

Study of Applicability of American Experience of Dual Language Instruction in Georgian Schools

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Abstract

My following research reports on a study that addresses the question: Is dual language educational approach that is currently used in USA a viable means of instructing Second Language in Georgia? The purpose of this study was to examine Georgian parents' perceptions of bilingual education and to investigate their views on bilingual education. It also examined how minorities would evaluate the future implementation of dual language instructions in Georgian schools. The research revealed that immersion programs are the best possible programs for language minority children in Georgia and has highlighted the minority parents' positions and the importance of dual language school programs for minority children. The parents viewed these programs as an impressive educational tool for their children and expressed their desire for these programs to be established in Georgia.

Keywords: dual language education, immersion programs, minorities, parental involvement
JEL Classification Codes: I20, I29

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Introduction

It is notable that bilingualism and bilingual education in the United States became the subject of renewed controversy as schools felt the impact of increasing immigration to the United States. As recent attention and validation has been directed toward Foreign Language and the National Foreign Language Standards that call for communicative competence, many schools are turning to dual language education to strengthen second language proficiency among students in the United States. Out of 270 million Americans today, about 100 million are descended from at least one ancestor who has an ESL background and immigrated within the last 120 years. It's note-worthy to stress from the very beginning that dual language instruction has been widely available in the United States since the beginning of its history as a nation.

Compared to "American Melting pot", Georgia has always been a multinational country due to ethnic minorities living within its territory and remains so to this day. According to policy research of center of Georgian Institute of Public Affairs the three largest ethnic groups can be distinguished: Georgians (83.8% of the population), Azeri (6.5%), and Armenians (5.7%). The remaining 4% is made up of smaller groups, including Abkhaz, Ossets, Russians, Ukrainians, Jewish, Kurds/ Yezids and Greeks. Since independence, Georgia maintained the system of public schools in terms of different language instruction. Thus children are supposed to enroll in Georgian, Russian, Armenian, and Azeri language public schools. This system allows minorities from sizable communities to receive full primary and secondary education in their native languages.

The research took a careful look at schools with tuition in other-than-Georgian languages that often fail to live up to the Georgian national educational requirements for the teaching of the Georgian language. Since independence, Georgia has preserved the system of different language instructions in public schools, which gave the children an opportunity to enroll in Georgian, Russian, Armenian, and Azeri language public schools. Additionally, there are some mixed schools combining different language "sectors"; for example, Georgian language school might have a Russian sector, where students are instructed in Russian language (language and literacy). This system allows minorities from sizable communities to receive full primary and secondary education in their native languages (as for Kurds, they send their children either to Russian or to Georgian schools, as there are no schools with tuition in Kurdish). It's thought-provoking to mention the schools with tuition in other-than-Georgian languages often fail to live up to the Georgian national educational requirements for the teaching of the Georgian language. Many schools also come to nothing to meet the basic criteria for teachers of Georgian languages. Some Georgian language teachers in the regions populated by national minorities do not know the language themselves. Although there are no real data on the number of such teachers, the first hand experiences of Transparency International

Georgia and other organizations working on the issue suggest that this is the norm rather than an exception (Transparency International Georgia, 2007).

Prior to the contemporary changes, the non-Georgian schools in the minority-populated areas mostly depended on their respective kin state for textbooks. It is notable for the research that the core social science courses (e.g. history and geography) were based on the kin state and were not in connection to Georgia. This inadequacy or non-existence of Georgian educational requirements further caused the most substantial problems among minorities: a) the lack of Georgian language skills and b) hindered process of accessing minorities to higher educational institutions. As for the state and private university level practically the only language of instruction other than Georgian is Russian, with a few English language programs. Nowadays, the new administration pays a great attention to minorities' enrolment in domestic universities.

From these facts, one may conclude that the qualified education for minorities might serve a great consideration and a real bilingual background for introducing a new trend of dual language instruction in Georgian schooling. It stresses the importance of linguistically adequate and efficient education of ethnical minority students in Georgia.

The purpose of this enquiry focusing on Georgian-American schools/universities (or Georgian schools where the tuition is done in English, except such courses as Georgian Language, literature and history) was to understand the perceptions and views of parents about their children's participation in bilingual education programs. This study examined the following questions: (a) Are parents aware of the goals and objectives of bilingual education? (b) Are they conscious of the different models and programs of bilingual education? (c) Do they believe their children should be taught in English and/or in the home language? (d) Do they support bilingual education?

