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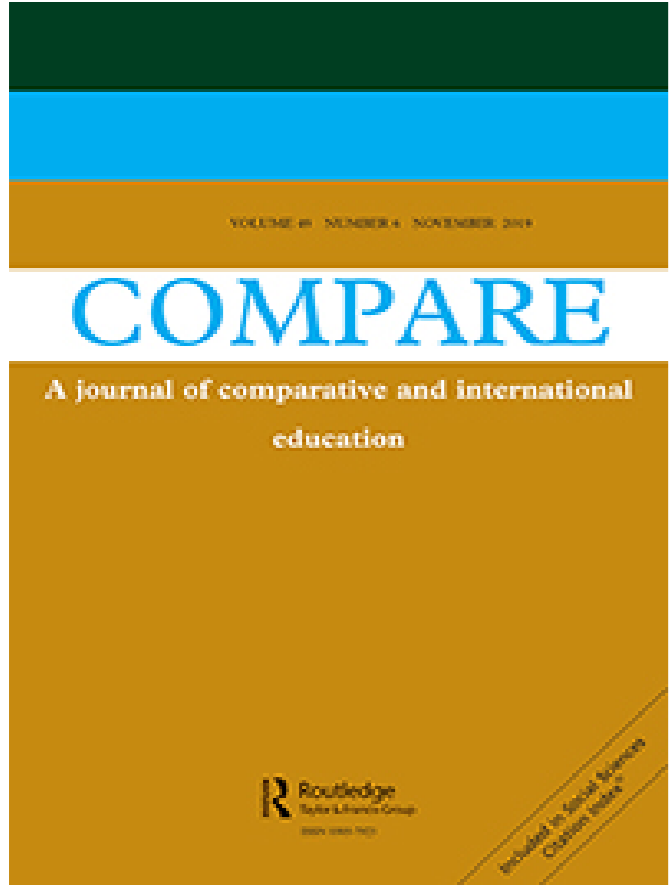
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## Bilingual education: the best solution for Hungarians in Ukraine?

Ilona Huszti, István Csernicsekó & Erzsébet Bárány

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## Bilingual education: the best solution for Hungarians in Ukraine?

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### 1. Introduction

Volume 43 of *Compare* published an article by Kulyk (2013). The author draws conclusions relating to the education systems of two minorities in Ukraine, the Crimean Tatars and the Transcarpathian Hungarians, based on semi-structured interviews and a total of 255 completed questionnaires.

The study seems to suggest that the author has found the educational model that simultaneously ensures the preservation of ethno-cultural identity and facilitates social integration. The researcher concludes that by introducing bilingual education, it is possible to solve the education problems of Ukraine's two minorities, which are significantly different from each other.

Our aim is to share our thoughts related to the above-mentioned issue in this forum. Our views are rooted in our research, conducted over the last 20 years, investigating the Transcarpathian Hungarian educational system according to various criteria. We intend to draw attention to the fact that the professional discourse among politicians, educational experts and professionals at Ukraine's Ministry of Education and Science about the educational system of minority communities, about their language policy situation and the transformation of all this is not correct and complete without involving the affected stakeholders, i.e. experts on minority education who at the same time are members of the minority in question.

### 2. Three options for minorities: integration, assimilation and segregation

As a rule, minorities have three options: integration, assimilation or segregation. The necessary instrument of integration is bilingualism: having a command of the majority language guarantees the opportunity of full-scale participation in social life, while mother tongue (or first language: the terms are used interchangeably) maintenance guarantees the preservation of one's own identity and culture.

Bilingualism is also a stage in the process of assimilation, but only as a transitional phenomenon. It is only present until the minority community gradually undergoes a complete language shift and becomes a new part of the monolingual majority



community, generally taking over the new culture and identity as well (or perhaps also maintaining some marginal elements of their former culture and identity).

Segregation does not require bilingualism. But first language monolingualism, consequently, does not facilitate either horizontal or vertical mobility; it isolates the individuals in their own communities.

The way of interpreting the concept of integration matters a great deal. According to Papp (2012, 13):

The concepts of minority and majority integration might differ. While the majority may call mother tongue education as a way of self-separation and takes every opportunity to suppress the native language of the students (even within a first-language school system), minority-rights advocates argue that first language education is a basic right and it also helps the social integrity of the community.

