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Analyzing the Intercultural and Multilingual University Space: Methodological Foundations

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Abstract

The authors present a panorama of the conceptual and methodological foundations proposed for the study of interculturalism and multilingualism in the modern universities. The authors take as their starting point M. Kagan's system-cultural approach, Yu. Lotman's semiotic theory, and G. Kress's discursive-semiotic concept of multimodal literacy. To clarify the features, characteristics, and identities formed in the practices of development and functioning of the multilingual and intercultural university community, the authors suggest a combination of P. Bourdieu's theory of practice with the cross-cultural comparative studies.

Keywords: interculturalism, multilingualism, post-literacy, new literacy, discursive semiotics, theory of practice, university space

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1. Introduction

Multilingualism and interculturalism of a learning space is a central theme in a situation of open and globalized international educational institution, and the tasks of internationalization of Russian universities in the rapidly changing world. The international scientific, theoretical and practical experience of solving this problem allows us to present the hypothesis that multilingualism and interculturalism of the university space should be regarded as an integral complex multidirectional system that is affected by the external and internal socio-cultural and civilizational challenges of the post-literacy age [4].

2. Methods

We do not take as our goal the study of interculturalism and multilingualism of the university space as an autonomous subject. Rather, we look at their applied, objective dimension. We set a task of a critical philosophical and cultural exlporation and

methodological and pedagogical development of a prospective complex model for the multilingual and intercultural university education.

The ideas that originated both in the practice of internationalization of the Ural Federal University space and in the theoretical reflections about the modern era of post-literacy, describe the university space as a space for open intercultural and multilingual exchange within the community of students and teachers from different countries. These ideas require several research frameworks. The general theoretical framework for constructing a holistic perspective of a multilingual education in the post-literacy age is the systemic approach based on the understanding of culture as a system with its own laws, structures, processes and properties that determine the state, functioning and evolution of its specific subsystems, components and elements. In our case, this subsystem is the practices of multilingual education.

Following M. Kagan [2, 45] we look at culture as a system of interactions between subject-to-subject and object-to-object subsystems, or human, subjective and functional modalities, of culture. From this perspective, and following the semiotic framework, culture is a text [3]. First of all, culture is something that exists independently of the perception and defines the conditions for the existence of an individual living in the area of different texts and languages. Secondly, from the perspective of functional modality, culture creates the need for coding and decoding textual messages: in other words, communicating these messages in one or another linguistic form to languages of different cultures and interpreting these verbal, written, or visual texts recognizing the existing cultural diversity and the unique nature of every cultural situation. Thirdly, at the same time, we view culture in its human modality as literacy, implying that the cultural subject is able to «read» and «write», and, broadly speaking, to create and decode cultural texts in every language that exists in the modern culture [4].

Our task is to explore the existence of the subsystem of multilingualism (various languages), interculturalism (multiple cultural texts), post-literacy (new multimodal and multilingual literacy, which is being acquired both in the process of official education and in the diverse unrestricted communication within and outside the university space).

We should also clarify the terms that are central for our research: multilingualism, interculturalism and post-literacy. We understand post-literacy as multiliteracy, as a diversified combination of all literacy forms that have been developed by the humanity. This approach was suggested by G. Kress, a British theorist of literacy in the age of digital media, and it has fundamentally changed the concept of the educational space; since education, in Kress' understanding of literacy, becomes an endless, ubiquitous

and inter-subjective process [6]. We understand interculturalism as a multiplicity of socio-cultural fields or surfaces that meet in one space. Thus seen, interculturalism removes ethnic and national diversity and begins to signify a structural-semantic, discursive multiplicity of cultures, cultural surfaces or fields in which a person, who finds her or himself in the university space, is involved. Multilingualism is the ability to create, decode and interpret texts that are constructed in all languages, that are possible in the concrete culture, including verbal communication and non-verbal languages of art, computer languages, programming codes, and explicit, logically univalent scientific statements [3].

The intellectual framework of systemic culturology guides the sequence of our research and our development of the multilingual education model: the first level describes the problem of the contemporary human modality of culture (the level of post-literacy). Here we suggest cultural intelligence as its foundation. The second level explores the practices of the multilingual education as the specifics of its functioning. The third level analyzes the peculiarities of the subjective modality of the contemporary culture of reading, its communicative environment, the space of the university communication, that is, the texts that manifest the new quality of culture (the so-called 'third space' and 'post-literate reading').

The theoretical foundations for the development of the multilingual education model based on the human modality of culture are the McLuhan's ideas about post-literacy as a specific socio-cultural age [7]. These ideas define the time frame for the phenomenon in question (the beginning of the XXIst century). We also turn to the discussions of the various forms of literacy initiated by McLuhan's followers such as P. Alberts, N. Gendina, W. Grigoryev, B. Dumont, I. Kolesnikova, E. Kuzmin, K. Mills, A. Rogers, and G. Sanders, who have elaborated this concept in the thematic fields of language philosophy, education and cultural periodization.

We take P. Bourdieu's theory of practice as the main methodological principle for determining the model's functionality. We believe that the theory of practice complies with the challenges of the multilingual education and enables the arrangement of the heterogeneous linguistic and pedagogical empirical material about the contemporary multilingual education as the functional aspect of the socio-communicative subsystem of culture and its peculiarities in the age of post-literacy. The divergent feature of the theory of practice, which differentiates it from other methods of study, is its interest in the microlevel of cultural processes.

In Bourdieu's system, cultural practices have a status of an event that changes the social world. The theory of practices allows for the specification of the concepts such

as 'multilingual university space', 'the intercultural university space' and 'the post-literate university space' in relation to modern Russia and the modern global world. This approach makes it possible to compare the practices and ideas about multilingualism and interculturalism existing in Russian and foreign university communities. To capitalize on these advantages, it is necessary to initially utilize the descriptive method and then the comparative research method in order to contrast different models of intercultural and multilingual practices. Also, the case study method is required for a thorough analysis of practices in the university space.

3. Discussion

It seems appropriate to critically examine the educational spaces of the Ural Federal University, Kazan Federal University and the University of Cape Town that exist in their own distinctive socio-cultural environments [5]. It is worth mentioning that the theory of practice takes an important methodological precedence over the traditional objectivistic models. Bourdieu's approach makes it possible to observe and formalize the participant observation as a method of critical analysis of the existing practices. In our research, the Bourdieu's theory of practice is sufficiently amplified by the M. Foucault's theory of discursive practices and the identity analysis in the liquid modernity concept by Zygmunt Bauman. This allows us to create a multilevel, empirical model of multilingual education practices based on the philosophy of culture, integrating such characteristics as equipment, skills, practical tasks, identities, values, forms of interaction and institutions.

We use semiotic and morphological approaches to elaborate the methodology of constructing a domain-specific layer of the complex perspective multilingual education model with the due consideration of manifold polymorphous texts in the contemporary culture, as well as the causes and processes of emergence and functioning of such texts in the digital and non-digital environment. To develop our approach to the morphology of the current post-literate reading, we refer to the works about the languages of culture, texts that were created in these languages and means of translating texts-mediators. Thus, we analyzed the works on social and discursive semiotics of such researchers as Ju. Lotman, T. van Dijk, G. Kress, R. Leite-Garcia, T. van Leeuwen, B. Cope, M. Kalantzis, and J. M. Swales.

4. Conclusions

The future methodological elaboration will help clarify the existing systemic approach to culture and the methods of the complex system modeling in the philosophy of culture and help to make it sufficiently specific according to the particular objectives of the research and its strategic aim - the systemic-functional modeling of the multilingual education in the age of post-literacy and tactical research tasks.

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