

A Critical look at Language Functions and Language Policies in the Russian Modern Educational Context¹

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Abstract

Foreign language teaching methods applied in Russia are reviewed, using as an example Tomsk State University (Russia) in the conditions of the modern educational environment. The new educational environment is defined. The specificity of the language environment for teaching foreign languages is characterized. A comparative analysis of approaches and methods to foreign language teaching is conducted. Conclusions are made on the effectiveness of the approaches to organizing the modern educational process. The analysis was also carried out on the regulatory framework relating to conflict resolution of these cases. As part of the study, an expert survey was conducted using an in-depth interview with representatives of the Russian Educational Context. The authors were interested in the issues of the formation and functioning of the Russian Educational Context, its problem and conflict zones, the impact on society, and social interaction within the film community.

Keywords: Russian Educational Context; Language Functions; Language Policies.

1. Introduction

For as long as there have been multiple languages in the world people have always been teaching them so that we might learn them and better communicate with one another. In the 21st century foreign language multicultural education is an important issue (Brown, 2000; Nasri, Namaziandost, & Akbari, 2019). Our improved understanding of how humans acquire language has led to a greater range of approaches to language teaching and today universities are better equipped to teach languages than they were in previous decades. Nowadays teaching foreign languages embraces ideas which range from using conventional, but well proven methods, to

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integrating innovative techniques and means of learning process organization, which appeared due to the emergence of new technologies and resources, mainly focused on worldwide communication, easy access to knowledge, a greater role of the learner in his / her progress and of the language in one's career development.

Language degrees continue to be offered by universities around the world with teaching often differing from country to country and Britain and Russia are no exception.

In its basic definition, language policy and planning (LPP) represent any organised, intentional and long-term intervention of the institutions of the state in the area of language selection (status planning), its form and lexicon (corpus planning), as well as the selection of a language as a medium of instruction within a given education system (acquisition planning). Furthermore, one of the basic postulates of this paper is that LPP is a multidisciplinary research area which cannot be analysed in isolation from specific socio-political, scientific and cultural contexts. These, in turn, directly imply that implicit and explicit objectives as well as planned (and/or achieved albeit unexpected) outcomes of a specific LPP vary significantly in accordance with the socio-political, epistemological and strategic attitudes of the language planners in different socio-political and cultural contexts around the world (Rashtchi & Keyvanfar, 2007; Shakibaei, Shahamat, & Namaziandost, 2019).

Language education policy and planning (LEPP) can, therefore, be equated with acquisition planning, and is an integral part of any serious LPP. In consequence, it shares the methodological apparatus, as well as the theoretical views (and/or biases), that affect the overall LPP activities. The general history of the LPP research foci can be analyzed from different standpoints, and we shall herein present three complementary models. According to Ricento (2000), the LPP paradigms can be best understood if three groups of factors are taken into consideration:

1. Macro socio-political (which include general socio-historical and political events and developments, such as state creation and disintegration, population migrations, wars, organization of capital and the institutions of the state, etc.);
2. Epistemological (models of scientific research and knowledge paradigms); and
3. Strategic factors (research objectives and argumentation).

Ricento (2000) provides an intellectual history of LPP in the light of the above sets of factors, and clearly distinguishes three phases in the development of LPP as a scientific field. The first phase of LPP (early 1960s) occurred in the period during which this research area was shaped from the standpoints of structural linguistics, within the historical and socio-political context of decolonization. In other words, the creators of the field (e.g., Fishman, 1968) at that point believed LPP to be an ideology-free and non-political process in which languages were viewed merely as systems which may be more or less suitable for standardization and modernization

(primarily in post-colonial societies on the Asian and African continents). And very often, only languages with developed writing systems and literary traditions (i.e., major European (colonial) languages) were considered suitable to become 'national languages'.

The second phase of LPP (early 1970s–late 1980s) is characterised by neo-colonialism in the socio-political sense. It saw the emergence of sociolinguistics as a theoretically and methodologically independent linguistic discipline which recognises the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to any language study. Moreover, it rejects the idea that languages can be analysed without reference to the socio-cultural context in which they are used. It was during this phase of LPP that theorists began to recognise the ideological aspect of any LPP, and to make initial correlations between purely linguistic and social, political and economic aspects of the LPP process (Sepehri, Hajjilili, & Namaziandost, 2019).

Finally, the third phase of LPP, which has not yet come out of its formative stage (mid-1980s to the present day) is being developed within the context of the 'new world order' shaped by the concepts of global capital, global media and global technologies. It operates within the predominant epistemological paradigm of postmodernism, and oscillates between two often conflicting positions of linguistic ecology on one hand, and the global role of English as the *lingua franca* on the other hand. Linguistic ecology strongly advocates that the preservation of linguistic diversity and linguistic identity of as many communities as possible is the right way to fight poverty and maintain global eco-stability (see, e.g., Scutnabb-Kangas, 2002, 2005; Scutnabb-Kangas, Phillipson & Kontra, 2001; Namaziandost, Shatalebi, & Nasri, 2019). Those in favour of the use of English as an international language, however, argue that the 'international variety of English' is viewed by its users as the mere language of communication, not identification (Geeraerts, 2003), which, in consequence, does not endanger the existence and the relevance of other languages.