Patten (2001, 701) an American expert on language rights and political theory, argues that language ghettos should be prevented. This logic implies that the successful social integration of minorities is hindered by the minority language, and minority students would be more successful if they acquired the state language as soon as possible. It is quite remarkable that a Ukrainian researcher like Kulyk (2013) should support this view, because a considerable majority of researchers in Ukraine agree that the millions who consider themselves of Ukrainian nationality but who speak Russian as their first language have undergone the process of language shift due to the impact of Russian language education (Bilaniuk and Melnyk 2008). It is therefore no accident that Ukraine applies education as the most effective means in strengthening the position of the Ukrainian language (Csernicskó and Ferenc 2010).

From a language pedagogy perspective, it also seems more efficient if children acquire subject knowledge in their mother tongue (Pinter 2006, 30). Cummins (2000) has come to the conclusion that it takes longer to acquire the skills needed for participation in school subject discourse than those needed for informal communication. Cummins' findings also refer to the fact that bilingual education may be advantageous from the point of view of the learners' cognitive and meta-cognitive development. Nevertheless, he emphasises that the learners' first and second language skills must be developed in a parallel manner, while not ignoring the first language in order to develop the second.

### 3. The present situation

The context we refer to in this contribution is Transcarpathia, one of the westernmost regions of Ukraine. A Hungarian minority of about 150,000 people live in this area, about 12% of the whole population of Transcarpathia (Molnár and Molnár 2005).

At present, all schools with Hungarian as the language of instruction (SHLI) – the Hungarian minority schools – in Transcarpathia, Ukraine, teach three languages: Hungarian as the mother tongue of the learners; Ukrainian as the state language; and a foreign language, usually English or German. In SHLI all the school subjects are taught in Hungarian, except for Ukrainian language and literature and the foreign language. In fact, the teaching materials for the different Ukrainian language teaching contexts (schools with Ukrainian as the language of instruction – SULI – and SHLI)



differ from each other in that both teachers and learners use different textbooks for studying Ukrainian language and literature. However, at the end of their studies in Form 11, learners have to sit the same examination in the form of the External Independent Testing (EIT), and meet the same requirements. We find this unfair because minority children are seriously disadvantaged at the EIT, a most crucial examination in their lives (see [Section 4.4](#)).

The Curriculum for Ukrainian for minority schools does not state the ultimate goals as to what level the learners should achieve by the end of their studies. It would be of utmost importance if it did. Instead, the Curriculum emphasises the significance of teaching linguistic features of the language, rather than developing the learners' communicative competence (Husztí, Fábíán, and Bárányné Komári 2009).

#### **4. The often-heard phrase 'Transcarpathian Hungarians cannot speak Ukrainian'**

Very often, Transcarpathian Hungarians in general are 'accused of' not speaking the Ukrainian language. While we understand that this over-generalisation does not and cannot refer to the whole of the Transcarpathian Hungarian population, no adequate explanation is provided for this phenomenon. Therefore, we attempt to explain the reasons in what follows.

##### **4.1. Lack of adequately qualified teachers**

Until the academic year 2003/2004, no teachers were trained in Ukraine to teach Ukrainian as a second language (state or official language: the terms are used interchangeably) to non-native Ukrainian learners. In those schools where the minority language is the language of instruction, Ukrainian is taught either by teachers who were trained to teach the language to native speakers as the first language, or by teachers with qualifications other than Ukrainian and who attended a brief retraining course to be able to teach the language. Furthermore, in many small village schools, Ukrainian is taught by university or college graduates who are, however, not qualified teachers but 'just' have a good command of the state language. Some of these teachers do not know the language and culture of the nationality of those they teach Ukrainian (Pohan 2003, 52), even though the Hague Recommendations on the educational rights of minorities as well as language rights experts (e.g. Skutnabb-Kangas [1990]) claim that the state language should be taught by bilingual teachers.

##### **4.2. Lack of appropriate textbooks and the improper curriculum**

After introducing Ukrainian as a compulsory school subject in all minority schools in 1991, no curricula and textbooks necessary for teaching this subject appeared for some time. When they did appear, they were criticised by teachers working in these schools (Pohan 2003). The primary criticism was that the curricula and the textbooks were compiled by teachers and research fellows who did not know the situation, the language and the culture of the minorities in question. The textbooks were justly criticised for



concentrating too much on the theoretical teaching of grammar and not being communication-oriented (Cserniczkó 2015b).

