

Problems of Bilingualism in Armenia

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Background

It is widely known that nowadays most of the world's population is bilingual and multilingual; this is especially evident for regions, where inhabitants have different ethnic background. Bilingualism is evidenced as a kind of cross-cultural communication. As Ter-Minasova (2000) noted, bilingualism is "communication of people presenting different cultures." A pure bilingual person is two native speakers or monolinguals in one, according to Vereschagin (1969). Such a person can speak, understand, read, and write in two languages, i.e., bilingual is an individual able to function, at some level, in more than one language. Halliday et al. (1970) consider that this person is not necessarily an ambilingual (an individual with native competency in two languages). Some bilinguals possess very high levels of proficiency in both languages in the written and the oral modes. Such bilingualism is considered as "coordinative bilingual" (Weinreich, 1953). Others display varying proficiencies in comprehension and/or speaking skills depending on the immediate area of experience in which they are called upon to use their two languages. The term "subordinate bilingualism" is used to define such a level (Weinreich, 1953, 1974).

Hence, we understand bilingualism as good command of two languages and regular "switching" from one language to some other(s), depending on the communicative situation (Khachikyan, 1989). Thus, bilingualism is equal and advanced proficiency in two languages. The phenomenon of bilingualism is acknowledged regardless of the level of language skills, beginning with the lowest one to the fluent command (Weinreich, 1953; Weinreich, 1974; Mikhailov, 1989; Rosentsveig, 1992). The higher the level of language command, the more successful the bilingual person can perform the communicative tasks.

In Armenia, as in other countries of transition, the social demand of the day requires stable knowledge of foreign languages. Any Armenian, bilingual or multilingual, must be able to use languages in real-life situations, in study, work and elsewhere. For a specific period of time the Russian language was of highest priority in Armenia, just as it was in all the republics of the former USSR. The interaction of such languages as Russian and Armenian in contact is connected with the interrelation of the bearers (native speakers) of these two languages. Both the inter-language contacts and the elements of Armenian-Russian / Russian-Armenian bilingualism (since the 19th century) are deeply rooted. The Russian language has been of high significance in the life and history of Armenians. The problems of Russian-Armenian bilingualism were of prime interest for the linguists of Armenia, as till 1990 the Russian language was widely applied alongside with the Armenian language. Almost 40% of the Armenian population was fluent in Russian (Esadjanyan, 1999).

Since 1991 the situation with the Russian language (in concern of studying it at secondary and high school as a general subject) has radically changed. In practice, almost at all educational institutions the process of teaching was performed in Armenian, even at Russian departments of colleges and universities. Thus, the Russian language lost its statute of a second mother tongue and was classified as a foreign language (Khachikyan, 2001). It was the student himself, who had the right to choose, what is preferable to study as a foreign language: English, German, French or Russian. As a result, for some period of time the Russian language ceased to be an obligatory main subject and became almost optional, minor. All these factors brought forth changes of the language functioning structure in real-time conditions. The absolute number of students of the Russian language was significantly decreased (Khachikyan, 2002).

A classic problem arose in respect of Armenian-Russian/Russian-Armenian bilingualism: "To be or not to be?" It should be mentioned that the same situation was observed not only in Armenia, but also in other countries of the NIS/CIS. On the background of highly emotional and, consequently not always objective ratings of a role of the Russian language in further progress and destiny of other nations and national languages assumptions were proposed in concern of possible alternative means,

which could facilitate in overcoming the language barrier amongst the peoples representing different nationalities of the Former Soviet Union. As such an alternative, first of all, the languages of title-national peoples were named alongside with the English language.

Since 1996 the language situation has changed anew. Some recession of interest to study the Russian language and towards the problems of bilingualism passed. There was a certain turning point: as a result Armenian-Russian bilingualism has won. In 1999 the decision of the Government of Armenia that the Russian language would be used in the system of education and cultural and social life of the Republic of Armenia was approved and adopted. This decision contained the concept about a place and role of the Russian language in the system of education and emphasized the necessity to intensify study of Russian. Numerous new Russian language schools, newspapers are appearing to meet the increased demand for Russian language courses. Appropriately, an interest to the Russian language and problems of Russian-Armenian bilingualism has increased. The scientific monthly "Russian Language in Armenia" is issued since 1999.

Now the social demand for study of Russian raises, the hours of practical Russian language at secondary and high schools are increased, the new generations of educational complexes for them are created: even the private schools, at which the educational process is entirely based on the Russian language. From our point of view, of high significance is the fact that bilingual Russian-Armenian schools are functioning with the profound study of both languages.

The Present Study

The development of bilingualism and formation of the experts corresponding the modern requirements and having good command of native, Armenian, and Russian, in the large degree is promoted by the Russian Armenian (Slavonic) State University founded in Yerevan in 1998. It is necessary to mention that at this university the majority of students are basically bilinguals (Russian students not knowing the Armenian language are scarce).

Our study was performed at the Russian-Armenian (Slavonic) State University. It was aimed to reveal the types of bilingualism in students with different levels of education. 25 students were proposed to read a specially compiled List of 650 Russian words with vowels in certain different positions (stressed and unstressed), in order to reveal interference in pronunciation of Russian vowels. Recording and audio-analysis was applied to process the obtained material.

Our analysis of the data revealed that the subordinate type of bilingualism is prevailing over the coordinative one. Bilinguals having equal command of 2 languages are few, as compared to bilinguals having perfect command of one language, Russian or Armenian, and making some mistakes in another language. At present our aim is to increase the level of language proficiency in subordinate bilinguals, acquiring the possible perfection, and to minimize the number of mistakes. This latter is a specific problem, especially difficult due to the absence of Russian-language environment. The solution can be found by joint efforts of specialists in linguistics and teaching methods.

Special attention is drawn to the comparison of different levels of these two languages in contact in order to reveal and overcome the interference of the native language. We apply the *linguo-cultural* method of teaching foreign languages as a unique mechanism of the dialogue, interrelation and interdependence of cultures.

Both our experience and researches performed with the involvement of students with different levels of Russian language literacy indicate that the main difficulty encountered by the Armenian learners of Russian is in the field of pronunciation of unstressed vowels.

Future Studies

The next stage of present-day development in Armenia requires study of English at all educational institutions, beginning with the kindergarten and nursery and, correspondingly, in-depth research on the processes and peculiarities of English-Armenian or Armenian-English bilingualism. This latter is of utmost significance for Armenians as a result of globalization processes occurring nowadays. Any Armenian, bilingual or multilingual, must apply foreign languages (English, Russian, etc.) in natural situations. The most successful second-language learners are the individuals, who can engage in frequent and ongoing linguistic and social interactions with native speakers.

A specific bilingual situation should be also traced in Armenian families living abroad, mainly in USA. In great majority of such families mother tongue, Armenian, is spoken, while at school, college

or university the students are immersed in English-language environment. Our further researches would deal with this specific phenomenon, taking into account that in many cases both the children and their parents are bi- or trilinguals (Armenian, Russian, English, etc.). Acoustic analysis of pronounced words will be applied and the results processed and reported.

Bilingualism, as well as all the processes related to it, is of prime importance not only as a communication means, bilingualism has acquired a new role and is aimed to solve new, more complex problems of human beings, problems of a national character, global mutual understanding, mentality, and culture.

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