

MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION FOR MINORITY SCHOOLS IN LITHUANIA: IN SEARCH OF BALANCE AND COMPROMISE

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Abstract. This paper examines language policy concerns in Lithuania, with a particular focus on the prominence, acquisition and use of the state language within the education of national minorities. Comparative aspects with Latvia and Estonia are shortly discussed as well. The study draws upon secondary data sources, primarily statistics provided by Lithuanian governmental institutions and policy documents. The paper highlights ongoing debates in language policy for education from the top-down mono-ethnic state approach and the opposing (or complementary) postmodernist perspective, which advocates for a context-speaker-sensitive approach to language in education. While discussing these issues, the paper aims to offer a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics between language policies in education and sociolinguistic realities by encouraging further research and considerations for more inclusive language approaches in multiethnic societies.

Keywords: Bilingualism, language acquisition, language policy, Lithuanian, state language, minority schools.

1. Introduction

The Baltic region has always been multilingual, with a diverse constellation of languages changing over time. The twentieth century has been marked by the Russian language “heritage” of the Soviet era, the rapid spread of technologies, and the acquisition of English at the end of the century. Although the linguistic diversity in the Baltics has been studied extensively (Ehala, Zabrodskaja 2011;

Lazdina, Marten 2019; Verschik 2021), it still requires attention and research, especially in the domain of language policy in education.

The status of the Russian language, as well as the attitudes towards Russian from the perspectives of the minority and majority, its prestige, and its use have significantly changed since the reestablishment of independence. It is obvious that various shifts regarding Russian are related to the geopolitical situation in the region and have to be taken into consideration always when investigating language questions, particularly today, as the war in Ukraine stirs negative attitudes not only towards Russia but quite noticeably towards the use of Russian. Attitudes and teaching/ learning or using Russian among the Baltic population vary primarily due to the ethnic composition. In approximate numbers, Lithuania has a much lower amount of the Russian population (5%), compared to 24% in Latvia and 22% in Estonia (governmental statistical data from all three Baltic states). Despite this difference, due to ideological/ political reasons, Russian was withdrawn from schools in Lithuania, the number of university students learning Russian also dropped, and lecturers had to retrain as specialists in other languages. The gap without Russian lasted approximately from 1991 to 2000. After joining the EU, diverse forms of mobility have become available, and Lithuanians started learning English. At the same time, Russian returned to schools and universities and became an important language for the business sector (Dabašinskienė 2011; Lazdina, Marten 2019).

Additionally, Russian was quite well accepted by Lithuanian society, as many individuals considered Russian to be a valuable language to know: approximately 50% believed that Russian was the most useful foreign language for personal development and for children to learn for their future (for other Balts, see Eurobarometer 2012). Current trends demonstrate a change in the attitudes (the data, however, were collected before the war in Ukraine), as the evaluation of Russian as a useful/ important language has changed significantly, from 22.35 % in 2010 to 6.77 % in 2020 (Vilkiene

2022: 230). Russian is also much less spoken by the younger generation (18-44 years of age) and more often by the older (45-74 years of age) (Hilbig 2022: 76-77). Thus, it is obvious that the knowledge and use of Russian has decreased due to the age factor and the changing attitudes based on the geopolitical threat coming from Russia.

The linguistic landscape in Lithuania is marked by a dramatic increase in the use of English, especially by the younger generation, as it is associated with economic and career advantages. Its value and prestige are much higher than ten years ago (Ramonienė 2022: 275), and it is spreading at an unprecedented speed at the cost of other languages (not only those of minorities but also other foreign languages, like German, French or Spanish), including Lithuanian. Despite its shrinking situation, Russian is still popular, widely used, and important for ethnic minorities in their native language acquisition and maintenance. Studies have shown (Ramonienė 2010; Lichačova 2013) that Russian has quite a high prestige among the Russian minority members.

