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Can teaching a foreign language in Serbia contribute to Europe-oriented education?

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One of the important roles of education is the development of citizenship, not just in its formal aspects, but above all through encouraging peoples' practical involvement in democratic processes at all levels. Students need to become good national as well as global citizens, able to participate in the democratic process by taking appropriate actions.

European citizenship should not replace or exclude national citizenship or identity, but complete it. European cultural and educational model(s) should emphasise cooperation, but should not forget national specifics and differences. Different values and ideas have to be lived, or at least felt, not only heard or taught about. An intercultural approach (as a challenge for the new education) does not mean that one should give to foreigners the cultural competences of the natives, but it should make both groups understand, tolerate and accept their differences. Tolerance and acceptance of the other are exceptionally demanding concepts, but we believe that educational institutions at all levels should promote empathy, solidarity, collaboration, and knowledge about and respect towards different cultures.

The capacity and opportunity to participate in social life in an international context depends on the individual's plurilingual competence. The construction of a democratic and multicultural Europe requires plurilingual citizens. In the *Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe* (2003, p 35) plurilingualism is emphasised as a fundamental principle:

The development of plurilingualism is not simply a functional necessity: it is also an essential component of democratic behaviour. Recognition of the diversity of speakers' plurilingual repertoires should lead to linguistic tolerance and thus to respect for linguistic differences: respect for the linguistic rights of individuals and groups in their relations with the state and linguistic majorities, respect for freedom of expression, respect for linguistic minorities, respect for the least commonly spoken and taught national languages, respect for the diversity of languages in inter-regional and international communication. Language education policies are intimately connected with education in the values of democratic citizenship because their purposes are complementary: language teaching, the ideal *locus* for intercultural contact, is a sector in which education for democratic life in its intercultural dimensions can be included in education systems.

There are some prejudices and reductive generalisations in ordinary conceptions of languages and language learning that should be challenged. Some say that one has to be

intelligent or gifted to learn languages, that languages are for the elite, that the learning of foreign languages takes a long time, is boring and difficult. However, knowledge of languages has become commonplace and is one of the competences needed in working life; it is now a component of quality of life. Also such knowledge does not have to be perfect; it needs only to enable every pupil or student to communicate in different ways. Accepting the non-native speaker's mistakes, imprecision or linguistic 'inventions' is a form of linguistic benevolence, which is itself a form of civility.

It is however important to explain that plurilingualism differs from multilingualism, which is the knowledge of a number of languages, or the co-existence of different languages in one society. Multilingualism may be attained by simply diversifying the languages on offer in a particular education system or by encouraging pupils to learn more than one foreign language - but some speakers may have knowledge of one or more foreign languages without being really aware of other cultures.

From this perspective, the aim of language education is profoundly modified. It is no longer seen as simply to achieve 'mastery' of one or two, or even three languages, each taken in isolation, with the 'ideal native speaker' as the ultimate model. Instead, the aim is to develop a linguistic repertory, in which all linguistic abilities have a place. ... Plurilingualism has itself to be seen in the context of pluriculturalism. Language is not only a major aspect of culture, but also a means of access to cultural manifestations. In a person's cultural competence, the various cultures (national, regional, social) to which that person has gained access do not simply co-exist side by side; they are compared, contrasted and actively interact to produce an enriched, integrated pluricultural competence, of which plurilingual competence is one component, again interacting with other components.' (*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*, pp 5-6).

Developing pluricultural awareness has linguistic dimensions, both cognitive and affective. 'The purpose of pluricultural education is to create a degree of adaptation to other cultures so as to establish with the members of those communities forms of communication as free of prejudice and stereotypes as possible. (*Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe*, p 68)

The acquisition of foreign languages should involve acquisition of cultural competence and the development of an awareness of the cultural complexity of the environment. Intercultural competence is crucial in the development of mutual understanding, and intercultural education is an essential goal of language education in that it contributes to personal development. As an educational goal (especially in compulsory schools), intercultural education concerns other subjects, such as literature, arts, philosophy, history, geography and citizenship education. Intercultural competence is not a matter of education alone but of the whole teaching/learning process, which includes knowledge

about other societies, the capacity to identify the relevant information and sources of information, and the ability to interpret and assess.

Intercultural competence and the capacity for intercultural mediation are one of the potential goals of our language teaching. We think that a further intensification of language teaching/learning in our country is necessary in the interests of more effective international communication, better access to information, greater mobility, more intensive personal interaction, improved working relations and a deeper mutual understanding. Our aim is a plurilingualism not as knowledge of separate languages but rather as a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of languages contribute and in which languages interrelate.

