EARLY BILINGUAL EDUCATION MOVING TOWARDS THE DUAL LANGUAGE IMMERSION PROGRAM, AN UPCOMING REALITY ALSO IN GJIROKASTRA

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the issues of bilingual education in Gjirokastra, in the 9-year primary schools, as an important link in the process of foreign language learning by our children. Albania has quickly embraced the concept of early foreign language learning. A memorandum signed by the respective governments of Albania and Italy in 2002 opened the way to a teaching process conducted in two languages, Italian and Albanian, in the upper cycle of the primary school and also in the high schools, so that half of the subjects would be taught in a foreign language. Through this paper we try to give our opinion why the implementation of this program of dual language immersion is necessary as an educational system based on pragmatic and functional concepts. The achievement of the dual language immersion program also in our schools, aims at a transmission of knowledge for a better internalization of the foreign language, and also at improving the perspectives of our students in the European labor market. The difficulties and the obstacles which might condition this process cannot diminish the advantages and benefits that the children studying in these schools where the teaching process will be conducted in two languages, will have over the children who will study a foreign language as a separate subject. The role of parents and a highly qualified teaching staff are important factors in the success of this process.

UDC CODE & KEYWORDS

■ UDC: 37.04 ■ The Bilingual Education ■ The Role of Parents
■ The Highly Qualified Teaching Staff ■ The Advantages And Benefits.

INTRODUCTION

During our several-year-period experience, we have observed children of different age groups, like 7-8 age group, 8-9 age group and 9-10 age group. Our experience teaches us that bilingual education in the primary school offers many advantages.

During this period we have conducted several polls and studies and drawn our conclusions. The biggest challenge that a society faces is the education and preparation of children for the future, their career, the social interaction, so that they can become worthy citizens of a European society. The different talks and meetings with parents have sensitized us to the fact that the positive, negative or neutral attitudes of parents towards the children's learning of foreign languages at this early stage of education, affect the results of their children.

The learning of foreign language in the primary school

In this changing world and in the framework of a united Europe, communication, transmission of information and ideas is made possible through the use of foreign languages. More than fifty years now, the idea of promotion of the early bilingual education spread very fast in almost all the countries of western Europe initially and then in Canada.

The learning of a foreign language in the primary school is a current concern. This process of teaching and learning aims at favoring a balanced bilingualism, so that children may later be able to use both languages (and more).

Claude Hagège in his book "L'enfant aux deux langues" emphasizes that every child who is exposed to a foreign language at an early age, is more likely to learn it easier than another child who is not subject to such exposure. "The success of an early bilingual education assures us that a subsequent multilingualism might be as successful as this" (Hagege n.d. p. 81).

Children are taught a foreign language so that they can understand that their mother tongue is one of the several other languages that other people speak. Children should realize that foreign languages may be learned and used in the same way as their mother tongue, and their teacher should serve as their model. Learning foreign languages may be fun like playing a game. Even the official linguistic policy of Albania aims at the spread of multilingualism in the form of learning several languages in the school environment. This whole process takes place in the framework of the participation in the reciprocal understanding among different peoples.

Based on the instructions of the Council of Europe, an experiment was carried out, during the 1992 -1993 school year, in some pilot schools of Tirana, the capital of our country, to introduce the learning of foreign languages in primary schools, in the framework of Kualida project, part of Council of Europe 5-year program 1990-1995.

Taking into account the positive outcome of this experiment and trying to meet the growing demand of parents and children, this experiment was spread to other big cities also, like Shkodër, Korçë, Gjirokastra and Vlorë. At the beginning, the experiment was in the form of sensitization of people to foreign languages and it aimed at accustoming children to the idea of learning a foreign language starting from the second grade. Foreign language classes were 30 minute-long, three times a week, before other classes were conducted, children groups were small in number and to this end highly qualified teachers were engaged. The chosen method was very interesting. Communication in the classroom gave children the opportunity to speak, express themselves, play with the words and sounds and practice through the various creative and entertaining activities. The techniques and means that were used aimed at an effective teaching/learning process. They are described in the curricula designed and distributed by the Institute of Pedagogical Studies. A decision of the Ministry of Education dating from 1996, to spread the experiment to other cities, was implemented almost over the whole country during the 1997-1998 school year. The schools did their utmost to create conditions conducive to the early learning of foreign languages, they even created foreign language laboratories,

something which affected positively the motivation of children. The experimental stage proved to be very successful. According to a decision of the Ministry of Education, the primary school children all over the country, starting from the 1998-1999 school year "were required to learn a foreign language starting from the third grade, two times a week and they would be organized in classes and not in groups" (MES, 1998).

English, French, and Italian are learned from the third grade of the primary school, in all the 9-year primary schools of Gjirokastra. There are a lot of factors which favor the learning of a foreign language in the primary school, like the psychological advantages of children during the process of foreign language learning, the development of their personality, the socio-cultural, pedagogical, political and environmental factor, etc.

