

MODERN CHALLENGES FOR THE KALMYK LANGUAGE TEACHERS

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Abstract. *The article deals with the issues of indigenous languages preservation and promotion. The author highlights the linguistic situation in the Republic of Kalmykia. It is suggested that in teaching the Kalmyk language it would be worthwhile to apply the methods which proved effective in teaching foreign languages. At the same time one should take into account the context of a particular linguistic community.*

Keywords: *indigenous language, language teaching, ethnic identity, teacher training*

It has been generally assumed that all Kalmyks are bilingual and they usually name Kalmyk as their mother tongue. As a matter of fact, the majority of the population may be regarded as pseudo-bilingual on account of the fact that the use of Kalmyk in the total volume of communication is quite restricted. The indigenous language serves the functions connected mainly with ethnic culture activities and everyday communication; it is partly used in mass media and education.

Meanwhile, the teaching of the Kalmyk language at all levels leaves much to be desired. It is taught in schools as one of the subjects and is not used as the language of instruction. As a rule, school leavers can hardly speak the mother tongue in everyday conversation. The crisis in Kalmyk language teaching has made many people think of applying the foreign language teaching paradigm to their mother tongue. This point seems rather debatable and causes heated arguments in the Kalmyk academic and educational circles. We do not intend to go into discussion here as this article represents some speculation on the issue of Kalmyk language teaching on behalf of a teacher of English.

As we see it, the transition to the teaching of an indigenous language as a foreign one implies that the whole methodology background should be altered. The renowned authority in this field J. Harmer describes two kinds of motivation: **extrinsic** motivation that comes from outside the classroom and can be influenced by various factors such as the attitude of society, family and peers to this particular subject, and **intrinsic** motivation. The latter is generated inside the classroom and comes as a result of teaching methods, classroom activities, the perception of their personal success or failure [1].

The case of Kalmyk demonstrates an impressive growth of extrinsic motivation for learning their mother tongue. Youths are willing to speak Kalmyk, and this desire in many cases stems from growing tendency towards acquiring one's ethnic identity in the current situation of academic and labor mobility. The young generation wants to be able to share a common language which becomes a symbol of common identity. They are also culturally conscious because they would like their unique language to survive and thrive so that it could be passed on to the new generations. So the situation with the extrinsic motivation seems quite satisfactory.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about the intrinsic motivation. For years the Kalmyk community has been aware of the outdated methods of Kalmyk language teaching, lack of resources and generally lack of language planning in this field. Today we still observe a sad state of affairs concerning this issue. After children start learning Kalmyk at school, they become

bored because of old-fashioned methods and dull resources, so it is a very hard job to sustain their motivation.

So this raises a serious issue: what is modern Kalmyk language? To whom is it taught? Who decides what kind of language we try to get students to master? H. Widdowson, an expert in English language teaching, considers the notions like "proper English", "usage", "native-speaker competence". For many years teachers have taught the "invented" language which did not give a clear idea of the actual situation in the English-speaking community. Therefore, some linguists are trying to get closer to reality. For instance, the Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary compilers wanted to help learners with "real English" (emphasis in the original) instead of the traditional classroom English. In language teaching, we need to constantly ask ourselves for what kind of community and for what kind of community we teach this particular language [2]. Both the teacher and the student should keep in mind the appropriateness of linguistic means (as H. Widdowson puts it, "proper words in proper places"). And it is evident that the Kalmyk language community and the scholars cannot agree on what is the proper Kalmyk language.

Today the usual teaching practice is the "demonstration" Kalmyk when students (especially very young ones) use their mother tongue at various performances, contests and other public activities. It is nice to see young learners sing Kalmyk songs, recite poems (often with a strong accent) and do all other kinds of show, but outside the performance hall they are hardly able to communicate on everyday topics.

However, the young Kalmyks want to make their mother tongue less formal, more colloquial, producing sometimes curious hybrid words (a Kalmyk stem + Russian or English affix): mendation, mendyariki (Mendt! - Hello!), handjos (Thank you! - Handjanav!). People can have different attitudes towards this linguistic phenomenon, but it demonstrates a conscious or an unconscious wish to speak a living language and to create a kind of language play. For the young Kalmyks these hybrids compensate for the lack of colloquial vocabulary which is required in everyday communication for certain subcultures. And in this respect we cannot but agree with a Swiss language scholar Brigitte Koch: "Language can only be successful, if it caters to as many of the communication situations he encounters in his daily life" [3].

One of the main obstacles which hamper the progress in mother tongue teaching is insufficient resources which are vital in learning any language. As a rule, mother tongue classrooms make use of Kalmyk fiction which was created mainly in the

twentieth century. Nowadays there hardly is any fiction in the Kalmyk language which could be studied at school.

Concerning literature, we can point out two aspects of its use in language teaching. One way is retrospective, in which students are initiated into the established literary heritage. This process is of transmissive character and is aimed at initiating language learners into the traditional culture.

The other way is of prospective character and is future-oriented, preparing learners to cope with unpredictable communicative tasks [4].

So the character of texts somehow influences people's attitudes towards the mother tongue and if we set the objective of improving Kalmyk language teaching.

"Public attitudes are extremely important. How is your language perceived by the young generation? Is it seen as the language of old people, of peasants, of archaic lifestyles? Or is it seen as something modern, vibrant, progressive? It is imperative that your language have a modern, progressive public image" [5].

