



This paper is taken from

*Creating Communities: Local, National and Global
Selected papers from the fourteenth Conference of the
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
Academic Network*

London: CiCe 2012

**edited by Peter Cunningham and Nathan Fretwell, published in London by CiCe,
ISBN 978-1-907675-19-5**

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Jurgena, I., Mikainis, Z. & Kevisa, I. (2012) 'The potential for bilingual education to help integrate ethnic minority communities within Latvian multicultural society', in P. Cunningham & N. Fretwell (eds.) *Creating Communities: Local, National and Global*. London: CiCe, pp. 145 - 152.

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Lifelong Learning Programme

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a selection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

The potential for bilingual education to help integrate ethnic minority communities within Latvian multicultural society

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Abstract

Since Latvia regained its independence, the implementation of bilingual education has been one of the main objectives in the field of education as a means for integrating ethnic minorities in the multicultural society. Bilingual education is one of many aspects of multicultural education, which emphasizes the interconnection between ethnic culture and language, and the importance of the transfer of this interconnection for the existence of a multicultural society. At present, several factors can be seen to effect the successful implementation of multicultural education in Latvian education policy: insufficient reflection on national cultures, ethnic identities and the contribution of ethnic minorities, in policy documents concerning national development and the formation of common citizenship identity; the need to improve educational programmes considering cultural, linguistic, and religious factors; insufficient evaluation of subjects considering the acquisition of different languages of instruction, etc. This article is devoted to bilingual education as a means for integrating ethnic minorities in multicultural society, a topical issue for present-day Latvia. The purpose of the article is to clarify the underlying principles of multicultural education and to analyse the experience of implementing bilingual education in the Latvian environment of multi-ethnic communities.

Keywords: *bilingual education, education policy, integration.*

Introduction

The Latvian society is ethnically diverse; almost 40% of the Latvian population belong to ethnic minorities. A caring attitude to minorities is a characteristic feature of democracy; therefore, the dialogue between different social communities is of particular importance.

Since Latvia regained its independence, the implementation of bilingual education has been one of the main objectives in the field of education as a possibility for integrating ethnic minorities in the multicultural society. The purpose of the article is to clarify the underlying principles of multicultural education and to analyse the experience of implementing bilingual education in the Latvian environment of multiethnic communities.

1. Integration policy and the education of ethnic minorities in Latvia

Integration policy has been one of the leading issues in the domestic policy in Latvia in the last twenty years. By pursuing a stable and reasonable policy with regard to the issues concerning the integration of ethnic minorities, Latvia has demonstrated its ability to be a reliable partner in developing a united Europe. In the contemporary world, it is not possible to find a country the inhabitants of which would represent only one ethnic, linguistic, and cultural group. Latvia is a multicultural society, too. This is demonstrated by the results of a demographic study carried out in 2011 (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2011, p. 4). Among the inhabitants of Latvia, there are 59.5% Latvians, 27.4% Russians, 3.5% Byelorussians, 2.4% Ukrainians, 2.3% Poles and other nationalities.

Education in the languages of ethnic minorities is a precondition that enables the ethnic minorities living in Latvia to preserve their cultural identity and ensures the integration of society. The Latvian government provides education in eight ethnic minority languages – which is more than in most European countries. Living in a multicultural society, it is important to get acquainted with the cultural values of other nations as well as to promote European integration with regard to personality development and self-actualization.

Language is one of the key elements of culture. The knowledge of languages enables people to understand each other, to get to know the cultural heritage of various peoples, and to cooperate in a multicultural society. Each language reflects the historical reality of a nation, the political, economic, and cultural situation in a particular state; the representatives of all nationalities living in Latvia constitute this state. Each of them preserves and develops their own language and culture: linguistic and ethnic differences are not an impediment for national unity. Each language and culture is a value to be cherished as a cultural treasure of humanity.

According to the proposals submitted to the European Commission by “European Ambassadors for Intercultural Dialogue”, prominent personalities of a cultural scene, the purpose of which to promote intercultural dialogue, reasonable and efficiently managed multilingualism can facilitate European integration; stimulate civic consciousness and the sense of belonging to the European Union. It can also considerably promote the cultural dialogue and the harmonious coexistence of cultures (European Commission, 2008).

