Migration and bilingualism

An Abstract

Migration denotes the movement of people from one place to another. People move from one country to another to find work, training or to escape political or religious persecution. The consequence of migration is the necessity to widen one’s linguistic competence and to learn another language.

This paper will analyse the migration of Poles and their bilingualism, with an emphasis on Great Britain. Tracing the migration of Poles to England over the centuries, it was recorded in English historical documents, that one of the first Poles who landed on the English soil was Gunhild the Pole, the mother of Canute the Great – Danish king. She was brought there by Canute and she most probably died in Winchester.

Since then there have been many Poles who came to the English shores and made homes there. Their plight was not made any easier due to the insular character of the English, who did not necessarily take kindly to ‘the aliens’. Joseph Conrad gives an example of a treatment of a Pole by the English country dwellers in a short story ‘Amy Foster’. Has much changed since then as the treatment of foreigners is concerned?

Significant number of Poles settled in Britain after the Second World War (about 250,000). Their integration into British society was not easy but effective. The Poles not only learnt English but retained their native language, and taught it to the new generation born in England. A strong sense of identity, a well organised community and the help of the host country created conducive conditions for integration. Polish Saturday Schools played a great role in retaining the native language. The younger generation became immersed in the English language and they spoke became like natives. Their parents though, although they had acquired fluency in English, spoke with a heavy accent that gave them the brand of a ‘foreigner’ a ‘stranger’. The accent however did not necessarily warrant a bad treatment from the natives. A good relationship with neighbours, colleagues at work, and the good reputation of
Poles transcended the accents and the less than perfect knowledge of English, to help integration into British society.

As the result of bilingualism, the host country benefited from the talent and skills brought to their country. Eventually when Poland became a totally free country in 1989, many Poles born in the UK went to work in Poland to help the Polish economy. Also, during the communist times, the Poles in the UK, thanks to their bilingualism, were able to contribute greatly to the abolition of communism.

A new wave of Polish migrants (about 1,000,000) came to Britain in 2004. Most of them couldn’t speak any English. Some found jobs with Polish firms, and others where the English language was not required. Their language skills have not improved greatly until now. As the consequence, because of their lack of English, they have no chance to improve their prospects and to integrate.

Young professionals who have come to Britain find work more easily as they speak at least some English. If their language is not adequate they take jobs below their status and education level. But they are inquisitive, eager to learn and to improve their skills. In time they move up the employment league, improve their English and function well in the host country.

Children and youngsters integrate into the host country the most easily. They acquire the language by being immersed in it in schools or colleges. At the same time the parents ensure that their children do not lose their native language. They send them to the Polish Saturday Schools. But as the number of Polish children is large, not all of the children find places in Polish schools. That is not the only problem. The schools are financed by parents themselves, and many of them cannot afford sending their children to a Polish School. So, there is danger that these youngsters will assimilate quickly into a new environment and forget their native tongue.

European Union policies confirm the importance of languages. There are many directives which support the learning and teaching of the European Union languages. The learning of foreign languages is to help the migrants to find employment in another country, and to integrate.
Not all European countries adhere to European directives with regards other language policies. An example is Lithuania, where recent Lithuanian legislation aims to eradicate, rather than encourage, the learning and retention of Polish among the ethnic Polish community.

Looking at the younger generation now we can see that many of them already speak two or more languages. Their movement in Europe is unrestricted, and they can study and work anywhere in Europe. Their linguistic skills will undoubtedly help with European cohesion and integration.

Currently a new European Project is being realised. It is called Heuropa. There are four partners working on it (Germany, Poland, Czech Republic and Lithuania). Its aim is to provide a computer programme for children of migrant workers to learn and retain their native languages. The programme is also aimed at the parents from mixed marriages who wish to learn together with their child/ren. The programme will be versatile and suitable for using in the classroom.

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