

Radomir Babin
Educational-Pedagogic
Institute
Subotica, Yugoslavia

UDC 376.744(497.113)

PRINCIPLES AND PROBLEMS OF BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN NORTHERN BAČKA*

The area of Northern Bačka with Subotica as its economic, cultural and educational centre, is known for its being inhabited, in approximately equal numbers, by members of the Yugoslav nationalities and of the Hungarian ethnic group. Accordingly, Serbo-Croatian and Hungarian appear equally to be the standard languages of the social environment concerned. This can be observed in the streets, squares, shops, public offices, cultural and educational institutions. A roughly equal number of the inhabitants speak as their mother tongues the Serbo-Croatian and Hungarian languages, respectively, along with the traditional natural bilingualism of a number of individuals; this has made possible in the educational organizations of this area a simpler, faster and fuller realization of the principles of the Yugoslav policy of education, the constitutional and statutory provisions concerning the implementation of the national equality of rights in the sphere of education and instruction than in other parts of SAP Vojvodina.

The national map of this area is supplemented also by the data showing that, along with the Yugoslav nations and the Hungarian ethnic group, whose languages are also officially the languages of communication in all the communes of this area, members of the Macedonian nation also live here (0.44% out of the total number of pupils) as well as Slovenes (0.08%), those belonging to the Albanian ethnic group (0.07%), and a very small number of members of the other nationalities. An ever-greater number of the pupils or their parents declare themselves to be Yugoslavs (11.88% of pupils in the school year of 1982/83). Besides other developments in inter-nationality relations (i.e. the number of ethnically mixed marriages has been increasing steadily), all this demonstrates that the area of Northern Backa is interesting for the observation of the developments in inter-nationality relations, particularly so in the field of education.

Therefore, in this paper, we shall try to illustrate, in a brief outline, the development of education in this area from the end of the Second World War up to the present, so as to explain the fundamental principles formed and endorsed in bilingual pedagogical work as being generally valid, and to point out some problems arising in the actual pedagogical practice that tries not only to accept and implement, but also to enrich creatively the theoretical assumptions underlying the policy of national equality and of the bilingual pedagogical activity.

* Original: Serbo-Croatian

In the search for adequate pedagogical solutions in the schools with two languages of instruction, experiments were made in this field using a completely bilingual teaching, when the teaching in the same class was carried out, with different variants, in two languages, discussing technical terms in the language of the social environment while teaching in the pupils' native language, and applying bilingual teaching on the principle of divergence. Of all these experiments the best results were obtained by the teaching method that was also longest in use, viz., that on the principle of divergence, broadly known as "the practice of Subotica." While the other experiments have been virtually forgotten, "the practice of Subotica," among its educational workers, still has its advocates, who underscore its value in securing the proficiency in the Serbo-Croatian language attained by the pupils of the Hungarian nationality. Though it is not our purpose here to offer a detailed description of the "practice of Subotica," we shall mention its main characteristic: the pupils of the Hungarian nationality who had completed their elementary schooling in their own language, were taught, after the enrollment in the first year of secondary school, again entirely in their own language, but in the second, third and fourth years, the number of the subjects taught in Serbo-Croatian was gradually increased, so that the final examination was taken in the Serbo-Croatian language. However, all these forms of bilingual teaching have been gradually abandoned with the dwindling of the democratization process in the society, when the society was also creating more and more favourable conditions for education in its mother tongue, thus increasing the ensurance of national equality of rights in the field of education. In this way, the development of education was such that it has attained the above-described organization of the schools - that is, two languages of instruction wherever possible. This means that, in the realization of the principle of the equality of rights, the pupils have, first of all, the possibility of being educated in their native language, and that through the certain teaching contents and forms of common work the paths are sought towards the integration of children into the multinational community.

As many as 67.34% of the elementary schools and all the secondary schools conduct the teaching in either language, in separate classes. In such schools, unless well thought-out and well-programmed work has been organized, the phenomenon of national isolationism may occur. This phenomenon is, therefore, prevented in various ways. Pedagogical practice is in the forefront in this respect, whereas the theory does not succeed in forming and giving meaning to all the results obtained in practice. We are going to enumerate some ways of preventing the emergence of national isolationism:

- all the professional, self-management and managing bodies at school are homogenous (in the commune of Subotica, for instance, 66.67% of the school principals are bilingual and hence able to communicate in the two languages with the parents, pupils and the public;
- the Pioneers' and youth organizations, all socio-political and social organizations at the school are uniform;
- one annual programme of schoolwork is adopted;

- the language of the social environment is learned actively;
- there are common sections of free (out-of-classroom) activities and pupils' interest groups, cultural-artistic and school sports societies;
- socially beneficial and production work is performed jointly.

In practice, however, some dilemmas have been raised, the solution to which the pedagogical theory should contribute more significantly. We shall dwell upon some of these issues.

