Teaching New Immigrants Their Mother Tongue As A Way To Ease The Problems of Immigration and Adolescence

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Abstract:
In this paper, I will offer a case study which will show the process of change in Israel from a monolingual society to a more openly multilingual one. As the language policy evolved, new immigrants from Russia began to learn not just Hebrew but also Russian at a mother language level. I will show how the language policy of 1995 was implemented in the local junior high school in Bet-Eliezr, Hadera, during this period. Through the implementation of teaching Russian in the school system, the students maintained a fruitful relationship with their nuclear family. The relationship between the students and the school, between the students and their parents and between the parents and the school helped the students become a part of a stable environment despite the drastic changes that were going on in their lives as a result of their migration to Israel.

I would like to show how, in one junior high school in Bet-Eliezr, Hadera, the use of Russian as a mother language helped to ease the immigration process; thereby fostering feelings of security and well being in the students. It is my hypothesis that the implementation of teaching students their ancestor’s heritage language can help stop the increased crime and drug rate that is seen today in the young Ethiopian community in Israel.

Key words: language policy, prestige, new immigrants, multilingualism, language attitudes, mother tongue

Overview
Israel is a small country, which consists of people from all over the world. In Israel, one can hear many languages being spoken when a person walks down any given street in any town. It is just recently that the government and the general population have become more open to multilingualism in the country. It is now acceptable for new immigrants to take Bagrut exams in their mother language even though the
language is not Hebrew. However, in the past, multilingualism was not accepted in the population. People openly discouraged the use of any language other than Hebrew (Spolsky&Shohamy, 1996).

During the period of British control in Israel, Hebrew was on its way to become a language, which would be used by most of the population. During this time it was imperative to begin the use of Hebrew for the new, young nation. The use of Hebrew served as a form of language ideology. It was not just a means of communication, it was a way of identifying the people within the country.

The British Mandate improved the overall standing of Hebrew as a language. This began in 1918, when General Allenby conquered Palestine. As a result, the German language was no longer a language that would be used in the country (Spolsky&Shohamy, 1999). This decision cleared the way for the British to regulate and mandate that Hebrew would be the official language in the country. Along with Hebrew, the British stated that both Arabic and English would be official languages in the country. As a result of there being three official languages, the government at that time decided that each separate community would decide on their own language for education. When Israel achieved independence in 1948, all the laws which were used by the British Mandatory, remained in effect (Spolsky&Shohamy, 1999).

Many of the new immigrants made a conscious effort to retain their mother language. These individuals made a decision to continue using their mother language at home as well as in their small loyal language communities in Israel. The common element shared by these language communities was their deliberate decision to actively use their mother language and not incorporate Hebrew into their language repertoire. This resulted in a slow adoption of Hebrew by these new immigrants. One specific group of immigrants into Israel, which kept the constant use of their mother language, was the Russians. Multilingualism in Israel was greatly influenced by a large number of these newly arriving immigrants (Spolsky&Shohamy, 1999).

Since the establishment of Israel, no Constitution has been declared. As a result of the lack of a Constitution, there are no governing laws which would provide for a language policy. The same elements of the language policy, which were in place
during the time of the British Mandate, have since not changed (Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999).

In the years of 1995 and 1996, a new language policy called “The Policy for Language Education” took effect in Israel (Spolsky & Shohamy, 1996). This document was created by the Ministry of Education and issued to the public on June 1, 1995 (Spolsky & Shohamy, 1996). This policy dealt with the teaching of both mother languages and foreign languages (Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999). This new policy stressed the importance of school instruction of both Hebrew and Arabic in both sectors. There was also an added element in the policy; the Government finally acknowledged the importance of the mother languages of new immigrants and provided for the maintenance thereof. The Establishment realized that many new immigrants were actually losing the ability to communicate in their mother tongue as a result of their immigration to Israel.

In order to maintain a high level in the specific mother languages, curriculums were established with specific guidelines. The goal of the Russian curriculum was to ensure the teaching and development of grammar and literature with the same aims as a native speaker of Russian would obtain in the former Soviet Union (Spolsky & Shohamy, 1996).