Minorities tend to be under-represented from a cultural and educational perspective compared to the majority group. Many studies conclude that minority children show poorer literacy skills than their monolingual peers because they have acquired less proficiency in their second language (August, Shanahan, 2006; Silven, Rubinov, 2010). Despite noticeable advancements in the majority language learning among ethnic minorities in Lithuania, research still indicates inadequate competence in acquiring Lithuanian, which is the cause of poorer academic performance, limited career prospects, and social isolation. One of the significant factors in ethnic minority families that should motivate them to raise their children as multilingual is the language of instruction. If parents want their children to study in the society's dominant language to integrate faster, this dominant language will likely be associated with higher social values than those attached to the minority language. On the other hand, the minority language could also be chosen as the main language of schooling if parents see more advantages for their children

in favoring it. These two directions have been observed over the years in the Lithuanian education system, and the outcomes are not always satisfactory regarding dominant state language proficiency. The obtained results suggest that children are much less competent in Lithuanian when attending minority schools (Dabašinskiėnė, Kubiliūtė 2019). This raises questions about language development among children belonging to language minorities, especially concerning their educational needs and schooling.

This study will debate language policy concerns in general and the issues of language of instruction in the education of ethnic minorities in Lithuania in particular. It draws upon secondary data sources, primarily analyzing data provided by Lithuanian governmental institutions and policy documents (mainly from 2018-2022). Specifically, the analysis will concentrate on the following educational focus points: ethnic majority versus minority, state language versus ethnic minority (mainly Russian) languages, and global English. The paper highlights ongoing debates in the language policy for education from the top-down mono-ethnic state approach and the opposing (or complementary) postmodernist perspective, which advocates for a context-speaker-sensitive approach to language in education. While discussing these issues, this paper aims to offer a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics between language policies in education and sociolinguistic realities by encouraging further research and considerations for more inclusive language approaches in multiethnic societies.

2. The state language: the problem of its prestige

As a state language, Lithuanian is insured and protected in all spheres of public life. Its status is recognized by the Lithuanian Constitution, State Language Law, and other related laws in education and administration, with additional supplementary acts and norms adopted at different periods of Lithuania's independence period. Other languages are employed in private domains and considered

foreign languages; the State Language Law regulates their use. The official institutions, such as the State Commission of the Lithuanian Language and the State Language Inspectorate, have the authority to arrange specific requirements for language practices in a top-down management mode (see Spolsky 2009).

Since the reestablishment of Lithuanian independence, the government has introduced a rather strict approach to turn the society, especially Russian speakers, towards societal dominant monolingualism (see Pavlenko 2013). The expansion of Russian during the Soviet era posed a threat to the status of the national language, which accounted for the efforts in the Baltic states to enact protective legislation for their state languages. These days, similar concerns involve the spread of English, which is seen as a significant danger reminiscent of the situation regarding the use of Russian (Vaičekauskienė, Šepetys 2018).

As the public discussions about protective, controlled, and purism-oriented language policy became louder and more visible, with the greater involvement of cultural and academic elites, politicians, and public opinion influencers, a change from the state institutions to a more moderate and more supportive approach towards linguistic practices of the society, including minority speakers ensued; thus, the pressure for a strict control regarding the state language has diminished. The turn to a more liberal approach towards linguistic practices (including minorities, young speakers using English and other hybrid varieties) within the society is also observed now while developing new language policy documents.

However, the most crucial condition for the long-term success of the state language policy is its recognition and acceptance – first at the legal level and then by society. The latter opposed the lack of consultations with the public and criticized the language policy for its conservatism, for clinging to the past, and for a rigorous approach to the relationship between language and society. The disregard for society's expectations and needs, paired with the imposition of norms and rules from above, brought about distancing from

one's own language, which can partly explain the intensive spread of English among young people. The fear of not being able to use the native language correctly and the disappointing results of the Lithuanian language and literature maturity exams (but excellent results in English) led to the decline of the Lithuanian language's prestige, its importance and necessity (Ramonienė 2022: 275-278).

Thus, sociolinguistic research on diverse issues (such as the repertoire of languages in use, linguistic behavior, multilingual tendencies, linguistic ideology prevailing in society, and linguistic attitudes towards languages, dialects, and languages of ethnic groups living in Lithuania) highlights an important problem – the question of language prestige. Having identified the problem, the respective Lithuanian institutions (the State Language Commission) developed the Lithuanian Language Prestige Program. However, most of the identified problems in this connection are associated only with globalization and the influence of the English language, while internal problems, the need for a more critical approach and reflection on the rigid language policy, are not noticed:

“Two things are of great importance for the functioning of the Lithuanian language: its legal status and prestige. However, until now, one of the most important areas of state language policy planning – the prestige of the language – has not received enough attention.” (VLKK, PP, 2019; II.3, the author's translation)

“It can be seen from the language attitudes in the public space that the prestige of the Lithuanian language is not high in some groups of society. The attitude towards the language is primarily determined by the processes of globalization taking place in the world. Due to the economic (and pragmatic) effect of globalization, the values of the users of different languages are changing, the criterion of functionality is starting to prevail, so the language is being viewed only as a communication tool. These processes promote the establishment of languages with greater communicative value, especially English.” (VLKK, PP, 2019; II.3, the author's translation).

