

The attitudes of Macedonian Universities towards multilingualism in the classroom

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Abstract

Macedonia is a multiethnic and multilingual country where people of different cultures and values live. Working together, teachers and students start to share their beliefs and try to eliminate stereotypes that people have for each other. Teaching students who have different ethnicity, age, gender, and beliefs is challenging for all language teachers. There is an increase interest in the use of all languages equally in the country because more than two languages co-exist and are necessary in our everyday communication.

In many countries in Europe there is a common practice that two or more languages are presented in study programs. The same case is with South East European University (SEEU) in Tetova, Macedonia. It was established in 2001 and instruction is delivered in three languages: Albanian, Macedonian and English. It is now regarded as a model for multi-ethnic, multi-lingual higher education in South East Europe. The teaching and administrative staff are of different ethnic backgrounds, Albanians, Macedonians, Turkish and many visiting professors native American speakers and native German speakers. To function effectively, there is a flexible use of languages at this Institution. There are language courses offered to the staff in Albanian, Macedonian and English and anyone who is interested to work here is required to speak more than two local languages. The present study involves 120 participants, 20 teachers and 100 students of different nationalities, Albanians, Macedonians, Turkish, Roma, etc. The study uses a modified version of Baker's (1992) questionnaire and a teacher interview.

The results show that all participantes have a positive attitude towards multilingualism and they strongly believe that it promotes tolerance among different ethnic groups. Since society in Macedonia is confronted with this issue everyday either at school or elsewhere we believe that the results of the study will be very useful.

Key Words: Higher education, multiculturalism, ethnic groups, language attitudes, Macedonia

1. Introduction

The Republic of Macedonia is a country located in the Central Balkan Peninsula. It is one of the successor states of the former Yugoslavia, from which it declared independence in 1991. The population of the Republic of Macedonia is 2.07 million, and current ethnic structure of its society is stable. The majority (64.18%) are Ethnic Macedonians, and this is followed by the largest minority, Albanians (25.17%). Other ethnic groups in the country include Turks, Roma and Serbs (<http://www.magnamedica.eu/macedonia>). The official languages are Macedonian and Albanian languages. The Macedonian language belongs to South Slavic languages and it is spoken by 2-3 million people who live in the country and in the Diaspora. On the other hand, the Albanian language belongs to Indo-European languages and does not belong to any other existing branch. In Macedonia people generally speak more than two, Macedonian\Albanian and Turkish, or even three languages at home, at work or elsewhere.

The Macedonian education system consists of pre-school education, primary, secondary and higher education. Elementary and high schools students are separated into classroom based upon the native language that they speak while in universities students who have different cultures, ages, and religions study in the same classroom. There are many state and private universities located in different cities in Macedonia but the South East European University, where the present study is done, has the most-modern facilities in the country. It is located in Tetova, and it has five faculties. All study programs follow the pattern of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), conform to the Bologna Agreement. The diplomas obtained at SEEU are recognized in a wide international/European perspective. There are around 175 professors and young assistants employed at the University. Many distinguished professors from different European and USA Universities give lectures on different topics. There are around 7000 students enrolled and 3000 graduates. Since its establishment, in 2001, SEEU offers study programs in three languages: Albanian, Macedonian and English. This makes the SEEU unique in the region and it aims to prepare the students to function in today's diverse society. It is now regarded as a model for multi-ethnic, multi-lingual higher education in South East Europe. The whole linguistic situation in Macedonia is characterized by its multilingualism.

Many studies have shown that multicultural education has a great impact on the student achievement and teaching techniques that teachers employ. The present study will try to investigate teachers' and students' attitudes towards multilingual classes at the University level.

It is our belief that attitude is very important in teaching and learning because every person represents a culture due to the fact that people differ in all aspects. We should always have in mind that everyone has his/her wishes, opinions, habits, and their own way of thinking and how they perceive things.