The three basic principles emphasised in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2001, p 2) are:

- the rich heritage of diverse languages and cultures in Europe is a valuable common resource to be protected and developed, and a major educational effort is needed to convert that diversity from a barrier to communication into a source of mutual enrichment and understanding
- it is only through a better knowledge of European modern languages that it will be possible to facilitate communication and interaction among people of different mother tongues in order to promote mobility, mutual understanding and co-operation, and to overcome prejudice and discrimination
- member states (we think other countries also), when adopting or developing national policies in the field of modern language learning and teaching, may achieve greater convergence at the European level.

We are aware of the fact that tolerance and acceptance of the other are demanding concepts, but we also think that foreign language teaching/learning is the best way of promoting the development of positive representations towards diversity and has an important role in the development of respect for individual identities. The acquisition of national languages and of foreign languages is an essential competence for working life and for social cohesion. In the modern world, there is internationalisation and commercialisation of most human activities, the influence of the economy on society and the impact of television culture on the one hand and, on the other, the re-emergence of feelings of identity and of ethnocentrically based nationalism. This can lead to cultural homogenisation or to identity-centred isolationism and these are two dangers that should be avoided.

Transmission of knowledge is not the only role of compulsory schooling. The school should promote empathy, solidarity, collaboration, knowledge about and respect of different culture. Every school subject, including languages, should have the educational function of preparing children for life in society.

Plurilingual education is based on sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic and pedagogical considerations, but it is clear that the final decisions are political. In the process of reforms of education system in Serbia, the Ministry of Education and Sports aims to prepare new generations to live together in a modern, European, multiethnic country. In

the new *Law on the foundations of the education system* (Article 3) these important education aims in Serbia are emphasised (among others):

- enabling entry into European integration processes
- developing awareness of state and national identity and the nurturing traditions and cultures
- acknowledging the plurality of values and enabling, encouraging and developing a unique system of values and value attitudes based on the principles of diversity and well-being for all
- fulfilment of the right to diversity.

The education reform process is an extremely complex task consisting of a vast range of inter-linking activities and involving increasing numbers of partners and supporters, both local and international. In summer 2002 the Central Commission for the Development of Curricula presented the *Strategy for Development of Curricula in Compulsory and Secondary Education*. This document was the first concept of the national curriculum and proposed some major changes:

- giving more space for the autonomous and accountable professional initiative of teachers
- shifting the focus from content (program) to educational goals and outcomes, skills, attitudes and values that the pupils should possess
- basing education on five educational areas rather than on unconnected subjects
- the introduction of nine years of compulsory education organised in three cycles of three years
- the introduction of foreign language learning from the first grade of compulsory education.

It was then decided to form Commissions for the education areas (Social sciences and philosophy; Language, communication and literature; Sciences, mathematics and technology; Arts; Physical and health education). The Commissions suggested that the new compulsory schools should have three basic subjects (mother tongue, one foreign language, mathematics), some compulsory subjects (which depend on the year of schooling) and many special courses and non-compulsory subjects which schools and pupils can choose according to their interests.

Which are the goals concerning foreign languages that we are focusing on in the new curriculum of compulsory schooling?

Besides introducing a foreign language as a basic subject from the first grade of primary school and introducing a second foreign language as a compulsory subject from the fourth year of the primary school, and enlarging the number of foreign languages which can be taught at school, the Ministry of Education and Sports made preparations to join the Council of Europe Foreign Language Portfolio initiative and accepted the objectives mentioned in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2001, pp 3-4):

- to equip all Europeans for the challenges of intensified international mobility and closer co-operation not only in education, culture and science but also in trade and industry
- to promote mutual understanding and tolerance, respect for identities and cultural diversity through more effective international communication
- to maintain and further develop the richness and diversity of European cultural life through greater mutual knowledge of national and regional languages, including those less widely taught
- to meet the needs of a multilingual Europe by appreciably developing the ability of Europeans to communicate with each other across linguistic and cultural boundaries
- to avert the dangers that might result from the marginalisation of those lacking the skills necessary to communicate in an interactive Europe.

Therefore we are developing strategies for diversifying and intensifying language learning in order to promote multilingualism and plurilingualism in the international context.

