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Bilingual Education Developments in General Education: Estonia's Experience

Teaching children in a language that is different from their mother tongue has been practiced in Estonia since the beginning of the 1960s. At first it was teaching in the English language. The schools which at that time introduced English-medium instruction have been considered elite schools in Estonia up to today. In today's Estonia the main language of instruction in general education is the state language, Estonian; at the same time around one fifth of general education is Russian-medium. The Russian-speaking national minority in Estonia comprises about 30% of the total population. Russian-medium schools are located primarily in Tallinn and in the northeastern part of the state where the majority of the population is Russian-speaking. Besides the English and Russian languages, French, German and Finnish are also used as the languages of instruction along with the state language in general education of Estonia. Every fourth Russian-speaking pupil – who is not necessarily Russian by nationality, pupils of the Russian-medium school are rather representatives of nationalities of the former Soviet Union – studies nowadays in the Estonian-medium school or in the predominantly Estonian-medium language immersion programme. In this situation every teacher, irrespective of the type of school she/he works in, faces the challenge to master both the language of instruction and the state language as well as to know the particularity of the multicultural learning environment and to apply the methodology of content and language integrated learning.

The above-mentioned challenges are pinpointed in legal acts, state framework documents and development strategies. The Language Act states that employees in all the positions requiring higher education, including teachers, are to have the mastery of the Estonian language at B2 level; teachers of the Estonian language and literature are to master Estonian at C1 level. The Teacher's Professional Standard emphasizes knowledge about the particularity of the multicultural learning environment. A teacher is expected to consider the needs of pupils of a different language and cultural background in the study process. Besides, a teacher is to be aware of the history and culture of Estonia, Europe and the world, and he/she should also be the bearer of the national identity and fosterer of the community spiritual values (Teacher's Professional Standard V, 2005). The Estonian Integration Strategy up to the year 2013 defines the teacher's role as the formation of attitudes and values; the teacher should also focus on increasing positive attitudes towards other cultures (The State Integration Programme for 2008-2013). The Teacher Education Strategy up to the year 2013 presupposes a course in foreign language teaching methodology for all teacher training students. At the state level it is valued when a future subject teacher goes to pedagogical practice to educational institutions of different types where the language of instruction is different from the student's mother tongue (Estonian Teacher Education Strategy for 2009-2013). The new National Curricula adopted in 2010 value the content and language integrated learning methodology (National Curricula for Basic and Secondary School, 2010).

In modern Estonia under the notion "content and language integrated learning" people mean the methodology which ensures simultaneous acquisition of content and language which happens due to development of certain learning skills (Mehisto, P. & Marsh, D., 2008). Russian-medium schools of Estonia are in the vanguard of positive implementation of content and language integrated learning. Voluntary systematic application of content and

language integrated learning in Russian-medium schools began in Estonia over ten years ago with the launch of the “language immersion” project by the example of Canada. The aim of language immersion is the following: pupils acquire equally good skills both of the mother tongue and in the Estonian language and foreign languages. At least 50% of subjects in the language immersion programme are taught/studied in a language different from pupils’ mother tongue. Language immersion applies integrated and cooperative learning and it is based on the principle: one teacher, one language (Keelekümbluskeskus: kümne aasta jagu kogemusi. Language Immersion Centre: Ten Years of Accomplishment, 2010). Language immersion is practiced both in kindergartens and in basic school. Thus, in Estonia both early and late language immersion is used in its both full and partial forms. This teaching methodology has already proved its effectiveness (see language immersion scientific researches: 2001-2009:

http://www.kke.ee/index.php?lang=est&pages_ID=46&menus_ID=1&active_link_ID=55&mark=0). The rightness of the approach is proven by the fact that, despite of the voluntary choice of applying the programme, half of Russian-medium kindergartens and schools have joined it.

In 1997 the current “Law on Basic and Secondary Schools in Estonia” was added to with a new point, according to which Russian-medium schools were to start transition to partial subject teaching in the Estonian language at the level of secondary school not later than 1 September, 2007. The pupils who started studying in secondary school in 2011 are to be taught subjects in the Estonian language in the extent of 60% of the compulsory study minimum stated by the National Curriculum. The aim of such “transition” to teaching in Estonian is to provide Russian-medium secondary school leavers with equal (comparing to pupils finishing Estonian-medium schools) possibilities of further education or employment at the labour market. The transition at the secondary school level is built up on the step-by-step basis, every academic year a new Estonian-medium compulsory subject is added. This academic year 2010/2011 the compulsory minimum of subjects of Estonian-medium instruction in the first year of secondary school is 4 subjects, at least Estonian Literature, History of Estonia, Social Science and Music are to be taught in Estonian (adopted by the Government Regulation of 23 November, 2007). However, according to data of the Ministry of Education and Research, in 90% of secondary schools more than 4 subjects are taught in the Estonian language, besides, the range of Estonian-medium subjects is wide, it includes nature and exact sciences. Meanwhile, single secondary schools reach the 60% rate of Estonian-medium content/subject instruction. Up to today the subject of discussion is what we mean by the notion “content/subject teaching in the Estonian language”. Do we take into consideration the level of pupils’ Estonian language skills which depends directly on their age and speech skills in their mother tongue?