On the other hand, the emphasis on the state language as a unifying factor for society in the face of the threat of Russian aggression has been duly highlighted. In this context, the draft for the *Guidelines of the State Language Policy for 2023-2027* has been discussed by the parliament. The strong emphasis on the state language is due to the war in Ukraine and Russian aggression:

“The unifying function of the state language is emphasized during the preparation of the Guidelines in the special conditions of international politics – when Ukraine is fighting for the integrity of the state. According to the provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania, the state of Lithuania is created by the civil nation: it consists of all citizens of Lithuania, regardless of nationality. Considering the Lithuanian language and culture as the most important factor uniting the citizens of Lithuania, goals and objectives are being formulated to ensure that this language meets all the needs of public linguistic communication and ensures smooth communication between the state and society.” (VLKK, Guidelines, 2023; I.2, the author’s translation).

The *Vision* part of the Guidelines strengthens the unifying role of Lithuanian as a state language and its importance to all citizens:

“The state language policy will have a unifying effect on all citizens of Lithuania and various groups of society, including national minorities, immigrants or re-emigrants.” (VLKK, Guidelines, 2023; IV.16, the author’s translation)

The prestige of the Lithuanian language is an issue that is particularly relevant to society and important for the further successful functioning of the language. Obviously, society’s attitude towards the language, willingness to learn and use it freely, without tension and fear of being criticized, is the way to proceed, acknowledging that it will be a long process. If the prestige of the state language is not high, it becomes even more challenging to motivate ethnic minorities to learn the language.

3. Languages in minority education: the gradual transformation

Individual multilingualism is valued in Lithuania, as it is associated with higher economic value and career advantages. Preferences for foreign languages in education have been strong for many years: English is the first choice for learning the first foreign language, and Russian is the first choice for learning the second foreign language (see annual comments and reports from the Lithuanian Ministry of Education and Sports). According to Eurobarometer (2012), more than 90% of Lithuanians consider English the most useful language for their personal development and their children's future language learning whereas Russian is also considered quite important (approximately 50 %).

Investigating language-related issues in the region requires careful consideration of various changes and preferences influenced by the geopolitical situation. The Russian-speaking population lost its special position, and language acquisition policies aim to ensure competence in the state languages. Thus, Lithuania continually adopts new language planning and integration policies in the education system.

Despite recent developments, a significant percentage of Lithuanian schoolchildren continue to select Russian as their second foreign language, with 67.9% choosing it even after February 24, 2022 (this is an 8.6% decrease compared to the previous year's 76.5% and a historical average of over 80%; the source – comments and reports from the Lithuanian Ministry of Education and Sports). The main reasons for this choice, at least in previous years, are parental influence and now – more than ever – the limited availability of other language options due to constraints such as a shortage of qualified teachers and teaching materials. The extent to which parents would recommend their children to choose German, French or other languages, given the opportunity, remains uncertain and subject to speculation. In general, the shortage of teachers for various subjects

now is critical in Lithuania. Thus, the Lithuanian linguistic landscape in schools mainly represents a trilingual mode: Lithuanian as a state language, Russian as a minority and second most popular foreign language, and global English on the top with the highest prestige of the most required language.

Language attitudes and prestige are reflected in the current linguistic landscape of ethnic minority education. In Lithuania, a strong protective language policy in education started to be implemented since the reestablishment of independence, with the primary aim of teaching the state language to ethnic minorities. Thus, over time, especially after 2004, more positive attitudes and increased levels of the state language in minority groups have been observed in sociolinguistic studies (Ramonienė et al. 2010), particularly among the younger generation born in the independent state. This particular tendency and external factors (linguistic rights and the post-modern approach to minority needs) inspired discussions and a search for alternative, more inclusive educational approaches to adopt cultural and linguistic diversity that would reflect the language and educational needs of minority groups. The policy still retained a strong focus on Lithuanian, but, as we will see, Lithuanian language competence in minority schools was still found to be unsatisfactory.

