

Implementation of the project: "Finno-Ugric languages and cultures in preschool education" and its prospects

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I welcome all the participants of the World Congress of Finno-Ugric peoples. I highly value the significance of our forum in preservation of native languages and cultures.

Mother tongue is the spiritual core of mentality and the basis for national self-consciousness, emotional sphere as well as consciousness and physical health. Language is the main prerequisite for preserving the people. However, preservation of the Finno-Ugric languages in a modern world is already a very elaborate work. Therefore, the Russian-Finnish project "Finno-Ugric languages and cultures in a preschool education", which has been implemented since 2013, is especially relevant today.

The kinship of Finno-Ugric peoples has been proven by linguistic scientists; currently, there are serious researches being conducted on the subject of the real health and vitality of our languages. Unfortunately, the language situation is quite alarming: we can say that most of our languages are under a serious threat of extinction. Intergenerational transmission of language has been disrupted: the language is mostly practiced by a generation of grandparents. The generation of parents can understand the language, but however, they don't exercise it among themselves or with their children.

The project idea originated at the V World Congress of Finno-Ugric Peoples in Khanty-Mansiysk and was included in the report of the Finnish President Tarja Halonen: "If people want to preserve their native language, it is necessary to pay attention to preschool aged children ... We can extend our experience in reviving Inari Sámi language ...". This appeal was as if seeds had fallen on a plowed soil and sprouted seedlings. And today these seedlings already have made their flowers. And fruit, I hope, will definitely appear in the future. And all this happened thanks to the efforts of many people around the Finno-Ugric world!

Our active work begun through a Language nest project, which was implemented between 2008 and 2012 on the residential territory of the Finno-Ugric peoples in Russia. The project was succeeded by another project, called "Finno-Ugric languages and cultures in preschool education", which is characterized by its broader view on searching for different effective native language learning technologies for preschoolers. The project is being coordinated by the "Finland - Russia Society", particularly from its central office in the city of Helsinki. The project is funded by the Finnish Cultural Foundation, which is the largest private foundation in the country. In Russia, the activity is supervised by regional coordinators dealing with organizational and substantive issues. Creation of an interested and motivated network of specialists, trainers, researchers, practitioners in each of the Finno-Ugric regions in Russia can be considered as an achievement of the project. This allows asserting that the idea of forming early bilingual education (Russian-national one, in the first place) baffled all of the Finno-Ugric world in Russia, which complies with a global education trend, the drive towards multilingualism. A balanced bilingual education would enable us to give a foundation of stability in preservation

and most importantly, enable the practical functioning of our Finno-Ugric languages in the modern Russian educational environment.

The main objective of the project is to create a modern and efficient education system of Finno-Ugric language for kindergarten. Focusing especially on preschool education makes the project socially significant and very important for preserving the Finno-Ugric languages. Why?

Firstly, early age in particular is the best period for learning languages (also multiple languages simultaneously). It doesn't take a lot of time to see and feel the result.

Secondly, a language that has been learned at an early childhood, even on a phonetic basis, has a solid foundation and can later be activated at any age.

Thirdly, the child sees the kindergarten as "a second home, or a family," a bilingual language environment can become a quite natural and well-organized for the child. This is very important in a situation where linguistic intergenerational continuity no longer exists, i.e., there is no way to transmit the Finno-Ugric language within the family, which is already our reality. The family in this case can become a supporting factor and join the language revival along with the children.

Fourthly, the kindergarten is open to the society as a system that allows you to show the "rebirth" of the language in children, although, many have been skeptical and even negative about "language immersion" at the beginning of the project. Our "language groups" have become a subject of interest for society, scientists and the mass media. Our indirect challenge is to make the language a part of the urban culture, a full-fledged factor in the educational system, thus increasing its prestige and demand.

