



Electronic Media as the Tool for Preserving Ancient Language: Web Resource “Khalmg Keln” (The Kalmyk Language)

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ABSTRACT

According to UNESCO data, the Kalmyk language has faced a real threat of dying-out and is currently a declining language. In this respect the creation of e-textbooks becomes a burning issue. They would serve as educational information resources, which combines modern methods and play the role of encyclopedias. This article aims at describing the structure, basic problems and development process of this online educational information resource. The main objective of this e-textbook is to simplify learning of the Kalmyk language, develop the oral speech in the Kalmyk language and forward the Kalmyk culture. The educational information resource presents experience of those people who have been teaching children starting from kindergartens the Kalmyk language and the Kalmyk literature while taking into consideration their ethnic peculiarities. This article is mainly concerned with describing the structure, basic problems and development process of this online educational information resource, and also dwells upon spelling rules of the Kalmyk language, methods of teaching the Kalmyk language as a foreign one and introduction of information technologies to the sphere of teaching.

Keywords: The Kalmyk Language, Dominant Language, E-Learning, Teaching Methods, Educational Information Resource, E-Textbook

JEL Classifications: I21, I29, O33, O35

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The Linguistic Situation in Kalmykia

Throughout the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century languages have been dying all around the globe. Nowadays most languages of small-numbered peoples living on the territory of the Russian Federation are gradually disappearing. It is supposed that the bulk of them are going to die out in the near future (The languages of peoples living in Russia, 2002). The Kalmyk language falls within this endangered group, though, several decades ago it had been a significant means of communication and world-perception for Kalmyks. The dying-out of the Kalmyk language and its culture is seriously aggravated by globalization

and assimilation. The situation became critical in the second half of the 20th century when Kalmyks were deported to eastern parts of the Soviet Union. 28 December, 1943, was a starting point in the dying out of the Kalmyk language. This tragic event forced the Kalmyk people to adapt to new (geographical, cultural, linguistic, everyday, etc.) living conditions while their native tongue became less-demanded.

At this point there are few so-called “language oases” where Kalmyks still use their native tongue. The older generation prefers to speak the Kalmyk language but their communication with youngsters is nearly impossible since the younger generation is not fluent in Kalmyk or does not speak it at all. Representatives

of another social group understand colloquial speech but cannot produce their own utterances because of the language barrier. This phenomenon is called unilateral or passive language competence. In this case it can be assumed that the language freezes in its development. Its vocabulary does not get new words, syntactic constructions are being forgotten, and people’s speech is filled only with frequent linguistic units. Scholars are convinced that this linguistic threat can cause the inevitable death of ethnic diversity and the loss of linguistic data, which is required for describing the language structure (Kibrik, 1991).

1.2. The Reasons Behind the Dying-out of the Kalmyk Language

For a long time linguists from Russia and Kalmykia have been studying the structure of the Kalmyk language, comparing it with other kindred and non-kindred languages and dealing with other linguistic problems without realizing that due to interference and assimilation the language has started to decline. The dying-out of the Kalmyk language, which started in the middle of the 20th century, happened in accordance with a “well-established” scheme “One language (a dominant one) comes in contact with a weaker one, expands and forces its counterpart out of communication because speakers of a dominant language are stronger in political, military or economic spheres” (Vakhtin, 2001). Scientific works on the language situation in Kalmykia mention such factors as an inrush of Russian-speaking immigrants, deportation of Kalmyks, mixed race townships, Russian-teaching schools, poor motivation for learning the Kalmyk language, generation gap and etc., (Baranova, 2009; Bitkeeva, 2006).

In order to preserve the Kalmyk language new electronic textbooks should be created. They would serve as educational information resources, which combines modern methods and play the role of encyclopedias. In this article we are going to describe the structure, basic problems and development process of the online educational information resource for the Kalmyk language learners.

2. TASKS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE EDUCATIONAL INFORMATION RESOURCE “KHALMG KELN” (THE KALMYK LANGUAGE)

The prime objective of the educational information resource is to preserve the Kalmyk language and revive its national culture via creating a proper e-textbook. The electronic resource aims at simplifying the learning of the Kalmyk language, mastering its grammar and vocabulary, and forwarding the Kalmyk culture. It is built upon valuable experience of those people who have been teaching the Kalmyk language and the Kalmyk literature while taking into consideration their ethnic peculiarities. The usage of modern technologies in a teaching process and promotion of online information resources can give students better understanding of the origins of the Kalmyk language and its culture (Trofimova and Rassadin, 2014).