As May claims, one of the most comprehensive accounts concerning the issue was proposed by Churchill (1986), who suggested six policy “stages” revealing the educational and linguistic needs of minority children within the countries of OECD. The six stages are arranged (in ascending order) by the degree to which such policies recognize and include minority languages: Stage 1 (Learning deficit), Stage 2 (Socially linked learning deficit), Stage 3 (Learning deficit from social/ cultural differences), Stage 4 (Learning deficit from mother tongue deprivation), Stage 5 (Private use language maintenance), Stage 6 (Language equality) (May 2012: 177–178). Following the arguments proposed by Churchill, Stages 1–4 emphasize that minority groups should seek the same social, cultural, and linguistic outcomes as the majority group. The instrumental objectives

in education, as defined by the majority, should be the same for all ethnic groups within a nation-state. The premise is thus the incorporation of minority groups into the hegemonic civic culture of the nation-state, with minimal accommodation of minority languages and cultures. Churchill argues that it is only in Stages 5 and 6 that objectives and outcomes also incorporate the cultural and linguistic values of minority groups and, by doing so, begin to question the value of a monocultural and monolingual society. Both these stages assume that minority groups can (and should) maintain their language and culture over time, whereas stages 1 to 4 take the opposite approach (May 2012: 186).

Šliavaitė asserts that Lithuanian education policy is characterized by two of Churchill's Stages. *Learning deficit from mother tongue deprivation* (Stage 4) means that in solving policy problems, the aim is to create bilingual educational institutions where children of ethnic minorities could receive at least primary education in their mother tongue. *Private use language maintenance* (Stage 5) recognizes the use of a minority's native language in a private space; assimilation is no longer sought, and bilingual education is guaranteed throughout the school year (Šliavaitė 2016: 109). Her observations suggest that the Lithuanian education policy regarding minority languages is characteristic of Stages 4 and 5. Šliavaitė's statement is based on the fact that in 2011, amendments to the Education Law expanded the use/ learning of the Lithuanian language in the process of education conducted in the language of minorities, reflecting the argument that exclusively minority language schools do not guarantee appropriate achievements in the field of education due to the unsatisfactory competence of the state language. Thus, as we will demonstrate below, the emphasis on an increased number of Lithuanian classes and teaching some subjects in Lithuanian at different levels of education, particularly in preschool, will be reflected in the state policy documents and in practice.

The study "Analysis of the state of education of Lithuanian national minorities 2021", approved by the Lithuanian Ministry of

Education, Science and Sport (published in 2022), provides sufficient data on diverse parameters related to the four-year dynamics in the minority education process. However, this review lacks a more profound analysis and explanation of tendencies. Carrying out a qualitative analysis and formulating predictions for further management of the process would have been a valuable addition.

The following section will summarize the report, offering critical remarks and insights concerning future tendencies. As stated in the report (NŠA 2022), in the 2021-2022 school year, 47,438 preschoolers were studying in the languages of national minorities alongside general education schoolchildren. Among them, over 21,000 were enrolled in schools offering instruction in multiple languages, such as Lithuanian and Russian, Lithuanian and Polish, Russian and Polish, or all three languages, while more than 14,000 pupils were studying in general education schools with Russian as the language of instruction. The Polish national minority also constituted a significant portion, with over 10,000 schoolchildren belonging to this group. Belarusian was the language of instruction for 288 pupils. Figure 1 demonstrates a relatively stable distribution of languages throughout four years (2018-2021), with a slight but not statistically significant increase in Russian and a multilingual choice of languages in the last year. As we see, the total number of pupils choosing to study in a multilingual mode is increasing; thus, we assume the tendency is worth following and analyzing more deeply. This trend is further reflected at different levels of education from 2018 to 2021 (NŠA 2022), showing a decrease of approximately 9.5 percentage points in the number of children enrolled in *preschool* and *pre-primary* education programs conducted in Polish and Russian languages. The decrease is explained by most children being educated in preschools that offer education in multiple languages. In *primary* schools, there was a decline of 3.4% in the number of pupils receiving instruction in Polish and a decrease of 6.2% in Russian-language instruction. Again, primary schools offering bilingual education experienced an increase in pupil enrollment. The higher