In the course of many years, multilingualism has become one of the key terms characterising the humanitarian thought of Europe along with such international documents as the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages of the Council of Europe and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. These strategic policy documents of the European Union ensure the rights for the representatives of national minorities to identify with their language, both individually as well as in community with others, to acquire this language in the system of education, as well as the right to have protection against assimilation.

Latvia stands out among other member states with state-funded primary education in eight languages and secondary education in at least six languages. Latvia also stands in the forefront with regard to the methodology for language acquisition since the system that we know as “bilingual education”, the content and language integrated learning, is

now being promoted as the most appropriate methodology in all EU states. “The system which implies learning a language not as a subject, but as a means for the acquisition of knowledge about the world is now accepted as the most appropriate and effective one. Thus, it should be concluded that Latvia’s national policy has been farsighted, that we have secured the role of the Latvian language in integration and have created the best system for language acquisition at school.” (Druviete, 2011, p. 146)

2. The reform in the educational programmes for the schools of ethnic minorities in the system of general secondary education in Latvia - bilingual education

After Latvia had regained its independence, the development of a new system of education was started, the one which could also promote the integration of the Latvian society. In 1999, the Official Language Law came into effect, and the knowledge of the Latvian language became compulsory both in the public and private sectors; consequently, there had to be developed the system of education which could ensure the graduates of bilingual educational establishments (ethnic minority schools) and the schools where Latvian was the language of instruction equal opportunities in the labour and higher education markets. Another important argument for increasing the proportion of the Latvian language in the process of education was the necessity to transform Latvia into a state with a united society.

Until the mid 1990s, there were two different school systems in Latvia – Latvian and Russian - each with its own different curricula. A new approach with regard to the educational policy for ethnic minorities was started in 1995 as a result of the amendments in section 5 of Education Law, which provided that in primary education, i.e. forms 1 – 9, at least two subjects had to be taught in Latvian, while in secondary school, i.e. forms 10 – 12, three subjects had to be acquired in the Latvian language (Markus, Grinfelds, Svinks, 2002, p. 3). The new Education Law was passed on 29 October 1998, which put an end to school segregation and prescribed the formation of a united system of education. The Education Law also became the foundation for the system of education for ethnic minorities. It provides that the content of educational programmes intended for ethnic minorities ensure the preservation and acquisition of their cultural heritage and also envisages achieving such aims as the integration of society and equal opportunities for all inhabitants of the state.

There were envisaged several transition periods in the implementation of educational programmes for ethnic minorities: in the system of primary education, the implementation of educational programmes for ethnic minorities started in 1999 with form 1, and there were given three years for the full transition of the schools to the new programmes. It was in 2002 when all the primary school students (forms 1 – 9) acquired education in two languages (bilingually; the issues concerning bilingual education will be considered below); as to secondary education, bilingual instruction in form 10 had to be started in 2004: 60% in the official language and 40% in the native language. Thus, on 1 September 2004 forms 11 and 12 continued working according to the previous law, which required the acquisition of three subjects in the official language, and the schools were given additional three years to prepare and ensure the opportunity for all children to acquire 60% of subjects in the Latvian language starting from the school year

2007/2008. This transition period was natural since in 2007/2008 the students who had started learning according to bilingual education programmes in 1999 continued their education in the secondary schools in form 10 (NALLT, 2008).

In ethnic minority schools, the Latvian language has become not only a subject, but also a means of instruction, which ensures good acquisition of the Latvian language in the schools implementing educational programmes for ethnic minorities, thus gradually reducing the linguistic isolation of schools and putting into practice the functions of the official language stated in Education Law and Official Language Law (Vike – Freiberga, Apinis, Azarova, 2007). In Latvia, one of the key goals was to ensure that instruction in the educational establishments financed by the state and local authorities was conducted in the official language, ensuring the opportunity for the representatives of ethnic minorities to acquire their native language and culture at the same time. Latvia is one of the few EU countries where the implementation of educational programmes for national minorities is funded from the state budget.

The reform in the content of general secondary education for ethnic minority schools was also necessary in order to prepare ethnic minority students for the studies in the institutions of higher education in Latvia (where the studies in state-funded institutions have been conducted in the Latvian language since 1 September 1999), as well as to ensure the unity and succession in the system of education, thus facilitating the inclusion of the graduates of ethnic minority schools in the labour market, too.

