Migrants’ homeland, language, ethnic and cultural self-perception: The case of teenage Georgian students in Moscow

Moscow has become one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse cities in the world in the last two decades. The fall of the USSR in 1991 as well as local military conflicts in some regions of the post-Soviet space, triggered massive migratory flows. The conflict in south Caucasus region forced a great number of ethnic Georgians, Abkhazians and South Ossetians to flee from their homes in search of better living conditions. High rates of influx of migrants to Moscow necessitated the provision of equal education opportunities to children of different ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

In this paper, I am going to examine the role of homeland and language in the process identity construction by adolescent Georgian migrant students in the Moscow secondary school with a Georgian ethno-cultural component. More specifically, the study aims to answer the following research questions: 1. How do Georgian teenage students conceptualize the notion of homeland and mother tongue, and how their emotional attachment to these (or lack thereof) can influence their identity construction; 2. What role does the school play in the formation of Georgian cultural and ethnic identity?

In order to address the research question of the present study, the data will be analyzed and interpreted with the help of the ethnolinguistic vitality theoretical framework. The theory of ethnolinguistic vitality was first introduced by Giles, Bourhis and Taylor in 1977. However, the theory has been modified and refined (see in particular Bourhis et al. 1981; Ehala 2010/2011; Karan, 2011). The vitality of the group under investigation is assessed by three structural components: status, institutional support and demography. Zoumpalidis (2014) stresses the importance of the provenance factor, i.e. the country of origin of migrants and the role it might play in their identity construction process and group belonging.

In the present study, observation, quantitative (74 questionnaires filled out by students of 6th-11th grades) and qualitative (three group interviews with students, four individual interviews with teachers, two with administrative staff, and one group interview with teachers) methods of data collection are used. The fieldwork was conducted during the 2015-2016 academic year. Observations mainly took place in Russian and Georgian language classes. I observed the character of students’ interaction with the teacher and vice versa, students’ interaction (language behavior patterns, code-switching) with peers during the lesson and during the breaks. I likewise attended national Russian and Georgian celebrations organized by the school.

The preliminary results demonstrate that during the lessons, it is predominantly Russian which features as the language of communication and instruction. Both teachers and students express the idea that the students in Georgia are different in many respects, including ethnic and cultural self-perception. Homeland appears to play an important role in defining ‘Georgianness’.

References


