

Intercultural bilingual education in multilingual societies of Latin America: Challenges and perspectives

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The purpose of the article is to analyze the Latin American example of an intercultural approach to education in a bilingual/multilingual indigenous context. As a result of the political processes of the last decades, the continent, which used to be considered in a certain sense as a culturally homogeneous region, started elaborating new approaches towards identity, including language. This was reflected in new modalities introduced in education, aimed first at including indigenous children in the alphabetization/education process mainly through teaching them the dominant language, and later the focus changed towards multilingualism and interculturality. The process went in parallel with the global struggle for the rights of autochthonous peoples, as well as the recognition of the values of multilingualism and preservation of linguistic diversity.

Key words: education, multilingual, intercultural, Latin America, indigenous

1. Introduction

In the new history of language policies several types of regulations can be distinguished, from prohibition and oppression to recognition and protection (Múñoz Cruz, 2009, p. 225), but we can see a clear tendency towards the acceptance of the values of linguistic diversity. This phenomenon in the past decades led to the recognition of the importance of mother tongue in education, combating language endangerment and prevention of extinction of languages. International organizations having a mandate in the field are also extensively dealing with this topic¹. In developing countries with a large number of indigenous populations, the question of multilingualism and its manifestations in everyday life goes well beyond cultural, linguistic and educational features, and constitutes a comprehensive socio-political phenomenon.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the development of the Latin American example of multilingual approach to education. I will argue that the question of multilingualism in education and literacy has a strong right-based component and goes beyond merely pedagogical aspects. The impact of this approach on the promotion of rights of indigenous people is tangible both on national and international level. The Latin American experience has considerably contributed to the development of the perception of diversity as a democratic, pluralistic value.

As a result of the political processes of the last decades the continent – which used to be considered in a certain sense as a culturally homogeneous region, with

¹ See e.g. 37 C/4 UNESCO Medium-Term Strategy, 2014-2021

monoculturalism as a model to follow and diversity as a ‘problem’ – started elaborating new approaches towards identity, including language (López, 2009, p.4). The above-mentioned tendencies are applicable both to internal action (introducing vernacular languages in the education process; protection of indigenous identities and the strengthening of cultural and political representation of autochthonous population) as well as to international participation (e.g. adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples).

Aspirations towards safeguarding indigenous languages and cultures have created a number of variations of educational policies throughout the continent. Intercultural Bilingual Education (IBE) is an eloquent example of a multifaceted approach that is aimed at embracing not only educational, but more complex political and human rights aspects.

2. The sociolinguistic landscape of Latin America

A society is considered bilingual when two languages are spoken in a given territory. According to Patten, “bilingual societies [...] must decide whether or not to adopt some form of institutional bilingualism” (Patten, 2003, p. 296), education being one of its crucial elements. Most of Latin American countries are multilingual, however IBE started as a bilingual concept of educating indigenous population in a vernacular and a dominant language simultaneously.

Statistics related to the number of living languages in Latin America may considerably vary; the background paper commissioned to assist in drafting the 2010 Education for All Global Monitoring Report estimates it as 557 (López, 2009, p. 3), but according to the recent edition of *Ethnologue* more than 800 languages are currently spoken in the region (Lewis, Simons & Fennig 2015). Constitutions of about a dozen countries recognize the multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual nature of their society (López & Sichra, 2004, p.128). Political status of indigenous languages also follows a different pattern: they are recognized as languages of education in 7 countries, co-official with Spanish in 4 countries, of official regional use in 3 countries, and without a specific status in 5 countries (López, 2009, p. 3). In addition to indigenous languages we can count numerous creole dialects, as well as other languages of Asian and European origin.

Evidently, we are talking about very different ethnic and societal patterns in the continent, since in some countries indigenous communities constitute only 5% of total population (Colombia, Venezuela, Paraguay), while in others – such as Bolivia or Guatemala – this percentage exceeds 50%. Linguistic diversity is also very variable, i.e. Colombia and Mexico counts up to 60-80 spoken languages, while Ecuador has only 12 of them. Regional distribution at first glance seems less complicated, since indigenous population traditionally lives in rural areas, however, in some cases, the growth of urban indigenous communities is remarkable, e.g. 75% of the Mapuche population in Chile

lives in towns and cities. As for the total number of speakers, relatively few vernacular peoples – Aymara, Quiché, Quechua – count one million or more representatives (López & Sichra, 2004, p. 125). Over 80% of the total indigenous population of the region is concentrated in Bolivia, Guatemala, Mexico and Peru, historically considered as the “most indigenous” countries (López, 2009, p. 4).

