

Cultural diversity as a key factor in planning foreign language teaching policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Abstract: Bosnia and Herzegovina is a multiethnic and multicultural community which has traditionally displayed deep sensitivity to the need for appreciation, promotion, learning, connecting, and preservation of the different cultures. The aim of the paper is to indicate the multilayered nature of the cultural identity of Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as the fact that cultural, traditional, and religious diversity, as well as the civilisation imbue with the elements of the European and Oriental-Islamic culture have strongly affected the planning of foreign language teaching policy in this country for centuries. Having been subjected to strong political and cultural influences both from the East and the West, Bosnia and Herzegovina opens up possibilities for combining European and Oriental languages by applying modern curricula at primary schools. The primary goal is for the students to encounter cultures of entirely different regions and to be taught tolerance, understanding, and appreciation for what is foreign and different by establishing a correlation among those cultures themselves and a correlation between those and their native culture. The paper also addresses a close relationship between a foreign language and culture of the people using that language and indicates the necessity to teach a foreign language by teaching elements of foreign culture. Such a method introduces a student to the process of intercultural learning of a foreign language and produces a positive effect on the development of the student's cultural communication competences. BiH has shown strong tendencies towards harmonising the foreign language curricula with modern European concepts of foreign language teaching and learning.

Key words: cultural diversity, foreign language policy, curricula, interaction, tolerance, appreciation and coexistence

Introduction

Cultural diversity is one of the most significant attributes of the human population in general. It is mankind's centuries-long fact conditioned by numerous differences. It is primarily related to the use of different verbal and non-verbal communication codes within social communities and their relationship to other social communities. Additionally, it is related to different norms of behaviour, different beliefs, religions, opinions and values. Identification of individuals with a group that has a common system of symbols, meanings and norms of behaviour represents their *cultural identity*, and "(...) knowing another's cultural identity (...) does help you to understand the opportunities and challenges that each individual in that culture had to deal with" (Jandt, 2010:15).

The familiarity with cultural diversity has become a part of our daily lives, having in mind that meeting others has been alleviated by globalisation processes worldwide and a resulting wider opening-up of some societies towards others. A consequence of the globalisation processes is the strengthening of migration processes, which leads to an increased number of various multicultural contacts and formation of multicultural communities. On the other hand, we must bear in mind the fact that the diversity of cultures, i.e. multiculturalism, may be historically rooted in a social community thus constituting its distinguishable constant feature, not a product of migration processes.

Education policies have always had profound influence both in terms of developing and the weakening of cultural diversity. Therefore, the task of contemporary educational process, viewed through the prism of the transfer of knowledge and acquisition of competences, is to facilitate the acquisition of intercultural competences which enable coexistence with others, together with their cultural diversity (Byram, 1997). Within the framework of UNESCO report on Education for Twenty-first Century, under the leadership of Jacques Delors, another report was presented entitled *Learning – The Treasure Within*, which emphasises that education relies on four principles: "learning to be", "learning to know" "learning to work" and "learning to live together". The Commission has singled out the "learning to live together" principle as the most important one as it entails "(...) the development of people's understanding for other people, their histories, traditions, and spiritual values (...)" (Report, 1996:20-21), thus implying the conclusion that these principles can be applied successfully only if they are established on appreciation of cultural diversity.

Language is most frequently referred to as one of the basic criteria of cultural diversity and its fundamental element. Language is considered a product of spiritual culture of a people and its transmitter at the same time. This is why, from the point of view of cultural diversity, languages are not considered only a means of communication. In

fact, being the media of our experiences, our systems of value, our encounters with other people and our sense of belonging, languages are also a combination of our cultural expressions, the strongholds of our identity, our values, and our views of the world (Risager, 2006). Hence, in growing political and economic integration of European countries, whose level of future unity will depend on the level of mutual familiarity, understanding, and tolerance towards others and the different, the Council of Europe has defined the foreign language learning, promotion of significance of language and cultural diversity, and the need for their preservation as the priority tasks of education in the 21st century.