education level shows a somewhat different tendency: *pro-gymnasiums* demonstrate an increase of 3.1% in the number of students learning in Polish and a significant rise of 18.8% in those studying in Russian. The highest number of students from all national minorities were found in *gymnasiums*. Notably, Russian-language instruction in *gymnasiums* experienced the most significant increase in student numbers at 24.4%, followed by Polish at 7.4% and by several languages at 2.7%. Obviously, this difference in the choices of languages of instruction related to the level of education (preschool/primary vs. *pro-gymnasium/ gymnasium*) would require interpretation; however, we do not find any of it in the mentioned report. Thus, based on other documents and external context, we can only speculate, for instance, that the immigration from Belarus and other post-soviet countries influenced the change. However, this issue will require deeper analysis in the future.

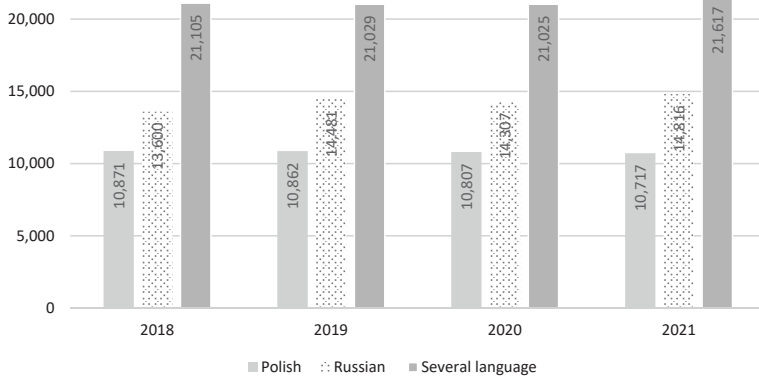


Figure 1. The change in the number of pupils receiving their education in the language(s) of a national minority in 2018–2021 (NŠA 2022: 20)

Language acquisition in the early years is of utmost importance; in international and national legal documents, the right for a child to study in the native language is viewed as fundamental. One would

expect children at this age to study only in minority languages, but in Lithuania, bilingual and multilingual acquisition is observed. The awareness of the benefits of bilingualism might be an explanation. The data demonstrate that in eight municipalities in 2020-2021 operated 82 preschools in the languages of national minorities (Table 1). From 2018 on, this number decreased by six preschools. As in previous years, in 2020, the stable tendency to organize preschool education in several languages remains. In this way, conditions are created to choose a school according to the desired language of instruction and ensure children's education in the institution closest to home. Teaching in minority languages in 2020-2021 took place in 95 general education schools of nine municipalities (Šiauliai city is added).

Table 1. *Distribution of preschool education schools according to the languages of instruction in municipalities in the 2020–2021 school year (NŠA 2022: 18)*

	Russian	Polish	In several languages				Total
			Lithuanian, Russian	Lithuanian, Polish	Russian, Polish	Lithuanian, Russian, Polish	
Kaunas city	–	–	1	–	–	–	1
Klaipėda city	4	–	8	–	–	–	12
Šalčininkai district	–	3	–	5	–	–	8
Švenčionys district	–	–	1	–	–	–	1
Trakai district	–	–	–	5	–	1	6
Vilnius city	4	1	11	2	5	14	37
Vilnius district	–	3	–	9	–	2	14
Visaginas municipality	3	–	–	–	–	–	3
Total	10	6	23	21	5	18	82

From 2018 on, in six municipalities (the cities of Kaunas and Panevėžys, the districts of Klaipėda, Mažeikiai, Širvintos, and Švenčionys), no pupils are studying in the languages of national minorities in preschool and general education schools; it means that the education process takes place only in a bilingual or multilingual form (NŠA 2022: 18-21, 55-56).