The development of the educational information resource will solve the following scientific problems: (1) To preserve the

Kalmyk language as a language of small-numbered peoples in the situation of language shift; (2) to sort out methods of teaching native speakers a language of small-numbered peoples if they have already lost this knowledge or perceived the Kalmyk language as a foreign one; (3) to create supporting data which will better present the Kalmyk culture, history and ethnography.

The project results can be used in various spheres. For instance, this information resource will be helpful not only in teaching students and pupils the Kalmyk language on the territory of Kalmykia, but also in conducting scientific research. Audio materials, texts, dictionaries and other supporting data can lay a solid foundation for developing theoretical aspects of the Kalmyk linguistics. The proposed project combines historical and ethnographical information, as well as folk and literary works. The developing educational information resource is free and available in the Internet (biliq.ru/xalbook). This system is oriented at people who intend to learn or study the Kalmyk language.

3. ELECTRONIC RESOURCES FOR STUDYING LANGUAGES AND DISCUSSING LINGUISTIC ISSUES

Modern information technologies and e-textbooks, in particular, give more opportunities to preserve languages. Furthermore, they can combine textual and multimedia information in the program interface. In the sphere of descriptive linguistics it means that e-textbooks comprise not only textual entries (electronic dictionaries, phrasebooks, grammar books), but also audio records of oral speech. Nowadays multimedia e-textbooks have acquired the status of the most popular tools for preserving and studying declining languages of small-numbered peoples.

The rapid development of online technologies expands the applicability of e-textbooks. Educational information resources have been created all over the globe since they are among the most efficient means of learning any subjects. There are different kinds of educational information resources, with some of them being generalist and the others being specific.

The most developed educational information resources are represented by English e-textbooks for different language proficiency levels. Such resources provide users with both theoretical and practical materials, which come in different forms. It simplifies and speeds up the learning process, enhancing students’ learning skills and developing their associative links. Educational information resources, for example English e-textbooks, are oriented at different language proficiency levels and age groups. They are such textbooks as Macmillan, Cambridge, Oxford, Longman and etc.

The teaching vocabulary has been recently enriched with the term e-learning. This acronym stands for electronic learning. It is worth mentioning that e-learning is drawing attention of more and more users, and turning into one of the most popular teaching methods (Baek, 2013). All reputable universities try to create their own systems of e-learning. Our modern life is so dynamic, filled with

new events and great information flow, which should be perceived and understood.

There are several advantages of e-learning, and they are as follows:

- An opportunity to go back and comprehend or revise some material. E-learning provides the best conditions for revising the learnt information since students can easily go back and reread the necessary topics.
- A student skills orientation. With e-learning students can choose their level in accordance with their real knowledge and skills (beginner, intermediate or advanced). They can also plan the time for course mastering in conformity with their preferences, their occupation, schedule and etc. In other words, e-learning is individual.
- Interactivity. In e-learning illustrations are dynamic and interactive to spark users' interest.
- Multimedia. E-learning is accompanied by various sounds, music tunes and visual images. That way the textual form of a word gets connected with its pronunciation which is important for building an independent system of knowledge.

The usage of computer technologies is still an apple of discord among scientists and teachers. There are completely opposite opinions (Dalton, 2005; Cornillie et al., 2012; Pereira, 2012; Reinders 2012; Sykes et al., 2012; Sørensen and Meyer 2007; Zheng et al., 2009). Some of them deny advantages of using games in the process of language learning and acknowledge only traditional methods (communicative, situational, suggestive and etc.). The others believe that the implementation of digital technologies makes traditional methods even more efficient. In our opinion, a balanced approach should be employed because some scientists overestimate the role of computer games in the process of language learning, while the others underestimate their potential. Language learning is a challenging process which involves different cognitive mechanisms.