Other (mainly European) authors view and analyse the history of LPP exclusively through the socio-political lens, thus expanding it to include the processes which shaped the European linguistic and political context during the 18th and 19th centuries. (See, e.g., Bugarski, 2005; Geeraerts, 2003; also see Milroy, 2001, for a detailed discussion on social/ideological factors in standardisation processes.) It should be pointed out that their taxonomies and classifications are based mostly on empirical data derived from the results of various LPP processes over the centuries, rather than on theoretical concepts (within contexts of specific linguistic and/or social and political theories) which have shaped LPP thought during the last 50 or so years. Geeraerts (2003) thus describes the rationalist and the romantic models of language standardisation (status planning in LPP terms) of the 18th century (which result directly from the larger socio-cultural movements of the period). He believes them to have underlined in a very powerful way every subsequent European LPP model. Of these the most important one to the present day is the nationalistic model of LPP (initially developed during the 19th century), in which concepts of national unity and

identity are directly related to specific, so-called national, languages (Namaziandost, Neisi, Kheryadi, & Nasri, 2019).

Among various forms of communication, cinema occupies a unique position in society. McLuhan attributes cinema to “hot” means of communication, that is, to those that expand feelings to a “state of fullness of data” (McLuhan, 2003), master the audience’s perception, and make the viewer identify with the characters. “The specificity of a movie spectacle is in its comprehensive impact on the deep layers of consciousness, in a breakthrough to the archetypes of the collective unconscious” (Bessmertnyi). The nature of cinema socializes people, unites them.

Based on the above, the authors of the study put forward the following hypotheses:

1. The modern Russian educational context is one of the most conflicting segments of culture that determine the mass consciousness of Russians through a number of factors;
2. The educational context of the Russian Federation is such an element of modern Russian culture that can contribute to the growth of political and cultural socialization of subsequent generations of the country;
3. Ideological conflicts in modern Russian educational context prevail over economic ones.

2. Methods

The volume of scientific works studying the Educational Context is extremely small. The concept “conflictogenicity of the Educational Context” presents an even bigger problem for theoretical comprehension since it does not have sufficient theoretical elaboration in Russian science.

A. Nigmatzianova defines conflictogenicity under the conditions of modern Russian realities as “a social phenomenon, a system of objective circumstances and subjective images that form tension as a result of social interaction of large social groups, including their own system of relations and group interests” (Nigmatzianova, 2016). Unlike a conflict, which is a “limiting case of exacerbation of contradictions,” conflictogenicity is a “set of tensions in various spheres of life”, which under certain conditions can lead to conflict.

Kramkova O. distinguishes linguistic and pragmatic conflictogenic factors that disrupt effective communication. “A linguistic (speech) conflict considers the confrontation of two or more communicants connected in a single communicative event, due to various factors: mental, social, ethical, etc., the extrapolation of which occurs in the speech layer of the dialogue” (Kramkova, 2011). L. Shkatova identifies the reasons for the emergence of conflictogenic factors in communication. One of them is the difference in cultures and values: “your vision is perceived as the only

true one and leads to the interpretation of the behavior of another person from our value system”, we automatically use typical forms of our cultural environment, knowing that the cultural environment will understand us” (Shkatova, 2010).

3. Results and Discussion

A rich language environment is not possible without the participation of native speakers and language specialists. The language environment created for teaching foreign languages in this respect differs greatly from that of the DU or any European university, because not many native speakers come to work, study and live in Siberia, a cold and rather distant place from everywhere. The process of learning another language under the conditions when the natural environment of the target language and its cultural context are detached from the learner is rather specific and more difficult. That means that on the one hand the teaching bears a lot of responsibility for creating such a learning environment which will enable the learners of the target language to master it as an effective means of communication, on the other it is the learner’s activity and involvement in the learning process. But it should be noted that in spite of the above-mentioned objective obstacles the language environment at TSU includes native-speaking teachers who make a very important contribution to create a more authentic environment for both subjects of the educational process – the learner and the teacher (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). It is understood that cultural penetration is important and that in order to fully understand a foreign language there must be an understanding of the culture behind it. Therefore, communication with native speakers is important and is guaranteed to all students in the course of their education. So in LE for teaching foreign languages at TSU at present a more accent is being given to the development of the pedagogical framework to foster active learning and achieving the target competencies by the students through face-to-face communication, effective instruction, innovative pedagogical tools, development of teaching materials and activities, involvement of native speaking members of the staff. On the technical side, it is mostly the use of the Internet as a source of information and computer-mediated environment for organizing teaching grammar and carrying out testing of linguistic competence. Consequently, the need for designing and utilizing the advancements of technology is clearly realized. It is worth noting that according to the «road-map» leading it to join the list of top research innovative universities in the world, a lot of attention nowadays is being paid to the development of a learning environment based on conceptually grounded methodology, setting appropriate context for rich learning experiences, making use of various relevant resources both physical and virtual, widening students’ learning space and creating additional opportunities for personal and professional development (Namaziandost, Hashemifardnia, & Shafiee, 2019).

