

Foreign Research
Чуждестранни изследвания

LANGUAGE LEARNING IN A NATION UNDER TRANSITION

Xhavit Beqiri
University of Pristina (Kosovo)

Abstract. This study investigates some features of language learning in countries in transition, focusing on Kosovo and South-East European areas and viewing the process in relation to language learning culture before. Understanding that language teaching is not a task pertaining to a teacher of language and literature, but to the whole school system, and intersubjective thinking began to produce their effects especially from the fall of the Berlin Wall and thereon, in almost all South-East Europe countries in transition. Kosovo was one of the countries affected by a transitional atmosphere in which introduction of different methods and techniques in the classroom were not only being seen as a need, but as a must. The present paper aims to argue that language learning and teaching, especially in countries that are going through a transition process, represents a very important challenge in terms of inputs and outputs of the system of education of today's society.

Keywords: language; learning; transition; method; Kosovo; teacher; student

Introduction

Language education and development, including language culture, is a complex and highly specific process in transition countries which cannot be achieved in the classroom alone but rather during the development and formation of the personality of each individual.

As of early 1990, the governments of South-East Europe countries directed their political systems and economies toward liberal democracy and free market. After 1999, Kosovo joined such regional trends by introducing a new approach to educational system. Resultantly, a new approach to language learning is promoted.

In theoretical terms, teaching strategies do not undergo radical changes within a short period of time. However, conservation of language teaching methods and techniques within the experiences of the former Soviet Union had exhausted a large part of Southeast European countries and prompted an eager search for language teaching experiences among other countries and regions of the world – western countries mainly – after the fall of the Berlin Wall. After 1999 and deployment of an international protectorate, Kosovo also experienced such a transition phase – from an economic to an educational one. But, of course, in a chaotic post-war situation, the “renewal of education in Kosovo was

hampered by time constraints, lack of funds and insufficient skills of many actors”¹⁾. At any rate, some steps were taken, and, within a few years, an idea was created as to way ahead, creating even medium and long-term educational frameworks²⁾.

The process of post-communist transformation in Kosova has, in the beginning, turned language education into a tool of re-examining and redefining state/national identity. Cultural and political debates over language policy and status of mother tongue, standard and dialects in Kosovo had an impact on both the new school curriculum and, consequently, on the approach to both native and foreign language learning. Although the educational policy-making process was led by internationals, the state continued to be understood as a kind of instrument for national agendas (see Brubaker, 1996), in the spirit of the principle that “languages transmit *culture* and culture encourages linguistic preservation” (Judt & Lacorne, 2004: 13).

Moreover, that language policy plaid, in many cases, a seminal educational role in the rise of the Kosovo Albanian state/national identity, like in some cases in Balkans. In fact, this connection of identity politics with language policies within the curriculum framework and as a teaching practice emerged as a legacy of the parallel education system of the 90s in Kosovo (Sommers & Buckland, 2004; Kostovicova, 2005).

Language learning: change of paradigms

First, to interrogate the language learning through the notion of the first language often like this language is regarded as an internally autonomous entity and ‘different’ from other languages, connected with the nation state ideology and national languages (Joseph, 2006).

Major changes have occurred in language teaching now, when most teaching methodology specialists perceive the role of the teacher as a facilitator or auxiliary in relation to the student. What appears first is that *language-based* learning has turned to *student-based* learning. Already, *the synthetic approach*, which has insisted in the paradigm of *grammar*, is being replaced by an *analytical paradigm* of planning the language learning, which means insisting in the function of language and learning thereof by communicating situations prior to grammar mastering.

Such an approach, which permeated in South-East Europe countries through foreign language teaching methods and techniques mainly, also influenced native language learning strategies. That kind of influence is particularly evident in Kosovo, where, after 1999, it had a major impact on education and language policies under the auspices of the UN and the countries that made up the NATO alliance.

This *analytical paradigm*, which also contains *synthetic approach* effects in itself, is felt throughout the language learning strategy in the new Kosovo Core Curriculum (2012), where *communication and expression competence* constitutes one of the six fundamental competences. The following is expressly stated therein as regards this competence:

“In order to develop as personalities, learn and take an active part in the society, it is important for the students and young people to comprehend the messages

addressed to them and express themselves properly via languages, symbols, signs, codes and art forms. To communicate effectively, students are encouraged to use the means of communication and expression independently, critically and creatively”²⁾.