1.1 Teaching in a multilingual context

The term multilingualism is a broad concept which covers a wide range of linguistic habits, talents, and measures, from individual bilingualism to diglossia and official language policies. The most general definition is that a multilingual person is a person who can speak and use several languages. Teaching in a multicultural environment is becoming very important in the 21st century due to a large numbers of emigrants in different countries of the world. These unfamiliar groups, cultures, and traditions can produce anxieties, hostilities, prejudices, and racist behaviors among those who do not understand newcomers. These issues have profound implications for developing instructional programs and practices at all levels of education that respond positively and constructively to diversity (Gay, 2004 cited in Flinders and Thornton 2004, p.314).

Chesler (2003) stated that “the effort to move toward just and effective teaching, to create a multicultural classroom, is hard work, requiring considerable time and energy” (p.4). He claims that this movement is the work of a lifetime, and that the learning (and unlearning) cannot happen in just a day or a semester. Teachers need to learn everyday in order to provide students with effective activities. As Cooper, Kiger, Robinson, Slansky(2009:332) claim, “We need to know how to organize classrooms that prevent failure and promote success. To accomplish this, we must organize our classroom based on what we know about how students learn best”. This means that as a teacher we should know about our students’ backgrounds, their cultures and give them the best instruction which includes everyone in the process of learning. Teachers and students need to be introduced with all the students’ backgrounds and avoid topics that are sensitive for some students. Thus, in multicultural classrooms this should be the first step that teachers should take. This means that in such classrooms teachers should introduce students’ backgrounds and give students the chance to be introduced in front of the others. So if students are faced with a sensitive topic like religion teacher can start another topic and all will have the chance to speak and no one will be offended.

Tomalin (2008, concl) states that it is very important for all teachers, when they are faced with teaching cultural awareness to consider several issues like the curriculum, the materials and the methodology. This refers to all teachers that enter their classroom. Every teacher need to be creative in every lesson. First teachers do not need just to think about the way they will lecture. What is important is that teachers need to think of issues that may face during the lesson. It is very important if teachers control their curriculum and see if activities and task they are providing meet students’ needs.

Similarly, Jones (2003, cited in Begum and Khondaker, 2008, p.61) believes that multicultural education is an approach to teaching and learning and democratic values and beliefs are its foundation. He further states that every student in the USA comes to school with their own level of cultural awareness and with their own cultural background. School is the place where students can share their stories and hear the stories of others.

However, there are some opposing views of their theory because in many institutions, education has not become yet a central part of the curriculum regularly offered to the students. Even though many

educators (Grant & Gomez 2000, Bank & Bank, 2002, Bennet 2003 as cited in Gay, 2004, p.316) believe that multicultural education is very important to promote qualitative education in practice teachers know that it can produce some crisis. They further state that “multicultural education is more than content, it includes policy, learning climate, leadership and evaluation...It must be an integral part of everything that happens in the education enterprise”.

Another difficulty seen by the teachers is that some teachers are doubtful about the feasibility of its implementation and they lack confidence in making some changes in their teaching philosophies. Therefore, teachers’ attitudes toward teaching in a multicultural environment are crucial especially in the Macedonian context. We strongly believe that this issue is very important because teachers should give their students a voice in the learning process, value their experiences, give them opportunities to work together, respect each other and live well with each other. Therefore, the findings of this study are of great importance in providing a deeper insight into the teachers’ attitudes towards teaching at this Institution.

As professors of English and German languages at SEEU, we find teaching in a multicultural environment challenging due to diversity in our classes. At the same time, it is dynamic therefore, teachers should give efforts to respond to this diversity. Dunphy (1998, para. 1) believes that “This multiplicity can enrich the students' experience, but it can also present an obstacle to the full and productive participation of some class members. It is incumbent on us, as teachers in this environment, to understand these difficulties and help all our students to engage fully in their education”.

2. Recent studies on language learning attitudes

According to the Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics (1992:199) “language attitude refers to the attitude which speakers of different language varieties have towards each others’ languages or their own language”. Many studies dealt with the issue of multilingualism in Europe and around the world and they provide different results.