1. There are divergent views of the work of the literary and other sections dealing with the cultivation of the language and of the national culture: some are of the opinion that these sections, too, should comprise the pupils belonging to different nationalities and hence speaking different languages, while others maintain that these sections should work separately, according to the languages of instruction. There are also people advocating a third, compromise solution - that the sections should be common, with a common managing body, but within the sections the work should be performed separately, according to the languages. At the schools of Northern Backa, this third solution has generally prevailed: within the literary section, for instance, work is done, as a rule, in the Serbo-Croatian and Hungarian languages separately, but when the members of the section are preparing a performance or a literary evening, at a number of schools the work is performed jointly on bilingual recitals and the like. Yet the practice prevails of preparing separate recitations or recitals that are always performed at a common bilingual performance.

2. Among the dilemmas there is also the question of the status of the teaching subject, the language of the social environment.¹ In SAP Vojvodina it is taught as an optional subject of instruction, the pupil is graded, but the marks do not influence his/her overall achievement. Opinions are divided on this matter too: some think that the existing solution is genuinely democratic and the best one;² others, however, particularly the educational workers and teachers of the language of the social environment, want this subject to be compulsory and believe that the marks should be taken into consideration in establishing the pupil's overall achievement.³ If the theory offered a many-sided consideration of this question, it could without doubt greatly assist the pedagogical practice.

It should be emphasized that no one denies the need for learning the language of the social environment. On the contrary, everybody does his/her best to raise the efficiency of this instruction to a higher level, for there is widespread awareness that knowledge of the language and culture of the people one lives with represents a very important condition for a successful integration of every individual into the production work and social life. Ever since the abandonment of the "practice of Subotica," which was such that members of the Hungarian nationality were not on an equal footing with others, for they completed their secondary education in the Serbo-Croatian language, the learning of the language of the social environment is practically the most important element of the preparation of

children for their integration into various forms of common school and extracurricular activities whereby the learning of the language of the social environment is expanded, deepened and knowledge of it reinforced and put into practice, so that, among other things, the great functional value of this knowledge might also be recognized.

The significance of the learning of the language of the social environment is even greater at a school operating in a nationally homogeneous environment or at a school where the teaching is conducted in only one language. It is natural that under such circumstances is less fully mastered in everyday situations and that the language of the social environment as a subject of instruction is not in a position to compensate for this handicap by securing better knowledge of the language of the other nation or nationality. Such schools, therefore, organize a series of activities, events and performances aiming at the learning of the language of the social environment and closeness of the members of different nations and nationalities. Most frequently, these take the form of meetings of twin schools belonging to different environments, joint camping trips and holidays, joint publication of school journals (for instance, *Ada-Sabac*), exchange of visits and sojourns of classes or groups of pupils, mutual correspondence of individual pupils or classes. A number of the schools from this area with Hungarian as the language of instruction, for instance, cherish brotherly relations with those from Serbia. The same aims are evident from sports events, the cycle race on the track of the Petöfi Brigade, etc.

Notwithstanding all the efforts made, the efficiency of the learning of the language of the social environment, in particular at monolingual schools, is not satisfactory. According to the research carried out by the experts of the Educational-Pedagogical Institute of Subotica, the percentage of the positive answers in the nationally homogeneous environments was 36.55 per cent in the fourth grade of the elementary school and 33.93 per cent in the eighth grade, while at the bilingual schools from the nationally mixed environments the result was somewhat better: 44.55 per cent in the fourth grade and 50.14 per cent in the eighth grade.⁴ The theory and practice are faced with the exacting task of improving this performance, which is important, for poor knowledge of the language of the social environment leads to the isolation of the "language collective," which prevents the attainment of the desired educational effects.

The language of the social environment in this area begins to be learnt in the pre-school institutions, more precisely, from the child's fifth year onwards; nowhere in this country, according to our knowledge, does this process start earlier. There have been a lot of expert discussions about the beginning of the learning of a second language. The experts have considered, investigated and tested the impact of second-language learning mother-tongue acquisition, and whether it negatively affects the mastering of the general educational contents, the stuttering of children, whether and to what extent it puts a strain on the children, and the like. It has been established that the age of 4 to 5 years is the best for starting to learn the second-language. "Accordingly, the learning of the Serbo-Croatian language should start already at the kindergarten level. This is important, given that the

children of this age acquire very easily and quickly the correct pronunciation and stress, a natural intonation and the idiomatic expressions of the language."⁵ Thus, in this area, the dilemma of an early start of the learning of a second language was eliminated. The validity of such a solution has been confirmed by the practice.

3. One of the problems is in a direct connection with the efficiency of learning the language of the social environment; it refers to the phenomenon of **language parallelism** at all public meetings held in bilingual environments. The question emerges here of the justification of the practice at some schools, and also outside them, to hold, for instance at various performances and meetings, identical speeches or - more rarely - recitals and recitations, in two languages, or to publish in school journal identical articles in both languages. In our opinion, such practice is suitable in the schools having two separate collectives, but it is harmful, in many ways, to the realization of the educational goals, and also to the learning of the language of the social environment at schools with two languages of instruction. The variety of content in speech, recitals, recitations or written articles, on the contrary, stimulates and increases the pupils' motivation for learning, enriching their aesthetic experiences, increasing information they receive and gives meaning to the efforts they make to master the language of the social environment. Even more senseless is the language parallelism sometimes resorted to by some self-managing and professional bodies in order to satisfy the formality in language use. The nature use of one's own native language in communicating one's own thought rather than in repeating what has already been said by someone else, is most appropriate in a bilingual environment.