Ethnic belonging obviously does not always correspond to linguistic identity: in a number of cases representatives of the indigenous population are not able to preserve their mother tongue; however, the different modalities of preservation of autochthonous languages together with the use of Spanish have created a truly differentiated picture of linguistic diversity. At the same time the chances of successful language preservation and language use in everyday life do not necessarily depend on the number of speakers (López & Sichra, 2004, p. 126), and the actual will of the given community to maintain their tongue is crucial in this respect.

3. The origins and development of IBE

Bilingual education with an intercultural component means a participation of two languages and two cultures in the process of learning, and it includes preservation, development and teaching of languages, and also the development and the rapprochement of the given cultures, in order to guarantee the practice of interculturality (Lozano Vallejo, 2000, p.12).

In Latin America there does not exist a dominant concept related to education and interculturalism (Williamson, 2004, p. 24.), however the best definition seems to be given by López, as it reflects best what IBE is about: “[i]nterculturalism in education refers to learning that is rooted in one’s own culture, language, values, worldview and system of knowledge but that is, at the same time, receptive, open to and appreciative of other knowledges, values, cultures and languages. The final aim of intercultural education is learning to live together” (López, 2009, p. 9).

IBE is one of the varieties of bilingual education, aimed at finding answers not only to the problem of illiteracy, but also to such issues as social integration of indigenous communities together with preservation of their cultural and linguistic diversity. Its roots go back to the first decades of the 20th century (López, 2009, p. 7), when indigenous teachers took the initiative to introduce local languages into literacy programs both for children and adults, sometimes starting from designing alphabets for some of those languages, since many of them did not have script. The 1930-40s were characterized by the aspiration to ‘enlighten’ the indigenous, with a paternalistic aim to preserv nation states (López & Küper, 1999.) Until the 1970s the concept of multiculturalism was mostly ignored, and the so-called transitional bilingual education – which was popular at the time – demonstrated strong assimilationist features.

While the decade of the 1990s was still mainly characterized by monolingual alphabetization in indigenous education (López & Küper, 1999), in the recent years this

trend has undergone considerable changes. Transformations in the language use tendencies of the continent have led to the consequence that with some exceptions, vernacular monolingualism is not typical any more, every community being at least bilingual (López, 2009, p. 4).

However, despite these changes on the ideological level and on the level of everyday use of languages, the notion of social integration in practice still continues to be identified with ‘Hispanization’, with an active participation of the members of the indigenous communities themselves who do not see opportunities for self-realization in their mother tongue and prefer to continue their secondary studies in Spanish (Lozano Vallejo, 2000, p. 134). This practically means a shift from one (indigenous) monolingualism to another (hegemonic) one, or – given the relative rarity of cases nowadays when a person or a community speaks only an indigenous variety – from multilingualism to monolingualism in the dominant/national language. In order to avoid this as well as to overcome still existing inequalities, further work on diversification of curriculum content shall be conducted and further decentralization of the education system is needed.

As pointed out by Levy, it is more complicated to be literate in a language than to speak a language (Levy, 2003, p. 231); however, alphabetization does not have to be aimed at educating in one language, and the Latin-American example shows that promoting literacy does not necessarily mean moving towards monolingualism. Indeed, the process started as a homogenizing one, but the recent two decades have replaced the focus from monolingualism as an ideal to multicultural values. Levy argues that the spread of mass literacy leads to consolidating nationalism – most likely to be interpreted here in the sense of nation-building process – and democracy, which has monolingual tendencies as a consequence at local level (Levy, 2003, p. 233). However, as it can be seen below, the alphabetization in Latin America, especially when it came to the phase of literacy in a vernacular language, was inextricably linked to the democratization movement in the continent. It also worth to be mentioned that the Latin American case is different from that of other regions of the world due to the fact that the struggle for recognition is not aimed at creating independent states, but to promote participation in political processes and decision-making, and guarantee economic inclusion within their own country (López & Sichra, 2004, p. 130) through education, among others.

Due to the large variety of ethnic and linguistic patterns, a uniform approach cannot be applied. In order to meet the needs of every community, instead of nation-wide statistics, policy-makers shall use figures applicable to a given region. For example, rural indigenous areas as the most vulnerable ones need special attention to the habits and socio-cultural specificities of language users (Zúñiga, 2000, p. 128), however the context of urban areas do not necessarily mean that language rights in education are guaranteed.