As a result of the influx of over 600,000 former Soviet immigrants arriving in Israel during 1989-1995, the government chose to implement new policies concerning Russian. (Dittmar, Spolsky and Walters, 2006.) In the case of the Russian language, the new policy would help to preserve the use of Russian as a mother language for many new immigrants. In the school systems, Russian would be taught as a mother language to the new immigrants. This is a great leap for the country because Hebrew would not be a monolingual language that was only spoken in Israel. (Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999). Through the implementation of the new policy, the government and its citizens would become more adaptable concerning multilingualism and the ability of the new immigrants to maintain their different mother languages.
In 1996, a formal written document was administered which stated the hours for teaching a mother language that was other than Hebrew (Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999). This document stated that the Russian language is of cultural value and needs to be maintained due to the large number of new immigrants who speak Russian as a mother language.

The policy states that Russian will be taught as a mother language to any new immigrant from Russia who resides in Israel for less than four years. Any new immigrant from Russia will be able to study Russian as a mother language for the span of four years in an educational institution.

It became the task of principals in the school system to inform all Russian-speaking immigrants of their right to learn the language. The teaching of Russian as a mother language was open to all students regardless of how many pupils are enrolled in the classroom.

Through the continued learning of the mother tongue in the school, these new immigrants were able to continue to develop their Russian language. Without the continued learning of Russian in school, the students' use of the language would have consisted of "home talk." This is a style of speech which is used only at home. In this speech, the language is structured on everyday words and slang. The framework of the conversation is based on shared information, thereby the speakers are not explaining in detail anything specific. "Home talk" can be compared to "school talk." "School talk" is based on unfamiliar words whereby new information is presented (Kleeck, 2007).

Children whose sole use of a language that comes from "home talk" may lead to lower reading comprehension ability and, in the end, lower academic skills in school. As a result of the low achievement in school, the children may possibly feel a negative social identity in society (Kleeck, 2007). Many students who use a minority language in a society have a problem with linguistic advancement, deficiency of academic success and identity problems (Priven, 2008).
With the influx of new immigrants into Israel, it became vital to ensure that the children had a positive attitude toward their mother tongue. These attitudes influence their language behavior and use as well as the behavior toward the language itself. Many of the new Russian immigrants felt great pride and respect for their mother tongue.

There are attitudes as well which are generated from the larger speech community pertaining to the new immigrants' language. These attitudes may be both favorable and unfavorable (Cooper & Fishman, 1973). Pertaining to the junior high school in Bet-Eliezar, Hadera, many of the native-born Israelis resented the fact that the Russians were always talking Russian between themselves. The native-born Israelis felt left out of the conversation. As a result of these feelings, many native-born Israelis began to learn Russian from their new friends and began to incorporate specific words into their Hebrew.

**Tichon Hadera, Bet-Eliezar Junior High School Language Policy:**
Concerning Hadera, the Russian-speaking population was extremely large. The Russian-speaking community in Hadera chose to include Russian in their speech community. Their choice was a result of social needs, beliefs, values and attitudes of the time (Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999). This group felt positive value toward the use of their mother tongue. These feeling did not vary from group to group, it was an overall consensus. There was a "prestige factor" involved in the continual use of Russian. The language was used as a form of membership to a group and ideological affiliations (Cooper & Fishman, 1973).

In 1994, a new junior high school opened up in Hadera, Tichon Hadera Junior High School in Bet –Eliezar, Hadera. This junior high school opened its doors with one grade level, seven. In the seventh grade there were eight classes, each with forty students. Sixty percent of the student body were new immigrants from the former Soviet Union and the other forty percent were native-born Israelis.

Any institution of higher learning is a place for the implementation of language policy. The school takes over the role of the family in terms of socialization. It is the role of the schools to close the gap which occurs between the language used at home and the
language used in educational institutions (Spolsky, 2004). With this in mind, the principal, Varda Shalev, decided without any official language policy at that time in the country, to allow the new immigrants to continue to study Russian in the school. Besides Russian, these pupils had to learn not only Hebrew but English as well. Learning Arabic was an optional language for the new immigrants. They themselves would decide if they wanted to study a fourth language.

**Implementation**

In the 1994-1995 school years, there were two classes of eighty pupils who studied Russian. There was a test that was given to all the pupils that were interested in studying Russian. Only the eighty best pupils were allowed entrance into the language class.

