

The Perspective of Foreign Language Teaching in Albania



Linguistics

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Abstract

This article looks at the changing mode of modern language teaching in Albania from the perspective of policy makers with a focus on English. It provides a historical background of foreign language teaching in Albania. It also states the current state of modern language teaching in view of the European Frame of languages. Besides, it gives the prospective of foreign language teaching to meet the ever increasing expectation of the Albanian society, highlighting the case of modern language teaching in the Foreign Language Faculty at the University Luigj Gurakuqi in Shkodra, Albania. The adoption of English language teaching at all educational levels, the inclusion of the internationally recognized English tests in the curriculum of the higher education as prerequisite for MA and doctoral studies point to significance of teaching and learning English in Albania.

Introduction

Recently, English language education in Albania has been a topic of special concern addressed with a focal attention by the government. It has been considered as an issue that would give solution to many problems that arise due to language barrier, would avoid misunderstandings and prejudices that divide nations and would promote peace and cooperation in the world. (Baugh & Cable 1981, pp. 6-7). This paper focuses on language policy in Albania. It demonstrates that in the course of history, though foreign language education in Albania was differently approached, nowadays, this issue has assumed particular importance. This paper intends to 1. give a historical background of foreign language teaching in Albania, 2. show that foreign language teaching used to be an issue addressed by foreign language policy in Albania in compliance with the political expediency, 3. state the promotion of English language teaching in Albania.

In this paper, foreign language education in Albania is historically and conventionally viewed from two perspectives. First, it gives a historical background with a focus on: a) The pre WW II period, b) The after WW II period, c) The after 1990 period. Second, it states the policy of the democratic state to improve English language teaching in order that it could contribute to a) the national progress, b) the integration of the Albanian people into the world community b) provision of Albanian people with foreign language competence that could be recognized at home and abroad.

Ideas that highlight significant moments when foreign languages were first taught in the Albanian schools, when foreign language teaching was politically manipulated, and when standards of foreign language teaching to the benefit of world integration were set, have been selectively cited. Besides, information about the level and the degrees of the Albanian students, the

current state of foreign language education in the pre-university and higher institutions in Albania has been provided. A case study about the admission of students at the foreign language faculty highlighting the numbers of the students that have taken up English has also been stated.

1. Historical background

1.1. The pre WW II period

Foreign language teaching in Albania has been an issue conditioned by the development of the Albanian language. The Albanian language was documented late in history. The first written document is a Gheg dialect baptismal formula, dated 1462. It was followed by a Tosk dialect *Gospel* fragment probably of the last years of the fifteenth century. The earliest printed text belongs to the sixteenth century; it is Buzuku's *Missal* ('*Meshari*', 1555), written in the North Gheg dialect (Pipa 1989, p. 1).

Albanian is an Indo-European language. The first scholar who discovered its Indo-European character was Franz Bopp in his work *On Albanian and its Proximity to Other Languages* (Çabej, 1960, p. 5). The French writer Malte Brun wrote that the Albanian language is the old Illyrian, an independent language and one of the most ancient of the European tongues. This idea was favoured by Thunemann in *Peoples of Eastern Europe*, by Xylander of Bavaria in *Die Sprache der Albanensen oder Skipetaren*, and by Leake, an English writer, in his *Researches in Greek* (Laboremus, May 1925).

Its late documentation and its mixed character can be addressed to the contacts Albanian language had with many languages (Demiraj, 1988, pp. 116-118). The destiny of Albania with its the numerous, long-term invasions by the neighboring or distant states, ever eager to exploit the place and de-nationalize the people made the Albanians view the Albanian language thru centuries, probably more than any other people of the Balkans, as a vital and self-protecting part of the nation, as an expression and identification of both its culture and existence (Shkurtaj, 2009, p. 165). Because of these invasions, the vocabulary is so mixed with Latin and Greek, Turkish and Slavonic words owing to conquests and other causes, that it is difficult to isolate the original Albanian" (Baugh and Cable, 1981, p. 25).