As recently approved by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, educational plans regulate the organization of the process in general education, taking into account the needs of the pupils and the resources of the school. Provisions made in the common educational plans of primary, basic and secondary education programs ensure the conditions for pupils at national minority schools to learn their mother tongue and develop their national identity and civic attitudes. In those schools, diverse models of teaching minority and state languages, as well as other subjects in minority/ majority languages are applied. However, each school is responsible for implementing legal requirements for the minimum number of subjects taught in Lithuanian. The discussions, tensions, and the long-term transformational processes of language education in minority schools have lasted for decades but have finally reached some positive results, at least in a formal/ legal format. Curricula in schools with the minority language as the medium of instruction have an established arrangement or a fixed number of weekly lessons in the Lithuanian language. This arrangement is especially important for preschool and primary education, as this age is crucial for acquiring basic competence in a second or third language. However, it is debatable whether a small number of weekly lessons (5) in Lithuanian will introduce a real change in the state language acquisition process, especially in the areas where Lithuanian is not linguistically dominant (Southeast region).

Compared to Lithuania, the recent transformations in Estonia and Latvia, due to long-term state language policies in education, put much more focus on the significance of state languages. These countries have foreseen that in future, all education in state and

municipal schools will be conducted only in the state language. This aims at greater integration of children from national minorities. The legislation states that Estonia plans to maintain the current 60% of education in the Estonian language in schools of national minorities, but by 2035, 100% of all state and municipal schools will have gradually switched to Estonian medium education (for Estonia, see Eurydice 2022; EMER 2023). Both Estonian and Latvian education policy stakeholders are committed to maintaining mother tongue teaching and cultural education for children of national minorities. The message from the Latvian minister highlights the unifying function of the state language:

“Education in one language, in undivided children groups, is the best means to unite the population of Latvia for the time to come and irreversibly”, claims Latvian Minister of Education and Science Anita Muīžniece (LRT.lt, 2022; the author’s translation).

In Latvia, from 1 September 2023 onward, all educational institutions will start the transition to education only in the state language (for Latvia, see Eurydice 2023; LMES 2023).

Unlike its Baltic neighbors, the Lithuanian government, committed to avoiding possible social tensions and acknowledging other priorities, does not follow the same policy:

“Currently, our priority is to reduce the differences in educational achievements throughout Lithuania by implementing various projects, revising educational programs, introducing changes in secondary education curricula, and attracting more new teachers. Therefore, there is no need to urgently start a discussion on the educational model in schools of national minorities”, said Jurgita Šiugždinienė, the Lithuanian Minister of Education, Science and Sports (LRT.lt, 2022; the author’s translation).

Even though there is no urgent need for a change in language constellations, much attention in the current government programs and plans is given to the education of national minorities with a focus

on bilingual language acquisition. The Eighteenth Government of the Republic of Lithuania gave the project “Good school for all and modern education curriculum” high priority, planning to achieve high-quality education in schools of national minorities, expecting very good knowledge of both minority languages and the Lithuanian language:

“We will ensure that the academic outcomes in national minority schools are very good not only in the Polish, Russian, Ukrainian or Belarusian languages but also in the Lithuanian language. We will look for ways to contribute to the revision of textbooks in Lithuanian, Polish, Russian and Belarusian so as to attune them to the latest programs and trends. We will implement a conceptual approach to bilingual or multilingual education that helps children from national minority backgrounds to integrate in the environment in which the Lithuanian language is used, and vice versa. (18th Government Program, 2020; 46.8)”.

As we see, the notion of “bilingualism” is related to “integration” into society; an enhanced focus on learning the state language has become a strategic goal, as the last decade did not bring the expected results in terms of competence in Lithuanian. Unlike Latvia and Estonia where bilingual education has long been the basis of language education for ethnic minorities, Lithuania’s model is gaining momentum and will likely continue to develop, taking advantage of opportunities and assessing challenges. Despite the hopes for the future, the present situation still does not offer good grounds for optimism. Currently, national minority students’ academic performance in the state language tends to be significantly lower. Moreover, the academic results of national and international school examinations show significant disparities across different dimensions, including academic disciplines (Lithuanian language versus other subjects), ethnicity (majority versus minority), and municipality (large cities versus rural areas). These discrepancies often lead to underperformance among children attending minority schools in

small towns or rural regions, resulting in lower academic achievements, limited opportunities for higher education enrolment, and reduced prospects for successful careers in the labor market. Consequently, the lack of adequate Lithuanian language skills, particularly in writing and reading, may potentially hinder young individuals from pursuing higher education and compel them to emigrate (Dabašinskienė, Kubiliūtė 2019). The teaching and assessment of the state language in national minority schools needs a reform, because of a limited linguistic environment and lack of exposure to the state language, to name just a few of the problematic factors. The reports on performance in the state language at schools in the regions densely inhabited by minorities, especially in the Southeastern part of Lithuania and Visaginas, indicate an increase in the competence of pupils' linguistic achievements; however, they are much behind the country's average.