To get more information on the comparative analysis of traditional teaching and teaching with the help of computer games refer to (Trybus, 2011). We are convinced that traditional and innovative methods of language teaching should be wisely combined. The choice between traditional and modern methods of language learning can adversely affect the results. There is a need of a certain balance. Teachers should understand that nowadays computer methods are the most efficient, the less expensive and labour-consuming. We learn while playing games. Games can stimulate both reproductive and searching activities.

4. THE STRUCTURE OF “KHALMG KELN”

Any textbook has its own structure. If theoretical and practical material had not been structured, then users and students, in particular, would have lost among numerous topics and exercises. The main advantage of an e-textbook is its practically unlimited size. Thus, an e-textbook can comprise great amount of useful data, and this feature should be used to uses' benefits. The Kalmyk e-textbook includes informative and educational sections.

The informative section aims at expanding students' knowledge about the Kalmyk people, their history and culture. There we

present texts in the Kalmyk language which are devoted to different aspects of the Kalmyk way of life: The history and ethnography of Kalmyks, their traditional territory and culture, their connection with Mongols and Oirats, and etc.

Texts in the Kalmyk language are not of the highest difficulty level (they are suitable for people with different levels of language proficiency) and are followed by post-reading tasks, checking general or detailed information. Tasks are formed in such a way that they can be deciphered by computer systems. For example, possible tasks can comprise the following ones: True/false statements, filling in the gaps or multiple-choice tests. Why did we decide to add tasks to the informative section? In our opinion, it is inefficient and inappropriate to give students texts without additional tasks. If students read a text and then complete several exercises, they learn more about the language system and the corresponding culture.

We give an example of the above-mentioned informative section (here you can see only basic topics without respective sub-topics):

1. Russia
 - Geography
 - The history of Russia
 - Population
 - Administrative division
 - Economy
 - State structure
 - Culture, education and science.
2. Kalmykia
 - Geography
 - Geographical location
 - Natural resources
 - Climate
 - Hydrography
 - Soils
 - Flora and fauna.
 - The history of Kalmykia
 - The ancestors of Kalmyks – Oirats
 - Kalmykia from ancient times till the 17th century
 - Kalmykia in the 18th and the 19th centuries
 - Kalmykia in the first half of the 20th century
 - Kalmykia during the Great Patriotic War
 - The liquidation of the national autonomous state and the Kalmyk deportation
 - Kalmykia in postwar years
 - Modern Kalmykia (1990-2000).
 - The Republic of Kalmykia
 - State structure
 - Population
 - Administrative division
 - Culture and religion of Kalmyks
 - Calendar
 - Nature
 - Holidays in modern Kalmykia
 - Points of interest
 - Museums
 - National games.

3. Kindred peoples

- Buryats
- Western Mongols
- Xinjiang Oirats
- Diaspora.

It is worth mentioning that the informative section includes some texts which are not directly related to Kalmykia, for instance, materials on Russia and kindred peoples. We have posted them because they will help students to realize that they do not live isolated, but rather connected to Russians and other Mongol peoples who have common origins.

However, the major section in the structure of our Kalmyk e-textbook is the educational one. This section presents profound theoretical and practical material which is divided into several categories and proficiency levels (A0, A1, A2, B1, B2). We had to exclude C1-2 tasks since they belong to advanced level, and people who have achieved this level can study independently and successfully work with existing textbooks. Moreover, the creation of such a resource requires great financial and intellectual efforts.

The presented educational material is also split into several categories in accordance with the language levels: Phonetic, lexical, morphemic and grammatical (morphological and syntactical). The theoretical material on the Kalmyk language was taken from grammar books (The Kalmyk grammar...1983; Pjurbeev, 2010). This material is of vital importance when the Kalmyk language is studied independently.

All project participants have unanimously decided that the Kalmyk e-textbook should comprise theoretical notions. However, it is still unsettled what way of presenting information to choose. Most grammar books are written in a scientific language (furthermore, they are in Russian which breaks the whole Kalmyk e-textbook concept) and too difficult to be understood by pupils. These grammar texts should be adapted to the language level of young learners, so that pupils will grasp new information faster and easier but the texts are enormous and impossible to be rendered in the framework of just one project.