Method

Optional type questionnaires (made up of questions and selections of answers), written in English and Georgian, were distributed to 100 parents whose children are enrolled at the schools where all subjects are instructed in English except Georgian Language/Literature and History and universities where all courses are taught in English. Of the 100 questionnaires distributed, 70 questionnaires (70%) were returned.

Results

Question 1: Do you understand the goals of bilingual education? (A. Yes; B. No)

Approximately two-thirds (68%) of the subjects responded that they knew or understood the objectives/goals of bilingual education. Surprisingly 32% percent answered that they were not aware of the exact goals of the program their children were enrolled in. Of those who responded that they knew or understood the objectives/goals

of bilingual education, the majority (58%) of the subjects responded that the objective/goal was to help students to develop English skills only, and approximately one in ten (12%) responded that bilingual education was to help students develop and maintain their home/language skills.

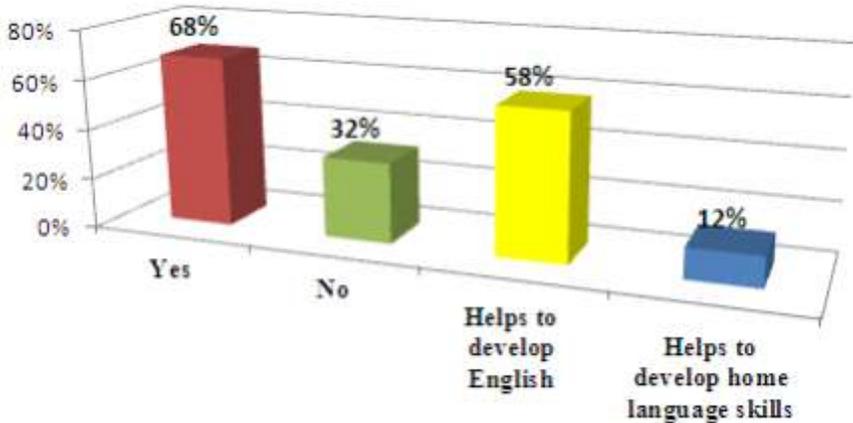


Figure 1. Parental understanding of the goals of bilingual education.

Question 2: Name the different models of bilingual education.

As you can see in Figure 2, about 68% of parents responded that they knew or understood the objectives/goals of bilingual education, but surprisingly for my research I have found only 6% of parents who answered that they knew the different models/programs of bilingual education.

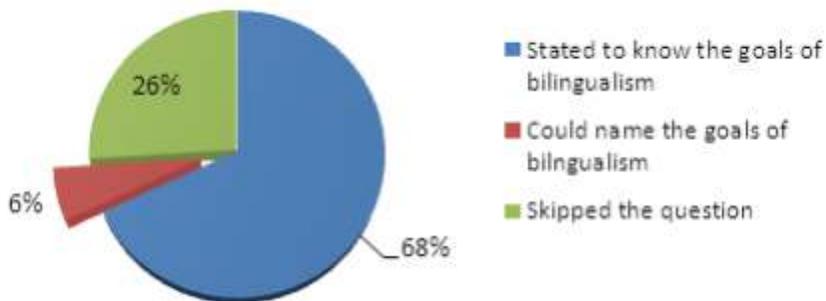


Figure 2. Parental perception of different models of bilingualism

Question 3: What language(s) do you think teachers should use in the classroom to teach your child? (A. Only English; B. Georgian; C. Both English and Georgian)

When asked what language(s) teachers should use to instruct students in the classroom, about three-fourths (76%) responded that teachers should use both English and the students' home/primary language. About one-fifth (21%) responded that teachers should use only English, and 3% thought only the students' home/primary language should be used in the classroom. It's notable to stress that the subjects are parents who sent their children to a school/university with English as education language.