Most recent studies show a lower state language proficiency among minority children not only in rural areas/ peripheries but also in big cities, including Vilnius (Dabašinskienė, Krivickaitė-Leišienė 2019; Dabašinskienė, Kubiliūtė 2020, Vilkienė et al. 2019). A study conducted by Vilkienė et al (2019) in six gymnasiums in Vilnius, comprising two Lithuanian, two Polish, and two Russian schools, revealed significant differences in the level of Lithuanian language proficiency among pupils attending Lithuanian and non-Lithuanian schools. Specifically, children from ethnic minority schools exhibited a statistically lower vocabulary size in the Lithuanian language than their counterparts from Lithuanian schools. We assume that the language of instruction is very important, just as language policies adopted by a family, e.g., their attitudes and linguistic preferences, as well as the language used at home and in social media. The evidence that lower proficiency in the state language is related to limited exposure to Lithuanian both at home and in social settings is reported in a study involving young children (Dabašinskienė, Krivickaitė-Leišienė 2019). The reports and studies on minority children's performance underscore the need to carefully explore the

effects of educational and sociolinguistic factors, especially those related to attitudes, linguistic environment, language dominance, and language prestige.

4. Conclusion and discussion

The Lithuanian education system continues to operate in a trilingual mode, showing the increasing prestige and use of English, reduced preferences for Russian, and a search for promising opportunities for Lithuanian. Changes, especially in language attitudes, prestige, use, and preferences of these languages, do not occur rapidly – it will require much effort from the state, its institutions, and society.

The dynamics of attitudes towards the Russian language from the perspectives of minority and majority, its prestige, use, teaching, and learning have been observed for many years. The principal minorities in Lithuania (Russians, Poles and Belarusians), according to the Law on Education, can enroll their children in Russian, Polish or Belarusian-medium primary or secondary schools or choose Lithuanian-medium schools. Schools of linguistic minorities follow the curricula for general education approved by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, including mother-tongue instruction (in the same proportion as in Lithuanian mainstream schools) and Lithuanian as a state language instruction; other subjects are taught in both languages.

Schoolchildren in Lithuanian and national minority schools learn the Lithuanian language and literature according to the same general curricula and, as of 2013, must take the same Lithuanian language maturity exam. It is true that its assessment is different for the time being: in terms of language correctness and expression, style, and logic, pupils' performance from national minority schools is evaluated more leniently. It was planned from 2020 to unify the assessment criteria which meant that the same level of proficiency in the Lithuanian language was expected from all school-leavers; however, the plans were not implemented. As already mentioned, the

proficiency in the Lithuanian language of most pupils from national minority schools is lower than that in Lithuanian schools. Hence, the evaluation system itself may adversely affect the future of ethnic minority pupils. Even though all aspects of exam evaluation have not yet been unified, the problem can be solved by rethinking the testing and evaluation of state language abilities for children from non-Lithuanian schools.

The state aims to promote the opportunity to learn the Lithuanian language, especially for the national minorities living in the regions dominated by non-Lithuanian speakers (Visaginas, South-east Lithuania, etc.). However, these regions experience more dramatic social-economic disadvantages, not just educational and linguistic; thus, the development of effective regional strategies and the implementation of plans to reveal unique sociolinguistic and cultural environments still await solutions in the future (cf. Vihalemm et al. 2020 for Estonia).

A balanced implementation of educational changes in the language acquisition process is essential for minority groups. The focus should be directed to the earliest age (De Houwer 2015, 2020), as the process of native and state language acquisition should ensure a harmonious progress. Success is guaranteed if children are emotionally stable and happy in the learning process. Moreover, their families should be part of the educational process and communicate with the school and the larger community (Schwartz 2010; Schwartz, Verschik 2013). The community and family dynamics regarding linguistic standards and expectations also impact language choices. Societal beliefs regarding language can influence community and family obedience to linguistic norms. As we have demonstrated, bilingual education is supported by the state, with multilingualism seen as a valuable asset and a form of significant social capital. Evidently, in minority families, parents deliberately attempt to transmit their native language to their children, motivated by the recognition that proficiency in multiple languages brings advantages. In this language transmission process, parents assume a pivotal role

in determining the language spoken at home and making decisions regarding their children's language education. The results suggest that parents value bilingual and multilingual schools for their children for pre- and primary education.