Project participants are also arguing whether texts should be posted in Russian or Kalmyk. As the Russian language is native for many of them, they believe that it will be adequate to present scientific information about the foreign Kalmyk language in the native one. However, if theoretical material is given in the Kalmyk language in the form of basic notions or tables, then students get into the language environment and learn to speak and think in Kalmyk much faster. We looked up to the grammar and vocabulary books published by Cambridge (Grammar in Use... 1989; 1999). Firstly, their units provide learners with short theoretical information and then give exercises to control the acquired knowledge. We have realized that if we choose to adapt all theoretical material, it will take too much time and other aspects will be completely neglected. Therefore, the adaptation of theoretical material will be finished in the framework of the next project.

The system of exercises and dictations in the Kalmyk language will be accompanied by automatic control and will show students' progress. This module of the educational information resource is personalized. In other words, users can choose those topics which they find the most challenging.

Other sections, like the Kalmyk e-library, e-dictionaries (Russian-Kalmyk and Kalmyk-Russian), annotated photo stock and various games, are additional.

The e-library will meet the requirements of the state educational standards developed in the Republic of Kalmykia for such subject as “the Kalmyk Literature” and “the Regional History.” We should notice that this library will not embrace the works of all Kalmyk writers and poets, but only those literary works which are studied at school. Some of them will be reduced to abstracts and separate chapters since the creation of the Kalmyk e-library is not our priority task. However, it is still really challenging. These texts are authentic, i.e., they are suitable for the C1-2 levels. Learners who belong to beginner or intermediate levels will not be able to grasp the plot and enjoy the literary language because they will constantly consult dictionaries to understand the meaning of all these words. To attain this end, English or Russian books are specifically adapted, so that they will be better understood by learners of different language proficiency levels. That way an independent language system is formed, and associative links within one language get stronger.

E-dictionaries will be available in all sections. Besides, students will be able to use them autonomously. For example, while reading a literary work you come across an unknown word, then a dictionary appears on the screen without interrupting your reading process. We also plan to create the so-called Kalmyk-Kalmyk dictionaries, or thesauruses. It should be noted, however, that these thesauruses will offer simple definitions based on essential vocabulary and syntactical constructions, therefore, students will experience immersive learning and create their own language system.

An annotated photo stock will comprise illustrated materials with annotations in Kalmyk and Russian, which will be useful for scientists studying the Kalmyk and Mongol cultures. The photo stock will not be accessed autonomously, but will accompany the educational section and the e-library in order to make reading more interesting and visualize different aspects of life in Kalmykia.

Through phonetic games students will get used to sounds of the Kalmyk language and master its pronunciation. In their turn, lexical games, based on various topics, are intended to systematize words of the Kalmyk language, presented in the forms of pictures and images. In our opinion, this visual representation will simplify their learning and divide the acquired knowledge into corresponding topics.

We will also add the separate module, entitled “Teachers' Workshop.” There we will post materials on the Kalmyk language and literature developed by teachers. They have successfully created lesson plans, out-of-school activities, educational games

and etc. Previously, this information was stored on personal computers but now these materials have been collected on one resource. All teachers can share their experience and find useful advice.

5. THE PROBLEMS CONNECTED WITH THE CREATION OF “KHALMG KELN”

While working on this resource, we have faced plenty of problems, with some of them being mentioned above. However, we believe the most urgent ones are the following: Spelling rules of the Kalmyk language and poor methods concerned with teaching the Kalmyk language as a foreign one. The first problem has been raised in the Kalmyk linguistics (Bitkeev, 2002; Trofimova and Rassadin 2014; Kharchevnikova, 2002) but did not receive an adequate solution. Some scientists are convinced that on this stage reforming the Kalmyk spelling rules will “kill” the language. The Kalmyk words should be pronounced in conformity with morphemic or positional principles; however, this approach is also insufficient since there are too many phonetic exceptions. The best solution will be to introduce special graphemes which mark the so-called vague vowels.

The existing methods of teaching the Kalmyk language do not comply with the current language situation. The Kalmyk textbooks are aimed at people who have some level of language proficiency, notably, the advanced one, no lower than B2. The created resource should meet the basic requirements of teaching the Kalmyk language as a foreign one. It is worth mentioning, though, that our educational information resource is a complementary e-textbook and does not solve the problem of multilevel school teaching.