Worth of mentioning is the Turkish invasion which left deep traces in the Albanian language. The presence many of Turkish, Persian and Arab words in the vocabulary of the Albanian language can be attributed to the contact the Albanians established with the Turkish people. This contact lasted for more than five centuries and reduced the Albania into one of the most backward countries in Europe, and the Albanian language into an unelaborated one (Thomai, 1999, p. 222).

The Albanian Renaissance patriots demanded Albanian schools and the development of the Albanian language as a first step to the evolution of the Albanian people. The first Albanian school was opened on March 7, 1887. It was at this time and in these schools when Turkish and later on

French or Greek began to be used as foreign languages in the newly opened schools where the language of instruction was the native Albanian language.²¹

Other foreign languages that were taught in Albania were English, Italian and German. The article “Language Course” in the newspaper *Laboremus* published by the students of the Vocational School of Harry Fultz, funded by the American Cross reads:

Since this school has been opened by the children of the American Red Cross and is partially funded by them, and because their language is English, which is known to be rich and elaborated, it was adopted as the first language in this school, with Italian and German as second languages. Albanian is their mother tongue (Haçi, Beqir. June 1925, p. 26).

After the First World War until the liberation of the country in 1944, the efforts of the teachers and the patriots consisted in opening schools against illiteracy and educating people in their mother tongue which signified contribution to the liberation of the country from foreign invaders and Albanian language preservation and elaboration. Schools run by foreigner invaders used their own languages as languages of instruction. Albanian language was paid no attention as it was considered as a threat against their hegemony. Hence, under these conditions, foreign language education was paid insignificant attention as the education in the mother tongue as a first step to the evolution of the Albanian people was of par importance.

1.2. The after WW II period

After the Second World, or as it is commonly referred to after the liberation of the country from foreign invaders, language policy in Albania was charged with political issues. Political dominance, the protection of power structures, the preservation of privilege and the distribution of resources were close to the hearts of the leaders of the communist power. In addition to its primary role as a means of communication, under specific conditions, language was used as a powerful social instrument (Mesthrie 1995, p. 2), and language resources became subject to governmental manipulation (Blount and Sanches, 1977, p. 8). The interests and needs of the Albanian language users were subordinated to the political and economic purposes and ideology of the communist group in power.

During that period, the foreign language that was mainly promoted and used in schools was Russian, due to the relationship the communist regime had with the Soviet Union whose language and social and political policy complied with the interests of the communist regime. As Crystal (1997, p. 4) puts it “There is great variation in the reasons for choosing a particular language as a favored foreign language: they include historical tradition, political expediency and the desire for commercial cultural or technological contact”. The socialist state in Albania chose political expediency. The state and the party was in charge of language development issues because they had the right to direct every aspect of life, including language (Beci, 1999, p. 95).

²¹ (www.shqiperia.com/lajme/lajm/nr/324/).

When the communist regime broke up with the Soviet Union, the state resolved that schools would give up teaching Russian. Instead, English was chosen, since it was a language Marx and Engels used to write their work *Capital*, and thus presented no danger to the regime. "With the collapse of the Soviet Union, there's a collapse of Russian and in the ex-satellite countries, the vacuum left by Russian appears to be filling rapidly with English" (Graddol & Meinhof, 1999, p. 8).

1.3. The after 1990 period

Quite another linguistic situation unfolds in Albania after 1990. As soon as language ceased to be a tool of manipulation in the hands of a group of people, it assumed its genuine features and was subject to natural development (Thomai, 1999, p. 222). The vacuum left by the abolishment of the totalitarian regime, the eagerness of the Albanians to admit progress, and the globalization of English, which in itself constituted a significant factor that urged people to overthrow the regime, were some reasons which motivated Albanian speakers to learn foreign languages, English mainly. The Albanian language would either dynamically keep pace with the development of the electronic media or would be reduced to a language suitable for the past time, without computers, internet, digital data, electronic mail and so on (Lloshi, 2011, p. 14). A good number of English loan words for sound or ungrounded reasons began to be used, demonstrating as such the eagerness of the Albanian people to be part of and contribute to the world progress. Hence teaching English as a foreign language became a necessity. It began to be taught in secondary schools, whereas other foreign languages being taught till then began to lose ground.