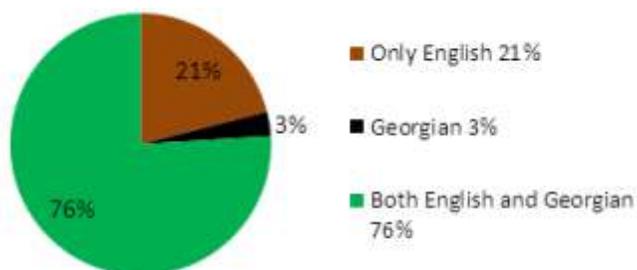


Figure 3. The language distribution for instruction

Question 4: Do you believe learning in Georgian language retards the development of English for your child? (A. Yes; B. No)

With regards to the subjects' views on whether or not they believed instruction in the students' home/primary language slowed down the development of English, 41% responded that it did and 59% said that it did not. Thus, although more than half the subjects did not think using the students' home/primary language interfered with the development of English, a significant percentage thought that the use of the home/primary language had a negative effect on English development

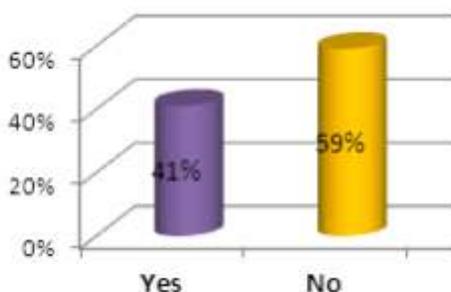


Figure 4. The role of Georgian language in acquiring English as a second language

Question 5: Do you believe learning in two languages retards the development of English for your child? (A. Yes; B. No)

When asked if the subjects thought the use of two languages to instruct their children interfered with their English development, majority (76%) of the subjects responded that it did not and about one in four (24%) responded that it did.

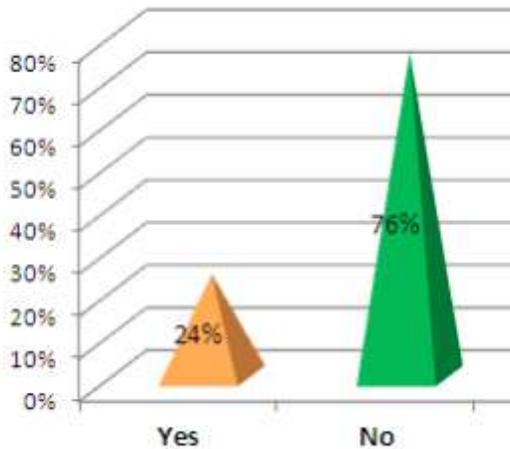


Figure 5. The role of two language instruction in acquiring English.

Question 6: What language(s) do you wish your child to develop?

Related to the parents' desire for how many and what language(s) they would like their children to develop, the majority (73%) of parents hoped that their children develop two foreign languages. However, almost one in three (27%) parents responded that they would like their children to develop English exclusively.

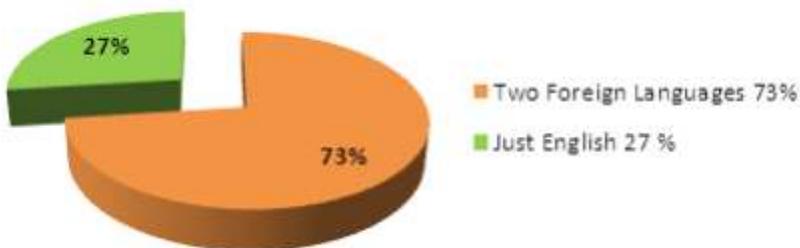


Figure 6. The number of languages the parents wish their children to acquire.

Question 7: Do you support bilingual education? (A. Yes; B. No)

Asked whether subjects supported bilingual education, the majority (77%) of them supported bilingual education. Only 17% of the subjects responded that they do not support bilingual education. Almost 6% declined to respond to this question.

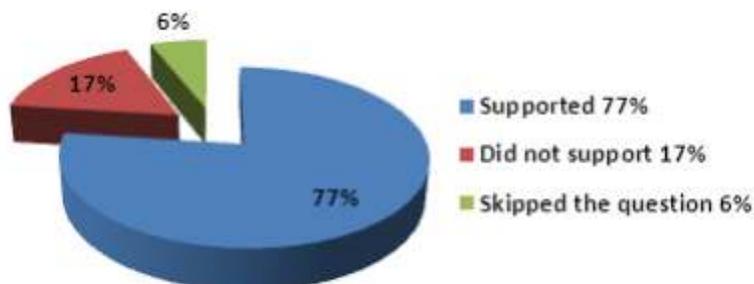


Figure 7. Parents supporting the bilingual education

Question 8: If you had a choice, would you prefer to have your child enrolled in English-only classes? (A. Yes; B. No)

Pertaining to the parents' preferences for their children's program assignment, approximately two-thirds (57%) of the subjects responded that they would like their children to be enrolled in mainstream classes, if given a choice, and one-third (33%) of the subjects preferred that their children remain in the bilingual education program. Here I have to point out 10% of the parents who skipped this question.