Russian was treated as an extension of the student’s personality. All pupils were allowed to speak Russian in school. It must be noted that the policy of many schools at this time was to forbid new immigrants from speaking Russian on school grounds. The basis for this decision by many principals was the fear that if a new immigrant continued to speak their mother tongue, it would infringe on their learning and adoption of Hebrew.

**Social Activities: Parental Interaction**

For a period of three years, the school integrated the Russian language into the social functions of the school. Every year there was a “Russian Evening.” Not only were the students involved in the preparation, but their parents actively participated in every event as well. The parents volunteered to prepare food, create decorations and sew costumes. The students' parents also participated actively as actors, singers and directors in the evening events. These new immigrants also had the opportunity to sell artistic items that they had made before the event began.

**Cultural Events**

The first evening was based on the Russian poet, Pushkin. His poems were translated into Hebrew and English. The following year, the evening was comprised of a play and poems by Shakespeare. Hamlet was acted out in Russian. Translations of the play, Hamlet, were distributed to the audience in Hebrew. The third evening was comprised
of love songs in Russian, Hebrew and English. During this evening, the parents actively participated as well in singing and playing musical instruments.

It must be noted that these events were not closed to the general school population. Every Russian student was able to bring with him three friends who were not Russian. The ability to bring friends caused the Israeli-born students to begin to appreciate their fellow Russian friends even more. As a result, a tolerance of each other’s culture was created.

**Students Interaction with their parents**
As a result of these evenings, the children were able to include their family in their life, be it inside or outside of school. The children actively needed the help of their parents concerning the use of the Russian language in these evenings. The family became the experts and the only one’s that could help them in school pertaining to their native language. Throughout these evenings, there was a recognition of the role of relationship that existed between the students and their nuclear family. This understanding and appreciation creates norms and behaviors that any speech community needs to survive and flourish (Fishman, 1972). Through the active use of the language, a relationship is guaranteed between the users.

**Language Ideology and Russian**
Language ideology played an important part in the educational system. Russian had an important place in the students’ lives. The students were proud of their language, culture and their parents as well. As a result of the strong tie that Russian had in the student's life, the school continued the advancement of the language. It was obvious to the principal that the only way for these children to have an easy transition as new immigrants was to continue to teach them their mother tongue, Russian.

**Bagrut in Russian**
For nearly ten years, many pupils were completing Five Point Bagrut in Russian. As a result of the lack of new immigrants arriving from Russia, today there are no pupils who are able to complete Five Point Bagrut. Despite the lack of new immigrants, Russian is still being taught in the junior high school. The students may choose Russian in place of Arabic as a second language.
Reflection
On a personal level, I was an English teacher to these new immigrants during this particular period. I was shocked when I learned through researching this paper that over sixty percent of the students during this period were new immigrants. I never knew who was a new immigrant and who was a native-born Israeli in my English lessons. I believe this occurred as a result of the school policy which reflected tolerance concerning others.

The policy of acceptance created a utopian atmosphere. In this setting, there was no separation between the new immigrants and the native-born Israelis. I can say that I am proud to have been a part of this period as an English teacher.

Ethiopians and their heritage language in Hadera
Today, the situation is quite different in Tichon Hadera Junior High School in Bet-Eliezar, Hadera. There are no new immigrants from Russia any more. The only legacy that remains from this time is the students' ability to learn Russian as a second language instead of Arabic.

I believe that the same language policy that was used by the principal, Varda Shalev, can be used today for the Ethiopian students in Hadera. These students have no connection to their past. By disregarding their mother language, they are losing part of themselves as individuals. Language is an extremely strong factor in terms of personal identity and the ability to belong to a specific culture.

In Hadera, there has never been any form of cultural nights sponsored by the school concerning the Ethiopian community. The schools have never deemed any social event after traditional school hours worthy enough to be based exclusively on the Ethiopian population. In the 1990's, the Russians had many cultural nights which created feelings of language prestige and positive self-identity. Unfortunately, the same never occurred for the Ethiopian population. There were no Ethiopian cultural events sponsored by the schools in the 1990's, nor were there any in 2008.
As Russian was used as a marker for group membership and prestige, the same is not true for Amharic. Many Ethiopian teens do not feel an ideological affiliation with their language or culture. These teens are trying to emulate negative aspects of the Israeli culture instead of the positive aspects which can be found in their own nuclear family settings which is based on their heritage language, Amharic.