It is common practice for Kalmyk language teachers to use the Kalmyk epic "Dzhangar" and other folklore texts as a means of transmitting the literary heritage to young learners, yet more often than not they are not motivating. They just don't speak to them. Both teachers and students badly need modern texts. Similar state of affairs could be seen in other post-Soviet republics. Speaking of the status of the Kazakh language in Kazakhstan, I. Savin points out that most of the resources lack modern character: "Even a cursory glance at numerous Kazakh books, brochures and magazines displayed in every bookstand shows that 90% of them are devoted to past events (...) there exists a layer of widespread ideas about the national culture which represents a stereotypical set of themes and images, playing, however, a small part in everyday motivation of individual tastes and preferences of particular persons" [6].

The young people of today need exciting, well-illustrated texts which are more immediately relevant to the students' lives. Why not write materials about the Kalmyk celebrities who have distinguished themselves in different fields of life both in Russia and abroad? Learners would definitely like to tell in Kalmyk about a TV producer, a brilliant showman Sangadzhitarbaev, a graduate of one of the most prestigious Russian universities? Every Kalmyk knows an outstanding sportsman, a kick boxer and a senator BatuKhasikov, and girls and boys would be delighted to know some facts of his biography. One can also remember the names of a famous anchorwoman, a Channel 1 TV star Alexandra Burataeva, a silver Olympic medal winner, a wrestler Mingiyan Semenov, a brilliant artist, academician Dmitry Sandzhiev whose talent has been recognized in Russia and abroad. Their life stories could be quite motivational both in the linguistic and social aspects.

Content is one of the topical issues in developing resources for Kalmyk language teaching. Students want to discuss the subjects which are close to the social realities of the community, which reflect life beyond schooling: "Youths in the changing world", "Cinema", "Entertainment" etc. Naturally, this kind of communication will require considerable expansion of lexis through borrowings or coinages by means of the mother tongue. Borrowings from Russian are likely to account for the major part of the new vocabulary, including English words which have come to stay in Russian.

Another means of transmitting a living language is cinema. In this respect one cannot but mention the Yakut cinema phenomenon which is much spoken of today. Some of the feature films (including the ones produced by amateur artists) have received favorable reviews from numerous critics. The most remarkable thing about these films is that they are made in the

Yakut language. Evidently, both the professionals and the amateur artists do not seek recognition outside Yakutia, they just shoot films that could appeal to their fellow-countrymen. So, why not follow this trend? Modern Kalmyk reality could offer a lot of stories which may be told by means of visual art, and they do necessarily demand big budget. They say that a Yakut film director can make a movie for only twenty thousand roubles. The modern Yakut cinema employs a lot of amateur artists including school teachers who are engaged in film-making during their vacation. And it is here that mother tongue teachers can make the most of their product and demonstrate how to use the language in a wide range of communicative situations. The language of the movies is also a source of language enrichment through idioms and colorful expressions which obtain high popularity among native speakers.

Listening is another powerful resource in mastering a language. Students need recordings of fiction, everyday dialogues, songs with linguistic commentaries and other texts (podcasts). The mother tongue should enter virtual reality because one cannot imagine the young generation without the Internet, which can become very instrumental in learning Kalmyk. A young Internet user shares her opinion in Facebook: "I think we can make use of the Instagram in learning Kalmyk. One could create a well-illustrated account with funny pictures and words and phrases in Kalmyk (accompanied by translation into Russian and English). Of course, it requires some advertising. To begin with, all Kalmyk Internet users could follow it and broaden the network through their connections".

The young Kalmyks would also like to watch commercials, documentaries, cartoons and other kinds of movies in the Kalmyk language. Now everybody has a mobile phone which can be used to make videos and upload them in YouTube.

So all of these means could be quite beneficial for the mother tongue teachers and learners. Modern means of learning and communication require dramatic changes in teacher-learner relationship which usually reflects specific socio-cultural traditions of a particular community. In oriental cultures a teacher has always been regarded as a highly respected person whose authority can never be questioned. Is one turns to the Western tradition, we can expect more learner autonomy when a student is given more freedom in the process of language acquisition.

Generally speaking, a modern Kalmyk language teacher must be technically proficient and be able to use classroom equipment: the overhead projector, computers, data projectors and interactive whiteboards. Mastering educational technology is an indispensable part of modern teacher training.

Meanwhile, one can start with basic things. The majority of the students of Kalmyk find it a big problem to write an essay or composition. This task in most cases seems quite impossible because textbooks do not offer sample compositions or patterns and clichés which could be helpful in writing. If, in comparison, we take an English coursebook, we will see a great variety of up-to-date topics, numerous clichés and sample essays that support students in mastering written English.

The teachers of Kalmyk could also use PowerPoint presentations in explaining Kalmyk grammar (which is rather complicated), animation, music. One of teaching techniques in English is learning the language through songs. There are some very lyrical Kalmyk songs that can be used in teaching lexis and vocabulary.

Today the teachers of Kalmyk face a strong demand: to follow the latest tendencies in language teaching, to keep up-to-date in order to meet the tough requirements of today's education and receive proper teacher training education.

Much depends on their will and sincere desire for self-perfection. Information on modern language teaching can be

obtained from teachers' magazines, teachers' seminars and conferences. There is now a wealth of all kinds of educational resources in the Internet which include materials that can be adapted to teaching indigenous languages.

In short, the Kalmyk language teaching for various purposes nowadays demands a responsible attitude on behalf of Kalmyk language teachers. They must be really committed to our common cause, and the community should be supportive of their efforts.

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