Lasagabaster conducted a study on student instrumental and integrative attitudes towards Basque, Spanish and English. There were 842 Basque undergraduates included in the study and their age ranged from 15-50. 50.4 % were male student and 49.6 % were female students. They had either Basque or Spanish as their L1 and their specializations covered a wide range of different degrees. The main instrument used was a student questionnaire and the aim was to elicit student responses based on their attitudes towards Basque, Spanish and English. The study results showed that L1, Basques group, showed slightly more positive attitude in the integrative motivation whereas with instrumental motivation it is the L1 Spanish groups which was more positive towards trilingualism. He believes that Gardner and Lambert’s study (1972) conducted in Canada showed a great influence on the attitude towards learning languages and the students’ attitudes played a major role in students’ learning.

Another study was conducted by Karahan (2007). His study examined the relationship between language learning attitudes and English language use in Adana, Turkey. There were 190 eight grade students of a private primary school in Adana, involved in the study. The English language is intensively taught (up to 10 hours a week) in this school. The study uses a student questionnaire which asks the students about their attitudes towards the English language and its use in the Turkish context. The results showed that the study participants have only mildly positive attitudes that female students have higher rate in their positive attitude towards English. The study supports the general idea that partially positive language attitude let learner have positive orientation towards learning English.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants of the study are 100 students enrolled at SEEU. Their age ranges from 18-30. Students have either Albanian (55), Macedonian (30) or Turkish (15) ethnicity, 45 of them are female and 55 male students. They are majoring at five faculties at SEEU, Faculty of Contemporary Sciences and Technologies, Languages, Cultures and Communications, Law, Public Administration and Political Sciences and Business and Economics

3.3 Instruments

Data for this research was collected through a student questionnaire and teacher interview. Part A of the questionnaire included personal information: age, gender, nationality and when they started learning English/ Macedonian or Albanian. Part B of the questionnaire is their attitudes towards English, Macedonian and Albanian language on the basis of five-point Likert Scale slightly modified from Lasagabaster based on Baker's (1992) questionnaire on language attitude. The second instrument is the teacher interview which contains 10 questions related to their perceptions and experiences in a multicultural environment.

4. Results

4.1 student questionnaire

The first part of the questionnaire contains questions related to the participants' personal information. One hundred students were asked to write down their gender, age, nationality and the length of the time studying languages. There were students from different nationalities, Albanians 50 (20 female and 30 male students), Macedonians 30 (15 female and 15 male students, and Turks 20 (10 female and 10 male students). Their age ranged from 18-30 years and they all had 5-15 years of learning English.

The second part of the questionnaire contains questions related to the participants' attitudes and experiences of learning Albanian, Macedonian and English. Total sample was taken from all faculties, 20 students per faculty. They study in three languages, Albanian, Macedonian and English. According to

the results obtained from the student questionnaire, Part B, multilingualism is very important to all of them and the participants show positive attitude towards it (Appendix 1).

The highest percentage got the knowledge of the three languages English, Albanian and Macedonian. It seems that the students believe that the knowledge of these languages helps them to get a better job which is instrumental orientation. Also, the knowledge of more languages make them cleverer. This supports the idea that learning a new language is a great mental exercise. As Cook (2002, p. 23) point out "Given the appropriate environment, two languages are as normal as two lungs". It seems that Macedonia is an environment where people see necessity and profits in learning more languages.

4.2 Teacher interview

There were 20 teachers, 10 of them have Albanian ethnicity, 6 of them have Macedonian ethnicity and 4 of them have Turkish ethnicity. They teach at the Faculty of Contemporary Sciences and Technologies; Languages, Cultures and Communications; Law; Public Administration and Political Sciences Business and Economics. Ten questions were designed to find out specific answers about teacher's perception of multilingual classrooms and the ways they manage students with different ethnicities.

Q1: What is your opinion about multicultural classroom?