I have recently spoken to one of my twelfth grade Ethiopian female students, Shosh. She told me that about thirty percent of her friends have criminal records. She said that her friends are involved with drugs, alcohol and crime. Most of her childhood friends have dropped out of school and do not work.

She sadly informed me that many of her friends are busy trying to fit into the "Israeli society." They feel as if they are on the outside looking in. She stated that it is as if they want to forget who they are and where they came from.

She claimed that there are various programs in her area. Unfortunately, she stated that they are of no real help in finding a solution to the delinquency of the Ethiopian teens. Shosh explained that the programs which are offered to the Ethiopians are only useful if someone needs money to pay for electricity or help in filling out a government form.

Shosh thought that the problem was that her friends felt no affiliation to any group at all. They had no common language with their parents. Each one spoke a different language and, as a result, they were not able to understand each other. The teenagers' parents are looked upon as primitive people and therefore have no right to interfere with the teenagers' lifestyle. In this speech community, there is no role-relationship which existed in the new immigrants from Russia in the 1990's. As a result of not having any role-relationships based on language, there are no standards for communal rights and responsibilities that exist between the members of this language community (Fishman, 1972).

I believe that it is the responsibility of the school to teach the Ethiopian students about their mother language and about their culture. Through this education, the students will begin to understand their parents and, in the end, value them more. Once children value and respect their family and themselves, they will have a brighter future.
Implementation of Amharic in the school system in Hadera

Recently, I spoke to an employee of the city council in Hadera. He is in charge of teenagers who are at risk in Hadera. We began to speak about the problem of the Ethiopian teenagers in Hadera. We both agreed that the problem was serious and there needs to be a solution fast in order to help these youngsters.

I posed my idea to him about teaching Amharic during the school hours to the children. He told me that there are after-school classes for these students in their neighborhoods. I asked if these programs have shown any improvement in the crime and drug rate of the students. The answer was clear by the look on his face.

We began to discuss the fact that these students had no real relationship with their parents. I stressed that they had no common language with them and, as a result, they were losing their identity. I asked why it was not an option that these students learn their heritage language, Amharic, in the school. I stated that if Amharic would be taught in the school system, this would create a feeling of prestige within the target community. Unfortunately, many Ethiopians have no real positive feeling toward their culture and heritage.

I referred back to the 1990's when the Russian were able, and still are today, to learn Russian in the classroom. The fact that the language is still offered gives prestige to the language and the culture as well. The city official stated that most of the Ethiopian parents were illiterate. Statistically speaking, forty percent of the Ethiopian immigrants that arrived to Israel were illiterate (Spolsky&Shohamy,1999). I had no idea what that had to do with anything. I stressed again the fact that the Ethiopian teenagers needed to feel a positive identity not only to their parent's language but to their culture as well.

I told this official about the conversation that I had with my Ethiopian student, Shosh. I informed him that she told me that her peers were, in essence, running away from themselves and their past. They had lost all ties with who they were. She herself stated that this was a shame. She stressed to me that most of the Ethiopian youth were
attempting to emulate the western society. Through their attempt to become part of another group, they were in fact losing who they are.

Our conversation ended on that note. He did inform me though that these kids had the opportunity to take the *Bagrut* in Amharic. I asked him if he knew of any students who had taken this *Bagrut* examination in our city. His answer was a simple shake of the head, "No."

Amharic's status as an immigrant language is extremely low in the country. This resulted from the fact that there is a low literacy rate and literate tradition. This language has no real importance as an international language in Israel and in the world. As a result of these facts, the Israeli educational system has not done enough to support the language (Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999).

**Concluding Remarks**

Through this paper, I have begun to realize just how important it is for any new immigrant to retain his mother tongue. It is up to the society that the new immigrants integrate into to implement the studying of these languages into the school curriculum. Varda Shalev, who was the principal of Tichon Hadera, Bet-Eliezar in the 1990's, took a brave step toward guaranteeing the successful integration of the Russians into the society in Hadera. By offering the Russian language to be learned in the school system, Varda Shalev, spared those youngsters the problems that the Ethiopian youth are experiencing today.

Since the publishing of the book, "The Languages of Israel Policy, Ideology and Practice," by B., Spolsky and E., Shohamy in 1999, no school system in Israel has been bold enough to incorporate Amharic into the school curriculum in Israel.

**References**


