some teachers are concerned with negative attitudes of some migrant boys towards Russian girls, whom these boys often

consider as “nothing” and that some of them “even would not sit at one desk with a Russian girl”. The reason for such attitudes of migrant boys is not clear and evokes serious concerns. Nevertheless, it could be assumed that it is partly due to girls’ behaviour. Teachers themselves admit that Muslim girls are quite reserved and shy, whereas some Russian girls are more open and outgoing. Consequently, that causes another issue: Muslim girls do not speak or communicate much in a class, or with classmates, especially if they do not speak Russian well (and they usually do not). Moreover, according to the interviewees, girls’ parents would prefer their daughters to speak their mother tongue and marry a Muslim man, “it is of crucial importance to them”, they state. It all determines their behaviour and this is reflected in their communication practices. It should be stressed here that in a modern, multiculturally complex society the issue of equality and tolerance, not only between different ethnic groups but also in relation to gender, is of paramount importance. In this regard, the school should also perform an additional role, not only follow the curriculum but be also engaged in equity pedagogy and educate students (and inform parents) to show respect towards the values of the majority culture, especially when it comes to gender equality.

A few teachers mentioned the instances of conflicts and even fights among migrants themselves; in particular, there are frequent arguments among Armenian and Azeri boys on the grounds of national issues, especially in light of the recent military conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Nagorny Karabakh region. Likewise, minor conflicts can be observed between Russians and migrant students, too. They are often connected with the language: “Learn Russian first” from Russian students, or “I am of non-Russian origin but I know Russian and study better than you do” from migrant students who are good at studying and do well in exams. Nonetheless, most teachers express an opinion that relationships among students more heavily rely on success in studying rather than on nationality.

Parents’ engagement in education

In general, according to the teachers, parents could be divided into two groups - indifferent parents and engaged parents.

Teachers mention the correlation between parents’ motivation and their children’s motivation to study better as well as to speak Russian more. Therefore, engaged parents have a positive impact on their children’s motivation in school.

It should be stressed that some teachers express great optimism about students who apply for the so-called ‘medical classes’ where they study chemistry and biology as the core subjects. These students seem to be by far the most motivated due to the fact that they already know what they are going to do in the future. They speak Russian more and try hard to understand difficult chemistry tasks (it is often problematic for them to get the meaning of what an examiner wants them to do in a certain exercise, because the wording can sometimes be incomprehensible for them). There is one instance reported when a girl made a decision to take the Russian language exam in the 10th grade instead of the 11th grade (and she passed it with a score of more than 80 out of 100) in order to have more time to prepare for her core subjects in the 11th grade. It is assumed that such outstanding results are achieved, to great extent, due to the substantial help of motivated parents.

There is also a sub-group of parents who seem to be involved in the process, because they come to school if they are asked to do that and they try to communicate with teachers, but regrettably, they fail due to the lack of the Russian language speaking skills. They usually tend to be shy and feel inferior. However, at least they pay attention. They could be the parents who send their children to extra “Russian as a foreign language” classes so that their children could acquire Russian and not feel ‘inferior’ in terms of the language proficiency in the future.

Finally, another group of parents seem to be indifferent to their children’s studying process. As some teachers assume “these parents have other priorities”. For instance, they pay more attention to work and their major aim could be to just send their children to school in order not to look after them much and make time for work. Also, the Russian language is not important to them, that is why they tend to speak their mother tongues with their offsprings at home.

Some of the so-called ‘indifferent parents’ may happen to be aggressive. They allegedly dictate their own terms to teachers regarding which subjects are important and which are useless to their children. They promote an individual approach for their children, and when it comes to the 11th grade and final exams, they ask for decent grades. Moreover, if teachers try to persuade migrant children to study Russian and take some extra classes, they say that “they already have a teacher”, or “they know everything and will deal with everything themselves”. As a result, the informants suppose that this is what their parents teach them in terms of how to behave and which responses to give.

Teachers also complain about the fact that parents do not help children with homework: for instance, they do not proofread their essays. It could be both a fair and an unfair point: even if a parent speaks Russian, this does not imply that they know how to write in Russian correctly, so they may have trouble with proofreading themselves.

Concerning primary schoolers' parents, some of them are negligent to Russian as a foreign language class. That is why, as some teachers assume, their children skip these classes and do not acquire Russian as a result.

One of the teachers reports that it has become more difficult to engage parents into the process of education (presumably due to the school rules and coronavirus restrictions). They cannot invite parents to school and give a class in front of them anymore. So, one of the teachers sometimes asks their students to record their classes (presumably using video or audio) in order to use the information at home and to show it to their parents. The only problem is that there are instances when students try to catch their teachers, recording the moments when a teacher, for instance, occasionally raises their voice, rather than recording useful information. One of the teachers speaks out against parents' engagement. They assume that the only thing which parents could do in the process of studying is to teach their kids how to study and work, leading them by example.