In many cases young children at the time of starting school speak up to four of five local languages, and already during primary school, they face the obligation to

learn subjects in the dominant local or national language they might not speak at all. As pointed out by Levy, the “pre-literate linguistic equilibrium” (Levy, 2003, p. 231) may include several languages a person speaks in their smaller environment; however, when it comes to literacy which often means the acquisition of another language, it becomes complicated and people start giving up their vernacular variety, moving to another area or simply remaining illiterate. Therefore, the goal of the IBE is precisely the preservation of the highest possible way of multilingualism even after achieving literacy.

As mentioned above, multilingual literacy is a significantly more complicated issue than a monolingual one; therefore, it requires more efforts, financial contribution and well-organized strategies. Direct indigenous involvement has also proved its efficiency, and as such it could be of key importance, therefore, for achieving sustainable results, it is crucial to ensure the participation of indigenous communities at every stage of the process (López, 2009, p. 49; Williamson, 2004, p. 25).

Language competences are crucial for any kind of social interaction, and without a functioning competence in the language spoken around, one will face a number of difficulties in everyday life as well as the fulfillment of his or her rights. Patten (2003, p. 307) referring to Kymlicka names this a “context of choice” that constitutes a range of opportunities in different kinds of human interactions. This can be demonstrated in two ways, either “a sufficiently healthy context of choice operating in her own native language” is provided, or a person “can achieve sufficient competence in a second language in which there is an adequate context of choice available.” In the context of Latin America that means that a Quechua- or Mapuche-speaking person should either have a wide set of options operating in his or her mother-tongue, or speak good Spanish in order to have access to opportunities of self-realization. Intercultural bilingual education is designed in a way to correspond to both of these possibilities.

It is remarkable to note what aspects of bilingual education were taken up by the government sector and what were promoted by the civil society, including the representatives of indigenous organizations. Government models generally focus on the technical features of intercultural bilingualism, embracing practices related to curricula development or pedagogical processes (Williamson, 2004, p. 25), while the civil sector still puts an emphasis on education and language related political rights (López, 2009, p. 2). The scope of this article does not permit to analyze the different experiences of some countries where IBE started either as a governmental policy or as a civil initiative, but it is still important to underline that the civil sector continues to attribute an utmost importance to the rights-based approach to this question.

4. International implications

The concept which started as a movement for the preservation of languages and culture of indigenous peoples has ended up having a considerable impact on international

developments related to the recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples. Or, more precisely, these two processes were developing in parallel, influencing each other. Education systems of the countries of the Latin American region started a comprehensive use of bilingual education in the 1980s, when the continent did not only face the appearance of isolated initiatives, but the issue also became an important element of the political struggle for the rights of indigenous population and the preservation of their identity with a large and systematic involvement of indigenous experts and educators (Williamson, 2004, p. 25).

This movement was also reflected on a global scale. In 1982 the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) established a Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP), which started the elaboration of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 1985. The Document was adopted by the UN General Assembly only in 2007, and it explicitly recognizes “the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning”, which should be guaranteed by the state “in conjunction with indigenous peoples” (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Art. 14).

Other important international forums were also dealing with the indigenous question. In 1989 the International Labor Organization adopted the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (C169) in 1989, and its Article 28 specifically mentioned that “children belonging to the peoples concerned shall, wherever practicable, be taught to read and write in their own indigenous language or in the language most commonly used by the group to which they belong” as well as it should be aimed that they achieved fluency in national language as well (C169, Art. 28).

The debate related to indigenous rights has been going on since then. On the occasion of the International Year of Languages (2008) UNESCO organized a large thematic debate related to indigenous and endangered languages and the role of languages in Education for All. During the discussion the rights-based approach to the question was emphasised also from UNESCO perspective, namely, the importance of equal treatment of languages by decision-makers, taking into account basic democratic principles, such as diversity meaning pluralism, „the equal dignity of cultures, of human rights, of non-discrimination and of equality of opportunity” (UNESCO 180 EX/INF.24, 2008).

Current discussion within United Nations and its specialized agencies regularly take up the issue of indigenous identity and rights, which started as a cultural debate, and by now has become a broad human rights issue. Among recent developments the adoption of the Outcome Document of the high-level plenary meeting of the General Assembly – known as the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples – can be

mentioned. The resolution unanimously approved in September 2014 explicitly refers to linguistic rights in education.²

5. Conclusion

IBE has proved to be successful in some areas, especially from the perspective of the evolution of values from dominant language acquisition to multilingualism and the importance of education in mother tongue as the key for self-realization. It certainly contributed to the protection of political rights of autochthonous peoples and international awareness raising about the needs of indigenous population, especially in developing countries; it has played a crucial role in promoting indigenous identity and slowing down the endangerment of languages. All these questions rank high in the contemporary international agenda. Domestic legislative framework – from Constitutional guarantees to regulations in the field of education – in most cases can be considered as satisfactory, even if implementation takes time. However, bringing up the issue of the role of mother tongue to international level had a considerable implication on worldwide processes related to rights of autochthonous peoples.