Real difficulties emerged eventually, after the generalization of the process of foreign language learning in the primary school, like: difficulties in finding the necessary qualified teachers, the teaching process was not conducted in groups anymore but in classes, so the number of children increased, the lack of audio-visual means, etc. Working with children is interesting and difficult at the same time. But the pleasure that one gets out of it, is the reward of a very engaging and demanding job.

In a circular issued by the Ministry of Education in 1997, it was emphasized the fact that the Ministry of Education had made the achievement of the continuity of the learning of a foreign language in the upper cycle of the primary school, a goal in itself.

The early bilingual education in Gjirokastra, offering students an excellent formation and a number of skills and competences

In 2002 the Albanian and the Italian government signed a memorandum which opened the way to the bilingual education in Italian and Albanian languages in the upper cycle of primary school, and in high school as well. According to this memorandum, half of the subjects would be conducted in a foreign language. A first stage of this bilingual education was implemented in Tirana in September 1998, followed by Shkodra and Korce, in September 2000. "The teaching academic content of this bilingual education has been based on the reform of the Albanian school system, aiming at achieving these goals:

Offering students an excellent formation that provides them with a number of skills and competences which will be of great use to them both in Albania and in Italy, so that they may continue their studies and also find a job in Italy as well as in Albania, also serving as facilitator in the relations between the two countries.

This provides the teachers with the possibility to become more qualified professionally through the formative-educational cooperation, exchange of methodologies and experiences. Workshops and debates will be organized periodically during all the school terms to improve the level of cooperation among the Albanian and Italian teachers and to favor an integrated and multidisciplinary teaching program, suitable to the general goals of the respective school term and to the specific objectives of the course.

The introduction of examples of collegiality, which is practiced widely in the Italian school system, is another important element in the integration of the two school systems under a European formation approach.

It creates a possibility for both countries to experiment a curriculum of European standards, characterized by the

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dialogue between the cultures of the two countries, addressing with great care the respective identities the two countries, in a very sensitive and important sector like that of education and formation (Sezioni Bilingui Italo-Albanesi, 2002). The goal of this bilingual educational program within the framework of this memorandum is the formation of students so that they are able to act as facilitators in the relations between the two countries to help the advancement of the European challenge and the cultural dialogue and understanding.

But what is really this bilingual educational system?

CLIL (content and language integrated learning) is the learning of subjects through the introduction of a foreign language which describes the different forms of the learning process having in mind the combination of the linguistic and non-linguistic learning. By non-linguistic learning we understand the fact that content-based subjects like history, biology, geography, chemistry, etc are taught and learned in a foreign language. The same thing should be done with other subjects like music, art and sport. This method gives students the possibility to practice foreign language in a very different setting, so that they shift their focus from the foreign language itself to the subject being taught. With EMILE, (Enseignement des matières par l'introduction d'une langue étrangère), the learning of the language and of the other subjects is integrated with two main goals, related to the subject and to the language, so this kind of learning, namely the dual language immersion program, is considered a method of learning with a double objective. CLIL participates in the promotion of the basic principles, which are always in constant interaction: Content, Communication, Conversance and Culture/Citizenship.

The first principle places the content of learning, the acquisition of knowledge, of competencies at the heart of the process of learning.

The second principle defines language as a means of communication as much as it defines it as a means of learning.

The third principle fosters the development of the skills of reflection combined with the basic competences of interpersonal communication (basic interpersonal communication skills) and with the acquisition of cognitive academic language.

The fourth principle deals with the concept of pluriculturalism. "Studying a subject through a different language and culture paves the way to a growing understanding and tolerance and other perspectives, an element which is crucial to the promotion of a European understanding and to the making of citizenship a reality (Do 2002, p. 27-28).

The goal is: the use of the dual language immersion program as a means to promote the multilingualism in the educational system and beyond.

This new experience of dual language immersion, in the city of Gjirokastra starts in Gjirokastra in September of the 2011-2012 school year, in two classes of the 9-year "Koto Hoxhi" and "Urani Rumbo" schools.

We think that the case of these two classes which will undergo this program of foreign language learning is the best example of this dual language immersion program.

The Regional Educational Board in Gjirokastra (REB) has organized meetings with the Italian ambassador in Tirana, with the Cultural Attaché in the Italian embassy in Tirana, and with the directors of the two 9-year schools to take the necessary steps to enable the realization of this serious and important enterprise.

At the beginning it will be conducted the learning of the Italian language and the improvement of the communicative skills acquired in the Italian language in the lower cycle of the primary school, and then the program aims at moving gradually to the learning of content-based subjects in the foreign language. The REB will organize a competition to choose the best teachers to make this enterprise come true, that will be assisted also by Italian trainers. Today the modern learning of foreign languages follows roughly the principles of communicative and pragmatic learning. A main goal is the ability to understand and use (in a written and oral form) the language in real-life situations. The fact that EMILE, CLIL, consider language as a means to learn the content-based subjects, is a result of the pragmatist orientation of the modern learning of foreign languages. Language is not learned as an end in itself, but it serves as a working language during the learning/teaching process, in an educational system based on pragmatist and functional concepts where foreign languages are seen as part of the interests and values of the members of a linguistic community.