2. Case Study

An example of the superiority of English teaching is the offering of the English study program as the only foreign language study program at the University of Shkoder. Two years later, as displayed in Table 1, the German study program began to be offered at this university and then successively, two other study programs, Italian and French, were offered in 1998 and 2004 respectively. German was the second study program offered at this university thanks to the policy of cooperation, the Austrian government and the Austrian universities, and consequently their assistance was greatly felt concerning staff qualification and infrastructure reconstructions which the university of Shkoder was much in need of. Then Italian study program began to be offered as the language of a neighboring country which Albanians were not totally ignorant of, thanks to the economic and cultural relationships the two countries have long had.

The fourth study program that began to be offered in this faculty was French study program, as French is the language of the Council of Europe and which once flourished but began to lose ground due to the globalization of English.

Academic year	Study program
1994-1995	English
1996-1997	German
1998-1999	Italian
2006-2007	French

Table 1. The Study Programs in the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Shkoder, Albania and the respective academic year

Another worth of mentioning indication of English superiority is the number of the students enrolled at each study program with each passing academic year. Initially, as displayed in Table 2, there was only a limited number of students admitted at the English study program. The criteria of admittance at this study program were very strict. Students were to sit an exam for selection and it was one of the most preferable study programs. With each passing academic year, the number of the students variably increased, reaching its highest figure 252 in the academic year 2007-2008. This figure fell again reaching a somewhat balanced figure through the coming academic years.

Compared to the number of students enrolled in the three other study programs mentioned above, the number of the students matriculated in the English study program is the biggest each academic year. There is a tendency of increased enrollment in the other foreign language study programs in the last academic years, however, English has the most. The criteria of admittance have changed. Students themselves decide their area of study based on the principle of merit and preference. There is no exam of admittance, however, a decrease in the quality of the students who choose language study programs has been noticed. The reason is that they do not consider English as a safe tool for the job market.

Academic Year	Study Program			
	English	German	Italian	French
1994-1995	27	-	-	-
1995-1996	34	-	-	-
1996-1997	37	30	-	-
1997-1998	42	20	-	-
1998-1999	30	29	31	-

1999-2000		31		25	30		-
2000-2001		34		28	30		-
2001-2002		64		19	30		-
2002-2003		75		15	30		-
2003-2004		95		27	46		-
2004-2005		99		18	21		-
		92		15	41		-
2005-2006		72		22	34		14
		252		23	97		19
2006-2007		106		13	46		9
		87		39	77		46
2007-2008		85		57	65		55
		92		52	55		56
2008-2009							
2009-2010							
2010-2011							
2011-2012							
Total		1354		432	633		199

Table 2. Number of the students enrolled in the Faculty of Foreign Languages

Source: Real data, taken from the Student Enrollment Office in the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Shkoder

The table above displays the number of the students enrolled in the Faculty of Foreign Languages at the University of Shkoder “Luigj Gurakuqi” through the eighteen academic years of its life. It shows that compared to the Italian German and French language study program, the English Study program has the most students, the number of the students enrolled progressively increased almost each academic year, reaching a somewhat stable figure in the last academic years.

3. Current Language policy

Challenges and new teaching and learning possibilities could not be faced by the centralized policy and old curricula. As such, a new flexible policy related to foreign language selection at schools and their corresponding percentage had to be adapted. Foreign languages would be considered not only as curricular subjects but also as means of communication.

To promote multilingualism and multiculturalism, to motivate students in order that they could improve their language competences, two important documents the *Common European Frame of References for Languages* and the *European Portfolio of Languages* have been adapted in the Albanian educational system. On the foundation of the curricular system, the Ministry of

Education in Albania has placed the *Common European Frame of References for Languages Teaching, Learning and Assessment* as a document that provides European Standards all countries of the European Council aim to attain. Accreditation of the *European Portfolio of Languages* as an instrument of the Council of Europe which presents personal linguistic experiences has been modeled to support and increase efforts of its users to reflect on learning languages and make it more effective.