In view of the above, this paper is focused on three main areas. First, it analyses the elements of cultural diversity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, its understanding in both broad and narrow terms, the effect these elements have on the planning of foreign language teaching policy in BiH, and their status and position in our contemporary education concept. Secondly, the paper attempts briefly to show that there is a close correlation between foreign language learning and its culture and that it is paramount to teach elements of the culture as it leads to developing intercultural communication. The final section of the paper points out the elements of harmonisation of the curricula in our schools with the European concept of curricula, which bring to the fore the development of students' cultural communicative competence.

Cultural identity of Bosnia and Herzegovina and its influence on planning foreign language teaching

Historical background

A culture of a people is inseparable from its history. The territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina has witnessed centuries-long interactions and blending of several civilizations. Nowadays, three religions coexist there with an enviable degree of tolerance and respect, without assimilation pretexts for integration and creation of a unique cultural pattern which would annul the diversity and the specific quality of each cultural individuality. BiH has thus “widely opened a door to another and different, so becoming a home to what is domiciliary and foreign, (...), to what is here and what is there, to what is altogether an ideal to which Europe itself is steered“ (Strategy for Cultural Policy in BiH, 2008:7).

Due to its rather sensitive geopolitical position between the East and the West and its incorporation into the *transitional zone of European culture*, the cultural and historic heritage in BiH is heterogeneous, formed in a broad time span from the pre-historic and antic to the mediaeval, Ottoman, and modern times. Owing to such a geographic position, its culture has been shaped under the influence of four cultural and civilisation heritages: Mediterranean, Central European, Byzantine, and Oriental-Islamic, which is one of the decisive facts that has affected the course and content of the education and cultural development of BiH, as well as the abundance of forms of its cultural-historic legacy. In the world that is becoming increasingly globalised, imposing its own system of values, which does not show too much understanding for traditional culture, which is, nevertheless, increasingly becoming aware of the need to preserve cultural values created for centuries, this abundance of cultural-historic heritage can become one of the comparative advantages of our country, “(...) and our culture an important product with which BiH of today can in fact be competitive in Europe and the world” (Strategy for Cultural Policy in BiH, 2008:12).

In addition to the three constitutive peoples – Croats, Serbs, Bosniaks - BiH is a home to representatives of 17 ethnic minorities: the Romani, Slovenians, Ukrainians, Czechs, Albanians, Poles, Macedonians, Bulgarians, Austrians, Germans, Turks, Arabs, Italians, Hungarians, Russians, Slovaks and others, who present through their activities the most significant proof of the affirmation of cultures of diversity at a time of globalisation, which is invaluable for the development of intercultural dialogue and the strengthening of social cohesion. From the point of view of language diversity, Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian are the three official languages of BiH, which show a high degree of mutual appreciation, clearly manifested towards the languages of minorities which are extensively used. Therefore, historically established multiculturalism, diversity of religions and traditions, and the language diversity lie at the heart of cultural identity of BiH. Hence, in defining priorities, the Strategy for Cultural Policy in BiH states as one of the fundamental goals and tasks: “(...) further affirmation of multiculturalism and cultural unity, constantly bearing in mind the cultural wealth and specific cultural feature of BiH which incorporates numerous influences from the East, West and the Mediterranean, which represents its peculiar advantage, the factor of unifying and not of separation and a step more on the road to European integrations and, particularly, the nurturing of the cultural specificities of each of its peoples and ethnic minorities, with a full support to the activities of the (...) national, cultural, and educational associations and their contribution to the promotion of culture, protection of cultural-artistic heritage and language” (ibid., 34).

Having experienced encounters with powerful European and Oriental cultures and civilisations, from which it inherited the spirit of cultural, traditional, and religious distinctiveness, long existing as an integral part of the globally known multicultural community – former Yugoslavia, having been taught painful experiences carried from the recent wartime events, Bosnia and Herzegovina understands the term and meaning of multiculturalism in its broadest terms, not only within its own borders. This is a result of the fact that multiculturalism in BiH, viewed in

the historical and geographic context, has always had its cultural forms which had its common institutions, which, by nurturing cultural diversity, did not advocate intolerance, isolation, and self-containment but openness, communication, and unity. Even nowadays, being a member of the Council of Europe, Bosnia and Herzegovina actively participates in the work of the Council of Europe Committees dealing with the issues in the field of culture. Its capitol was the organiser of the first pilot project entitled the First Intercultural City of the Council of Europe 2003/04, and the first forum on intercultural and interreligious dialogue organised in cooperation with the Council of Europe and the Japanese foundation.