Modern, professional and moral support of children's bilingual education is very important because many practical specialists in our environment simply doubt the correctness of their own activities. Much is being done by intuition, while stereotypes prevail. During the project, we have identified the most effective ways and technologies and familiarized ourselves with international bilingual and multilingual education experience. Thanks to the project we have an opportunity to interact with internationally known scientists and experts on the issue of bilingualism and language revitalization. After all, we can boldly consider the work with children in kindergartens and families as one of the fundamental process of revitalization that reinvigorates our languages.

Over the years of project implementation, we have become stronger in areas of methodology, information and motivation. The project helped to rethink the notion of language learning process in preschool years. It also allowed to treat our languages both as a goal of not theatrical but adequate fluency in them and also as a mean of acquiring modern knowledge and information.

Today, the project involves all of the Finno-Ugric regions of Russia: Karelia, Komi, Mari, Mordovia, Udmurtia, Perm region, Khanty-Mansi, Taimyr Dolgan-Nenets Autonomous Districts, parts of Nenets Autonomous District of Arkhangelsk region as well as Leningrad, Vologda and Tver regions.

It is encouraging to see yearly increase in the number of kindergartens and consequently children, who are included in our project. Initially, we chose pilot / trial platforms and limited our activity to a small amount. At implementation stage, other kindergartens were included and the project gave them informational and methodological support. Thus, a real network of kindergartens is now created together with resource and skill centers i.e. kindergartens, which have been involved in the project from the very beginning. Information on the project opportunities, primarily educational ones, spread out quickly and after a while, new kindergartens adjoined and began collaborating with us.

It was noticeable, how the work of our caregivers with children changed during the implementation of the project and how important were the lectures and workshops to them, as well as visits to kindergartens in various regions as they tested new methods and techniques teaching children the language, while creatively getting familiar with using visual material and existing resources. Our caregivers are increasingly active and have begun speaking with the children more boldly in a form of free communication, not only in connection with language lessons. We consider this a great achievement!

In our work, we rely on a natural phenomenon, known from the ancient times in Russia - the national Russian bilingualism and its significance in the personal development of a child. It should be noted that the provisions of the Law "On Education in the Russian Federation" and the Federal state standard of preschool education create a favorable situation for the educational institutions in strengthening the position of national languages, starting from the preschool level. Nowadays, each preschool education organization has the sole right to determine the content and language of education in accordance with the Law. The most important condition for the implementation of bilingual preschool education is the willingness of teachers to conduct such work as well as having parental consent and active participation of the family.

The project showed that success in learning the Finno-Ugric languages can be achieved when motivated and experienced caregivers work with the children, speaking their native tongue fluently and flexibly and when the parents are fully informed in what is happening at the preschool institution, supporting their children in mastering the two languages. In addition, you should always start working with a younger group to have time to teach the basics of the language. Children of our linguistic groups, who were involved in our project today have already become first-graders. They are distinguished by their openness and creative activeness, as well as linguistic sensitivity. They are well oriented and actively use the Finno-Ugric language in situations that are familiar from the kindergarten. The future task is to support a bilingual child at school. The succession of Finno-Ugric language education from the kindergarten to school, as well as mastering the language at grammatical and written levels could be the subject of the next project and one of our common priorities and objectives for all of the Finno-Ugric space in Russia!

A particular objective of the project was to organize the work with parents, and today it can be noted that the parents of our "language groups" involved in the project, have become more active in kindergarten life, in dialogue with caregivers and their own children. Parents are interested in their children's success. They still learn more about the benefits of early bilingualism - the creative environment in which their children are being educated. The parents become involved in the process and show willingness to start learning the Finno-Ugric language.

Actually this was the objective of the project: to engraft interest to the language in family through the children, to launch returning of the language into society. When children begin speaking, a very rapid rethinking of our language values and priorities occurs. The family and the surrounding community become naturally involved - actually these are the goals that we have been striving towards for long years. We become aware of the deep role of the language itself and not of events, formalities and attributes decorated by the language. We hope that you'll be able to recognize this result from the videos that will be aired tomorrow in continuation of this topic.