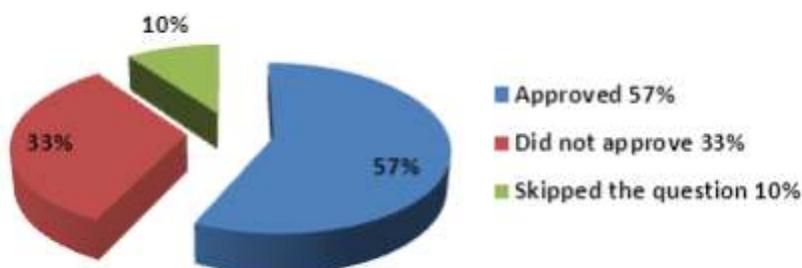


Figure 8. Parents' preferences for English-only classes

Discussion

Several interesting observations can be made from this study.

1. Although the majority (68%) of the subjects claimed that they knew or understood the objectives/goals of bilingual education, and 6% responded that they knew or understood the different models and programs of bilingual education, only a few

was able to name the models/programs of bilingual education.

2. Approximately 76% of the subjects thought that teachers should use both Georgian and English to teach students. This rate is similar to the one reported by Shin and Kim (1996) in which 70% of the parents responded that they supported the placement of their children in a bilingual classroom where both Korean and English were used for instructional purposes. When subjects were asked whether or not using two languages to teach students may retard the development of English, the same percentage (76%) of parents responded that using two languages did not interfere with their children's English acquisition. However, 41% of the subjects responded that using only the home/primary language for instruction interfered with the development of English language skills. In other words, almost half the respondents did not think the exclusive use of the home/primary language was conducive to English language development. Thus, it is quite evident that parents believed programs in which two languages—Georgian and English—are used in the classroom are most effective in helping their children to develop English skills.

3. It is interesting to note, however, that approximately two-thirds (57%) of the parents surveyed responded that they preferred to have their children be placed in mainstream classes if given the choice. Two explanations may be offered to explain what appear to be contradictory responses. It is possible that in spite of their support for bilingual education, the subjects may feel that (a) their children no longer need to be enrolled in bilingual education classes. b) probably they are not satisfied with results of education in English-only schools/universities.

Majority of the parents indicated that they thought the use of two languages in the schools was helpful to their children's English development, and that they desired their children to become bilingual. Yet, two-thirds of the parents responded that they would prefer to have their children placed in English-only classes. This study has shown consistencies in many questions related to the tendency of bilingual education development. For example, 21% of the subjects responded that teachers should use only English for instruction, 24% thought that using two languages negatively affected the development of English, 27% desired their children to develop English competency, and 17% did not support bilingual education. Thus, the results of this study seem to indicate that only about 17% to 27% or about one in five parents supported the English-only instruction in the schools.

Conclusion

1. This study has found that despite the participants' perception that they understood the objectives of bilingual education; most parents did not recognize different models and programs. Thus, it seems critical that prior to inviting parents in the discussion of bilingual education there needs to be a development of an appropriate

education program to facilitate a better understanding of what bilingual education is. Our society certainly needs to be better informed on these issues, before deciding to what type of schools to take their children. In the absence of such education efforts, parents' views and positions on bilingual education and their decisions which may be crucial for their child's destiny, may be based on inaccurate "common" perceptions of the objectives of bilingual education and even false ideas.

2. Nevertheless, majority of the surveyed parents supported bilingual education. Most subjects thought that the use of the students' primary/home language and English in the classroom was essential to helping their children. About one in five parents desired teachers to use English as the medium of instruction in the classroom.

Though in Georgian society there is a widely spread false idea that the best way to teach English (or another foreign language) is to hire (if possible) a native English speaker for this job or for a local teacher to totally avoid the native tongue in the process of teaching, most respondents believe that application of home-language does not create serious problems to foreign language acquisition.

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