Accordingly, in the Core Curriculum already, an effective communicator is identified as per communication and expression competence, hence developing a new approach to language learning.

Of course, *direct language learning strategies and indirect language learning strategies* have become part of such a widely accepted approach to language learning. The first group includes memory, cognition and compensation strategies, and the second group includes metacognitive, emotional and social strategies. Of course, all these language learning strategies complement each other. Therefore, for students to achieve better results in the learning process, teachers must apply them in a planned and continued manner (Davies, 2007; Gjokutaj, 2014; Cheong, 1983). But, above all, it is direct language learning strategies that enable the students to *produce language* when a sort of knowledge gap is involved (Deepak, 2012). Undoubtedly, strategies also include cognitive strategies, which remain crucial to the students; the language targeted for learning is manipulated or *transformed* as per strategies by repetitions and summary analysis and reviews. On the other hand, *indirect strategies* support and manage continued language learning too, by indirect means - Samida. Hence, *affective strategies* evoke the weight of emotional factors without highlighting the weight of *social strategies* as a focus on language as a social act of communication.

Of course, education at present is in competition with the dynamics of major global changes, which has necessitated radical changes in the education system. In many countries, and especially in countries in a transition of socio-political system, the need for reforms has been dire, but professional and intellectual capacities to implement them were in short supply. Also, as a not easy obstacle, learning with the *teacher at the centre* remains *in between*.

Until after 1999, grammar was a central notion and a major part of language teaching in Kosovo. Of course, understanding language learning as grammar learning seems to be a category mistake as opposed to perceiving it as a recognition of contents and patterns appearing in the language. Naturally, unmotivated memorisation of grammar categories does not add to such type of language learning either, so it becomes necessary to reconsider the strategy and grammar's impact upon language learning and teaching. Unfortunately, this is still happening in Kosovo too.

Indeed, such a clumsy attitude towards language learning represents one of the most severe tests for societies in transition, not only in South-East Europe, despite some success stories.

However, looking at the current reality of language use, one can notice that most language communities are now influenced by each-others' language (in different spaces also). Many new languages patterns in communities' everyday lives involve different

forms of contact – physical and virtual. Hence, the second language influence on first language learning is highly evident and has many other cultural implications. We are constantly exposed to different sources from a dynamic language interaction of social and written media. This is the space where the influence of different languages and discourses from different media and languages become inevitable, being exposed to English in various everyday activities in different contexts (Harris, 1980; Garcia, 2007; Creese & Blackledge, 2010).

Today's foreign language learning space has been occupied by present information technology and social networks. Technology's impact is so big now that children communicate more via cell phones, *iphones*, *laptops* and other visual and audio aids than with their parents or other family members. This can be noticed in children's speech, as most of them learn their mother tongue almost as a *second language*, because technology teaches them another language, a superior one, first (mainly English).

In today's sociolinguistic context, the teacher must face a dual task. He/she must implement the work plan in the institution (imposed by the *curricula*), but also play the role of a go-between or facilitator between the children. Nothing impairs language development and communication in childhood more than the idea that a speaking child is not being understood by others. The psychological effect of such an incomprehension has grave consequences upon the natural course of language development and education. Therefore, a teacher needs to go beyond himself during the class/activity with the children to be able to develop a communication with everyone and enable the children to communicate with each other unimpededly. Accordingly, he/she must not only "learn the content of the *curricula*, but also – and more importantly – develop a range of cognitive and social competences" (Denton, 2013).

Today's *curricula* describe language teacher as being competent to choose between teaching and learning methods and techniques in order to implement the language *curricula*. But as stated in the Core Curriculum:

"The implementation of methods, techniques, and forms of teaching and learning is key to the realization and achievement of the steps for the field and the main stages. The teacher should use different methods of work in order to achieve the results of the field.