Innovating the foreign language learning programmes

Although in the transitional process and divided into two entities, and the entity of the Federation of BiH itself into ten cantons, although still in a state of an institutional and political chaos, in the past ten years BiH has invested a great deal into the education system reform. In the Federation of BiH and the Republic of Srpska the *New Concept of Nine-year Education and Upbringing* has been produced. Harmonisation with modern primary school concepts and compatibility of education standards with those of the European Union is referred to as one of the fundamental principles the Concept rest on. Following the recommendations of the Council of Europe, the BiH education system has implemented the projects of early foreign language learning, *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* has been adopted, new upgraded foreign language curricula have been implemented, particularly at the primary school level as the key factor in developing students' capacities for successfully mastering the elements of a foreign language and culture (Prebeg-Vilke, 1991), the goals and objectives of the foreign language teaching have been redefined, and the foreign language teachers' role has been reviewed and corrected.

In order for the students to master at least two foreign languages by the end of their schooling, under the innovated Framework Primary School Curriculum in both entities, the first compulsory foreign language, English, is being taught in the third grade. The second compulsory foreign language is now taught in the sixth grade; however, the students choose one among several optional foreign languages. The number of languages and the language selection itself differs in the Federation of BiH and the Republic of Srpska, and among the cantons themselves. They are mostly dictated by the interests of the majority population in a canton. In addition to the English language, the languages offered in the Republic of Srpska are: German, French, Russian, Italian, and in some schools, Spanish. Apart from English, the Federation Ministry of Science and Education has proposed German, French and Arabic, however, the cantonal ministries have been granted the autonomy to amend the list of languages offered based on the interest of students and their parents. The continuity of learning these languages has been ensured throughout the secondary schools and universities. Numerous private educational institutions, religious ones too, actively promote the learning of Turkish and Persian in addition to some of the above-mentioned languages.

Our education system selected those European foreign languages under the influence of several key factors. The first factor, the leading one in planning foreign language policy worldwide, is the overall political and economic power of the country where the language is spoken and its global influence. Based on this criterion, English has stood out among other languages, becoming a global language of today and achieving the status of a *lingua franca* of the contemporary multilingual Europe and the first foreign language taught at all schools. An analysis and forecast of the labour market needs, current foreign language hierarchy in the world, and overall socio-political circumstances in a country, the political, economic, and cultural in particular, relations with the countries whose languages are taught are also rather important factors that have affected the selection of the dominant European, and non-European – Oriental languages, too.

Oriental languages are an inseparable part of the cultural-historic heritage in BiH. As a result, they have been present in our education system for centuries. During the Ottoman Empire rule in these areas, literacy, education, and literature was developed in Arabic as the language of science, law, theology, Turkish, as the language of administration and fine literature, and Persian as the language of poetry (Šabanović, 1973). In addition to having been studied at religious schools in continuity, in the mid 19th century they began to be taught at classical grammar schools in all the major centres of BiH (Ramić, 1999). With certain discontinuance and amendments, they remained an integral part of the secondary and university level curricula in our country, and the literary heritage created in these languages holds an exceptional cultural value of BiH.

At the time when the issues under discussion are conflict of civilisations, conflict between the East and the West, the need for a closer cooperation and intercultural understanding, Oriental languages have increasingly been taught in the modern world. The growing strategic, economic, political, cultural and military potentials of the countries where these languages are spoken also represent significant causes of interest in these languages. By implementing the projects of early foreign language learning, whose goal is to promote the importance of multilingualism and cultural diversity at the earliest school age, the BiH education system has intentionally and purposely opened a possibility to combine the European and Oriental languages at primary schools. Bearing in mind the fact that “(...) teaching a foreign language can in no way be separate from teaching a culture (...)” (Serrano, 2002:124), the combinations such as these are aimed at exposing the students to cultures of entirely different regions – European and Oriental - from a very early age and teaching them tolerance, understanding, and appreciation for

what is foreign and different by establishing a correlation among those cultures themselves and a correlation between those and the native culture.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has practically lived the cultural diversity for centuries and is aware of the need for its further preservation within its own borders and its promotion and understanding in a broader European context. Therefore, planning foreign language teaching as the most important medium of foreign culture has traditionally been addressed with full responsibility and willingness to implement modern teaching methods which nowadays emphasise the acquisition of (inter)cultural communicative competence.

