Building Global Communities Through Universal Bilingual Education

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Abstract

This paper explores the process resulting in building global communities through the idea of universal bilingual education. In order to do so the paper presents basic theoretical concepts of global communities that are useful today, ie. community of trade, community of law, and community of autonomous communities. Those three concepts are being used to reflect the key aspects of the process in the context of bilingual education and its central role to the effort of building global bridges across local determinants of national schooling systems and the school practice. Thus the case study of the Polish educational initiative International Social Education Programme Bilingual Future serves the purpose of showing how it could be done with the clear goal of gaining real linguistic competence along with social, communicative, and intercultural skills.

Keywords: *Universal Bilingualism, Bilingual Education, English, Global Communities*

1. Introduction

This paper will explore the issue of the emergence of global communities in the context of specific bilingual education models and implementation strategies of particular solutions. The main problem tackled here is related to the transformation process occurring within two main domains. The first domain in which change is visible today and also seems to be necessary in the forthcoming future is the organization of particular schooling systems. The school as an institution is affected today immensely by the combination of those elements, and in different European countries, various solutions are being proposed in order to counteract them. The other domain, which has undergone a significant change in recent times, is linked with the basic educational paradigms that make the foundation of every national schooling system and are closely related and represented by national educational policies. In many circumstances, these policies tend today to shift towards a more conservative side, making the field of education a battleground for a proxy war of political ideologies [1]. The differences in socialization and enculturation patterns between today's youth of Generation Z start to be crucial in the cultural sphere [5]. Thus the generational gap is becoming wider in the recent years, especially when we take into account the key role of information technology in the life and learning strategies of children and young adults alike.

2. Theoretical framework

The firm awareness that there's the possibility of building something beyond the local framework is essential to the understanding of the young generation's life expectations in many stances. It is more comprehensive if we take into account the fact that a combination of global and local elements is also to be found in the way young people communicate with each of their peers or construct age-complex socio-cultural narratives and discourses. It is worth noting that the imaginary online communities, to paraphrase Benedict Anderson's notion, tend to some extent to export these

semantic codes outside the internet ecumene. A global community of the young emerges from the many efforts to translate the various local cultural codes into a general global language. To no surprise, English has become thus the most popular linguistic platform of mutual understanding there. Nevertheless, when we speak of global communities in the context drawn above, we have to let go of the usually taken-for-granted dichotomy of local vs global, as it is not perceived by young people as exclusive anymore but rather as two complementary levels of the same reality. These levels mostly have a common denominator – the growing value of information as the main indicator for education, economic growth, or international relations. Based on the process of exchange and circulation of information (and, in more general terms, also knowledge in all of its diversity), it becomes clear that contemporary global communities can be created and integrated with two major community models in mind. Omar Dahbour identifies them respectively as 1) community of trade and 2) community of law [3].

The community of trade is being founded in the tradition of contractualism. This might be problematic in the process of global community building, as it may cause the emergence of new and deepening of some already existing inequalities among the state and non-state actors involved. Although the theoretical framework for the community of trade is rooted in Charles Beitz's concept of distributive justice, it is obvious that the economization of relations becomes troublesome in many contemporary applications. The community of trade must be thus reformed into a new and more equality-endorsing model allowing the circulation of key values.

Second form of community model to be discussed here is the community of law. According to Dahbour, it might be considered as a simple idealization of the existing model of international law [3]. On the other hand community of law is bound by legal and formal boundaries drawn from local and international contexts. The visible ineffectiveness of the execution of international legal acts is rooted in the complexity of these boundaries and should be considered as an obstacle to overcome immediately, not just through the means of increased cooperation but through the bottom-up action and empowerment of local authorities and institutions. This issue has long been discussed in the legal context of global vs national law. What was central to those debates was, however, the fact that the center of the debate was not the deprivation of states of their legal power. Dahbour proposes a solution to the problems mentioned above in regard to the two described models of global communities by suggesting a third one – a community of autonomous communities [3]. These global communities seek to limit the interdependence caused by trade relations and power abuse or legal abstraction in the spirit of Jean Jacques Rousseau's vision of autonomous city-states.

3. The Key Role of Universal Bilingual Education

One of the key areas of education which is affected directly by the influences described above is foreign language education. Especially teaching English to non-English speakers can be problematic if we take into consideration how difficult it can be when the existing schooling system is not endorsing learning real linguistic competencies and is focused instead on maintaining the existing ineffective model based on memorizing vocabulary and the sheer content of textbooks. The many

deficits in contemporary foreign language education originate in that very ineffective policy but also are often related to specific educational paradigms affecting the system as a whole. Starting from the moment of birth, and taking into account the lifelong learning process, including adults re-learning their trade, gaining new competencies, we shift the notion of education into new territory. The necessity of change in the educational paradigm opens thus paths for possible reforms of schooling systems, both on the local and a global scale. What starts this process in the first place is, however, grounded in the very subject of all educational efforts, i.e., the cognitive potential of a growing child.