The curriculum and the textbooks do not correspond to the already acquired languages of the children either: the expectations exceed the possibilities. The Ukrainian curriculum does not make use of the existing foreign and native language skills acquired at and outside school. It drills children in several grammatical categories that they have already become familiar with in their native language classes. For example, children already know the basic parts of speech (they know what the verb, the noun, the adjective, the numeral, the pronoun and so on are from their Hungarian classes), but teachers should also be aware that children know the definitions in Ukrainian taught in their Ukrainian classes as early as lower primary school, instead of placing the emphasis on developing the pupils' oral language skills. In practice, it means that rather than developing children's speaking and oral communication skills, teachers demand that children rote-learn the definitions of various grammatical phenomena. After examining the textbooks, one may have the impression that education experts consider the knowledge of the Ukrainian grammar system as the goal to achieve rather than learning to communicate in Ukrainian. Schools do not facilitate the acquisition of the Ukrainian language but deliver theoretical, grammatical knowledge about it.

### **4.3. Lack of the appropriate approach and the method based on it**

Though 'Ukrainian language' is a school subject with an identical name in the timetables of Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian schools, it refers to different contents. In SULI, children are admitted to school with native Ukrainian skills, thus the pedagogical goal of Ukrainian teaching in their case is to teach them to read and write, as well as to develop their language skills, make them aware of the norms of the standard language, provide them with a firm foundation for foreign languages, and so on. In schools, however, where Ukrainian is not the language of instruction, merely a school subject, the main goal is to teach children who do not speak Ukrainian to be able to communicate in it. If we have this difference in goals as a starting point, it is evident that quite different methods must be used to teach the subject 'Ukrainian language' in the two different types of schools.

If the goals of teaching Ukrainian are different in the various schools, then it is logical that the performance requirements should also be different. In Ukraine, however, the requirements regarding the subject 'Ukrainian language and literature' are the same for everybody. It means that school-leavers must know the same material in 'Ukrainian language and literature', regardless of what their mother tongue is and what school they attended (whether they studied Ukrainian as their own mother tongue or only as one of the school subjects) (Cserniczkó 2012).

### **4.4. Different situations, same requirements**

Education policy in Ukraine interprets the concept of equal opportunities in a peculiar way. We have mentioned that the subject 'Ukrainian language' means quite different things in SULI and in SHLI.



Everybody has a mother tongue and it is natural that everybody has the right to learn: (a) their mother tongue; (b) the state language; and (c) a foreign language at school. Rights (a) and (b) are both covered by the Ukrainian classes in Ukrainian schools. However, in the case of minority learners, the subject ‘mother tongue’ clearly corresponds to (a), and the subject ‘Ukrainian language’ corresponds to (b). Both types of schools prescribe the teaching and learning of a foreign language (c), though. It means that the amount of schoolwork greatly differs for Ukrainian children and children with other mother tongues or first languages in Ukraine. While the learners’ language skills differ greatly in SHLI and SULI, the expectations regarding the learners’ language skills are the same. As was mentioned earlier, the same requirements must be fulfilled by everybody in the independent testing in Ukrainian language and literature, which was made compulsory in 2008.

## 5. Consequences of low-efficiency Ukrainian language teaching

Ukrainian language teaching in Transcarpathian SHLI is not at all efficient (Cserniczkó 2015a, 2018). A significant part of Transcarpathian Hungarian parents see this education as a segregation programme (Skutnabb-Kangas 1990, 14) that stops their children from successful integration and social mobility. Because of the low standard of teaching Ukrainian, more and more parents decide to have their children attend SULI (Cserniczkó 2015a, 2018). This is the so-called ‘submersion’ or ‘sink-or-swim’ model (Skutnabb-Kangas 1990, 13). Skutnabb-Kangas and Dunbar (2010) call this form of education a dangerous educational model for minorities, as it does not help maintain their ethno-linguistic identity. The segregation programme does not help social integration, either.

Many young people try to solve the problem by entering tertiary education in another country, mainly in Hungary. The majority of these Ukrainian citizens, however, never return to their home country, and those who do return have to face the primary problem: their lack of skill in Ukrainian.

Our mutual responsibility and interest – that of the Ukrainian state and of Transcarpathian Hungarians – is that the SHLI should facilitate integration rather than segregation, and that the education system fosters prosperity in the students’ home country rather than prompts them to emigrate.