The motive for the creation of a bilingual program is almost always the same. All the scholars cite as an obvious and transparent goal the transmission of knowledge for a better internalization of the foreign language, and also the improvement of the perspectives of the students in the European job market.

Which are some of the advantages of this bilingual system?

The internalization of the economy, based on knowledge, enables the students to learn new linguistic competences, and the opening to new cultures. Several countries consider the bilingual education as an integral part of the internalization and of the development of the cultural conscience of the students.

Being equipped with two languages means a whole new world of opportunities for the future.

The ability to speak two or more languages has a lot of values regarding the possibilities to find a job, advance in the career, and also the personal development and enrichment.

Bilingual education is an integral element of the preparation of our students to become productive citizens in the future for their country and Europe. It affects the development of the hearing and visual senses, and also the observing skills.

It affects the general development of the students and constitutes a factor in the struggle against the failure at school through the development of the ability to predict things, to take very good stock of different, various situations, and find their way out.

It helps in the development of the autonomy of the students and in the development of their personal responsibility in the carrying out of their work.

As it usually happens when people face a new experience, before mentioning the advantages of this project we would like to mention some issues, which are directly related to the success of the whole project.

- Have they conducted surveys and polls in order to find out what they think about this foreign language teaching/learning method?
- Have there been enough meetings and talks with parents, teachers and administrators?
- Have the teachers who are specialists in the foreign language teaching process been consulted?

In our opinion, the REB should have taken into account the opinions and suggestions of the parents, who obviously affect the motivation of their children. The social, cultural and intellectual position of children will affect its success. We also think that before starting their work the REB should sensitize the parents whose children will experience first-hand this language immersion program, to the fact that:

- This innovation will not affect the school performance of their children.
- The competences acquired by the study of a language are transferred onto another language.
- The quality of internalization of a foreign language by these children will be much higher than that of the children who study foreign language as a separate subject.
- Also in content-based subjects like mathematics, chemistry and so on children will have higher results. Such a thing has been proven by the experience of other students.
- This kind of learning favors the cognitive and intellectual development of the children, their creativity and plasticity.
- Parents greatly affect their children's motivation and confidence that they will be part of an experience that will have considerable advantages for them.
- This experience will be finalized successfully if the possibilities of studying in a foreign language intensively will increase also outside the school environment, creating possibilities to use and practice it beyond the school environment.

The REB should be rigorously professional in engaging the best teachers who will work with a small number of students and should seek the help of specialists, and always bear in mind the fact that planning, organization, and cooperation are crucial to the progress of the project.

Teachers should be highly qualified, they should be well-acquainted with the theories about learning a second language, should know and implement an appropriate pedagogy, should speak the language very well so that children do the same thing as well. As we know practice makes perfect. Teachers should immerse themselves in the foreign language but at the same time should try to reach a balance between the teaching of content-based and grammar-based subjects.

Conclusion

Maybe our students will not speak the foreign language as native speakers do, but they will acquire important skills for their intellectual, cultural and social development. If we have a positive vision for bilingualism and multilingualism, i.e. if the goal is not that our students speak like native speakers, (something which they might even do), we should sensitize them to know how to use the advantages of speaking two or more languages. We are optimistic about the positive results of this important enterprise, because we also should have a dual language immersion program in our schools.

The foreign language learning process has more chances of being successful, when the student has the opportunity to learn the language in real-life situations which enable him to internalize the language through practice" (Berteau 2000, p. 1-16).

EMILE does not recognize age limits. It is not a special method, but a sum of different opportunities to integrate multilingualism in the teaching process" (Hazette, 2004).

In this paper we have tried to present our opinions about the conditions and the expected results of the possibilities of learning in a foreign language in the upper cycle of the 9-year primary school and in the high school. Nowadays, a lot of emphasis is placed on the fact that the learning of a foreign language in itself should not be considered as the explicit goal of the activity taking place during the foreign language learning class. Teachers should be concerned about the fact that the cognitive and/or affective implication of the students should be strong, so that his attention turns to the linguistic goal of the class to concentrate on its semantic content and on the information it transmits. In this way, we create the conditions and make the necessary preparations to move from the learning of a foreign language to the learning in a foreign language. "Since language permeates practically all human interests, the early teaching of modern languages could be related temporarily or permanently to many school activities, especially to art, music, drama, history, geography etc. In this way this learning process may play an integrating role crucial to the learning process in general" (The Nuffield Foundation 1977, p. 62). The Albanian -Italian memorandum on this bilingual educational system aims precisely at this thing. There are examples of such successful experiences dating from the 70s and so on. Finally the experience which students, parents and teachers will be part of will be a very big significant step towards a world full of possibilities.

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