3. The principles of bilingual education and its implementation in Latvia

Traditionally, bilingual education refers to adding a minority language (as a language of instruction) to the official language, but not vice versa (Druviete, 2010, p. 121). In most countries in the world, instruction in the official language is a norm. In contrast, the Latvian concept of bilingual education corresponds to the new scientific ideas concerning the role of the native language. The official language complements child's native language as a means of instruction in an increasing proportion, thus ensuring the acquisition of both languages and skills at a high level (Druviete, 2010, 119.lpp.).

The aims of bilingual education are:

- to integrate individuals and groups in a united society, to socialize people for full-fledged participation in the life of society;
- to create a multilingual society; to achieve unity in a multi-ethnic, linguistically diverse state;
- to provide language skills necessary for the labour market and social mobility;
- to preserve ethnic and religious identity;
- to acquire language as a means of communication between linguistically and politically isolated communities;
- to gain deeper understanding of language and culture (Baker, 2002).

In 1999, the Ministry of Education and Science approved the master programme of bilingual education with four sub-programmes or models. These models enable children to acquire the Latvian language and culture as well as their native language and culture.

In all the models, instruction is provided bilingually. The offered four models were discussed and evaluated (with the participation of teachers and parents), and each school could choose the most appropriate one. On 1 September 1999, education in form 1 started according to the new system (NALLT, 2008, p. 68).

At present, the following four sub-programmes of primary education are offered in Latvia for ethnic minority schools (NALLT, 2008, p. 34):

1. Sub-programme No 1 : envisages the transition to Latvian as the language of instruction; student's first language is studied as a separate subject at least until form 6;
2. Sub-programme No 2: envisages vertical using of both languages until the end of primary school (forms 1 – 9); both the first and the second languages are used in the process of education;
3. Sub-programme No 3: envisages gradual transition to education in the official language during the nine years of primary school. In form 1, one subject is studied in the official language; each subsequent year one more subject is added until the end of primary school – form 9. As a result, students should be ready to study in the official language in secondary school;
4. Sub-programme No 4: envisages the acquisition of elementary education (forms 1 – 4) in the ethnic minority language. Starting from form 5, half of the subjects are studied in the official language, the other half in the native language until form 9.

From four educational sub-programmes for ethnic minority schools offered by the Ministry of Education and Science, sub-programme No 3, which envisages gradual transition to education in the Latvian language by adding instruction in Latvian in one subject each subsequent year, won the highest approval. In the school year 1999/ 2000 over 50% of 224 ethnic minority schools chose this sub-programme. It gives an opportunity to study mathematics, physics, and chemistry in the native language longer than other subjects. The second most popular sub-programme was model No 2, which gives a lot of opportunities for creative approach in the implementation of bilingual education to schools; they can use various educational methods and techniques in the acquisition of the content of each subject. Sub-programme No 1, which envisages the acquisition of all subjects in the Latvian language as a second language, is the most difficult one with regard to its implementation. According to sub-programme No 4, which gives an opportunity to obtain elementary education in the native language and to study the Latvian language as a separate subject, in forms 4 – 6 50% of the lessons have to be conducted in Latvian, while later the proportion of the subjects studied in Latvian has to be increased to 60% of all the lessons.

In Latvia, bilingual education is understood as a system where the Latvian language is used along with the minority language as a second language (official language), and it is used both as a means of instruction and as a school subject. This approach to bilingual education corresponds to the latest approaches in the world. The Latvian language complements learners' native language in increasing proportion both as a second language and as a means of instruction, thus ensuring proficiency in both languages at a high level.

In the study conducted by the Baltic Institute of Social Sciences in 2010, the heads of schools implementing educational programmes for ethnic minorities mentioned various important factors concerning the content of education:

- the need for succession in the acquisition of subjects in the Latvian language from pre-school institutions to secondary schools;
- teachers' Latvian language proficiency, linguistic motivation, and learning motivation (according to the headmasters questioned, teachers' motivation in professional development and the advancement of their Latvian language skills is still very different due to various subjective reasons);
- the development, improvement, and adaptation of the methodology of bilingual corresponding to current needs;
- disengaging from the politicizing of the issue;
- eradicating formal bilingualism in schools;
- the role of learners' families in the formation of learning motivation and attitude; lack of understanding of the essence of bilingual education among many parents (BISS, 2010, p. 32).