4. While the cultivation of one's own language for the pupils of the ethnic groups attending instruction in the Serbo-Croatian language is organized in various parts of Vojvodina, in this area, where this form of work had been started, after the creation of conditions necessary for complete secondary and partially for higher and university education in one's own language, the interest on the part of the pupils and parents in this aspect of the cultivation of one's native language, culture and tradition, has completely dwindled away. In a broader social framework of this environment, it is considered that this function should be performed by the language of the social environment, while the experts believe that, in view of the fact that, besides all the conditions for mother-tongue education, 13 per cent of the children of the Hungarian ethnic group and 4 per cent of the children of the Yugoslav nations and nationalities do not attend instruction in their native languages, there exists a real need for the cultivation of one's native language, since the teaching of the language of the social environment cannot, either in terms of the curriculum or with respect to its objectives and tasks, and in particular in regard to the actual possibilities, entirely compensate for the deficiencies in the knowledge of one's own language and one's own national culture. However, the subject motives of these pupils and of their parents are very complex and difficult to explain, especially concerning, first, their decision not to attend instruction in their own language, even though it is available, and secondly, their relatively

slight interest in the deepening of the knowledge of their own native language and culture.

5. The working language used at the meetings of professional and self-management bodies at the schools with two languages of instruction can be, according to normative provisions, each of the two languages of instruction, or both at the same time. In practice, the Serbo-Croatian language is more frequently used, but there are schools where the working language is either Hungarian or both the languages alternately.

6. One of the dilemmas relates to the common Yugoslav programme core covering language and literature for the children of the Hungarian nationality. While the idea for the introduction of these common-core contents into the other curricular subjects has been accepted without reserve, in relation to the language and literature core some fear has been expressed that Hungarian as the mother tongue will not be sufficiently learned from the original works, but mostly from translations into Hungarian. The application of new curricula and educational programmes in school year 1985/86 will actually show whether and to what extent such fear is justified. So far, the educational programme in the Hungarian language has already contained 21 per cent of the texts to be analyzed from the Yugoslav and world literatures. We must add that the Hungarian children were able to acquaint themselves with the works of the most significant Yugoslav writers, especially in the secondary schools, during the lessons or by reading selected books in Serbo-Croatian as the language of the social environment. Thus, the content from the literatures of the Yugoslav nations and nationalities has already been well represented so far - and from now on this content appears in a somewhat different function and with a different arrangement, because from now on the language of the social environment as a subject by itself will focus on a functional training of the pupils for communication much more than on familiarizing them with the literary works.

7. Although there are within our community such institutions as are liable to follow the implementation of the curricula and of educational programmes, the appropriateness of textbooks and manuals, teaching aids, methods and procedures, and to help the teachers promote their teaching practice, we cannot be satisfied with the overall situation in this area. There is but little research work done whose wide-ranging effects might secure such an insight into the highly ramified bilingual pedagogical practice as enabled a theoretical synthesis of all the experiences gained, so that the theory would stimulate the practice to be infused with a new vigour, reaching new heights and conquering new areas. Without such a combination of theory and practice, which could enrich the practice with an integrated teaching methodology of the language of the social environment, and provide it with a series of instructions and suggestions for organizing the work in a bilingual environment, not forgetting the provision of contemporary teaching aids for the language of the environment, it will be impossible to enhance the quality level of this work.

Notes

1. Formerly, this subject was labelled the non-mother tongue. Later, the name was changed because it was - and still is - considered that the language spoken by the pupil in an ethnically mixed family often is not the native language of his/her mother, and that the denomination "the language of the social environment" is therefore more appropriate.
2. This opinion is supported by the fact that almost all the pupils and the youth in the communes of this area learn the language of the social environment: members of the Yugoslav peoples learn the Hungarian language and members of the Hungarian ethnic group the Serbo-Croatian language.
3. Their reasons are of a practical nature: they think that thereby the pupils' motivation for schoolwork could be increased (particularly in the case of the nations), which could in turn enhance the efficiency of work. As one of the reasons they point out that in five Yugoslav republics the learning of this subject is compulsory.
4. See: Mijana Burzan, Josip Buljovčić and Ferenc Kučera, "The Results of the Testing of Knowledge of the Serbo-Croatian Language in the Fourth and Eighth Grades of the Elementary School in the Nationally Homogeneous Environments (With an Analysis of the Most Frequent Mistakes)," in *Oktatas és Nevelés*, No. 40 and No. 55, Szabadka, 1981 and 1984, pp. 37-50 and 57-67.
5. Flemer Brunet, 1981, "Learning of the Serbo-Croatian Language in the First and Second Grades of the Elementary Schools with Hungarian as the Language of Instruction - An Experiment," in *Pedagoška stvarnost*, No. 8, pp. 547-48.