Initially, we planned to burn all materials to DVDs in the form of exe files but, taking into consideration modern trends of information storage, as well as opinion of general audience and teachers of the Kalmyk language and literature, we decided to put our educational information resource on the Internet since it will give free access to all learners of the Kalmyk language, history and culture. As you probably know, exe files are created for a particular operating system (Windows XP, Windows 7, 8, Mac, Linux, Android and etc.). Besides, each operating system has its own peculiar features which should be considered for developing programs. We recalled the experience of our Buryat colleagues who worked on the electronic resource devoted to the Buryat language. They created it for Windows XP and then had to change all settings for Windows 7, which was quite hard and expensive. If it is an online resource, then it can be accessed by anyone who has the Internet connection. In the framework of school modernization in the Republic of Kalmykia all computers were changed by new ones with Linux operating system and the Internet connection (both wire-connected and wireless) (The Decree of the Government of the Republic of Kalmykia, 2012). If we have decided to create exe files for traditional in Russia Windows operating system, then it would have been impossible to use the results of our work in Kalmykia. Furthermore, our programmers have never worked on creating software for Linux. All these factors altered our work on the project.

6. TYPES OF GAMES AND TASKS PRESENTED ON THE ELECTRONIC RESOURCE

The program code of our games is based upon Flash technology. Initially, we studied electronic resources of the following leaders in the sphere of teaching English British Council (<http://www.britishcouncil.ru/>), Macmillan (<http://www.macmillanpracticeonline.com/>), Oxford (<https://www.elt.oup.com>) and etc. The games developed by these institutions can be applied to the Kalmyk language learning. Moreover, these games are based upon cognitive approach, which we find really useful. It has been stated that learning new words is easier when they are regarded as elements of the language system, regardless of their levels. For instance, a word can be examined together with its synonyms, antonyms, morphological forms or other topical words. In this case an independent language system arises which seldom refers to the initial language system, namely, the Russian language. If this learning principle is upheld, then students will start to think in the language they are studying. This achievement is crucial for preserving the Kalmyk language.

In Table 1 we present the initial list of games which can be amended or updated in the course of our further work on the educational information resource:

The educational information resource embraces the following teaching methods: Electronic crossword puzzles for enriching students' vocabulary, digital games, e-library and e-dictionaries which are essential for learning a language. The right answers have been inserted into the system; therefore, controlling the input data is much easier. All tasks are interactive and time-limited, so students have a good incentive to complete them in time with maximum results.

7. CONCLUSION

While creating “Khalmg Keln,” we have realized that methods of teaching the Kalmyk language leave much to be desired. On the one hand, the adoption of new and modern principles will take a lot of time. On the other hand, the lack of financial aid from the Government of the Republic of Kalmykia aggravates the existing problem. Besides, teachers do not have enough experience in teaching the Kalmyk language as a foreign one. If this situation remains the same, then we can assume that the Kalmyk language will die out. It is widely known that to revive the language will be much harder.

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Table 1: Games which can be amended or updated in the course of our further work on the educational information resource

No	The name of the game	Comments
1	Match the words given in two columns	It is a universal game. A student should match words in the right and the left columns
2	Build words using the translated text or the letters depicted on the picture	The game is focused on revising and controlling spelling rules. Such tasks are vital for the Kalmyk language learning
3	Find a word in the puzzle	The game improves spelling and solidify the learnt vocabulary
4	Group out words in accordance with their topics	The game enables students to group out words. It is aimed at solidifying the learnt vocabulary and creating associative links between words
5	Learn a word	While playing this game, a student learns new words via finding correlations between their phonetic images or depictions
6	Fill in the gaps in words or texts	The game is intended to solidify the learnt vocabulary, spelling and grammar rules.
7	Find an odd word	A student gets a sentence where a letter or a whole word is missed The game is focused on building associative links. It can be used for learning both grammar and vocabulary
8	Color a picture	This game is designated for the smallest learners. The speaker gives certain commands, if a student does everything correctly, then he or she is promoted to the next level (to color a more challenging picture). This game helps students to learn the names of basic colors and the words which are depicted on the given image
9	Build a sentence using the given words	This game helps students to grasp the word order in the Kalmyk language
10	Find a mistake	The game aims at improving spelling and solidifying the learnt vocabulary

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