For most teachers (13) this is a familiar issue because most of them have been teaching multilingual groups. Nevertheless, some of them (5) believe that this is a very sensitive issue and the teacher should carefully choose the discussion topics about religion and ethnicities. Only a few of them (3) believe that it is very difficult to teach these classes because you sometimes have to use students' L1.

Q2: What is the ethnic background of the students in your classes?

The answer is the same because all teachers (20) have diversity of the students, Albanians, Macedonians, Turkish and Roma.

Q3: Do you bring multicultural education into your teaching? If so, in what way?

Majority of the teachers (11) believe that teachers should challenge the students to work in groups and compare different cultures without making judgments about each other. The others (7) believe that teachers' previous education is very important to deal with diversity. 3 of them are of the opinion that

Q4: Which are the techniques and strategies that you use in multicultural classroom?

The most-used teaching techniques were group work, classroom presentations, and debates reported by the majority (15) teachers, on the other hand other (5) teachers use class reflections and quizzes.

Q5: What language do you use in your classroom and if it possible, do you use student's L1?

All participants (20) reported that they use all three languages English, Albanian and Macedonian depending on the course they teach.

Q6: Have you ever faced with a problem between different ethnic backgrounds during a lesson?

Q7: What is important for teachers to consider when entering multicultural classroom?

Majority of the teachers (11) believe that teachers should be aware of the diversity in their classes, the others (5) believe that teachers should not raise political questions in the classes and the other 5 are of the opinion that teachers should be fair and objective in testing their students.

Q8: Do you think that multilingualism plays an important role in binding different ethnicities in the classroom?

All participants (20) believe that multilingualism can have an important role in binding all students in the classroom regardless of their nationality because they can discuss all issues beyond all boundaries.

Q9: What are the issues you are most faced with?

For some teachers (8) there are no special issue that they are faced with, for the others (6) some unpleasant political issues can be difficult to be discussed and for another group (6) class debates can sometimes lead to misunderstandings in the class.

Q10: What are the advantages of multicultural classroom? What are the disadvantages of multicultural classroom?

The advantages are that students learn from each other (10) and for others (10) students can become more experienced when they learn from each other. The teachers see no disadvantage while a few of them (3) believe that some students may feel inferior or left aside by others and sometimes one culture prevail over the other cultures.

5. Conclusion

The present study, which investigated the students' and teachers' attitudes towards multilingualism at SEEU, supports the general argument that participants have a positive attitude towards learning Macedonian, English and Albanian.

Regarding the attitude of the participants with Macedonian L1, they believe that Albanian is a difficult language to learn and this is a result of the language policy in Macedonia where Albanian language is not included in the school curriculum as a school subject while Macedonian language is introduced from the fourth grade. On the other hand, half of the participants believe that it is worth learning and it can enrich their cultural knowledge.

For students with Albanian L1 on the other hand, Macedonian is a difficult language to learn and they believe that there are more useful languages to learn than Macedonian. Higher percentage received the statement Macedonian should be taught to all students at Universities. This shows that there is an interest in learning local language as well.

Regarding the learning of English as their first foreign language at the University level around 90% of the participants believe that it should be taught to all students. Also, statements like English is a language worth learning and If I have children I would like them to study English received a very high percentage. It seems that the students are aware of the importance of English in all spheres of life. It is the language of mass communication, business meetings, even travelling abroad.

The results obtained from the interviews show that teachers hold a very positive attitude towards multilingualism in their classes and they also show their preparedness to teach in these classes. According to them, multilingualism For them the most important issue is to treat all students equally and be fair and objective in evaluation them. It seems that the teachers are an important factor in establishing positive learning environment and pleasant climate for learning.

Generally, the study reveals that multilingualism plays an important role in Macedonia especially in higher education but there are many issues that need to be taken into consideration for further research. The study recommends that we as teachers we should be tolerant, respect and collaborate with others if we want a successful teaching. Only if we allow others to meet us then we will have the chance to let others recognize ourselves.