The Educational Context has turned from an instrument of cultural development into a battlefield. A film is a weapon, which brings income to the

owners. It is comparable to the income of the largest industries. In Russia, in recent years, the volume of film production has grown very much. State support plays a significant role in growth (Sedykh). Currently, the subsidy system remains the most powerful tool for financing the Russian cinema. The commercialization of cinema often comes into conflict with the task of maintaining the high artistic potential of the films being shot” (Sedykh). However, today the private sector practically does not invest in Russian cinema. The development of fundraising tools continues - pre-sale agreements, product placement, bank lending, fundraising, and crowdfunding (Sedykh). However, state mechanisms for financial regulation of this sphere are still successfully used everywhere (Parc, 2018).

One of the conflict generators in the Russian Educational Context is the shortage of personnel. The second is the presence on the market of a large number of “one-project” companies, which are created specifically for the production of a particular film and cease to exist immediately after its completion (Spivakova & Arakelian, 2016). The current situation, of course, negatively affects the Educational Context in general. Due to the high instability of film companies, there is no continuity in management and there is no accumulation of experience in organizing film production. The third conflict generator is the financing of projects by young screenwriters and directors of the Russian Educational Context. According to the regulatory framework, “the age of a debut director must not exceed 30 years (for debut feature films of young Russian directors who have received the corresponding specialized higher education (director) at the expense of budgetary support from the federal budget)” (Boletskaia, 2014). However, meeting these requirements is often physically impossible.

4. Conclusions

A history of language teaching in Russia (Russian as L1 and L2, minority languages and foreign languages) clearly indicates that:

1. There exists a direct relationship between a language's status and its place in the educational system on the one hand, and its value as a social (often ethnic or national) symbol on the other hand;
2. Language planners often choose to base their LPP and LEPP decisions and documents on strategic rather than purely epistemological factors (in other words, their beliefs about language often override their scientific knowledge and expertise about its structure, the acquisition process and its social functions); and
3. From the standpoint of language users, it is also evident that as important as languages are as carriers of ethnic and other identities, they are also sometimes (in the last few decades in particular) recognised as instruments for improving one's social status. For example, if you speak the majority language you are more likely to

get a better job; if you speak specific foreign languages, you are more likely to internationalise your career, and to maximise your intellectual potential.

These facts have sometimes been fully recognised by language planners, but also very often completely neglected or even discriminated against.

Therefore, the fact that Russia was at certain points in modern educational history considered the *avant-garde* when it comes to early foreign language education (e.g., the documents issued by the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe from the 1970s and 1980s), does not undermine the reality behind the declarative right to education in minority languages. At first glance these language education policies were very progressive for their time (before WWII and for the duration of Titoist Yugoslavia). However, they have almost always led either to subtractive bilingualism (resulting in a kind of apartheid in which members of minority groups are being denied access to higher education due to their insufficient competence in Russian), or to language shift (in favour of the majority language). Furthermore, the members of Russian society who do not belong to minority groups have also consistently been denied access to minority languages within the educational system. And finally, the ideology of teaching Russian as L1 as the symbol of national identity and unity, which views interaction with other languages as inherently threatening to the preservation of the Russian linguistic and cultural heritage, is still very far from the most recent LPP standards.

In conclusion, individual applied linguists and other scholars aim at shaping language policies and language education policies in Russia based on expert knowledge and the know-how from language teachers and other practitioners (including the members of the institutions of the state). However, despite their efforts, there still exists a lack of (primarily) academic consensus on what Russia's LPP and LEPP goals and objectives should be in terms of:

1. Choice of languages to be taught;
2. Time and space allocated to those languages within the institutional educational system;
3. Language contents to be learned;
4. Teaching methods to be applied; and last, but not least
5. Rationale (epistemological and strategic, recognising the effects of a broader socio-political context which brought a specific policy about) behind the answers to the above four questions.

It is our strong belief that any serious Russian language education policy should include a thorough analysis of the above parameters, which would lead to a series of theoretically sound and practically applicable solutions. These would in turn be presented to the academic and general public, and incorporated into a well-thought-out national educational strategy. These measures could enable the future generations of the children of Russia to be raised in an atmosphere of intercultural competence

and tolerance, and in turn, help them become members of a plurilingual and pluricultural Europe.

This model of LPP and LEPP takes into consideration LPP theory, recognises the impact that various extralinguistic factors often have in the creation of language education policies, and is capable of evaluating their value and predicting their consequences. We are confident that a similar model of LPP and LEPP can be successfully applied in other (mainly Eastern and South-Eastern European) countries in transition as well.

We have identified the following recommendations for the prevention of conflicts in the Educational Context:

1. Due to the growth of conflict and pre-conflict situations in the industry, the cinema community is recommended to create a public institution for conflict resolution, the main purpose of which is to resolve and prevent conflicts in this area of public life;
2. Government agencies shall improve the regulatory framework in this area, which provides mechanisms for resolving and preventing conflicts in the industry;
3. Specialists in conflict management shall pay attention to the processes of prevention of ideological conflicts in the Educational Context by forming a variety of conflict resolution technologies.

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