Pupils and teachers’ evaluation of and attitude to the serious changes which took place in Russian-medium schools during the last years have been the subject of research. The first results of such researches (2009) show that we are standing at a crossroads: pupils and teachers’ discontent with the changes in the area is at a high level, although it is too early to make conclusions yet. The differences between Northeastern Estonia with neighbouring Russia-Ida-Viru County, Tallinn, the capital, and other regions of Estonia are considerable. The standpoints of teachers and pupils also differ: as the research shows, pupils are more open to studying in the English language. The positive result is the pupils’ growing interest towards studying in secondary vocational educational institutions and universities in Estonia. The methodology of teaching and motivation of pupils remain the problematic issues. Teachers do not feel confident in issues of methodology, only one third of teachers consider Estonian-medium instruction of their subjects fully grounded. Teachers complain about pupils’ low motivation to learn, especially in the case of pupils whose academic performance is less

successful. At the same time pupils claim that the lesson was tiring and not engrossing (Masso, I. & Kello, K., 2010). This claim is proven by the fact revealed during the TALIS (2007/2008) research of teachers conducted within the frames of OECD that viewpoints of teachers in Estonia are liberal and modern, although the teaching practice is considered more traditional as compared to other countries (Loogma, K., Ruus, V-R., Talts, L & Poom-Valickis, K., 2009). The above-described researches focus on attitudes; unfortunately, up to now there has not been conducted a research based on lesson observation.

Teachers instructing in the Estonian language are positively inclined to language immersion kindergartens, the necessity of teaching in the Estonian language is recognized first of all at the third school stage i.e. for 13-15-year-old pupils. Understandingly, Estonian-medium instruction at the early age provides a better preparation for secondary school with Estonian as the language of instruction. Studying of the state language is compulsory; Estonian-medium subject teaching begins on schools' initiative. Beginning from 2009 compulsory Estonian language learning to children from the age of three has been introduced to Russian-medium kindergartens (National Curriculum for Preschool Children's Institution, 2008). The first feedback proves that the process has begun, in most kindergartens there are teachers and necessary study materials. The Estonian-medium instruction is applied already at the basic school stage in the vast majority of schools. According to the data of the Ministry of Education and Research, it is practiced in, at least, three fourths of schools. The most common subjects of Estonian-medium instruction are skill subjects: physical education, art, music. Tallinn, where 40% of Russian-medium schools of Estonia are located, has developed its own model in which at the first school stage Estonian-medium instruction comprises 22% of the study process and at the next two stages the share of subjects taught in Estonian is 34%. At the first school stage 7-9-year-old children study Estonian as a second language and besides that they study in the Estonian language such subjects as human science, music and physical education. Nature science, civic science and art are added at the next school stage in the case of 10-12-year-old pupils. Handicraft and one elective subject are added at the next school stage for pupils up to 15 years of age (Recommended Lesson Division Plan of Tallinn Model, 2011).

As a digression it should be mentioned that in basic and secondary school state language learning is provided beginning from the first grade and its minimum amount is 6 to 12 lessons per week, whereat Estonian language learning begins from the first year of study and the biggest amount of compulsory Estonian is at school stages 2 and 3 i.e. in the case of 10- to 15-year-old pupils (National Curricula for Basic and Secondary School, 2010). The basic school graduation examination in the state language corresponds to B1 level of the European Language Framework and the similar examination at the end of secondary school corresponds to B2 level. Although Estonia has been considerably successful in state language learning since it regained independence, researches conclude that the above-mentioned levels of language mastery are not sufficient for Estonian-medium learning at the next level of study and that pupils' language skills are poorer than expected (Vare, S., 2006).

Unfortunately, academic results of Russian-speaking pupils are also considerably poorer than those of Estonian-speaking pupils. The overview of the academic performance of pupils from Russian-medium schools is provided in reports of OECD PISA researches (2006, 2009), according to which schools with Russian as the language of instruction have showed poorer results. Although during three years the performance of Russian-medium schools has improved, first of all, in functional reading, the average performance in all subject areas of pupils from schools with Russian as the language of instruction is around 40 points lower than that of their Estonian-speaking peers. Thereat, one academic year is considered equal to 50 points (PISA 2009 – Estonia's results). A small number of subjects taught in the Estonian

language – the research studied academic performance of 15-year-old pupils – could not have had a considerable effect on the indexes of the development level of main skills.