Using a student-centered teaching methodology enables students to motivate themselves to work, develop creativity, exchange ideas, debate, facilitate learning, collaborate, solve problems, research resources for obtaining information, etc. The teacher should select teaching methods and techniques in order to achieve the learning outcomes, by adapting the skills and knowledge of the students, their requirements, the place where the lesson takes place, the space and the material condition of the school (classroom)"²⁾.

So the Curriculum already addresses the issue of language teaching methodology correctly, leaving a wide scope for individual teacher and student choice.

In addition, such *curricula* require language teachers to adjust methods and techniques to students' prior skills and knowledge, their needs and demands, the environment (the school, the classroom) and the teaching material.

The use of new teaching methods and techniques aims at putting the student at the centre of learning process activities, so that the students can cooperate more with each other, according to *peer-to-peer learning*, which is often the key to better results. However, good teaching is not only relying on a set of methods, or a particular curriculum, as good as it might be, because, beyond them, the classroom has a certain spirit, a unique atmosphere that is created by everyday mutual relationships between the actors in the classroom (Richards, 2010).

Besides an official curriculum, as Doll observes, there is an “unplanned, unofficial and secret one, that has to be taken into account” (Ortstein & Hunkins, 2013: 17) and that “involves mutual psychological action between the students and the teachers and, especially, with their feelings, attitudes and behaviour” (Ortstein & Hunkins, 2013), helping thus the “students develop their learning skills and strategies while learning the contents at the same time”³⁾.

Awareness that language teaching is not a task pertaining to language and literature teachers alone, but to the entire school system renders *inter-subject thinking* indispensable. Lambasting language teachers for the low level of the overall language culture of the societies in transition (in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc) has now become a conventional rhetoric. It seems that the fact that language education and development, including language culture, is a very specific, complex process that cannot only be achieved during a class in a classroom but, rather, throughout the course of formation and development of the personality of each individual, is being overlooked intentionally (Ivanenko, 2014). Therefore, “the student cannot learn the language at language or literature classes alone, should teachers of other subjects neither respect, nor know the language” (Cheong, 1983: 66). Simply put, “to study the language of the classroom in whichever field – history, science, technology, culture, literature – is to study the learning processes associated with these classroom subjects. Internal and external constraints placed on the learning of classroom language” (Cheong, 1983: 66).

It is known that rapid changes often put the teacher in front of big dilemmas: whether to retain the teaching practice applied so far, which he/she knows and applies better in the classroom, or always rush toward new practices that are imposed by time and external factors. Therefore, “productive educational change does not imply, at its core, the ability to implement the latest policy, but rather the ability to survive the sudden demands of planned and unplanned change as you progress and develop” (Fullan, 2010: 17). Hence, the art of creative adjustment to the classroom environment and the student remains always important to language learning in the classroom.

In the context of language communities in transition, such as the case of Albanian language, in the entire geographical area in which the language is *first language* or has the same status as the first language (in Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia), besides official language learning codes, *individual standards* of language learning come to play. This indicates that the teacher is still being more than a facilitator.

Conclusion

A good teacher is likely to remain the one who creates and applies his or her tradition in keeping with the basic principles of language teaching, never closing the door to new opportunities provided by the development of the society and, consequently, the new approach to the daily work in the classroom. Applying different methods and techniques in the classroom is not only *something necessary*, but *something indispensable*. Intertwining the local tradition with the overall trends of contemporary teaching globally is a big favour that the time is doing to the student, and teachers should always take this fact into account. Countries in transition like Kosovo cannot circumvent rich language teaching experiences already proven in many countries around the world.

Making the students language-able remains the first and necessary step towards *communication competence*, which implies his/her ability to use language in accordance with discursive situations and demands requirements for strategic competence, entailing speaker's abilities to employ verbal and nonverbal communication strategy or improve communication efficiency (Richards, 2010). Such language use would constitute a value in itself as part of a quality education in the countries that still feel the transition.

NOTES

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✉ **Mr. Xhavit Beqiri, Assist. Prof.**

ORCID ID: 0000-0001-5078-4729

Faculty of Education

University of Pristina

Pristina, Kosovo

E-mail: xhavit.beqiri@uni-pr.edu