The fact that some countries – such as Uruguay – which until recently has not reported about indigenous population living in its territory, have recognized the presence of autochthonous peoples means that identity politics appear as a new factor in contemporary political thought which also needs to be taken into account while forming educational strategies (López, 2009, p. 4). This tendency may also be considered in many aspects as the merit of the IBE.

Insufficiencies of the IBE lay mostly in the field of implementation and practicalities. Even if successfully applied, in many cases bilingual education stops at the level of primary school, however, ideally, the presence and use of the indigenous languages should continue at least at the level of secondary school, or even further, which would mean a “societal sustainable bilingualism” (López, 2009, p. 10) with long-term positive implications on social and economic opportunities of the representatives of indigenous communities. The still remaining inadequacy between the question of identity and self-realization in one’s vernacular language may lead to considerable tensions.

² See A/RES/69/2:“§ 14. We commit ourselves to promoting the right of every indigenous child, in community with members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, [...] or to use his or her own language; §15. We commit ourselves to developing, in consultation with indigenous peoples, policies, programmes and resources, where relevant, that target the well-being of indigenous youth, in particular in the areas of health, education, employment and the transmission of traditional knowledge, languages and practices“.

The United Nation Millennium Development Goals Report 2015 shows that Goal 2 (achievement of universal primary education) has not had any significant progress in Latin America from 2000 to 2015; the enrollment rates remained at about the same level of 94% (MDG Report, 2015). However the changes compared to the 87% measured in 1990 show a progress by 2000, and that may also result from the success of IBE that has moved its focus towards an extensive use of autochthonous languages at school.

Referring to the doubts expressed by Levy relating literacy in mother tongue, it can be mentioned that the United Nations Education for All Global Monitoring Report underlines (EFA GMR Report, 2015, p. 148) that despite the ambivalence of the attitudes towards the feasibility of multilingual approaches, these latter proved to be much more credible today than at the start of the EFA period³, even taking into account the slowness of achieving tangible results.

Literacy of bilingual people should not only mean learning as such, but also transferring capacities into the other language spoken by the person (López & Hanemann, 2009, p. 244), and as such being functional and transmittable to other members of the society as well as for future generations. Evidently, more emphasis should be put on adult literacy (EFA GMR 2015, p. 148), especially in the still existing setting of vernacular monolingualism.

Bilingual education should in any case be considered in a wider context, which takes into account cultural, political and other aspects of the issue. Multicultural education which includes bilingualism or multilingualism has by nowadays achieved a broader meaning, which embraces the promotion of indigenous rights and – ideally – is supposed to go well beyond the learning of the hegemonic language of the given society, or managing reading and writing skills in either of the languages the given community speaks.

To sum up, despite the success of the human rights aspect of Intercultural Bilingual Education a considerable further work related to pedagogical side is needed, aimed at reaching the whole marginalized population and overcoming considerable gaps still remaining in the quality of teaching.

Following the right-based approach towards languages, the use of mother tongue in education is the main and the most concrete demand among linguistic rights, starting from the claim of the right to use mother tongue at schools – at least for basic understanding purposes, – till the opportunity of partly teaching in indigenous languages and finally, a system of bilingual education itself. The expansion of this notion has led to the implementation of bicultural-intercultural concept which includes the majority language as a second language (Iturralde Guerrero, 2004, p. 112).

These aspects – which go beyond mere technicalities – have to be placed properly in the national educational policy debate of the countries of the region. The issue

³ The Education for All (EFA) is global initiative started in 1990 and includes a set of targets to provide quality basic education for all children, youth and adults by 2015. See more at <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-all/>

transcends the frame of educational or language policies and involves questions of wider social transformation; since most countries of the continent still face the early phase of the “intercultural pluralist reorganization”, all attributes of a multicultural society shall be adjusted to this trend, according to the different needs of the very diverse Latin American communities (Múñoz Cruz, 2009, p. 222). And, precisely that way, the region will be progressively moving from inclusion of indigenous communities through intercultural bilingual education to an “intercultural education for all” (López 2009, p. 9.), which would be a sustainable outcome of the process started several decades ago.

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