A large number of like-minded professionals, activists of national and cultural societies and young families reached out to our project. Young families began to show a strong desire to join family communication clubs, sc. language holidays or language courses. There are very good examples of parental activity in online social networks of the Internet. They contain language materials and creative content for children. Children's literature is being published much more actively in the regions. Families began to appear, where young parents established themselves in the belief that they should begin speaking their native language with their child since birth. In the framework of the project in 2015 an interregional competition of creative projects named: "I speak - they speak at home: Finno-Ugric languages in kindergarten and family" was organized. It was attended by 22 kindergartens of 6 Finno-Ugric regions: The Komi-Perm District, Karelia, Komi, Udmurtia, Mordovia and Mari and Khanty Mansi Administrative District. The winners were given grants for implementation of specific parent-child projects.

The goal has been reached in a certain way, for example through our activities in specific project. However, an important task is to make this phenomenon more extensive and widespread. We need advanced knowledge to actualize the global experience of how bilingualism is achieved and how it moves and how to extract advantage from it and contribute to our national security.

Throughout the entire project, on a high methodological level, regional and interregional seminars were held in all Finno-Ugric regions supported by local ministries and departments.

We invite Russian and foreign specialists from reputable centers of preschool education to our seminars, as well as experts and trainers of leading publishers, who publish preschool education programs. The project collaborates with the regional ministries of education and national policy, as well as educational authorities and municipalities.

A special informational and methodological edition in two parts (theory and practice) on the results of our project can be considered as a positive factor for creating a common space in the sphere of early bilingualism. There were two numbers of special informational scientific and methodical journal named: "Pedagogical spring", published by Education Development and Retraining Institute of Education Employees of Udmurt Republic. The journal summarizes theoretical and practical experience from the implementation of the Project "The Finno-Ugric languages and cultures in early childhood education."

At present, a material digest is being prepared based on the results of the project implementation in all of the Finno-Ugric regions (Editor of the digest: E.Yu. Protasova). Work has begun on the creation of workbooks (vocabularies), which include the program's necessary

scope of children's speech content in linguistic Finno-Ugric groups of the kindergarten, covering all the necessary topics throughout the kindergarten daycare. This work is greatly important in accordance with federal requirements to the structure of the preschool education program.

Today, there is an active virtual network of all professionals and practitioners. It's an information portal called: FINNOUGR-DOU.org. There is a lot of material on our educational workshops and useful links for anyone interested in bilingual education.

There are two essential noteworthy problems among the problems that have identified over the course of the project. Firstly, the project has shown increasingly weakening linguistic competence of caregivers, while a high quality linguistic immersion in early childhood requires experts that are fluent or proficient in the language. There is a generation transformation of caregivers taking place and it is usual that the proficiency level of younger teachers is much lower compared to the older teachers. At the same time, young teachers use modern computer technology much more often and they are also prepared for innovations. There is a positive example of teachers of different ages working in pairs, helping each other, exchanging linguistic experience among other things. Linguistic competence improvement requires regular language courses, supported by the local authorities of the particular region.

Secondly, often the post-kindergarten language education doesn't continue in the school's 1 grade because there isn't a school in the microdistrict, where you can study the Finno-Ugric language. It has become a really heavy problem, especially in the cities. This requires serious and sustained administrative decision making, such as creating educational "kindergarten - school" - complexes in the particular microdistrict. It is important to expand the operational scope of the Finno-Ugric language in school, not just limiting to studying the Finno-Ugric language in the classroom. We must look for ways and models of transferring the Finno-Ugric language to children at the primary school level as well as forms of further use of the language.

Thus, the project "Finno-Ugric languages and cultures in preschool education" has allowed combining linguistic initiatives and achievements in the sphere of Finno-Ugric preschool education, uniting the most active practitioners, supporting them with additional knowledge and skills. It has also provided a specific instrument in a form of efficient language learning technology with its documentary and program description, relevant literature and practical experience. And of course it has also increased motivation for exercising the Finno-Ugric languages. There has been a response from families and local communities. Obviously, such work should be continued!