## 6. The latest developments

Much has happened since Kulyk’s 2013 article was published. However, the most significant event was the ratification of the new law ‘On Education’ by the Ukrainian Parliament on 5 September 2017. Its Article 7 on language use has been a highly debated issue since its appearance in national and international fora, too. In brief, it says that the language of the educational process at institutions of education is the state language. Persons belonging to national minorities of Ukraine are guaranteed the right to education in communal educational institutions of pre-school and primary education in the language of the national minority they belong to and in the official language of the state.<sup>1</sup> The viewpoint of the Hungarian national minority in Ukraine about the notorious Article 7 is clear: first and foremost, the organisations protecting the interests of the Hungarian



minority in Ukraine believe that it is contrary to the Constitution of Ukraine in that it does not allow members of national minorities to receive education in the country wholly in their mother tongue (involving pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary education), although Part 5 of Article 53 of the Constitution of Ukraine guarantees this right.<sup>2</sup> Article 7 of the Law does not offer solutions to the problems of language teaching.

After the ratification of the Law Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs requested the Venice Commission to prepare an opinion on Article 7 of the Law on Education of 5 September 2017, which regulates the use of the state language and minority and other languages in education. Paragraph 119 of the Opinion of the Venice Commission<sup>3</sup> unambiguously states that:

While introducing a comprehensive reform of the Ukrainian education system which globally seems to be positively received, the new Education Law also proposes new principles for the use of languages as medium of education and as subject of instruction. In particular, Article 7 of the new Law, by reducing the scope of education in minority languages, notably at the secondary level, has drawn strong criticism and protests both domestically and internationally.

Among others, the most essential recommendations of the Venice Commission were to continue ensuring a sufficient proportion of education in minority languages at the primary and secondary levels, in addition to the teaching of the state language, and to improve the quality of teaching of the state language. Now the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine seems to have accepted the recommendations<sup>4</sup> and even to follow them in theory, although in practice little can be felt and experienced from their deeds. Various meetings are organised between the educational authorities and the representatives of the national minorities at the state level. A certain kind of understanding seems to have started, though it is far from being clear how this complicated situation will be resolved. There is a great deal of uncertainty in the community about whether there will be bilingual education or monolingual education in Ukrainian, which is the language of the majority. Anyway, we are optimistic and believe that the solution that the Ukrainian government will propose for the situation will be beneficial for the Hungarian minority living in Ukraine.

## **7. Conclusion: how could the problem be solved?**

Learning the state language is undoubtedly important and useful for Transcarpathian Hungarians. However, we firmly believe that learning the Ukrainian language is not the main goal. Acquisition of the state/official/second language is only the means of social integration. We are also certain that while preserving Hungarian schools, we have to find the educational model that facilitates the goals of maintaining ethno-linguistic identity and the acquisition of Ukrainian at a level that makes successful social integration possible. On the other hand, we are also sure that besides these two goals, teaching all the other school subjects at a high level is of equal importance. We must not allow that teaching and learning Ukrainian gain higher importance than good quality school education, as in a well-functioning state, the command of the state language is not the main requirement of social integration. Instead of bilingual schooling (= transitional educational programme) suggested by Kulyk, we would like to



preserve the ‘language shelter (maintenance)’ educational programme recommended by Skutnabb-Kangas (1990, 13–14).

In summary, bilingual education is possible, although it needs the right investment. It needs to be well planned and managed. However, we cannot neglect the fact that Ukraine, which became independent in 1991, still has not created the required conditions for teaching the Ukrainian language as a school discipline for the 28 years of its existence. We are convinced that teaching Ukrainian in Transcarpathian SHLI can only be effective and fruitful if the state is willing to cooperate with the experts of the Hungarian minority (i.e. representatives of Hungarian interest protection organisations in Transcarpathia) in every respect.

## Notes

1. Source: [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-REF\(2017\)047-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-REF(2017)047-e). Translation provided by the Ukrainian authorities.
2. Ukraine’s Law On Education from the point of view of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia: <https://kmksz.com.ua/2017/10/09/ukraines-law-education-point-view-hungarian-minority-transcarpathia/>; Education Law of Ukraine: Why is Article 7 Wrong? <https://kmksz.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Why-is-wrong-the-Law-of-Education.pdf>
3. CDL-AD(2017)030-e. Ukraine – Opinion on the provisions of the Law on Education of 5 September 2017, which concern the use of the State Language and Minority and other Languages in Education, adopted by the Commission at its 113th Plenary Session (Venice, 8–9 December 2017). Available at: [http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2017\)030-e](http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2017)030-e)
4. Position of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine regarding the opinion of the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) on the provisions of the Law on Education of 5 September 2017 (CDL-AD (2017) 030). <https://mon.gov.ua/ua/news/position-ministry-education-and-science-ukraine-regarding-opinion-european-commission-democracy-through-law-venice-commission-provisions-law-education-5-september-2017-cdl-ad-2017-030>

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