The introduction and implementation of bilingual education in Latvia has played an important role in social integration and ensuring equal rights for all inhabitants of Latvia. Bilingual education introduced in Latvian ethnic minority schools appears to be a successful and reasonable policy, the effectiveness of which could have depended to a considerable extent on the resources invested. The support of the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and several countries enabled Latvia to develop the models of bilingual education which correspond to the standard of good practice and are still being improved. At the same time, lack of long-term studies based on strict scientific methodology does not allow to assess the effectiveness of the models of bilingual education implemented in Latvian schools. The comparison of the results of national secondary school examinations of the graduates of Latvian and ethnic minority schools (VISC, 2009, 2010) can not serve as the basis for evaluating the effectiveness of bilingual education due to the fact that it is necessary to have a control group, i.e. learners who study only in the second language (for example, the students of Russian origin from Latvian schools), and it is necessary to carry out an experimental study. Nevertheless, if the improved Latvian language proficiency is regarded as the result of this policy, as well as in view of the fact that the examination results of the graduates of ethnic minority schools generally do not show a lower level of academic success compared to the results of Latvian school graduates, it can be concluded that so far the policy of bilingual education in Latvia has been successful. However, if the investment of resources in teachers' professional development is not continued, focused on increasing motivation and the advancement of bilingual teaching skills, the effectiveness of bilingual education might decrease in some aspects. For instance, comparing the results of the state examination in the Latvian language in form 9, the results in 2010 were lower than in 2009 (NCE, 2010).

Like any other education policy, the policy of bilingual education requires constant monitoring and regular revisions in order to correct mistakes and adapt to changes in the environment and the target group. As regards bilingual education, these changes are

often connected with the changeable nature of the political environment. It is necessary to study and summarize the best practice in Latvian bilingual education to ensure its sustainability.

Conclusions

Education in ethnic minority languages is a precondition enabling Latvia to preserve the cultural identity of ethnic minorities and ensure social integration. The Latvian government provides education in eight ethnic minority languages, which is more than in most European states.

Within the state-financed system of secondary education, there are implemented educational programmes in eight ethnic minority languages in Latvia: Russian, Polish, Jewish, Ukrainian, Estonian, Lithuanian, Romani, and Byelorussian. In the state-financed universities, instruction is in Latvian, while in some private institutions of higher education instruction is provided in other languages.

Until the mid 1990s, there existed two separate school systems in Latvia - Latvian and Russian - each with its own different curricula. When the new Official Language Law came into effect in 2000, the Latvian language proficiency became a compulsory requirement for working both in the public and private sectors; thus, there had to be created a system of education which could provide equal opportunities both for the graduates of Latvian and ethnic minority schools in the labour and education markets.

The reform in the content of education for ethnic minority schools was introduced gradually starting from the year 1995, and it was fully completed in the year 2007. Only starting from the school year 2007/2008, educational programmes for ethnic minority schools had been fully introduced from form 1 to form 12.

The system of education plays a decisive role in the implementation of the state policy. The reform in the content of ethnic minority education and the successful implementation of bilingual education has been a significant step in the language policy in Latvia. It has secured the functioning of Latvian as the official language and promoted the complicated process of linguistic integration in the society. In practice, the ideal aim of the language policy, which can be achieved only with the help of the system of education, is the perfect proficiency in the official language of each inhabitant whose native language is not Latvian and their ability to participate in all processes in the state.

The introduction and implementation of bilingual education in Latvia has had a great impact on the integration of society and putting the principle of equal rights into practice. It has to be pointed out though that the implementation of the reform concerning the education for ethnic minorities can be successful only in combination with other measures aimed at the consolidating of the role of the Latvian language as the official language common for the whole society – further legal regulation of the status of the official language (including higher education), academic studies of the language, its cultivation and standardization, the publishing of academic and popular-science

literature, promoting a positive attitude to the measures aimed at increasing the competitiveness and prestige of the Latvian language.

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