According to the data of state examinations (the system has been in operation since 2000), the academic results of Russian-speaking youth are lower (as compared to the ones of their Estonian-speaking peers), primarily in the area of history, civic science, geography and foreign languages. It is noteworthy that those first Russian-medium schools where Estonian-medium instruction is applied to a much larger extent, showed academic results equal to the ones of Estonian-medium schools (Käosaar, I, 2010). Directors of Russian-medium schools have recently been attracting the public attention via mass media to the problem of the most talented children's going to Estonian-medium schools (Õpetajate Leht (Teachers' Newspaper), 14 January, 2011, 2).

The forgoing proves that the quality of Russian-medium education in modern Estonia requires special attention. At the same time it is yet early to assess the influence of Estonian-medium instruction on pupils' performance. Estonia's neighbouring state, Latvia, conducted the transition to Latvian-medium instruction in its schools in 2004, without using the step-by-step approach at the secondary school level. There it is already possible to assess results of state examinations. Those are significantly in favour of Russian-medium schools (Papule, E., 2010). Latvian colleagues emphasize exceptionally strong motivation to work in national minority schools.

Besides the quality of teaching, developments of next years are considerably influenced by the number of pupils. Today less than 1500 pupils went to Grade 10 of the Russian-speaking secondary school; according to the data of the Ministry of Education and Research the number of pupils in the Russian-medium secondary school has decreased by almost 50% since 2005. The same number in the case of Estonian-medium schools is over 20%. The number of pupils is continually showing the decrease tendency both due to demographical reasons and also due to the fact that after finishing basic school Russian-speaking pupils choose vocational education (39% of pupils from schools with Russian as the language of instruction and 28% of pupils from Estonian-medium schools) or Estonian-medium secondary school. Understandingly, the decrease in the number of pupils causes changes in the school network and additional stress among teachers. At the same time the next few years are also marked with transition to the new national curricula, which foremost poses challenges in formation of general skills and interdisciplinary integration.

In the course of big changes it is important for both the state and schools to be able to pay attention to preserving the mother tongue and culture of pupils. An essential role is given to Russian-speaking teachers who are to keep and preserve the language and culture of their nation. It certainly sets special tasks to teachers of Russian as the mother tongue and other teachers who teach their subjects in the Russian language.

At the same time Estonia faces a specific challenge: teachers' Estonian language skills. Estimably, up to one tenth of teachers in Russian-medium schools are Estonians and up to one third of teachers do not have Estonian language skills at the level of B2, which is expected for working in the school system of Estonia (statistics of the Ministry of Education and Research, 2011; see also Masso, I. & Kello, K., 2010). Such structure of teachers' language skills poses separate challenges to implementation of bilingual teaching.

Understandingly, further on the discussion of implementation of bilingual teaching focuses on teacher training and availability of study materials, as well as on teachers' skills to adopt these materials to their needs. Training of teachers for Russian-medium schools already was the subject of discussions over a decade ago (Vassiltšenko, Asser, Trasberg, 1998). The participants of that discussion focused on the teacher's language fluency and also on the

issues of the possibility of teacher training in Russian (mother tongue) and linking the Estonian context with the national culture of a pupil.

The alterations made in this area of the teacher training curriculum are, unfortunately, not enough: the subject which would pay much attention to multicultural education is rather an exception than a rule in the teacher training curriculum. The forgoing proves that in today's Estonia all teachers need special preparation for using the content and language integrated learning methodology. The sample syllabus of this subject is being developed. It is extremely important to pay special attention to training of teachers who work both in the Estonian and in the Russian languages. Content/subject teaching in the Russian language should be introduced, first and foremost, in the basic school in the case of exact and nature sciences.

Although up to today bilingual education in Estonia has mostly been the territory of the Russian-medium school, the situation is now changing. The new, adopted in 2010, National Curricula value multiculturalism and content and language integrated learning. It is possible to suggest that during next years discussions on multicultural education do not focus on Russian-medium schools. A significant change is to happen in schools with Estonian as the language of instruction. Results of international researches show that learning in the multicultural environment is significantly underestimated in schools (Loogma, K., Ruus, V-R., Talts, L & Poom-Valickis, K., 2009). Estonian-medium schools in Estonia definitely have to learn how to promote bilingual education and multiculturalism from Russian-medium schools and their teachers.

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