The dependence of foreign language and culture and development of intercultural learning

The objective of the foreign language learning is to achieve successful communication in all the language domains. Starting from the etymology of the term *communication*, Fred E. Jandt (2010:37) points out that communication and culture are inseparable. A derivative of the Latin word *communicare*, it means:“(…) to share with or make common, as in giving to another a part or share of your thoughts, hopes and knowledge”. On the other hand, he believes that culture, being a product of human social activity, is a code we learn and share, and learning and sharing requires communication. Therefore, in order for us to understand each other, communication and culture must be learned together.

Taking the fundamental *communicative function* of language as a starting point, we can reach the conclusion that learning a foreign language means learning about a foreign culture. Therefore, in order to successfully participate in communication in a foreign language, we must, at least to a certain degree, learn and understand the cultural background of the language, know the customs and habits, and how to behave and act in a variety of situations in life, as close as possible to how speakers of a foreign language would (Tanović, 1978). This implies that foreign language should be acquired within its *cultural context*. Namely, in the process of its learning and teaching it may not be separated from its natural environment and general cultural heritage it originates from. Contemporary linguistic theories of foreign language learning and teaching are based on such principles bearing in mind that they bring us closer to the community that uses it and that they change our preconceptions, notions and prejudices with regard to that community. The principles emphasise that foreign language teaching without the elements of foreign culture is incomplete, imprecise, and nonsensical even if learners know nothing about the native speakers or the native country. (Genc & Bada, 2005).

These theories have also indicated the incompleteness of a widely accepted communicative approach whose goal is to develop the learners' communicative competences focusing on the functional and structural aspect of a language and their mutual combination in fuller communicative sense. With an approach like this, a learner masters the ability to choose the most suitable linguistic form for the execution of certain language functions and to use the language in accordance with the situation environment or social context, which means that, depending on when, where, why, who with and what they talk about, learners know which lexicon and models of expression to use (Littlewood, 1981). The fundamental disadvantage of this approach is that, in essence, it does not encourage the development of cultural awareness in learners, which is embedded in one of the chief goals of the modern language learning, and that is “the development in learners of sensitivity to the culture (in the widest sense) of the communities whose languages are being studied” (Byram, 1993:26). In building communication competence, the language and cultural component are complementary as communication attains its full meaning only in relation to the fundamental socio-cultural signs. Communication cannot be reduced to transferring solely linguistic message as its essential features are composed of extra-linguistic and paralinguistic aspects of communication – mimicking, gesture, body movements, special intonation and rhythm used in specific situations. Not knowing those can lead to misunderstanding the message.

Foreign language acquisition by teaching elements of foreign culture should primarily serve to developing cross-cultural communication, which introduces the learner to the process of intercultural language learning defined as “(…) a process where the learner's picture of culture grows wider, with the help of new information about foreign culture and language, increasing in the same time the consciousness of the special features of one's own culture and language” (Kaikkonen, 1997:47). Therefore, for so oriented foreign language learning to be successful, it is necessary to develop in learners a positive attitude towards the foreign phenomena. After that, learners are focused on observing the elements of foreign culture and their comparison with their own culture, which further leads them to learning and acquiring the standards and norms of the foreign culture. Acquisition of new codes and meanings helps develop students' linguistic and cultural skills in communication.