Nowadays, teaching and learning foreign languages have become a necessity for special social groups. Albanian scholars need foreign languages to read their papers at various conferences abroad, to listen to other scholars' papers and to share experiences with them. An increasing number of professionals now assume that to do their job they need to be bilingual. To preserve national heritage, to facilitate communication between peoples, to favor understanding and mobility in Europe, to restrict prejudices and discrimination, teaching and learning foreign languages have been promoted (The Common European Frame of Languages, 2006, p. 4). The priority of the Democratic State is to be integrated in the European Community. It considers learning foreign languages as a prerequisite to its integration. As such, it adopted *The Common European Frame of Languages*. To ensure an ever greater unity among people by keeping a common attitude in the cultural field, the government and the competent educational authorities are keeping in view the objective and the recommendation of the Council of Europe as stated in *The Common European Frame of Languages* (2006, p. 4).

For this reason, pursuant articles 78 and 83 of the Constitution, item1, with the proposal of the Council of Ministers, the Assembly of the Republic of Albania has prepared the draft for the new law of education. Article 13 of the draft of the law of pre-university education reads that the mission of the educational system is to develop students basic long- term skills and equip them with competences as to be able to communicate in the native and/or official language and foreign languages.

An important innovation in the new law of pre-university education is teaching two foreign languages in the secondary schools. The draft specifies that the curriculum of the secondary education will include two languages, one as a first language and the other as a second language. The group of languages that can be selected as a first or second language is determined by the bylaws whereas the first foreign language to be taught will be determined by the school and the second by the student. Article 52 states that pre-university education concludes with the state graduation exams. Students have to be tested on a number of common obligatory subjects and electives, foreign languages along with the Albanian language and literature have been decided as obligatory. Electives have to be determined by the instructions of the ministry.

Higher education has also undergone complete restructuring. To remove obstacles to student and academic mobility, to improve the quality and to ensure standards of higher education, the Bologna process has been adopted in Albania. As higher education in Albania is state controlled, the Bologna Process has been implemented through legislative reform. Higher

education conforms to the three cycle model (Bachelor degree, Master Degree and doctorate) of the Bologna Process.

In view of the importance and perspective of educational exchange, based on the *Common European Frame of Languages*, in order that partners could be assisted to describe the levels of skills, and to facilitate the description of different levels of qualifications, the Ministry of Education has determined the standards of teaching English as a first foreign language (2006, p. 24). Higher education institutions establish qualification specific standards and criteria for the recognition of the English language, on the basis of internationally recognized tests, as well as methods for assessing the overall theoretical level of the candidates. Article 26 of the Higher Education Law, number 9741, 21.05. 2007, amended, number 9832, dated 12.11.207 and number 10307, dated 22.7.2010 in Albania resorts to the MA and doctoral studies as follows: “Students of this study program must sit the test of English on the basis of the internationally recognized tests”. Under these conditions learning a foreign language becomes a must for those who want to complete their studies.

4. Conclusion

Though the issue of foreign language teaching in Albania was approached differently, nowadays, it is line with foreign language teaching in the world, aiming at meeting the challenges of increased global competition. The development of new courses and curricula with significant international content, promotion of partnership activities with institutions abroad and the establishment of joint degrees have increased the dimension of higher education in Albania and the commitment of the Albanian higher institutions to world integration.

This study shows that before the WWII, education of the people in their mother tongue as a reaction to their education in the languages of the invaders and neighboring countries was uppermost in the consciousness of the Albanian people. Teaching foreign languages would come next, as a necessity to supplement education in the mother tongue and not to run counter the interests of the neighboring countries and the invaders.

After the WWII, language was used as a powerful social instrument by the communist state. The party in power was in charge of language development issues. The state resolved Russian as a favored foreign language because the communist state was in good terms with the Soviet Union.

After the 1990s, language development took its natural course. Since then, teaching foreign languages has been given due importance as a prerequisite for integration and foreign language competence recognition. Language barrier that could cause misunderstanding and divide nations has been greatly removed. Through foreign languages, Albanian higher institutions are constantly demonstrating commitment to European integration.

5. References

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