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Appendix 1

Part A: Background Questionnaire

1. What is your age?
2. What is your nationality?
3. How old are you?
4. How long have you been learning another language?

Part B: Attitude part (slightly modified from Lasagabaster based on Baker's (1992) questionnaire on language attitude)

SA=strongly agree, A=Agree, U=Undecided, D=disagree, SD=strongly disagree

ITEMS	SA	A	U	D	SD
1.I like hearing Albanian spoken	20	25	30	25	
2.Albanian should be taught to all students at Universities	10	35	30	20	5
3.I like speaking Albanian	15	30	30	25	/
4.I prefer to be taught in Albanian	15	10	35	40	
5.Albanian is a difficult language to learn	30	30	30	10	
6. There are more useful languages to learn than Albanian	15	40	25	15	5
7.Learning Albanian enriches my cultural knowledge	15	40	25	20	
8.I would not mind marrying an Albanian speaker	20	15	30	20	15
9. Albanian is a language worth learning	15	30	30	20	5
10. If I have children I would like them to study Albanian	20	30	20	20	10

Table 1: Attitude towards Albanian

ITEMS	SA	A	U	D	SD
1.I like hearing Macedonian spoken	5	30	25	20	20
2.Macedonian should be taught to all students at Universities	5	15	25	40	15
3.I like speaking Macedonian	5	20	30	25	20
4.I prefer to be taught in Macedonian	/	25	40	20	15
5. Macedonian is a difficult language to learn		15	30	25	30
6. There are more useful languages to learn than Macedonian	20	40	20	15	5
7.Learning Macedonian enriches my cultural knowledge	5	30	40	20	5
8. I would not mind marrying a Macedonian speaker	5	15	15	15	50
9. Macedonia is a language worth learning	/	15	25	30	30
10. If I have children I would like them to study Macedonian		10	20	30	35

Table 2: Attitude towards Macedonian

ITEMS	SA	A	U	D	SD
1.I like hearing English spoken	50	40	5	5	
2.English should be taught to all students at Universities					
3.I like speaking English	50	40	10		
4.I prefer to be taught in English	45	35	20		
5. English is a difficult language to learn	35	30	10	15	10
6. There are more useful languages to learn than English	10	10	15	25	40
7.Learning English enriches my cultural knowledge	40	40	10	10	
8.I would not mind marrying an English speaker	30	30	20	10	10
9. English is a language worth learning	40	30	10	10	5
10. If I have children I would like them to study English	60	30	5	5	

Table 3: Attitude towards English

<i>ITEMS</i>	<i>SA</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Knowing Albanian, Macedonian and English make people cleverer	50	45	3	2	
2. Knowing Albanian, Macedonian and English helps to get a job	60	40			
3. People know more if they speak Albanian, Macedonian and English	52	40	5	2	1
4. People who speak Albanian, Macedonian and English can have more friends than those who don't have	45	40	5	5	5
5. People can earn more money if they speak Albanian, Macedonian and English	50	33	8	6	3
6. If I have children I would like them to study Albanian, Macedonian and English	40	55	5		
7. given the new European context (CEE, Euros, free movement of people and goods) it is very important to speak Albanian, Macedonian and English	45	50	5		

Table 4: Attitude towards Albanian, Macedonian and English

Appendix 3

Interview questions

1. What is your opinion about multicultural classroom?
2. What is the ethnic background of the students in your school?
3. Do you bring multicultural education into your teaching? If so in what way?
4. Which are the techniques and strategies that you use in multicultural classroom?
5. What language do you use in your classroom and if it possible, do you use student's L1?
6. Have you ever faced with a problem between different ethnic backgrounds during a lesson?
7. What is important for teachers to consider when entering multicultural classroom?
8. Do you think that multilingualism plays an important role in binding different ethnicities in the classroom?
9. What are the issues you are most faced with?
10. What are the advantages of multicultural classroom? What are the disadvantages of multicultural classroom?