If we understand languages as the pillars of cultures, then the importance of learning foreign languages is obvious. There is a need for learning foreign languages in schools and universities, particularly for young children. It is true that the first language is acquired naturally in the earliest years of socialisation. Languages acquired during childhood are often experienced as being easier, not only for psycholinguistic reasons, but because the teaching is not overly academic and produces little social inhibition. We want to start early with foreign languages to ensure that the population have access (during the whole of compulsory and secondary education) to effective means of acquiring a knowledge of foreign languages.

Some interesting research about children and young peoples' socialisation carried out over several years at the Pedagogy and Psychology Department of the University of Bialystok in Poland shows that:

- children's knowledge about other ethnic groups and cultures is low and stereotyped; it comes from children's books (where everything is black or white), from television programmes and the internet (which are not controlled by their parents)
- younger children perceive differences in the categories of themselves and strangers (mostly foreigners), and have a tendency to favour their own category

- the comparatively low level of knowledge about the other, together with the tendency to favour their own category in relation to the other, shows a lack of empathy for the feelings and meanings of others (Misiejuk 2003, p 458).

All researches concerning children's socialisation and early learning of foreign languages show the reasons why it has been decided in Serbia to start foreign language learning early (at the age of six or seven) and to continue it during the whole of compulsory and secondary education as one of the three basic subjects. The national education system, particularly compulsory schooling, should be used as a basis for the creation of a culture of plurilingualism. Therefore the overall need for teachers of foreign languages has increased and we also need to prepare primary school teachers to teach a foreign language, integrated with cultural issues, in the first cycle of elementary compulsory school.

What are some innovations in the curriculum at Teacher Education Faculty, University of Belgrade?

Preparation of curricular reform for teachers' faculties is supported by the Finnish Government. In the new curriculum of the Teacher Education Faculty at the University of Belgrade and in the new syllabi for different subjects, some references to European peoples exist in a few subjects such as: European foundations of Serbian culture, The world around us (history, geography and environmental studies), Civic education, Sociology, Philosophy, Arts, and Music, but mostly in foreign languages. A new syllabus for foreign languages includes:

- one foreign language as a compulsory subject in the first year of studies
- the same foreign language as a compulsory subject in the first semester of the second year of studies - now called 'Foreign language for specific purposes' (the aim is B2 level of *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*)
- a foreign language as a non-compulsory subject in the second semester of the second year of studies (the aims are further development of all four language skills, mastering features of scientific language and translating of pieces from reference books)
- a foreign language as a specialisation in the third and fourth year of studies for those students who choose this specialisation so that they can teach a foreign language in the first cycle of the elementary compulsory school (this programme must be prepared in cooperation with the Faculty of Philology and should include improvement of students' knowledge of the contemporary foreign language, methodology of foreign language for young learners and hours of practical work in schools);
- we are also considering how to provide in-service education for primary school teachers who have a good knowledge of a foreign language and want to teach this in the first three years.¹

¹ The result of work of the new Government may introduce some changes in the *Law on the foundations of the education system*.

All those syllabi emphasise learners' communicative competence, which has the following components:

- linguistic competences (lexical, grammatical, semantic, phonological, orthographic)
- sociolinguistic competences with regard to socio-cultural competence (linguistic markers of social relations, politeness conventions, elements of register differences)
- pragmatic competences (discourse and functional competence).

For the motivation of our students it is important that they see different possibilities to use their knowledge of foreign languages, to be really in contact with foreigners, to get to know another country and its people in a very personal way. That is why we are suggesting different activities for our students, such as:

- presenting some characteristics of the culture of countries whose languages are being studied
- presenting pieces of foreign literature for children, articles or books connected with the profession of teacher (trying to point out differences and similarities between ours and foreign countries)
- encounters with foreigners living in Belgrade (students interview them and try to answer some intercultural questions or meet them in some international clubs, like a French café);
- small group discussions and open-ended collaborative enquiries on topical and controversial issues, role-plays, simulations and debates that reflect events in society
- organising exhibitions, concerts, and film projections at the faculty, in collaboration with the cultural centres of foreign countries
- discovering the world in a very special way – through pen pals (for example, Letternet as an exciting and effective way to meet new friends from Germany and intensify the use of another language).

We are aware of the fact that this is only a beginning, both of our own work and of a completely new perspective in the training of primary school teachers to teach a foreign language at elementary level (A2 of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*). It is necessary to rethink teaching objectives, produce teaching materials appropriate to the new policy emphasis, train education staff and teachers, and raise awareness in schools and universities. This requires long-term action, the results of which will not be immediately obvious or even satisfactory, but the political and cultural significance of such educational choices should be visible immediately.

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