The changes in language education for minority schools have been introduced gradually. The last decade has been marked by a search for *balance and compromise*, and has led to a more tolerant and open dialogue between majority and minority groups; thus, the language "issue" does not seem to be as crucial as it was two decades ago. Recent criticism from the wider society concerning language policy-related issues, including the lack of pluralism and a truly multilingual approach in education, has intensified due to the continuous spread of bureaucratic and institutionalized approaches to language use in Lithuania. It seems the potential beginning of a transformative phase is gaining momentum. In this process, the prevailing *top-down* mono-ethnic-state approach will hopefully develop into a *bottom-up*, context-speaker-society-sensitive approach, which calls for a more dialogical and community-oriented standard (cf. Blommaert 2010) and requires continuing efforts and discussions.

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RESÜMEE

MITMEKEELNE HARIDUS VÄHEMUSRAHVUSTE KOOLIDES LEEDUS: OTSIDES TASAKAALU JA KOMPROMISSI

Ineta Dabašinskiene

On tõsiasi, et vähemusrahvused kipuvad olema kultuurilisest ja hariduslikust vaatenurgast enamuse rühmaga võrreldes alaesindatud. Paljudes uuringutes on jõutud järeldusele, et vähemusrahvuste laste kirjaoskus on kehvem kui nende ükskeelsetel eakaaslastel, kuna nad valdavad teist keelt vähem (August, Shanahan 2006; Silven, Rubinov 2010). Vaatamata märgatavatele edusammudele etniliste vähemuste keeleõppes Leedus näitavad uuringud endiselt leedu keele ebapiisavat omandamist, mis on halvema akadeemilise edukuse, piiratud karjääriväljavaadete ja sotsiaalse isolatsiooni põhjuseks. Üks olulisemaid tegureid rahvusvähemuste peredes, mis peaks motiveerima lapsi mitmekeelsena kasvatama, on õppekeel.

Siinne uurimus käsitleb keelepoliitikat üldiselt ja eelkõige Leedu etniliste vähemuste hariduse õppekeele küsimusi. See tugineb teistele andmeallikatele ning analüüsib peamiselt Leedu valitsusasutuste esitatud andmeid ja poliitikadokumente (peamiselt perioodist 2018–2022). Täpsemalt keskendub analüüs mõnele hariduse fookuspunktile: etniline enamus *versus* vähemus, riigikeel *versus* etniliste vähemuste keeled (peamiselt vene keel) ja üleilmne inglise keel. Ettekandes tuuakse välja hariduse keelepoliitika praegused arutelud ülalt alla monoetnilise riigi lähenemisviisist ja vastandlikust (või täiendavast) postmodernistlikust vaatenurgast, mis pooldab kõnelejat arvestavat keelekäsitlust hariduses.

Üha suurem keskendumine riigikeele õppimisele on kujunenud haridussektori strateegiliseks eesmärgiks, kuna viimane kümnend ei ole toonud oodatud tulemusi. Erinevalt Lätist ja Eestist, kus kakskeelne õpe on pikka aega olnud rahvusvähemuste keeleõppe aluseks, on Leedu kakskeelne mudel alles hoogu saamas ja areneb tõenäoliselt veel edasi,

kasutades ära kõiki võimalusi. Tulemused viitavad sellele, et vanemad eelistavad alus- ja alghariduses kaks- ja mitmekeelseid koole.

On ilmne, et Leedu haridussüsteem toimib jätkuvalt kolmekeelsena: kasvab inglise keele prestiiž ja kasutus, vene keele eelistamine väheneb ja otsitakse leedu keele laienemisvõimalusi. Muutused, eriti suhtumises, prestiižis, kasutuses ja eelistustes, ei toimu kiiresti – see nõuab riigilt, asutustelt ja ühiskonnalt suurt pingutust.

Võtmesõnad: kakskeelsus, keeleomandamine, keelepoliitika, Leedu, riigikeel, vähemusrahvuste koolid

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