In the case of bilingual children, the potential presented above is especially visible in their non-linguistic competencies, like, for example, social skills, intercultural communication, greater level of empathy, greater level of self-confidence towards others, etc. On that level of development, social competence is usually defined as the ability of a child to gain personal goals within social interactions while at the same time maintaining positive relations with others. This sort of social skill has even greater importance in the context of intercultural relations and the adaptive processes of children with immigrant background within the school system of the host society [6]. Certainly, in such case, bilingualism and multilingualism have an obvious advantage over monolinguistic competence. In consequence, it forces us to redefine bilingualism as a specific feature of interactions and simultaneously a factor of increasing strength in the sphere of relations occurring on an interpersonal and intergroup level. Both aspects of social relations contribute eventually to the construction of meaningful connection to the world, either on a local or a global scale. The question remains, however, how this socio-cultural connection leads us to the actual increase and the change of character of linguistic competencies in English for non-English speakers. Innovative tools for bilingual and multilingual education remain a key asset in that regard.

4. Case Study: International Social Education Programme

An outstanding example of the implementation of innovative bilingual education based on English and applied with the pedagogical philosophy in mind described at the beginning of this paper is the International Universal Bilingual Education Program/Bilingual Future in Poland. The program originated in the early 2000 when the idea of a bilingual education was born and developed by the team of specialists into a sophisticated form of a complementary ecosystem of various instruments used by early education teachers on every day basis. The program is being implemented in three basic types of educational institutions: 1) creches, 2) kindergartens, and 3) elementary schools (just in three first years). The choice of the mentioned types is related to the methodological and conceptual base view of the necessity of acquiring English as a second language at the youngest age, starting from birth up to 7 years old. This relatively short time frame makes the pedagogical effort of crucial importance due to the fact that this age period holds a special significance in language acquisition. The application of Eric Lehneberg's hypothesis of the critical period finds its place in the idea behind the program, as well as many other theories of bilingual education and upbringing that refer to the concept that learning starts from the moment of birth. Lennberg's idea is being taken here as a

reference for designing various forms of educational activities supporting the child not just in the process of language acquisition but also in the whole natural development and socialization.

Lenneberg identified the critical period as the time frame in the human development process that allows us to acquire most efficiently our basic competencies in the sphere of communication thanks to the maximum plasticity of our neurological system and brain [7]. It starts with the birth and ends with the puberty. Outside the critical period, linguistic competencies are acquired with visible difficulty and require much more effort with no guarantee of success. With that statement, he made an attempt to bring back biology into the linguistic and pedagogical discourse, a claim similar in its resonance to Noam Chomsky's idea of universal grammar. In his opinion, language is a species-specific mental organ that „grows" in the mind, just like any other organ does [2]. The holistic approach represented by his theory takes the notion of development and moves it from the reductionist position to the study of the whole complexity of language acquisition process. In effect, we must accept the assumption that there's a universal matrix for language that is biologically encoded in all human beings, but the influence of environmental factors transforms and particularizes this natural structure of the brain, forming the basic linguistic competence at the end. The competence can be culture-specific but still reflects the elements of a universal language structure like syntax, semantics, or phonology. Lenneberg's view of nativism is thus located within the dispositional model. Our linguistic properties are therefore contextualized while still maintaining a great potential for learning and perfecting them as dispositions of our mind. What can be problematic are the limitations of our biology and the aging process of the brain. Therefore the critical period remains the key moment in which must place those pedagogical actions and schooling efforts which are essential to the educational goals set in a particular system of education.

The Bilingual Future program is facing those challenges through the idea and practice of direct cooperation with and between schools and kindergartens involved in the program. Networking, exchange of experiences and innovative methods or pedagogical ideas, and last but not least, direct interpersonal relations between teachers, school principals, and local authorities are an extra added value to Bilingual Future's effect. It follows the principle of self-determination and gives autonomy to teachers on how the daily activities in English are put within the organization of the institution and allow them to combine English with other activities and subjects like arts. What could be considered an obstacle to the implementation of the program on a wider scale are the limitations in the number of professional English teachers and the digital infrastructure in some of the institutions. The solution given by the program is fairly simple and comes towards those problems. It allows teachers who work in schools and kindergartens already and do not speak English at all thanks to the ready-made scenarios, short cartoons and songs, and other content used by the teachers on a daily basis in the program with the groups of preschool children divided into two age levels: 1) 3-4-year-olds, and 2) 5-6-year-olds. Both levels are linked with specific characters as it is being argumented through the context method and One Person One Language rule.

6. Results and Discussion

The example of the International Universal Social Education program can be considered as a successful practical implementation of bilingual education focused primarily on linguistic effectiveness and full second language immersion. It is also an exemplification of and an important contribution to the bottom-up approach to education as such. What we may draw as conclusions from this example represents as well the community-building process in the third dimension mentioned by Dahbour. The autonomy given to the educational institutions by the program and the weight put on establishing English-based global communication reflects two major ideas contemporary education reforms should follow. The first one is counteracting the negative trends in schooling systems taking place worldwide and limiting not just the learning potential of the young generation but obstructing many direct innovative actions taken by teachers and educators at the level of particular schools and classes. The tendency to stop innovative education through extensive workload given to teachers, a large number of bureaucratic duties, or low pay and social status often has the effect of teachers leaving education for good and moving into other areas of the current job market. The Polish example is, in recent years, more than obvious in that regard. Especially subject-specific teachers, who may find more lucrative work elsewhere, are tempted to adapt to the situation. The lack of human resources in professional English teachers is affecting Polish preschools as well. This situation forces the school authorities to move other subject teachers to teaching English, despite the fact that they are not qualified to do so. The everyday absurds and dialectics of the Polish school and preschool reality are a striking example of the necessity of reforming the language education philosophy in general.

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