Standardization and integration issues

Basically, teachers and schools evaluate the success of children in the framework of education in terms of their language acquisition and speech, allowing them to gain knowledge and participate in the life of the school. However, according to the interviews, the leitmotif of the discussion deals with the issues of standardization of education, which contrast with the expected integration of children of immigrant background.

Taking into account that in the Russian school education system there is only one unified method of teaching Russian as a native language, teachers cannot pay due attention to students who have language and adaptation difficulties. The pace of going through the school curriculum does not allow teachers to concentrate on weak points because one or two lessons are allocated for each topic and teachers risk not having time to fulfill plans by the end of the year. Correspondingly, students for whom Russian is a non-native language may not understand the topic and fall behind

the program, therefore, it affects both their external and internal motivation and has negative results on their academic performance.

Despite the implementation of the unified school program of the Russian language, teachers are aware of the need to supplement the current methodology or create a new one. Firstly, abstract concepts are perceived easier for a native speaker than for children with limited language proficiency in Russian, so it would be more appropriate if methods of teaching Russian as a foreign language were applied since they are based on clear meanings. Secondly, traditional forms of work are irrelevant for assessing the knowledge of a foreign language student. For instance, 'written retelling' as a type of work is difficult for children whilst this type of speech activity is not practical in life and for this reason the question of the appropriateness of such a task should be addressed. Teachers believe that more free forms of work can enable students to be successful, for example, the introduction of the so-called free dictation would make it possible to prepare for future studies at the university and allow a foreign speaker to learn to catch the idea of an utterance, and not to retell information.

Methodological questions are also part of the preparation for the state final exam. The exam tasks are difficult for native speakers of the Russian language, respectively, the probability of success of children who do not speak Russian as their L1 diminishes considerably. It applies to all levels of the language since the perception of various linguistic aspects is different for native speakers and foreign speakers. The Russian exam is not passed mainly by those for whom Russian is a non-native language inasmuch as methodically the school curriculum does not take into account the questions about foreign pupils. In addition, the School Education department considers low exam results as a school's flaw, so at the moment the responsibility is not taken by methodologists at a higher level but by teachers in the respective school. This misunderstanding and miscommunication makes conditions in which the Russian language exam is an obstacle for children of immigrant background to enter a university.

Teachers suppose that the issues of standardization of the program should be reviewed. They propose to create new methods of work that can be borrowed from the program of teaching Russian as a foreign language. Moreover, taking into consideration the difficulties with results and admission to university, a unified state exam could be divided from the point of view of Russian as native and non-native. Furthermore, it is essential to mention that at the school level teachers try hard to help children speaking Russian as their L2 and suggest their own methodological

solutions, so the support of schools at the level of the department and the Ministry of Education can significantly change the existing integration challenges for the better.

Concluding remarks

It is clear that teaching the Russian language to children whose proficiency in Russian is low is of paramount importance but also a quite challenging process. Since they (both teachers and students) face a number of problems, teachers suggest several ways of dealing with these issues. In the concluding section, we would like to discuss a list of recommendations based on the initiatives suggested by teachers. These can be divided into two categories: educational attainment, psychological climate.

Educational attainment

Since a large number of students have difficulties with retelling and writing essays, teachers believe that students should develop reading skills and practise reading more in Russian. The teachers believe that this activity will help children structure their thoughts and assist them in the analysis of new information. One of the suggested initiatives assumes implementing the educational process without formal assessment. In this way, the grade-driven stress that children experience due to limited knowledge of the Russian language will be considerably reduced. Likewise, it will give the opportunity for children to comprehend the material based on their language proficiency (not age). Additionally, the educational curriculum should also be rethought: the number of Russian as a foreign language classes should be increased (from 1 to 5 per week). Teachers also believe that special textbooks for non-Russian-speaking children have to be developed. This might have a positive effect on fostering their internal motivation.

Psychological climate

Some teachers consider that creating new separate classes and ‘teaching differently’ will solve the problem of effective language learning needs of immigrant children. It is believed that this will considerably simplify their work and make the educational process easier. However, we believe that this will not only be inefficient but also will not work in the current educational settings. Most importantly, there is a high possibility that this initiative can lead to substantial segregation in school. As a result, the aggression and potential conflicts among different ethnic

and social groups will increase and might have disastrous effects on academic performance of children on the one hand, and their socio-psychological state, on the other. Moreover, it can lead to deprivation. Having the aim to integrate these children into the Russian-speaking community, teachers will isolate them.

One of the problems teachers face while working with immigrant children is lack of motivation from the children's part. That is why the format of education is very important. Interactive methods of education can boost children's interest in learning not only the Russian language but also show better academic results in other subjects at school.

Finally, it is of paramount importance to create the atmosphere of safety and psychological comfort in the classroom for all children. This might considerably increase the level of internal and external motivation that will be reflected in their academic performance.

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