Curricula and developing cultural communicative competence

Contemporary curricula in BiH are focused on developing learners' communicative competence from their very first encounter with a foreign language, indicating at the same time, the necessity of acquiring a language in a broader social context based on the culture of the people speaking it. Therefore, the primary goals of foreign language teaching referred to in the literature are to teach learners how to communicate in a foreign language, in

writing and orally, about various aspects of every-day life, to develop the learners' general culture by teaching them about the life and tradition of the countries where the language is spoken, and to attempt to develop in learners through the foreign language teaching an awareness of the importance of multilingualism, the spirit of tolerance, cosmopolitanism, humanism and internationalism. Further, one of the fundamental goals of the foreign language instruction referred to in the literature is to develop intercultural skills that help learners learn about the culture of the foreign language speaking countries, compare it with their own culture and tradition, and develop a positive, tolerant attitude towards diversities, all of which serves the purpose of enhancing their cultural communicative competence.

Contemporary foreign language teaching methodologies in our schools support and promote European inter-cultural approach to foreign language teaching. By displaying how cultures are intertwined, this approach contributes to shaping learners' personality in terms of tolerance and respect for what is different, setting aside the ethnic differences, and explaining the importance of preserving social diversities and cultural pluralism within a nation (Vrhovec, 1999). The techniques applied in developing learners' (inter)cultural awareness in class and beyond are varied and mainly start with the strategies of observation, reflection, and conclusion about the cultural signs from every-day lives related to food, refreshments, sports, celebrities, and items used daily. Role-plays and simulation of daily situations in communication, comparisons, and contrasting with the elements of one's own culture, use of different audio-visual aids and authentic materials, trips to and living in the country where the foreign language is spoken etc. develop at the same time learners' communication skills and change their attitudes and relationship towards members of other cultures and nations in a positive way. Naturally, the selection of the technique and strategy depends on the learners' age and success and their efficiency primarily on the knowledge, skills, creativity, and motivation of the teachers themselves.

Although education institutions in BiH are in a rather poor financial situation, and although primary and secondary schools are to a great extent divided based on the ethnicity of the students, as a result of which we have a unique phenomenon of *two schools under one roof*, the entity ministries of science and education keep abreast with contemporary trends in the foreign language teaching in Europe and make efforts in implementing them in their own curricula. Approaches that develop in learners sensitivity to cultures of others and different are not entirely new in our traditionally culturally aware society. However, in this rather sensitive post-war period it is essential to emphasise their importance in order to raise new generations which will be aware in the overall globalisation process of the significance of preserving their own cultural identity and which will have a developed sense of general unity and collectiveness in the cultural diversity of the united Europe.

Conclusion

Cultural diversity is considered the most valuable legacy of human civilization, though simultaneously a cause for frequent conflicts, lack of mutual understanding and intolerance. Rapid globalisation processes in the world lead to more common multicultural encounters which, as a result, call for development of positive attitudes and tolerance to others and those different from us. Viewed through the prism of the transfer of knowledge and acquisition of competences, modern education systems, particularly the processes of foreign language teaching and learning, have a task to help the acquisition of intercultural competences that enable coexistence with others and their cultural diversity. This is why one of the fundamental objectives of the foreign language classes is teaching elements of foreign culture, primarily serving the purpose of developing intercultural understanding and communication.

Shaped under the influence of the Mediterranean, Mediaeval, Byzantine, and Oriental-Islamic culture, BiH has existed for centuries as a multicultural community with a developed sense of respect, appreciation, and understanding of the cultural diversity in its broadest terms. BiH is a place where the cultures of the East and West come together. Therefore, the possibility for combining the European and Oriental languages at the earliest school age is a proof of its attempts to build a bridge of understanding and tolerance between these two different cultures and support and promote them equally in a student's consciousness applying modern foreign language learning programmes.

Contemporary approaches to the foreign language teaching suggest that foreign language learning has to take place in its broader socio-cultural context and in a direction opposite from the usual one. In fact, instead of the traditional practice of having the most important elements of a culture of the people speaking a language adopted through that foreign language, these approaches endeavour to put at the forefront learning about cultural and civilisation contents intended to stimulate and strengthen a student's personal motivation to further master the foreign language itself. An approach like this simultaneously develops students' communication and cultural competences, which guarantee accuracy and precision in communicating in a foreign language only in correlation.

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